



MINNESOTA HISTORY Interpreter

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Minnesota Historical Society



Minnesota's State School for
Dependent and Neglected Children,
Owatonna, 1890.

Inset: Brothers Oscar (left) and
Harvey Ronglien in 1939.

State School Orphanage Museum

'I was but one'

Former state school resident heads effort to preserve children's stories

Harvey Ronglien remembers sneaking down to the tracks near the state school's apple orchard. "We loved watching the freight trains and the hoboes who rode them," he says. "Many of us boys wanted to be bums when we grew up. I suppose some of us made it."

Not Harvey. He was one of the lucky ones. Now retired after a lifetime of work in Owatonna, the city he adopted, he has many memories – some good, some bad – of the 11 years he spent at the State School for Dependent and Neglected Children on the outskirts of town. Harvey was 4 years old when he and his

brother arrived at the school in 1932. Their mother had died of tuberculosis and their father, alcoholic and unable to cope, ended up in prison. So the state school became home.

Home to thousands

From its opening in 1886 until it closed in 1970, the school was home to thousands of children. The sprawling campus became a self-contained world, where they lived in "cottages," went to school, worked assigned jobs, played games on the green, even tended chickens and cows on the school's farm.

The 1940s brought a rethinking

about the traditional approach to caring for homeless children in orphanages. With the establishment of the foster care system, the state school in Owatonna refocused on providing programs for educable retarded children. But those services, too, were gradually deinstitutionalized and in 1970 the state school closed its doors.

A new life for the old school

For four years the buildings sat empty. Then in 1974 Owatonna voters

'I was but one' continued on page 2

'I was but one' *continued from page 1*

approved the city's plan to purchase the site. Thus began the school's transformation into a civic center known as West Hills. Owatonna's city government moved into the old administration building. County government offices followed suit, joined over the years by many community organizations. The Little Theater of Owatonna took over the old auditorium. The Golden Agers club transformed a residence into its recreation center. A day care center opened in several classrooms and the Bookmobile staff adopted the old library as home base. In this flurry of activity, an arts council was founded to develop the Owatonna Arts Center, with artist studios in the old kitchen and bakery and a performance hall where wards of the state had once dined.

Remembering

Harvey Ronglien watched the transformation, amazed at the outpouring of community interest and resources into the school buildings and grounds. But something was missing. "They've forgotten the

children," he recalls telling his wife, Maxine. "In a few generations all of us will be gone. Who will tell our story if we don't do it?"

So in 1992 the Rongliens persuaded the city to let them set up a small museum, at their own expense, in a room of the old main building. Four years later, with financial support from community foundations, businesses and individuals, the museum was enlarged and given a more prominent position in the building's expansive corridors. Now a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the history of the institution and the stories of its inhabitants, the Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum gives visitors a glimpse into a nearly forgotten piece of Owatonna's past.

The Rongliens also spearheaded the fund drive for a statue memorializing the "state school kids" and took part in a project led by Owatonna resident Bud Blekeberg to place crosses on the graves of children in the school's cemetery that had been marked only with numbers on cement slabs.

For the record

The latest project undertaken to record the story of life at the orphanage is a documentary film by Minneapolis filmmaker Kathleen Laughlin. Partially funded with a state grant-in-aid from the Minnesota Historical Society, the project is headed up by Michael Maas, former president of the Steele County Historical Society, who proposed the idea after hearing Harvey's accounts of visits to the museum by former "state schoolers." At the heart of the film will be interviews with a dozen former residents from the 1920s,



Maxine and Harvey Ronglien commissioned Stillwater sculptor Walley Schoop Sr. to create the bronze memorial, *State School Kids*, that stands outside the historic Administration Building.

1930s and 1940s, along with two staff members and descendants of those who lived and worked at the school.

"So little is known about these children, even by their own families," says Maxine Ronglien, "because many state school kids refused to talk about their orphanage experience. This documentary gives them an opportunity to share their stories not only with their children and grandchildren but with each other."

"I was but one of many," Harvey wrote in a recent issue of the orphanage museum newsletter. "Tragedy brought us together. And that shared experience made brothers and sisters of us all. Now we come together again, in comradeship, to tell our story to the rest of the world."

