

The Oldenburgs

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Things seemed to be going passably well for the Oldenburg family in April 1930. There were (almost) six: John Oldenburg, age twenty-eight (b. May 26, 1901), worked as a road construction contractor. He and his wife, the former Edna Luedke, owned their home at 614 Second Street in Shakopee. They had three daughters—Winifred, six (b. December 28, 1923); Virginia, three (b. February 3, 1927); and Jacqueline, almost two (b. June 9, 1928). Edna, twenty-nine (b. November 16, 1900), was pregnant with Mary, who would join the family the second of September.¹

But it was deep Depression time. By 1934, the family had moved to a tiny house at 908

Jefferson in St. Paul, and John was working as a night watchman for the state. What's more, Edna was sick with TB. The Tuberculosis Division of the St. Paul Health Department had referred the three oldest girls to the Preventorium. They entered on September 7, 1934. Winifred stayed a year. Virginia and Jacqueline stayed for the next seventy-four months. Young Mary joined them at age six and stayed four years. The girls did not have a conventional childhood.²

By November 1940, the sisters had all been released. According to a family member, the girls spent additional time in foster homes because, from the time of her youngest daughter's birth, for part of 1940, and up until her own

John and Edna Oldenburg around 1930 with Winifred, Jacqueline, and Virginia (L-R) prior to the arrival of little Mary. *Courtesy of Sara Markoe Hanson.*



death, Edna was in and out of hospitals, first for TB, then for cancer.³

It appears something had gone wrong in the marriage, too. John and Edna divorced in February 1942. On October 26 that year, John enlisted in the US Navy. In 1943, he married Alice Mielke in San Diego.

Despite the many hardships, the sisters adjusted to life outside The Preve—attending high school and entering the world of work as clerks, stenographers, and bookkeepers. Eventually, they married: Winifred in 1943, Virginia in 1948, Mary in 1953, and Jacqueline in 1954. Their mother often stayed with one family or another.

Edna died young—a month before her fiftieth birthday. Life treated her daughters well, and roughly, as it tends to do. Virginia died at fifty, and Jacqueline even younger at forty-six.

Winifred and Mary lived the long lives more typical of Preventorium alumnae: Winifred died in 2014, and Mary is still living. The sisters' father died in 1980 in Maryland.

Like the Bodin boys before them, the Oldenburg girls could not have needed six years, or four, or even two to prepare to live outside the Preventorium. But at a time when disease, the Great Depression, and so many other difficulties disrupted their lives, The Preve helped the sisters get through it all.

Note: Virginia Oldenburg married Eugene Pawlenty. One of their five children, Timothy, served eight years as the Governor of Minnesota (2003-2011)—from the Preventorium to the Governor's office in one generation.

NOTES

1. "Edna Aristina Luedke," Markoe Family Tree, ancestry.com. Most of the information in this article comes from this site and from correspondence with Sara Markoe Hanson with White Bear Lake Area Historical Society. She is the daughter of Mary Oldenburg Markoe.

2. "Children's Preventorium Record of All Admissions and Discharges, 1915 to 1953," Ramsey County, Minnesota, from the personal collection of Jacci Krebsbach.

3. Sara Markoe Hanson, email correspondence with author and editor, January 9, 2023.