“WE WILL DO WHAT IS BEST FOR THEM”: CHILD-SAVING IN MINNESOTA, 1890 - 1920

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Interdisciplinary Studies
Historical and Genealogical Research

by
Claudia S. Beaty

Spring 2012
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For Grandpa Nelson and Aunt Shirley.

I dearly love you both.

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ABSTRACT

“WE WILL DO WHAT IS BEST FOR THEM”: CHILD-SAVING IN MINNESOTA, 1890 - 1920

by

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By the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of charitable agencies and Progressive Era reformers had turned their attention to the issue of America’s growing population of orphaned and/or dependent children, many of whom resided in overcrowded, unclean and impersonal orphan asylums. In an attempt to “save” orphaned and deprived children, child welfare advocates throughout the United States discussed, developed and implemented various plans for improving child-saving methods and facilities. The Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (MNSPS), which operated from 1886 until 1945, was Minnesota’s solution to solving the problems faced by needy children. This study examines the experiences of one particular family who lost custody of three sons to the MNSPS, in an effort to ascertain whether the
processes and methods employed by that institution and its staff were successful. The study is based on information garnered from the children’s MNSPS case files, and other primary documents including court records, superintendent reports, censuses, and contemporary newspaper articles. The research suggests that this family’s involvement with the MNSPS reflects typical experiences within the institution. Although the brothers were “saved” from a life of poverty and neglect, they also endured emotional trauma by being taken from their family to live in an institution or with total strangers. While providing for the physical needs of neglected and disadvantaged children, child welfare advocates failed to consider the importance of a child’s emotional well-being and familial bonds.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The words “orphan” or “orphanage” generally tend to conjure up images of a ragged homeless waif, or an undernourished child, such as Oliver Twist, begging for a cup of porridge. Therefore, when I learned that my maternal grandfather, Arden Nelson, had lived in an orphanage, my curiosity was piqued and I wanted to know details. The facts were hard to come by, however, since Arden never spoke of his childhood, except during one late-night conversation with his youngest daughter, Shirley. During that exchange, he confided that he and two of his brothers had resided in some sort of school or orphanage, instead of with the rest of their family. In the summer months, the school would separate the brothers, sending them to work for farmers, some of whom treated them badly. One autumn when Arden returned to the institution he learned that one of his brothers had been killed in a farming accident. Arden eventually ran away from the school, and then spent several years working odd jobs while searching for his mother and remaining siblings. Shirley, only a teenager at the time of hearing this rare glimpse into her father’s childhood, listened to his story but did not probe for details. This project represents the culmination of years of historical and genealogical research spent searching for answers to the many unasked questions that arose from that conversation.¹

¹ Interview with Shirley Nelson Heinen, July 2003.
Arden Nelson’s birth in Montevideo, Minnesota in 1910, occurred during what historians have termed the Progressive Era. During this era (circa 1890s – 1920s), enormous changes took place in almost every aspect of life in the United States, including the social, political and economic spheres. Progressive reformers, consisting mainly of Protestant members of the middle-class, struggled for women’s suffrage, prohibition, public safety, and an end to government corruption. By the end of the nineteenth century, apparently with the public’s well-being in mind, many reformers also intruded on the family unit, and more specially, indigent children.2

By the time Arden Nelson was born, the matter of “child saving” had captured the attention of the nation, and thus had been at the forefront of many reformers’ agendas for almost two decades. As with all issues during this era, the opinions and suggested solutions for helping orphaned and neglected children varied, as did the success of child-saving measures taken. In Chicago, for instance, settlement houses such as Jane Addams’s Hull House provided schooling, food and recreational activities for neighborhood children, and assistance for their parents. Even before Addams’s work achieved notoriety, New York City minister and reformer Charles Loring Brace instigated a system called “placing-out,” which involved sending children away from large urban areas to Midwestern farms on what became known as “orphan trains.” And some states, such as Minnesota, created and ran cottage-style institutions like the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (MNSPS), located

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in Owatonna, Minnesota. That facility would figure prominently in the lives of Arden Nelson and his immediate family.\(^3\)

In this paper I will discuss the child-saving ideologies and methods embraced by Progressive Era reformers in Minnesota, which led to the establishment of the MNSPS and, by chronicling the Nelson family’s involvement, analyze and critique the effectiveness of that particular institution, as far as that family was concerned. Because of its unique status as a state-run agency, administrative staff kept abundant and meticulous reports and files, which provide vital details regarding the institution’s juvenile inmates. By studying the children’s case files, along with the policies, procedures and daily routines of the MNSPS, one can assess, to certain degree, whether the aspirations and ideals of the child-saving advocates of this time period were met. Clearly an institution such as the MNSPS provided basic necessities such as food, clothing and education to needy and neglected children who would have gone without. What welfare proponents tended to overlook or ignore, however, was the emotional toil involved in a child’s removal from his or her home and family. No matter what innovative techniques were employed or comfortable surroundings provided, a large facility filled with strangers would still be a bewildering and frightening place to a child. And although the supposed outcome of removing neglected children from their parent or parents was eventual reunification, it rarely worked out that way. Questions arise as to whether many of the children who entered the MNSPS were truly “saved,” or would they have fared just as well or even better had they remained with their parent or parents.

\(^3\) Ibid.
Although the circumstances and outcome of just one family cannot speak to the overall success or failure of the MNSPS as a child-saving institution, it is valuable to explore specific case files. Normally history obtained from public records concerns only exceptional or well-known public figures, such as Charles Loring Brace or Jane Addams, in the case of Progressive Era reformers. The information gleaned from the primary documents used for this project, such as state and federal censuses, court proceedings, and especially inmate case files, provides an insight into how the lives of an ordinary poor rural family were affected by the actions of the child-savers. Most likely the Nelsons could not have imagined that the events of their lives would have any significance to future generations, and left no journals, diaries or letters behind to describe their experiences. But their stories offer a unique perspective not only to their descendants, but also to historians in general.
CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF STATE-SPONSORED ORPHAN ASYLUMS

Very few orphan asylums existed in the United States until the 1830s, mainly because poverty among large numbers of people had not occurred in this country before then. Prior to 1800, society separated poor people into two groups: the deserving and the undeserving poor. Children, along with other needy folk such as widows and the aged, were considered worthy of society’s help, while strangers and healthy adult males were not. Neighbors, relatives, and private charities generally offered enough assistance to widows and children to allow them to remain in their own homes. The common practice of apprenticing or indenturing orphans and other dependent children permitted them to remain in private residences, thereby retaining their status as contributing members of society. The placement of needy children into almshouses (also called poorhouses) occurred in some cases, but generally only as a last option.¹