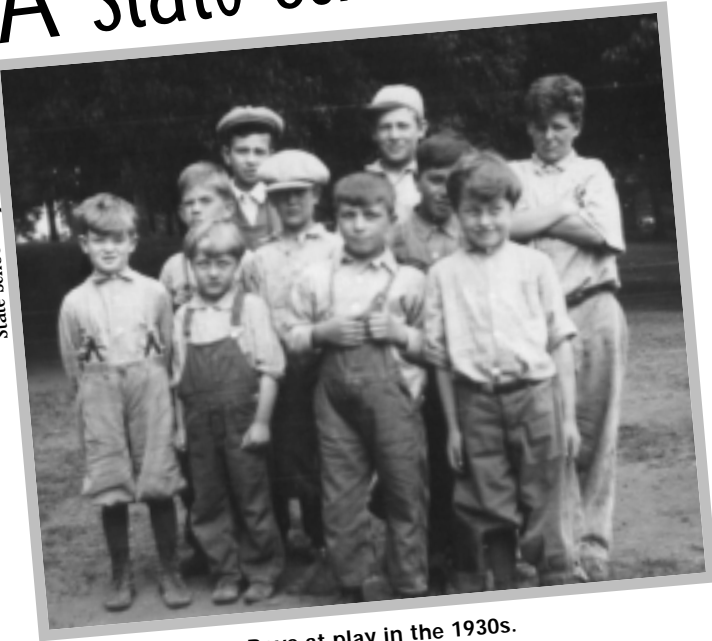
For more information call Harvey Ronglien, project historian, or Maxine Ronglien, chair of the museum's board of directors, at 507-451-2149. Harvey will be a featured speaker at the Minnesota Historical Society's 23rd Annual Statewide Historic Preservation Conference, to be held at the former State School for Dependent and Neglected Children in September (see page 8 for details).



For a documentary film, Eugene Bliss recalls his childhood experiences at the state school and as an indentured farmhand.

A state school scrapbook

State School Orphanage Museum



Boys at play in the 1930s.

Each kid was as tough and determined as the next one. The playground was like a combat zone. Slingshots were strictly prohibited – every boy had one.

Harvey

The place ran by the bell system – bells to get us up, bells for breakfast, lunch and dinner, bells for school. We didn't have clocks – we knew the time by the bells.

Vivian



State School Orphanage Museum

Cottage 6 kids in the 1930s.

We all had jobs – even the young ones. There was never a speck of lint or dust.

Vivian



Minnesota Historical Society

Classroom, 1900.

Minnesota Historical Society



Dining room, 1900.

We'd line up two by two and march off to breakfast. Every morning we had cornmeal mush. I hate that stuff to this day.

Harvey



State School Orphanage Museum

The girls of Cottage 4 in the 1930s.

Every Tuesday and Saturday was bath time in C-4. The soap was brown and smelled like tar. Afterwards we got a change of clean clothes, dealt out by the matron.

Vivian

A place with character

Dakota City casts volunteers as living-history interpreters

What Dakota City needed was more people, the staff decided about the ca. 1900 historical village on the Dakota County Fairgrounds in Farmington. More people from the turn of the century, that is. So began their search through historical records and old newspapers for county residents to bring back to life. Their goal: to enrich living-history interpretive programs for visitors to the Dakota City Heritage Village.

"We looked for a mix of well-known persons and average citizens," explained curator Cathy Osterman. "Once we had a pool of candidates, we hired a consultant to pull out good story lines, do more research and write character profiles. We compiled

all the information in technical manuals for six characters ranging from a druggist to a district judge to a budding poet and a midwife."

Next came the casting call – recruitment of local volunteers to play the parts. The volunteers use the manuals to learn scripts for staged vignettes presented at village events and at meetings of local clubs and organizations. There are also notes on topics of conversation that each character might have had with village neighbors. Those notes guide the volunteers' role-playing with Dakota City visitors.

Profiles for more historical persons are being developed. "The biggest challenge," says Osterman,



Dakota City

Volunteer Ed Mako, in his role as druggist Richard McClintock, encounters a young visitor outside the Dakota City general store.

"is finding players who can make the time commitment." For more information on this interpretive program, call 651-460-8050.

Mankato observes 150th anniversary

County society ties in its own centennial programming

It's a big year in Blue Earth County. As the city of Mankato observes its sesquicentennial, the Blue Earth County Historical Society is marking its 100th anniversary with a year-long series of events tied to the city observance.

Monthly themes proposed by the sesquicentennial committee are guiding the society's public programs. June's theme, transportation, will give rise to an eye-popping assembly of vehicles from the society's collections, all displayed on the grounds of the Blue Earth County Library. Visitors can examine an 1870 stagecoach, an 1890 horseless carriage, a 1916 Mankato fire engine and a 1926 Pontiac.

As is often the case with observances of Blue Earth County history, however, celebrations must be

tempered with more somber considerations. That constraint stems from a dark chapter in Mankato's past: the execution of 38 Dakota men for their participation in the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862.

