

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

A Temporary Shelter for  
Six Children Under 12:  
St. Joseph's Orphanage

Page 10

Spring, 2002

Volume 37, Number 1

*'The Best School in the City,' 1896–1916*

**Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years**

—Page 4



The first Mechanic Arts High School building, right, shares the site at Central and Park Avenues with the old Madison School, left, where grade school pupils are playing. This spectacular 1911 photo by Charles P. Gibson also reveals a long-vanished neighborhood in downtown St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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## CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** 'The Best School in the City,' 1896-1916  
Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years  
*John W. Larson*
- 10** A Memoir  
A Temporary Shelter for Six Under 12—  
St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home  
*Janet Postlewaite Sands*
- 14** Donations and Their Own Pockets  
An Orphanage's Roots in 1869 St. Paul  
*Paul D. Nelson*
- 16** Growing Up in St. Paul  
The War to End All Wars:  
A Schoolboy's Recollection of World War II  
*Ray Barton*
- 19** The Fire Insurance Patrol: Gone But Not Forgotten  
*John S. Sonnen*
- 20** Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul:  
A Review Essay  
*John M. Lindley*
- 24** Book Reviews

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue historian John Larson takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century to the founding and early years of one of St. Paul's best known educational institutions: Mechanic Arts High School. Founded in 1896, Mechanic Arts High School exemplified the educational philosophy that identified vocational education and training is a prerequisite for the citizens of a nation that was rapidly undergoing industrialization. Using materials such as the high school's own student publications, Larson chronicles the first two decades of the school's history, its years under the leadership of Principal George Weitbrecht, who was an extraordinary educator.

Janet Postlewaite Sands shifts our attention to another kind of institution in a memoir of her months living at St. Joseph's Orphan Home in 1945-46. Although she was only seven at the time, Janet Postlewaite's recall of the events in her family's life that forced her and her brothers and sisters to take up temporary refuge at the orphanage is both clear and vivid. Paul Nelson follows Janet Sands's memoir with a brief essay that provides the background and history of St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home. In light of current newspaper headlines that raise probing questions about the function and value of orphanages today, Janet Sands's family story asks us to consider these issues in a broader context and complexity than we might first have thought necessary.

Newspaper headlines and world events are a theme that's present in Ray Barton's account of how he reacted to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As Barton explains, the events in New York, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, helped bring back his own recollections of his youthful years between 1941 and 1945 when the United States was fully committed to war with its Axis foes.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

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## *A Memoir*

# A Temporary Shelter for Six Under 12— St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home

*Janet Postlewaite Sands*

I still can't drive down Randolph Avenue between Snelling and Hamline without seeing the orphanage. It was a huge, four-story red brick building set back far from the street. There must have been windows, but I remember none; in my mind I see it windowless. The orphanage had a front door, but I can't recall ever using it. A playground to the east extended to Holy Spirit school. Behind the building the orphanage farm seemed to go on for blocks. I know the building was torn down in the 1960s, but so far as I'm concerned it is still there and all the children are still playing in the yard or doing their chores inside.

I remember the events that brought me there, though not always in the right order—my older sister Judy has helped me. It all began in August of 1944. I recall so clearly how my mother came up from washing clothes in the basement complaining that her legs were sore. This was unusual because she never com-



*St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home at 1458 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul, as it looked in 1960, two years before it was torn down. Janet Sands: "There must have been windows, but I remember none; in my mind I see it windowless." St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press photo from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.*

plained about anything. At this time of her life she was thirty-seven years old and had six children under twelve. I was the third girl and the fourth child. It was strange to see her pull over a stool to make dinner and then say she felt so terrible that she was going to bed. I didn't see her again for a long time. She was taken to St. Luke's Hospital that night, stricken with a recurrence of rheumatic fever.

She spent ten weeks there, but even after she came home she mostly had to rest in bed, as she had lost the use of her legs. Mom did her best to take care of us, but it was very hard. Dad helped by doing all he could around the house and getting a housekeeper for a while. Twice he placed my younger brothers, who were just four and two then, in the Christ Church nursery for several weeks. Dad refused to accept money from Catholic Charities to help pay for the housekeepers. This went on for about a year; all this time my mother supervising the house and us as best she could from her bed.

In September of 1945 my father got sick too, with heart disease, and was taken to Mounds Park Hospital, where they put him in an oxygen tent. Dad's illness made it impossible for my mother to take care of us anymore. (I don't remember this part of the story; I had to learn it from records.) From that point on there was a lot of confusion, but it didn't really bother me because I was sure that all would be well soon. I had started second grade at Longfellow School (I was seven and a half years old), and I remember that on that day in September no one had told me to stay home. So off I went to class, only to have someone knock on our classroom door and tell me to go home. My mother arranged for all of us to be taken to St. Joseph's Orphanage while she went into Ancker Hospital. How I got home and how I got to the orphanage I can't remember.

Benedictine nuns ran St. Joseph's. Most of them came from Germany, and when they didn't want us to know what they were saying they talked in German. Very few of the children were true orphans, as most had either a father or mother living. A lot of their fathers were still in wartime military service and their mothers could not take care of them.