The amount and use of almshouses increased greatly in the first half of the nineteenth century, especially after a series of state legislative reviews took place during the 1820s. Reviews conducted in states such as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and New York, caused some lawmakers to recognize flaws and omissions in the handling of pauperism and poor people. For the first time, legislators suggested

¹ Hacsi, Second Home, 14-16.
state supported, long-term care facilities for the poor, although they still recommended assistance only for the “worthy” poor.2

Between 1830 and 1860, a number of factors continued to contribute to a transformation of ideas regarding the treatment of orphans in the United States. During the 1830s, American society, especially as exemplified by middle-class families, became more child-centered, regarding childhood as a separate, distinct stage of life. Also, religious groups involved themselves more in child-saving matters. The effects of industrialization, however, played the largest role in the growing number of institutions for the needy. As more and more immigrants arrived to work in factories, cities’ populations rose, causing increased poverty and dire conditions. Many children required food, shelter and guidance, which in turn led to a continuing rise for the need of additional almshouses and asylums.3

Twenty-three private orphan facilities opened in the United States between 1830 and 1840, the vast majority established by Protestant and Catholic churches. The movement continued to expand in the 1840s, with the founding of thirty more in various towns and cities from Bangor, Maine, to Mobile, Alabama.4 By 1850, orphan asylums numbered over seventy, and could be found in at least twenty-one states, including California, which had five asylums established in that decade.5

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As the use of almshouses and orphan asylums increased, so did dissatisfaction with the care these institutions provided for the needy, especially children. Almshouse populations swelled in the pre-Civil War era, brought on by epidemics and the growth in the number of immigrant workers. In many cases, asylums afforded care not only for orphaned children, but also for half-orphans—children with living, but poor, parents. A growing conviction developed among concerned members of the middle class that it was wrong to house these innocent children in facilities alongside adult paupers, the criminal, and the insane, which often happened in almshouses.6

On January 9, 1853, a group of concerned New York City citizens, in an effort to help the city’s vast number of orphans and half-orphans, founded the Children’s Aid Society, choosing a bright and dedicated child advocate, Charles Loring Brace, to lead the new organization.7 Although intrigued by the theories of Charles Darwin and the implications of Social Darwinism, Brace disavowed the survival of the fittest theory. He, instead, agreed with evolutionists who argued for intervention programs that would change and benefit all society. Brace and his contemporaries developed a new system of dealing with the increasing amount of dependent children, especially those living on the streets of New York City, called placing-out, a precursor to the foster-care system that exists today.8 Brace, convinced that children would benefit from an environment totally different from a large city like New York City, began communicating with farmers in the

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Midwest and West who agreed to take in needy children, and in doing so, would (in Brace’s opinion) provide salvation for the homeless waifs. On September 28, 1854, thirty-seven boys and girls boarded a train in Albany, New York, headed to Dowagiac, Michigan, where Children’s Aid Society workers handed them over to their new foster families. Those children became the first of approximately 150,000 children who eventually found new rural homes via orphan trains between 1854 and 1930.

The Civil War created the need for even more child asylums. In New York City alone, the war years led to a growth in the child population of almshouses by 300 percent. The war also created additional demands for labor in the western states. Charles Loring Brace and the Children’s Aid Society responded to the call for more workers, sending more destitute children from New York City to the West than the organization had shipped before. Post-war reconstruction and the continuing settlement of the West brought about new opportunities for the placing-out of children, and eventually southern states began receiving the urban poor, as did states in the Southwest such as Texas and Oklahoma.

Later in the century, the importance of the effects of the war lessened, but the nation continued to become both more urban and industrial. An ongoing influx of immigrants in the large cities caused a growth spurt in the number of Catholic and Protestant asylums, and public facilities began to appear in significant numbers for the

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9 Stephen O’Connor, Orphan Trains, 106.


11 Marilyn Holt, Orphan Trains, 74-76.
first time, particularly in the northern states.\textsuperscript{12} From 1860 to 1890, the population of the United States rose from 31 million to 63 million, and the number of orphan asylums tripled, going from 200 to approximately 600.\textsuperscript{13} During the 1880s, many socially conscious individuals began to turn their attention to the conditions inside orphanages, and to the fate of orphans and half-orphans housed in such facilities, and by the decade of the 1890s, the salvation of children developed into a major weapon for members of the burgeoning Progressive movement.

Never a cohesive movement, progressivism consisted of many different coalitions that gathered around specific reforms. These reforms included a myriad of issues, including women’s suffrage, prohibition, food and drug safety, conservationism, and child labor laws. Proposed solutions to the numerous social problems varied widely. The ambivalence of reformers about the best course of action to take to help dependent and needy children brought about a host of ideas on what should happen to these youths, but no real answers.

By 1908, child welfare advocates and their causes gained the attention and support of someone no less influential and powerful than the president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. On Christmas Day of 1908, after Homer Folks and other prominent figures in the field of child welfare convinced him of the urgent need to respond quickly to concerns involving poor, orphaned, abandoned and abused children, Roosevelt called for a conference on the care of dependent and neglected children. More than 200 delegates from charity societies, settlement houses, juvenile courts, children’s

\textsuperscript{12} Hasci, \textit{Second Home}, 27.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 49.
institutions, and public relief programs, assembled at the White House for the conference on January 25, 1909, to grapple with the issue of the nation’s growing number of needy children.14

The conference participants agreed upon the fundamental precept that children should not be deprived of a home life. With that concept in mind, the group issued a list of pronouncements regarding the sanctity of family life. Some of these declarations, as stated in the conference’s published report included the following:

Children should not be removed from their families except for urgent and compelling reasons, and destitution was not one of those reasons. If necessary, poor families should receive financial aid so that they could support their children.

Children who had to be removed from their own families should be cared for, wherever possible, in family homes. If necessary, foster families should be paid to care for other people’s children.

Only those children who could not be cared for in their own homes or in foster homes should be consigned to institutions, and those institutions should be made as homelike as possible.15

These and other recommendations put together during the White House Conference of 1909, helped shape child welfare policy throughout the twentieth century.16

Three years after the conference, one of its female attendees, Julia C. Lathrop, a friend of Jane Addams and a Hull House resident, gained the distinction of becoming the first woman to head a federal agency. Shortly before leaving office in March of 1909, Theodore Roosevelt urged Congress to pass a bill to establish a federal children’s bureau. His successor, William H. Taft, signed legislation on April 9, 1912, that appropriated

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15 Ibid., 15.