James Lundgren, executive director of the Blue Earth County Historical Society, is familiar with the issues. "Commemorating history is different from celebrating it," he wrote in the society's newsletter, *The Blue Earth County Historian*. "We can and should look to the past not only to note our successes but also to learn from our mistakes. The sesquicentennial gives everyone an opportunity to reflect on the past while we at BECHS work to preserve the historical record for future generations."



For news about the society's centennial-year events, call 507-345-5566.

Of fish houses, wood boats and cash prizes, too

Fishing museum hosts first annual art show

History and art intertwined at the First Annual Jeane Pearce Walker Art Show, held last fall at the North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum in Tofte. Fifteen artists submitted more than 50 entries – paintings, drawings, wood carvings, silk batik, even jewelry – all inspired by the show's theme "Fisherfolk."

The show's sponsors, New Yorkers David and Scotty Walker Wilber, conceived of it as a tribute to Scotty's mother, a Duluth resident and patron of the arts with an interest in historic preservation. Artists from the Grand Marais Art Colony served as jurors, awarding cash prizes to four entries. The museum's board of directors presented a Board's Choice Award and the Wilbers purchased a painting of the historic Sverre Mathisen fish house to donate to the museum's collection.

Plans are underway for the second annual art show, to be held Sept. 14-Oct. 6. In keeping with this year's theme, "Boats: The Heart and Art of Commercial Fishing," all entries must portray a boat used in



Purchase award (left): *Sverre Mathisen Fish House*, oil by Krishna Worheide. Third place (above): *John Hagen and Boat*, oil by Anna Hess.

Lake Superior to catch, haul or deliver fish to market. Submissions from artists throughout Minnesota are welcome; the entry fee is a \$15 membership to the fishing museum. For more information call 218-663-7804 or e-mail the museum at nscfm@boreal.org.



North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum photos

Visiting the neighbors to share ideas, compare notes

In January eight staff members of the Winona County Historical Society piled into director Mark Peterson's van and headed up the highway. Their destination: the Goodhue County Historical Society two counties away. Their purpose: to pay a visit, compare notes, share ideas – in other words, to get to know their neighbors.

"It's important to take time to see what others are doing," says Peterson.

"We toured their museum, archives and storage areas, then the two staffs sat down to get acquainted. Our educator talked to their educator, their curator met with our curator, and so on."

This is the second of many such field trips Peterson and his staff hope to take. They started with the neighboring Olmsted County Historical Society, which recently

reciprocated the visit. Next up is the Fillmore County Historical Society.

"We'll try to do a couple a year," says Peterson. "I look at these outings as both staff development and group bonding. Everyone learns something and we have a great time together." For details call Peterson at 507-454-2723.

AASLH Seminar for Historical Administration

Three-week program targets experienced staff

Each year a select group of museum professionals gather at Colonial Williamsburg for a seminar in historical administration. Designed to strengthen leadership in the history museum community, the intensive three-week program covers all aspects of museum administration, from financial management and board relations to exhibitions and interpretive programs to human resources, marketing and more.

The seminar is geared to full-time, paid staff of history museums, historic sites and preservation organizations who have three to 10 years of experience and are now in or preparing to fill a position of administrative responsibility.

"It was an eye-opening experience," says Char Henn, director

of the Goodhue County Historical Society, who attended last year's seminar. "I came back with so many ideas, especially about approaches to funding. Now, every time a school group comes in, I write to their city council member and county commissioner about the children's experience. That really helps our cause when local governments work on their annual budgets."

May 24 is the deadline for the 2002 seminar, to be held Nov. 2-23. For more information and an application form, call Peggy McDonald Howells, manager of museum professional services for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, at 757-220-7211, fax 757-565-8213, or e-mail phowells@cwf.org. Call Henn at 651-388-6024 for the inside story.



Char Henn (front row, center), director of the Goodhue County Historical Society, posed with colleagues at the 2001 AASLH Seminar for Historical Administration.

Museum Loan Network fosters collections-sharing

Grants support long-term loan of art, artifacts

Across the country, untold thousands of objects reflecting our cultural heritage lie in collections storage. The institutions that own them simply have more objects than they can put on public display. To bring more of those materials to light, the Museum Loan Network was born. Funded since 1993 by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, it is administered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Office of the Arts.

Both a database and a grant program, the MLN facilitates the long-term loan of art and artifacts between institutions. (The network does not support the loan of works for

temporary or traveling exhibitions.) The MLN **database** is a computerized directory of objects and collections available for loan. Two types of **planning grants** are available: travel grants for both borrowing and lending institutions, and survey grants for lending institutions to identify underused objects in their collections. **Implementation grants** supplement the costs involved in the loan. Grants are awarded twice a year, with application deadlines in May and December.

