

## Clyde Habas

PAUL NELSON

Clyde Eugene Habas was born in St. Paul's Ancker Hospital on December 4, 1931. His mother was Emma Mary Smith (1911-1940) of St. Paul (born in Leeds, England). His father, Joseph Peter Habas (1907-1991), was from Delano, a hamlet near Philadelphia, although, he seems to have grown up in Sauk Rapids. Clyde had an older sister, Delores Jean, born 1930. Their father soon "flew the coop," in Clyde's words, and his mother married again, this time to Curtis Jones. They had a son, Curtis, born in 1937.<sup>1</sup>

In March 1939, Clyde was living with his mother, sister, stepfather, and grandparents George and Frances Smith, at 544 Wacouta Street, near the Gospel Mission, when, without any warning that he remembers, he was taken to the Preventorium and dropped off (by whom he does not recall). "I cried," he said, "for most of a week." One of the staff held and comforted him. It took him a year to get adjusted. He never saw his mother alive again.<sup>2</sup>

Clyde is not aware of any tuberculosis in the family and suspects that his placement was mostly the work of his stepfather, whom he believed wanted to get rid of him. "It felt like punishment," he said.

According to the 1940 US Census, his mother, stepfather, and stepbrother moved to 784 L'Orient. Joseph Habas, meanwhile, was living in Minneapolis. Emma Mary Jones died August 12, 1940 of, according to Clyde, a botched abortion. Her death certificate confirms "septic abortion." Clyde was allowed to attend the funeral.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Clyde adjusted to the routine, which included two winter "sunbaths" a day, under what he called "alpine lights," for about 30 to 45 minutes a session with goggles and a mandatory flip halfway through. While the children lay there, a nurse read to them. Novels. Food was adequate, though he reported not remembering ever getting seconds. Also, "the milk was always lukewarm." One item they had

too much of was canned figs. Many of the kids disliked them, so they were hidden and passed around. They could have been used as laxatives, like prunes. Mealtimes were regimented: the children gathered and stood at the tables and could only sit after a signal.

They slept on sleeping porches, outdoors most of the year, except in extreme cold. In winter, yes, they had to go outside wearing the big diaper and boots. In warm weather, they were often instructed to run from place to place. School was just two or three hours a day, with two or three grades grouped together. Other than in class, boys and girls were kept apart as much as possible.

Clyde remembers Mexican American kids who came to The Preve during his time. He observed that they mostly fit in well—but not with him, as one boy, aided by two others, sexually assaulted him on a bunk and then warned him of reprisals if he told anyone in authority. Examination of the Preventorium records shows that two brothers, whom Clyde named, were enrolled at the time, so they certainly had the opportunity to do as Clyde described. In any boarding school environment, such abuses can and do happen.

Clyde recalls visiting days were Sundays, but no one ever came to see him, nor does he recall any letters. He estimates that maybe one-quarter of the residents received guests on any given Sunday. The streetcar line did not reach that far north, so transportation would have been complicated for many families. Kids typically spent a week in July visiting their families at home. Clyde remembers when The Preve got a telephone—one line—in the nurse's quarters. There was some use of that to keep families in touch but not for him.

There were a few chores—make the bed, keep things neat—but not much. They didn't, for example, tend the garden, although Clyde

Clyde Habas as a senior at Mechanic Arts High School. In *The M—Mechanic Arts High School Yearbook, 1951*.



sometimes sneaked in to grab a tomato or a carrot. For a while, he had the task of tending one of The Preve's three ponies. He got the assignment of the least docile one, which he felt was another punishment.

Even after nearly eight decades, Clyde still feels pain that no one in his family visited him during his stint at the institution. Yes, his father had abandoned the family, and his mother was dead, but he had grandparents, uncles (at least two of whom had cars), aunts, and a sister. He still harbors some bitterness. There was never any privacy, and he believes that rules against talking with girls left him somewhat socially limited in later years.

All that said, there were positives. He had friends, including his old neighbors on

Wacouta—Jim and Patsy Carney. He remembers the resident director, Margaret Weikert, employing him to change her cat's litter box (a dollar a week), so he had a little cash for the occasional visit to a store on Rice Street. He loved to fish in the lake and play baseball. "There was always something to do." He wasn't bored.

He recalls tiny rebellions among the children. Now and then, some would run away, but "they didn't get far." Some of the older kids (residents were rarely kept there after age twelve) would sneak out of the dormitories late at night, after the last nurse's light went out, and meet in a corner of pasture. "Nothing sexual went on," he believes. It was just socializing. He and his chums sometimes left their beds to meet on the fire escape—little gestures toward autonomy.

Clyde's release in 1941 came without warning. He went to live again with his Smith grandparents, his sister Delores, and half-brother Curtis. Every place they lived, he recalls, was infested with vermin. His grandfather, who had been a trucker's helper for a coal company, was too worn down to earn much, so the county gave them checks to care for the children. Still, Clyde preferred that life over The Preve. Assessing his time in the Preventorium, "I hated it."

He attended Jackson Elementary briefly then on to Mechanic Arts, where he played football, baseball, and basketball, and belonged to the school's projection crew (AV club). Because he had been held back a year, he graduated at nineteen. He joined the US Army for two years, studied drafting, landed a job at 3M, then Minnesota Plastics, working there many years. He and his wife, Mary Ellen, raised six children in their house on East Ivy, where they lived more than six decades.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. "Clyde Habas," interview by author, July 15, 2022. The majority of the information in this piece comes from this personal interview; "Clyde Eugene Habas," Minnesota, US, Birth Index 1900-1934, certificate, 1931-46176, ancestry.com; "Joseph Peter Habas" and "Emma Mary Smith," Korslund Family Tree, ancestry.com; "Rossi, Delores J.," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, April 1, 2015, A8; "Curtis F. Jones," *Sixteenth Census of the United States-1940*, Minnesota, Ramsey, St. Paul, enumeration district 90-201, sheet 61B.

2. "Curtis M. Jones," *Saint Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1939), 696.

3. "Curtis Jones," *Sixteenth Census of the United States-1940*; "Joseph Habas," World War II Draft Cards Young Men 1940-1947, 29-439, ancestry.com; "Mrs. Emma Jones," Minnesota, US Death Index, 1908-2017, 025533, ancestry.com.

4. "Clyde Habas," *The M, Mechanic Arts High School, 1951*, various entries.