$25,640 to the new Federal Children’s Bureau (FCB), an agency created to examine and report "upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people." The FCB began operating in August of the same year, with Lathrop at its helm. Under her leadership, the organization gathered information regarding the condition of children from across the United States, calling attention to the urgent needs of poor and dependent children, thereby providing a factual foundation for many future programs and laws. Lathrop remained chief of the organization until 1922, and continued advocating for women and children’s welfare until her death in April 1932.17

Politicians and citizens of the state of Minnesota had been active in child welfare issues at least a decade before the 1909 conference in Washington, D.C. For example, in the election of 1881, voters chose Lucius F. Hubbard, a proponent of Charles Loring Brace’s ideas on social work and juvenile institutions, to serve as their governor.18 During his five-year term, Hubbard involved himself in many reform matters, including public health issues, regulation of the railroads, charities, corrections, and child saving. He established the Minnesota State Board of Charities and Corrections in 1883, choosing a former minister and one of the most innovative social workers of the day, Hastings H. Hart, as its secretary. Hubbard, with Hart acting as his top advisor, persuaded the

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Minnesota legislature to adopt many new health and welfare programs. The two men eventually developed a plan that led to the state legislature’s passing a law in 1883 that established the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (MNSPS).19

Both Hubbard and Hart agreed with the prevailing view of the era: that children should be removed from poorhouses and impoverished natural homes, and placed-out to farm families. The governor’s strategy included a system of interim institutionalization of children in a cottage-style facility, so that the children maintained good health and received some manner of education until placement in a suitable home occurred.20 In accordance with Hubbard’s plan, legislators set up the MNSPS “to provide for such children a temporary home only in said school until homes can be procured for them in good families.”21

Hubbard’s views differed from those of Brace and other activists in the use of indenture contracts. Brace favored the immediate placement of children in a family home, fearing an indentured situation would lead to abuse and prevent children from leaving bad homes. Hubbard and Hart felt confident in their plan for a temporary home-like state school, and the use of indenture, since they had modeled the MNSPS after a similar state

19 Clement, “With Wise and Benevolent Purpose,” 4

20 Ibid.

public school in Coldwater, Michigan, which had been operating successfully since 1874.\textsuperscript{22}

The law establishing the MNSPS provided for a governor-appointed board of five commissioners to select a location for the school, as well as hire a person to operate it. After an intense competition between a few Minnesota towns and cities, the board chose Owatonna, mainly for intersecting railroads and its rural setting, yet close proximity (approximately sixty miles) to the most densely populated portion of the state, the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The commissioners picked Galen A. Merrill, former vice-superintendent of the Coldwater, Michigan state public school, to serve as the first superintendent of the school in Owatonna.\textsuperscript{23}

Merrill firmly believed in not only the home-like cottages that housed the orphans of the MNSPS, but also supported the practice of removing children from almshouses and asylums, and placing them into traditional family homes. He outlined his ideas about the new state school in his first report to the school’s governing board, writing that [a model institution] “is the one that builds up the system of caring for these children in homes...rather than the one which constantly enlarges its borders and becomes a source of increasing public expense.” He continued, “We may have cottages but let us have the most of them, not on the grounds at Owatonna, but all over Minnesota, and let there be only about one child in each cottage.”\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[C\textsuperscript{22}] Clement, “Wise and Benevolent Purpose,” 4.
\item[C\textsuperscript{23}] Nathaniel Winship and others, *History of Steele and Waseca Counties, Minnesota* (Chicago: Union Publishing Company, 1887), 274.
\item[C\textsuperscript{24}] Owatonna State Public School, *Superintendent’s Reports*, Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, MN. Galen A. Merrill report to Board of Control, December 7, 1886.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
With Merrill at its helm, the MNSPS opened its doors on December 10, 1886, and remained in operation as a child-welfare asylum in one form or another for almost eighty-five years. Merrill ran the institution until his death on October 10, 1934, a remarkable forty-eight year tenure. The MNSPS maintained steady growth during its first twenty-five years of existence, reaching its pinnacle during the Depression era. By 1937, the grounds had grown to 329 acres and the number of student cottages reached 15, and housed nearly 500 students. The narrator of a 2002 film documentary on the MNSPS described it as “a city on a hill, on the edge of town, in a world of its own, practically self-sufficient in its salad days.” The school used a huge root cellar to store food, most grown on the grounds of the facility. The MNSPS had its own greenhouse, dairy barn, farm buildings, schoolhouse, fields, pastures, orchard, and animals. It also had a nursery, hospital, dentist, barber, shoe repair, church, cemetery, icehouse, water tower, and power plant. At one point it even had a zoo. Everyone living there had jobs to perform, including such chores as working in the fields, tending the livestock, working in the kitchen and bakery, and taking care of the babies.

The state-run MNSPS differed from private institutions because Minnesota required the absolute surrender of parental rights over all children entering its school. In

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26 “Galen A. Merrill Dies at his Home Here,” The Daily People’s Press (Owatonna), October 11, 1934, 1.

27 Ronglien, RTC, July 11, 1996, 10.

28 The Children Remember: Life at the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children, 1886-1945, VHS, produced and directed by Kathleen Laughlin (Owatonna, MN: Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum, 2002).

29 Ibid.
Superintendent Merrill’s opinion, the rule served several purposes, including acting as a deterrent for people who would try to “throw off the burden of supporting their children” by leaving them at the school and never coming back to reclaim them. Merrill also believed that revoking parental rights would help achieve the ultimate purpose of the school, to “elevate the dependent classes and lessen their numbers,” thereby breaking the cycle of destitution in individual families. According to Merrill, when children entered a cottage-style facility such as the MNSPS, “their old life is shut out, and they enter here a community governed and maintained under high moral and Christian standards...and during the few months which they spend here they are given a foretaste of the benefits awaiting them in the homes to which they are going.”