Organizations eligible for these grants and for access to the online directory are nonprofit, tax-exempt institutions in the United States.

Borrowing organizations must meet facilities standards for the safety of loaned items, have access to a professional curator, and employ at least one full-time professional staff member who can perform museum registrarial duties.

For more information about the MLN, eligibility requirements and grant guidelines, go to <http://loanet.mit.edu>. You may also contact the MLN office:

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Phone: 617-252-1888
Fax: 617-252-1899
E-mail: loanet@mit.edu

Fundraising made easy

Seminar covers grant-seeking strategies

Short on funds to put all your great ideas into action? The Minnesota Council on Foundations has a solution. In a day-long seminar titled "Grant-seeking for Beginners," you'll learn some simple ways to improve your chances of securing grants.

Sessions offer advice on identifying potential funders through research in print and online sources; guidance in developing a strong

proposal; and insight into the decision-making process from the funder's point of view.

When: June 27, Sept. 20 or Dec. 12.

Where: Earle Brown Continuing Education Center, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

Cost: \$90.

To register: Call MCF at 612-338-1989 or e-mail info@mcf.org.

For other information on grantmaking and grant-seeking, go to the Council's web site at www.mcf.org. In addition to grantmaker deadlines, you can access a downloadable Minnesota Common Grant Application form, the article "Writing a Successful Grant Proposal" and news from Minnesota's foundation community.

Family history classes at the Minnesota History Center

These one-session classes at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul are offered by Jim and Paula Stuart Warren, nationally recognized genealogical writers and lecturers. For registration and costs, call Warren Research at 651-503-4802 or e-mail jim@warrenresearch.com.

Discover Your Family History Workshop

June 1, 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Designed for beginners, this workshop covers the basics of genealogical research.

U.S. Census Records: The Basics and Beyond

June 1, 1:30 to 3 p.m.

Explore the wealth of data in census records for the years 1790-1930. Highlights include online indexes, digitized federal records and special census schedules.

U.S. Passenger Arrival and Naturalization Records

June 8, 10 to 11:30 a.m.

Learn how to use printed, microfilmed and original sources to determine often-elusive immigration and naturalization dates.

Organizing Your Genealogical Materials

June 8, 12:30 to 2 p.m.

Make sense of your research materials. A few easy tips will help keep you on top of your project.

Writing Your Family History in Small, Manageable Pieces

June 8, 2:30 to 4 p.m.

This class offers practical, "write-as-you-go" methods for preserving and sharing your research results.

New Chisago County history book debuts

Chisago County Historical Society



To celebrate Chisago County's sesquicentennial in 2001, the county historical society has published a new history book. Titled *A History of Chisago County 1851-2001*, it weaves together the themes of immigration, settlement and expansion, all illustrated by more than 200 photographs. The authors, volunteers from the Chisago Lakes area – retired English professor Lloyd Hackl, newspaper columnist Robert Porter and former reporter Leilani Freeman – gleaned stories from diaries, family histories and old newspapers to tell the county's history through the voices of those who lived it.

The book (291 pages, \$26 including shipping and tax) is available at the Chisago County History Center in Lindstrom (651-257-5310) or by mail order from the Chisago County Historical Society, P.O. Box 146, Lindstrom, MN 55045.

Historic state school to host preservation conference

Preservationists will gather in September on the campus of the former State School for Dependent and Neglected Children to attend Minnesota's annual preservation conference. The Owatonna landmark is an apt setting for this year's conference, which will explore the theme "finding new uses for Minnesota's historic state institutions."

Opened in 1886, the school was part of a network of state-owned-and-operated custodial institutions. Dispersed throughout the state, these institutions brought economic prosperity to many small communities.

The Owatonna school was designed to be largely self-sufficient, with group residences for up to 500 children and its own food service,

medical and recreational facilities, working farm and power plant. In 1970, with a foster care system long in place, the school closed and its sprawling campus and historic buildings became surplus property. Four years later the city purchased the site and breathed new life into the old school with the creation of a civic complex called West Hills.

This and other historic state institutions will share the spotlight at the 23rd Annual Statewide Preservation Conference Sept. 12-13 as participants examine efforts by



Minnesota Historical Society

The Administration Building at the State School for Dependent and Neglected Children, built in 1887, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

communities across Minnesota to forestall their demise. For registration information call 651-296-5434.

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Readers are invited to submit information for publication. To be considered, items must reach the editor by the first of the month, two months before publication. Send to Interpreter Editor, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, MN 55102-1906.

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