

# The Preventorium in Context

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No one knows how many children's preventoriums once operated in the United States. In her history, *Saving Sickly Children*, Dr. Cynthia Connolly reports that, in the late 1920s, the National Tuberculosis Association counted forty-five, which she believes an undercount. They were concentrated mostly in the Northeast, where crowded cities massed great numbers of at-risk children, and in Southern California, an area acutely conscious of tuberculosis because so many sufferers moved there for the climate. Besides the Children's Preventorium of Ramsey County in Minnesota, there were few in the Midwest—three in Ohio, one in Illinois, one in Wisconsin, and two in Michigan. The rest were scattered around the country.<sup>1</sup>

One reason preventoriums came into being and, at least in the case of Ramsey County's, facility, lasted so long was that in that era, charitable residential institutions for children were common. People called them orphanages.

Because the standard definition of "orphan" is "a child deprived by death of one or both parents," orphanages are probably poorly understood today.<sup>2</sup> Most children who lived in orphanages were not orphans. Most were not even half-orphans. Most had both parents living.

When the Preventorium opened in 1915, St. Paul had several charitable residential institutions for children, among them:

- St. Joseph's German Catholic Orphan Society, 1458 Randolph
- Protestant Orphan Asylum, 670 Marshall
- St. Paul Catholic Orphan Asylum, 933 Carroll
- Crispus Attucks Colored Orphan Asylum, 1537 Randolph
- Children's Home Society, 2239 Commonwealth (St. Anthony Park)
- Evangelical Lutheran Kinderfreund Society Home, 2022 Marshall

There also were residential institutions correctional in nature: Ramsey County's Boys Totem Town, the Detention Home for Girls, and the House of the Good Shepherd. In short, there was nothing anomalous about the Preventorium: the people of Ramsey County were accustomed to children living away from their parents in institutions.

To give some sense of the numbers on census day in 1920 (January 6), there were 153 children living at St. Joseph's. Forty-five girls ages fourteen and under resided at the House of the Good Shepherd. Meanwhile, fifty-four young people were in the custody of the Protestant Orphan Asylum.<sup>3</sup>

A 1938 study found that in the year 1930, to take one example, there were 1,358 Minnesota children living in orphanages. Of these, only 4.6 percent (about sixty-five) were true orphans. Another 39.8 percent were half-orphans (one parent dead.) That means most children living in orphanages that year were not orphans at all. Orphanages, rather, mostly served the function that foster homes do today—very much like the Preventorium did.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Preventorium presented itself, or allowed itself to be presented, as a public health institution, what it most resembled—what it really was—was an orphanage. And, as orphanages went, it was probably the most desirable in the county. It was relatively small; it was secular (either an advantage or a disadvantage depending on one's point of view); its staff and routines were focused on the health of the children; and, most of all, it had a delightful location on the shores of Lake Owasso. No other orphanage could offer the equal of outdoor life with ponies and a swimming lake. This may help explain why so many children stayed there so long—The Preve was a pretty good gig.

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## NOTES

1. Cynthia A. Connolly, *Saving Sickly Children: The Tuberculosis Preventorium in American Life, 1909-1970* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 2-3.

2. "Orphan," Merriam-Webster, accessed January 4, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/orphan>.

3. "St. Joseph's German Catholic Orphan Society," *Fourteenth Census of the United States-1920*, Minnesota, St. Paul, enumeration district 140, sheets 4A-4D;

"House of the Good Shepherd," *Fourteenth Census of the United States-1920*, Minnesota, St. Paul, House of the Good Shepherd, enumeration district 148, sheets 15B, 16A and B, and 17A; "Protestant Orphan Asylum," *Fourteenth Census of the United States-1920*, Minnesota, St. Paul, enumeration district 78, sheets 5A and B.

4. Sister Claire Lynch, *Orphanages of Minnesota*, a report based on WPA documents on file at Minnesota Historical Society, 1977.