Since the MNSPS’s requirement of total surrender of parental rights differed from previous agencies and asylums, many Minnesota parents misunderstood the permanency of handing their children over to the state school. Sadly, once Merrill had placed a child into a home, either via adoption or indenture contract, he would rarely divulge the child’s whereabouts to his or her natural family, even if the parent had not fully understood the consequences of releasing guardianship to the state. An 1889 Minnesota law made the return of children to their families possible, if the parents could demonstrate they had become capable of supporting them. However, the law pertained only to children who had not already been placed-out. In most cases, by the time a family


31 Ibid., 210-211.
could prove it could provide for its children, the children no longer resided at the MNSPS, and the parents’ chance to regain custody had passed.32

In general, no matter how frantic or heartfelt a parental plea, Merrill refused to tell them where a child had been sent. Many case files from former MNSPS inmates contain letters from mothers pleading with Merrill for information about their children. In one instance, Mrs. R, on June 28, 1905, wrote to the superintendent demanding to learn about the whereabouts of her four children. She stated, “It’s pretty hard to be deprived of a mother’s own children without a cause.” In his reply, Merrill wrote that he was “pleased to inform you that the last reports of your children were good. They are all in good homes and seem to be well liked by their guardians. I am not at liberty to give you the address of your children.” For the next thirteen years, Merrill denied Mrs. R.’s repeated requests regarding the location of her children, telling her, “Do not be anxious. We will do what is best for them,” or “it does not seem to be in the best interest of the children to give them your address.” Even after Mrs. R.’s son Ray had turned eighteen and was headed overseas to fight in World War I, Merrill appeared hesitant to grant the young soldier’s request for his sister’s address. The superintendent told Ray R. that he “was not at liberty” to give out the address, but offered to contact the sister’s foster parents to find out if they would agree to the request.33

Merrill’s steadfast refusal to aid in the reunion of family members seemingly contradicted his stated philosophy regarding the return of children to their natural parents.


33 Owatonna State Public School, *History of the Children, 1886-1945*, case 2751, Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, MN (hereafter cited as HOTC). Merrill made a notation on Mrs. R.’s letter that “father deserted family” and “mother immoral. Mrs. R.’s four children were indentured to four separate homes. Separating siblings was common practice at the MNSPS.
After serving more than forty years as superintendent of the MNSPS, Merrill ostensibly believed the separation of a child from its family should only take place as a last resort. In a report written around 1930 he wrote,

> It must not be forgotten that there is no love like mother love and that before children are deprived of the enjoyment and influence of that love, we must be reasonably certain that that which we purpose to substitute for it will be of equal value in its influence upon their character and lives.\(^{34}\)

He further stated, however, that since removal of the child from its natural home was considered the last resort, “it is often the case that we find such a record of conduct as to forbid the return of the children.” Merrill cited a survey showing that of the children who had been returned to their parents, 55% had done well, 27% fairly well, and 18% poorly, in contrast with 83% who were doing well in foster homes.\(^{35}\) He clearly felt that foster care remained the better option.

Permanent adoption, the number one choice for placement at the MNSPS, took place in a small percentage of cases. The next best option involved the use of indenture contracts between the state and Minnesota families. Superintendent Merrill eventually utilized the indenture method extensively at the MNSPS, but only after he had employed full-time state agents to inspect and monitor future homes, both before placing a child and on an ongoing basis after placement. In order to obtain a child from the MNSPS, an interested citizen completed an “Application For A Child From The State Public School” form, submitting the paperwork, along with two dollars. After Merrill reviewed the request and found the applicant suitable, Merrill’s staff drew up a contract

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\(^{34}\) Minnesota State Public School. Correspondence, Speeches, and Writings of Galen A. Merrill, 1886-1933, 109.F.15.8F, 24-25, Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
granting the new guardian custodial rights over a boy or girl from the school. Merrill made the final determination regarding the applicant’s acceptability.\(^{36}\)

Once approved, the applicant signed an indenture contract, agreeing to several terms regarding the welfare of the minor child. The guardian’s obligations included ensuring the child would receive at least four months of education per year until age eighteen; providing training in a useful occupation; giving the child suitable and sufficient clothing; and treating the child “properly and kindly as a member of his family.” Each guardian agreed to give the child, at age eighteen, $75 - $100 and two suits of clothing. Some families met the conditions of the indenture contract, but more often than not the opposite occurred and children were only taken for their free labor. Abusers of the contract found methods to get around the terms, such as sending a child to school one day in four months, or listing the generic “farming” or “housekeeping,” for the occupational training.\(^{37}\)

Although its founders created the MNSPS to serve as a temporary, home-like atmosphere for needy children, many of its inmates ended up living at the MNSPS for several years, becoming precisely what progressive reformers had fought against—institutionalized. Harvey Ronglein, who spent eleven years as a resident of the MNSPS, discussed his contradictory views on the state school and institutionalization in his memoir. He appreciated the clean environment, warm bed, a good education, and three regular meals a day, especially since he lived there during the Depression. He loved his fellow students, many of whom remained life-long friends, and felt that he learned a good

\(^{36}\) Matthew A. Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 164; HOTC, case 3977.

work ethic. However, according to Ronglien, even though the facility strived to duplicate a family atmosphere, it was nevertheless an institution, and after a few years of residing there, he became institutionalized.38

The mission of the MNSPS changed gradually over the eighty-five years of its existence. In 1917, the state abolished the board of control for the Owatonna school, transferring its duties to the state board of control, which then assigned the power of commitment to the county juvenile courts. The courts increasingly began referring young, healthy, needy children to private foster-care agencies, while sending children they considered feeble-minded or of low intelligence to the MNSPS. In the mid 1930s, following the death of Merrill and the retirement of much of the “old guard” staff, younger administrators with new social ideas created new approaches regarding placement of homeless children, which included abandonment of the indenture contract.39

By the 1940s, social workers only recommended institutionalization for a limited number of cases, and only when they determined the child was not suitable for home placement.40 The purpose of the facility increasingly shifted to the care of educable mentally retarded children, officially changing its name to the Owatonna State School in 1947. By the late 1960s, the trend toward mainstreaming retarded children caused the institution to lose its clientele, and it closed completely in July 1970.41

38 Harvey Ronglien, *A Boy From C-11*, 177-178.


CHAPTER III

THE DEMISE OF A FAMILY

Thousands of children and families, from farms, villages and cities, in all corners of the state, dealt with the Minnesota welfare system during the sixty years the MNSPS operated as the only state-run orphanage. The institution accepted inmates regardless of ethnic origin, race, or religious affiliation, and in ages ranging from birth to eighteen years. No matter what the child’s situation, each was delivered into a strange, new institutional culture and had to quickly adapt. And every child had his or her own story to tell.