*Five of the Postlewaite children in 1943, before their parents' health problems intervened: Jim, Judy, Joan in back; Janet in front and Jack with the spectacles. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos with this article are from the author.*

My first recollection of the orphanage is of the dining room. It must have been the first week I was there and I didn't know the rules of the place. Meals were served family style, and on the table was a big bowl of oatmeal, which I loved. At least, I loved the oatmeal at home. I had filled my bowl, only to find that the orphanage oatmeal tasted like some thick glue. The nuns would not let me leave the table until I had eaten every bit. I sat in that room, with all lights dark except a few overhead, for a long, long time, but still refused to touch that oatmeal. Other students came and cleaned the tables, but they would not look at me or say a word. It seemed like hours before some sweet nun told me that if I told no one else and ate just a little bit, she would let me go. Somehow I managed that and was allowed to leave the room.

At night I was separated from the rest of my family. Judy and Joan, my two older sisters, slept in a third-floor dormitory for older girls. I slept down the hall in a dorm for younger girls. My oldest brother, Jack, who turned nine the day after we arrived, lived upstairs in a dorm for boys; the youngest brothers, Jeff and Jim, stayed in the convent part of the home. I saw them only at mealtime and at playtime after school.

Jack and I both remember the fire escape on the back side of the building, but



*Judy Postlewaite in back; Jack, Joan and Janet in front in 1940.*

with different feelings about it. He recalls his fourth-floor view: the orphanage fields, then the countryside, still mostly open then, stretching off for miles to the south. I remember that I hated that fire escape. We had to use it sometimes to go out to play. It was made of iron and we could see through the steps. I always feared that I would fall down the stairway because I was afraid to look down at the steps and see how far I was from the ground.



Janet Postlewaite with her mother,  
1942–1943.

Every morning we had to get up and dress in our good clothes, then go down to mass. Mass was held in a chapel on the first floor on the other side of the dining room. It was a beautiful place with a statue of the Little Infant of Prague in a glass dome which stood on a pedestal along the chapel's left wall. There were hard wood benches and pews, but beyond that my memory leaves me. I made my first holy communion in that chapel; I remember my beautiful white dress and veil.

School for us younger kids was held in the main building; my older sisters had their classes in a different building to the west. I went to a small room with about fifteen other children. It was just like most classrooms, but had one thing that I thought was wonderful, the "pagan baby



"My dad, Jim and me, 1942–1943."

bank." It was a wrought iron coin bank bearing the figure of a little black boy kneeling in prayer; when you put a penny in his hands it went into the bank and he bowed his head. At that time it was the goal of the Catholic church to convert all of Africa. I'm sure that is why the little black boy was there.

After school we all had jobs. Some worked in the farm fields out back, others did washing in the laundry building. They told me this was the worst job. One of my jobs was polishing shoes. The nuns were very big on polished shoes and we had to leave our good shoes in one place every Saturday so they could be picked up and polished in time for mass on Sunday. I also worked in the kitchen peeling potatoes and carrots and doing other odd jobs that I could manage at the age of seven.

After chores we had some free time before dinner. We had to go through the whole change of clothes routine before eating. We changed our clothes six times a day. After dinner we had homework and prayers before bed. The nuns forbade us to talk after lights out, but we always talked anyway. When Sister Mabel

caught us she made us stand with our hands out in front of us as she hit them with a piece of rubber hose. I do remember that I did not resent this because we had talked after the lights were out. I don't remember any bruises so it must not have been that hard.

The nuns watched us closely. Decades after my time at St. Joseph's, I found the "behavior record" that they had kept on me. It was good except for the C they gave me for "Reverence." On the back I found written, "Janet is a dear, wholesome, honest girl of sweet disposition. She is untidy with her possessions and has not yet mastered her slipshod way of cleaning." This was written in February of 1946 when I was seven years old. Some things never change.

The day before Halloween, 1945, the four older children (Joan, Judy, Jack, and I) were called into the big parlor off to the right of the front door. We knew something was very wrong because this room was never used. It must have had windows, but I can't remember looking out. I tried to walk very softly so I wouldn't hurt the oriental rug that covered the wood floor. Ornate pictures of



*The author's favorite family snapshot: Joan, Judy, Janet, Jack and Jim in 1944, the year before their stay at St. Joseph's Home began.*

popes, bishops, saints, and other people I didn't know covered the walls. Their collective eyes seemed to be looking down at me to make sure that I would behave. All the furniture looked as if it had never held a child. When I finally sat down in an old, itchy chair, Sister Mabel came into the room. She told us our father had died. It was All Saints Eve, Halloween Day.

I never went into that room again until we were called and told that my mother was going home and we were to join her. She had been told she would never walk again, but when dad died she made up her mind that she had to walk so we could all be together again.

Many people have visions of Oliver Twist or prison when they think of an orphanage, but St. Joseph's was not like that. It was a wonderful place, and it kept us together for those eight months. We often wonder what would have happened to us had we not gone there. We probably

would have been sent all over the country. No one would or could take six children under twelve. I remember my aunts and uncles saying that some would take Judy and Joan, the eldest. Others said they would take the youngest, Jim and Jeff. I don't remember anyone saying they wanted Jack and me. Years later I found out that Catholic Charities suggested sending us to a boarding school somewhere, but my mother refused.

I went back to St. Joseph's once as an adult, to get my First Holy Communion Certificate. I had to wait in the parlor, the same parlor where I had learned of my father's death. It was still very formal and uninviting but somehow smaller. Everything was smaller.

*Janet Sands is a graduate of St. Joseph's Academy in St. Paul, a retired University of St. Thomas staff member and a former St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commissioner.*



*Home again. "My mother and Jim," 1947.*



*Fredrick McGhee, family and friends on the porch of the McGhee home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1910. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See "Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul" on page 20 and a review of Paul Nelson's biography of McGhee on page 24.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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