One family living in the small town of Montevideo, Minnesota, provides an example of an individual family’s experiences with the MNSPS during the early twentieth century. John Nelson and Betsy Mines, both Minnesota-born children of Norwegian immigrants, married on March 8, 1889, in Granite Falls, Minnesota.¹ The couple lived in Granite Falls until May 1904, when they moved to nearby Montevideo. Betsy bore eight children during her marriage to John, six of whom survived infancy. All sons, they included Henry Benjamin (Ben), born 1890; Walter, born 1892; Clarence, born 1896; Joseph, born 1901; Arden, born 1904; and Orven, born 1908.²

¹ Paralytic Stroke Results in Death of Mrs. Fred Bjorndahl, Montevideo American, November 24, 1944.
² Ibid.
Although John listed his occupation as “day laborer” or “common laborer” on state and federal censuses during his twenty-two year marriage to Betsy, witnesses at their 1911 divorce proceedings described him as a heavy drinker who had rarely contributed to the support of his wife and six children. John worked as a farmhand in the summer months and joined threshing teams during harvest season, but brought in little or no income throughout the rest of the year. He spent much of the money he had earned in saloons, and was arrested more than once for non-support. Relatives, including John’s father Gilbert and Betsy’s father Hans O. Mines, periodically took the family in or gave them money to pay their rent, but the living conditions for six children were far from ideal. By the time Betsy filed for divorce, John had deserted the family altogether, moving to nearby Appleton, Minnesota where he worked as a bartender. When asked on February 9, 1911, whether her husband had supported her lately, Betsy replied, “I haven’t seen him for over a year or got a cent from him since the first or middle part of September, I think it was, a year ago.”

John’s lifestyle of drunkenness, vagrancy, and abandonment of familial responsibilities contrasted greatly with the growing respectability of other citizens of

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Montevideo. On November 3, 1909, an editorial in the *Montevideo Leader* newspaper stated that the town “is a flourishing young city surrounded by a well settled and prosperous community.”6 By that year, the town of Montevideo, established in 1867 when George W. Frink made claim to a plot of land along the Chippewa River, boasted at least a dozen churches (mostly Lutheran), a bank, an opera house, schools, a Carnegie Library, and a newly constructed hospital. In a special election held on June 30, 1908, the citizens of the Village of Montevideo ratified a charter creating the new City of Montevideo. Two months later, the city elected its first officers, who included a mayor, seven aldermen, a treasurer, and two constables.7

On February 25, 1910, the City Council of Montevideo published its newly prepared and adopted ordinances on the front page of the *Montevideo Leader*.8 The ordinances put restrictions on a wide range of activities, many of which focused on issues of morality. For example, Chapter 5 of the rules prohibited “obscene or filthy acts,” such as a person appearing in any street in “a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.” It went so far as making it a misdemeanor for any person or persons who “allowed” any type of animal they owned to engage in reproductive activity that could be witnessed by the public within the city limits. Cigarettes, tobacco, alcohol and gambling were forbidden within 100 feet of any building containing a billiard table or a bowling alley. Ordinances banned vagrancy, drinking in public places, gambling, and public

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7 Ibid, 109.

8 Ordinances of the City of Montevideo, Prepared, Adopted and Published By Authority of the City Council, *Montevideo Leader*, February 25, 1910.
intoxication, all vices of John Nelson. In addition, the laws strove to protect the town from wild juveniles, adopting an ordinance for the restraining of children under sixteen years of age between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., and one against street beggars.\footnote{Ibid.}

John Nelson (and most likely his wife and older children) had been engaging in the type of activities and behavior forbidden in these ordinances for at least three years before the city council adopted these strict measures. One recorded incident took place on November 24, 1906, when Chippewa County Justice of the Peace Elias Jacobson issued an arrest warrant for John Nelson, on charges that he sold intoxicating liquor without a license. The county sheriff arrested Nelson that same day, and brought him into court. Nelson pleaded not guilty, and the justice ordered him to return to court in one week, ready to pay two hundred dollars in bail. Nelson showed up the next week and waived his right to “any further examination on the matter.” He had managed to secure the money for his bail, so the justice released him from custody and ordered him to appear and answer the charges at the next “General turn” of the court.\footnote{State of Minnesota, Village of Montevideo Justice’s Court, \textit{Justice Court Ledger, 1900-1910}, Montevideo, MN, 246. The outcome of Nelson’s return to court did not appear later in the Justice’s Court record.}

Less than a month later, Nelson landed back court, this time on far more serious charges. On December 29, 1906, Ole Johnsrud and C. A. Sherdahl, two Village of Montevideo Trustees, petitioned the Chippewa County Probate Court to have Judge J. M. Severens commit Clarence, Joseph, and Arden Nelson to the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota. Johnsrud and Sherdahl, two local businessmen, stated in the petition that in their opinion, the three boys “are through the habitual intemperance and neglect and
grave misconduct and cruel and bad treatment of their parents, and are in peril of their life, health, or normality.” The court issued a citation to the boys’ parents, requiring them to appear at a hearing if they desired to show cause why the children should not be removed from their home.11

John Nelson hired attorney C. W. Beusel to fight the lawsuit. Beusel argued against commitment of the three boys, offering three objections:

That the petition herein does not comply with section 3122 code of 1905 in that it fails to show sufficiently that Ole Johnsrud and C.A. Sherdahl are members of the governing board of any city, county, town or village as required by said section.
That said petition does not show that all of said children are not under 10 years of age as required by Statue.
That said petition fails to show in what respect, or in what manner the said children have been neglected or for what reason it is sought to take the said children from their parents.12

At that point, the judge ruled in favor of the Nelson family, and the children remained with their parents.13 Three years later, however, only a few days before the city published its new strict ordinances, the family faced the courts again. This time the outcome of the trial led to the breakup of the family.

John Nelson’s 1906 court battles clearly did not guide him towards a path of clean and responsible living, since he left Montevideo and his family for good in August, 1909. Betsy brought court proceedings to compel him to support the family, but after John moved out he continued his heavy drinking and failed to provide any monetary...

12 Ibid. Only three of the Nelson boys were included in the 1906 petition for commitment because Ben and Walter were over the age of ten, and Orven was not yet born.
13 Ibid.
assistance other than a few dollars. Betsy earned a few cents now and then by taking in laundry, but nothing close to enough to properly feed and clothe her children. It took less than a year for Betsy’s ill-managed and poverty-stricken household to come to the attention of the town’s more upstanding citizens.\footnote{Nelson v. Nelson.}

In early 1910, two local businessmen, also county commissioners, petitioned the Probate Court of Chippewa County to remove Clarence, Joseph and Arden Nelson from their home. According to court documents, the three boys were “all in a state of habitual vagrancy and mendicity (sic) and are ill treated and in peril of health and morality by reason of the habitual intemperance, neglect and misconduct of both parents.” Judge Severens jotted notes down during the hearing, writing, “father’s been away a year or more. Residence not known. Drunkard, immoral—worthless,” and “mother washes and irons for support. Lives in dirty, unsanitary place. Children on streets. Wholly neglected. Children had to steal coal for keeping them warm.” The court papers listed several reasons leading to the condition of the children, including the habitual intemperance of their father, plus the fact that he had abandoned the family. The documents also listed John’s “moral depravity” and neglect to provide the necessities of life as causes of concern. The petition noted Betsy’s inability to earn an income to provide for the family properly, her use of intoxicating liquors to excess, the filthy living conditions of her household, and her lack of moral responsibility.\footnote{State of Minnesota, County of Chippewa Probate Court, Petition for Admission to State Public School, January 25, 1910. Again the petition only involved Clarence, Joseph and Arden. Ben and Walter were old enough to take care of themselves. Betsy was still breastfeeding her youngest child, Orrie, so he was not taken.}
Although Betsy’s husband was nowhere to be found during the commitment hearing of his sons, her father Hans Mines tried to lend some assistance to his daughter and grandchildren. He offered to bring one of the boys home to live with him, although stated he could not take custody of all three. Judge Severens, however, would not allow any of the children to live with Mines, declaring he was “not fit and too ignorant.” Therefore, with no family member deemed worthy to care for the children, the judge signed a commitment order on February 14, 1910, sending the three boys to the MNSPS in Owatonna.16

State Agent John Austin escorted the children to the state school, where they arrived by hack on February 17, 1910.17 According to former MNSPS inmate, Eva Carlson Jensen, the check-in process was a frightening ordeal. She described her arrival at the school in 1921, in her memoirs:

We were taken into a large building, my brothers went one direction and I went the other. I was just petrified! People took my clothes off and started examining me, poking and prodding and checking my hair. I started to cry and I said, ‘I want my mama.’ A lady came over to me and slapped me across the face so hard I saw stars. She said, ‘There will be no crying in here!

After that night, Carlson never saw her brothers again. The state transferred the two boys to another facility shortly after their arrival. The three siblings never had a chance to say goodbye to each other.18

16 Ibid.; HOTC, case 3977.
17 HOTC, case 3977.
18 Eva Carlson Jensen, No Tears Allowed, memoirs, obtained via the Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum, Owatonna, Minnesota. The separation of siblings was common practice at the MNSPS.
Many former MNSPS inmates remembered the terrifying and humiliating delousing procedures suffered by each new arrival to the school. In her memoirs, Arlene Nelson (no relation) described her experience with this process at age 12:

They laid me on my back, and four of the older kids held on to each of my arms and legs. I was spread out like an angel in the snow. One of the men tilted my head over the edge of the table and began to pour a large bucket of kerosene over my hair. It was terrible! The smell was stifling, and he was not very careful how he poured the kerosene. Later they told me that they had done that to get all the head lice and eggs out of my hair.

After examinations by a doctor and a dentist, the staff assigned Arlene and her sister Edythe to different cottages, separating the sisters for the first time in their lives.19 Less than a month later, Arlene was indentured to a family in Kenyon, Minnesota. Edythe ran away from the school at age seventeen.20

Clarence, Joseph, and Arden Nelson most likely suffered through the same sort of unsettling procedures when they arrived at the institution. After a physical examination, at which time a physician declared them to be in good health, the Nelson children were each taken to separate cottages to reside with boys their age. None of them would remain at the MNSPS for long, however, and it would be many years before two of the three youngsters were reunited. And no one in the Nelson family would ever see one of the brothers again.21

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20 Ibid., 107.

21 HOTC, cases 3977, 3978, and 3979.
CHAPTER IV

CASE 3977: CLARENCE O. NELSON

Clarence Nelson arrived at the MNSPS on his fourteenth birthday. Following standard procedures, a physician conducted a detailed physical examination. Nelson presented himself as a 4 foot 7 inch teenager with brown hair, blue eyes, clean skin, and good teeth. The doctor wrote “normal” under most of the categories listed under Clarence’s “Present Physical Condition,” although he described the boy as a “thin underfed child” with small muscles, enlarged tonsils, and a curvature of his spine from scoliosis. Under the “Mental Condition” section of the physician’s report, the doctor noted Nelson’s speech and his head size and shape as normal. According to the report, Nelson could read, write, “use playthings,” had clean personal habits, and was not destructive.1 In all likelihood, Clarence next endured the kerosene treatment for lice, and was then escorted to the student cottage for boys in his age group.

In early March, MNSPS Superintendent Merrill received a letter from Ben Nelson, the oldest of the Nelson brothers. Although he displayed poor writing skills, he managed to convey to Merrill the fact that the family had concerns about a foot injury that Clarence had suffered two years earlier when he was hit by an automobile. Ben also inquired after his other two brothers in Merrill’s custody, “Joe and Ardie,” as he called them. Merrill answered Ben’s letter on March 9, 1910, with the typically curt reply he

1 HOTC, case 3977, Physician’s Report, February 17, 1910.
employed when responding to a family member’s plea for information on an inmate. He wrote that he was “pleased to inform you that your brothers, Clarence, Joe and Arden are well and getting along nicely.” He added, “I do not think Clarence is having any trouble with his foot, and he will receive such attention as he may need in our hospital.”

Unbeknown to Clarence or his family back in Montevideo, Merrill already had plans to send him to a new home, albeit on a trial basis. The superintendent had been corresponding with Mr. A.P. Pederson, a Norwegian farmer from Brownsdale, Minnesota. Mr. Pederson had written to Merrill during January and February, 1910, lamenting the fact that Willie, a MNSPS boy who had been living with Pederson and his wife under an indenture contract, had run away. He asked Merrill for another boy, stating his preference for a male Scandinavian, preferably a good boy who would not try to escape, since Mrs. Peterson “was sick for two weeks after Willie left.” Merrill replied on March 2, 1910, that he had an available boy, describing Clarence as fourteen-years-old and of Norwegian descent. He wrote:

He is a good boy apparently. He has been here but a short time. I think you may like him. If you would like to try him, kindly sign and return the enclosed papers and send $2.00 to help defray the expense of transportation and we will arrange to send him to you soon.

Pederson signed the standard form for indenture on March 21, 1910, paid the two dollar fee, and took Clarence home with him.

Clarence lasted less than a week at the Pederson farm. Obviously frustrated, Pederson wrote to Merrill on March 25, 1910, informing the superintendent that he

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2 Ibid., letter from Ben Nelson, March 5, 1910; letter from Galen Merrill, March 9, 1910.

3 Ibid., correspondence between Merrill and A. P. Pederson, January 21, 1910 through March 21, 1910; Application for a Child from the State Public School, March 21, 1910.
assumed Clarence was back at the MNSPS, since he had run away. A hired hand told Pederson that the boy had confided he wanted to go back to the school because he did not wish to stay on a farm. Pederson wrote, “It looks as if you selected our place for your bad boys. The first one was bad enuf (sic), but the second was worse.” He went on to complain that Clarence had stolen money from his wife, and tobacco from him. Pederson told Merrill he would return the youngster if he found him. No mention was made of “trying out” another child.4

Fours days later, Merrill informed Pederson that Clarence had not returned to the school, and that he suspected he had gone home to Montevideo. Merrill and his personnel began an investigation that same day into Clarence’s whereabouts, starting with a letter to John Austin, the Truant Officer who had delivered the Nelson children to the school. It took Austin and other MNSPS representatives a few months to locate the missing teenager, but eventually the Chippewa county attorney informed Merrill that his staff had located the Nelson boy. He had made his way back to his mother, who had moved in with her parents in Myers, Minnesota. Merrill sent Agent A. J. Harpman to fetch Clarence and return him to the school, which he did on July 21, 1910.5

Clarence was not the only boy under the care of the MNSPS who made an escape attempt during the spring and summer months of 1910. Owatonna’s Journal Chronicle reported five other runaways between April and August that year. Ben Schultz and Oscar Staffne, both indentured but to different homes, joined forces to make their getaway. Schultz’s guardian, convinced his ward had been happy and content, blamed the


5 Ibid., letter from Merrill, March 29, 1910; letter from C. A. Fosnes, July 9, 1910; State Agent’s Report from A. J. Harpman, July 21, 1910.
more “wild and reckless” Staffne for the boys’ departure. Twelve-year-old Arthur Kostomo, who had only lived at the school for a month, set out by himself to walk the three hundred mile journey it would take to get back to his mother. He managed only fifteen miles, when a man recognized the blue and white striped shirt worn by MNSPS inmates and turned him over to the local authorities. In August, the newspaper reported that James Smith and Arthur Pautz, “tired of the quiet and routine life at the state school at Owatonna and with dreams of traveling, seeing the great big world,” hopped on a train’s box car. They made it thirty-five miles to Albert Lea, Minnesota, but police greeted them at the station, due to a tip from a railroad employee. Like Clarence, all the boys were returned to the school.⁶ Clarence, once again, would not remain at the school for long.

The following October, a young farmer living in rural Owatonna named William F. Behsmann, filled out the standard MNSPS Application for a Child form. Unlike the majority of applicants, however, Behsmann seemingly wanted more of a hired hand for his farm than a child to join the family. He left blank the section where he, as potential guardian, would agree to send the child to school. He also requested a child sixteen years of age, and he expressed a willingness to pay wages.⁷

Following MNSPS procedures, Merrill sent Agent Harpman to inspect the Behsmann home before agreeing to the placement of a child there. The agent reported that the farmer, along with his wife and their two-year-old daughter, lived in a small farm

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⁷ HOTC, case 3977, Application For a Child from the State Public School, October 3, 1910.
house which was in fairly good condition. Harpman rated Behsmann’s reputation in the neighborhood as “good,” his habits (intemperate or otherwise) as “temperate,” and his language (profane or otherwise) as “satisfactory.” In the “further remarks” section, Harpman wrote that Behsmann agreed to pay his ward $12 per month from December 1 to April 1, and $20 per month for the remaining months, for a total of $208 per year.\(^8\)

Merrill sent a letter of approval to Behsmann, indicating they had selected a boy to send to him. He wrote that Clarence “is not very tall, but he is sturdy.” He reiterated the terms of the agreement between Behsmann and Harpman regarding the wages Clarence would earn during his stay with the family, and asked that he come to the school to fill out the paperwork and take Clarence home with him.\(^9\)

Behsmann arrived a few days later to complete the form and to meet his new ward. In the Indenture Contract, he agreed to become Clarence’s guardian until the boy turned eighteen, and to teach him the occupation of farming, both ordinary clauses in the contract. However, the wording in two sections of the document varied from the normal Indenture Contract. Behsmann stated he would send Clarence to school for eighty days out of the year, approximately half the number of compulsory school days set by the State of Minnesota. Also, instead of the standard agreement to pay the child $75 at the full term of the contract, Behsmann consented to pay “$20 per month from April 1 to Dec. 1 each

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\(^8\) Ibid., State Agent’s Special Report, November 28, 1910.

\(^9\) Ibid., letter from Merrill to Behsmann, December 5, 1910.
year,” per his arrangement with Agent Harpman, but the paying of wages amounting to $12 per month for the winter months was not mentioned.\(^{10}\)

Nine months later, Clarence Nelson’s case file landed back on Merrill’s desk, this time prompted by a letter from Clarence’s mother Betsy. She had evidently sought legal advice since, although she signed it, the letter was typed on stationery from the office of J. O. Haugland, a Montevideo attorney. In the letter, Betsy indicated that she had received a letter from Behsmann soon after he had signed the indenture contract for Clarence. She told Merrill, “Mr. Beshman (sic) has written a letter to me wherein he told me that he was to pay the boy $20.00 per month for eight months of the year and that the boy was going to go to school the other four months of the year.” Betsy wanted to know if her son’s wages would be paid directly to Clarence, or if the school would collect the money. She also admonished the superintendent about the schooling arrangements. She wrote, “It seems to me that four months of school in the year is too little for a boy so far advanced in years as Clarence is and I should think that it would be for the better interests of Clarence if he could go to school more than four months in the years.”\(^{11}\)

Merrill promptly replied to Betsy, informing her she had the correct information regarding the terms of the agreement. He added that after deducting the cost of clothing for Clarence, Behsmann would pay the balance of the child’s wages to an account kept by the MNSPS. He also answered her concerns about Clarence’s lack of school attendance, He told her that they had tried to place him in a home where he could

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., State Public School Indenture of Clarence Nelson to Wm. F. Behsmann, December 10, 1910; State of Minnesota, Common School Teachers’ Term Report to the County Superintendent, 1907-1911—Blue Earth County, location # 128.1.1.7B, March 31, 1911, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota State Historical Society.

\(^{11}\) HTOC, case 3977, letter from Betsy Nelson to Merrill, September 14, 1911.
attend school all the time school was in session, but he would not go to school and ran away from that home, apparently referring to the short time he stayed with the Pederson family. He went on to inform Betsy that Clarence had not been behaving at the Behsmann house either, and unless his conduct improved the family would return Clarence to the school. He stated he would send an agent out to visit Clarence, and “try to encourage him to settle down and do better.”

MNSPS Agent Swanson completed his report on his visit to the Behsmann farm four days later. He listed the child’s physical condition as “good,” but noted his moral condition as “saucy, independent and profane.” According to Swanson, Clarence had attended school for four months out of the past year, but had only progressed to a third grade level in his studies. Swanson wrote that the boy had “acted badly” during his stay with the Behsmanns, but undergone a complete turnabout regarding his bad behavior a couple of weeks earlier, following a letter Clarence had received from his mother. According to Swanson, Betsy had “admonished him to do his duty and be obedient.” Behsmann told Swanson that he “could not ask for a better boy than Clarence has been since, and if he continues in this way he will be entirely satisfactory.” The agent and the guardian also discussed money matters: specifically, whether Clarence should be allowed to purchase the bicycle he wanted to buy with his two dollars per month allowance. Swanson told Behsmann he thought that allowing the purchase was a bad idea. He wrote, “I told him that a bicycle in my estimation is a curse to any boy and would not only be a bill of expense but would be a source of trouble to both him and Mr. Behsmann.” Swanson felt, however, that the trouble would most likely never come about. He felt

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12 Ibid., letter from Merrill to Betsy Nelson, September 14, 1911.
Clarence would not manage to save enough to buy a bicycle for a long time since he wasted his allowance on candy, soda pop and tobacco, even though he had promised to quit smoking. 13

A few months later, the Nelson family contacted Merrill once again. Betsy’s oldest son Ben wrote to tell him that he and his mother thought the superintendent was not doing his duty by Clarence. He wrote, “He was taken from us because he did not get enough schooling and it don’t (sic) make any difference about the money he is making, it’s the school that he needs. I hope you will see that he gets what is left of his time in schooling.” 14 Merrill replied:

I will say that we are giving Clarence all the schooling he will make use of. He is not a very obedient boy, does not like to go to school and we have done the best that we could do for him. I think it is better that he have a steady home and steady place to work than to be running around the country getting into trouble as he would do if he were allowed to. 15

Not long after this exchange, Behsmann decided to return Clarence to the MNSPS, stating he had no confidence in the boy and that he no longer wished to keep him. 16 Merrill had to, yet again, find another placement for Clarence.

In early September 1912, Merrill, probably leery of another failed situation or escape attempt, sent Agent Harpmann to Montevideo to investigate the possibility of placing Clarence either with his grandfather Hans Mines, or with someone in the nearby vicinity. Harpmann first interviewed Mines, who stated he would allow Clarence to live

13 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, September 18, 1911.
14 Ibid., letter from B. H. Nelson to Merrill, February 1, 1912.
15 Ibid., letter from Merrill to B. H. Nelson, February 5, 1912.
16 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, September 3, 1912.
with him and his wife on their farm, but that he could not promise to give his grandson anything more than a home and clothing. The agent noted in his report that the couple were “good people morally, but are ‘stingy’.” Harpmann spent the next day driving to several other farms, looking for someone who would hire Clarence and allow him to live with them. He had no luck with his search, stating, “The Nelson boys all have a bad reputation and are not wanted.” He recommended “that Clarence be allowed to go to Hans O. Mines on a contract for board and clothes, and let him make such contracts for work for Clarence as he may be able to do.” Mines completed the standard application form, omitting the section whereby he agreed to pay Clarence any money at the end of the indenture term. Merrill approved the application and Clarence came back home to Montevideo and his family, albeit still under the jurisdiction of the MNSPS.18

His grandparents clearly had little or no control over Clarence’s behavior, since he managed to get himself into more serious trouble a few months after his return home. On August 28, 1913, County Attorney C. A. Fosnes wrote to the MNSPS to inform them of the youth’s arrest. He wrote:

Clarence Nelson, who I understand is out of your institution under parole, and now here, is getting into considerable trouble and if you still have control of him think it would be well to have him looked after. He is to be tried today for assault and while the outcome of it is not certain, there is no question but that he is carrying weapons around and drinking more or less. There is no question but he would be better off elsewhere.19

17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., letter from C. A. Fosnes to MNSPS, August 28, 1913.
Merrill replied to Fosnes the next day, informing him that Clarence was no longer under the guardianship of the MNSPS. He wrote that the Board of Managers had discharged Clarence from guardianship, since he had nearly reached eighteen years of age. Merrill told the attorney that, if it became necessary for Clarence to be placed in an institution, it would have to be somewhere other than the MNSPS.20

Although the MNSPS had severed ties with Clarence, the institution still had a small amount of money in an account for him, money he had earned while living with the Behsmann family. In February, 1914, Merrill wrote to Fosnes again, asking for information on Clarence’s present situation so he could dispose of the money in his account.21 Fosnes told Merrill he thought Clarence now resided in Minneapolis with his father’s cousin, Iver C. Nelson. Iver, an attorney, had represented Clarence regarding the August assault charges, and had offered to let Clarence live with him. Fosnes informed Merrill that due to the fact that the MNSPS would not take Clarence back, and that Iver could provide a good home for the youth, the court released Clarence to his cousin’s custody.22

Once Merrill ascertained Clarence’s location, he sent Agent Harpmann to Minneapolis to make one last report on the former inmate. He found that Clarence had moved out of his cousin Iver’s house, and was now living with Clarence’s father, John. Iver had tried to steer Clarence in the right direction after taking him in following the boy’s arrest in Montevideo, but to no avail. He gave Clarence a job as an office boy at his

20 Ibid., letter from Merrill to C. A. Fosnes, August 29, 1913.
21 Ibid., letter from Merrill to C. A. Fosnes, February 11, 1914.
22 Ibid., letter from Fornes to Merrill, February 14, 1914.
law firm, and encouraged him to get involved in healthy activities, such as joining the Y.M.C.A. and attending night school. Harpmann wrote that Clarence had no interest in, and did not appreciate the opportunities Iver presented. Instead, Clarence chose to move in with his the father, whose desertion of the family years earlier had led to Clarence’s incarceration at the MNSPS. John had not made many changes in his lifestyle, as evidenced by the comments in Harpmann’s report. He wrote, “Jno. Nelson (sic) Clarence’s father drinks but will not allow Clarence to drink. On two occasions when he found Clarence under the influence of liquor he gave him a good threshing (sic).”23

Merrill had to wait a few more months to finally close the file on Case 3977, Clarence O. Nelson, since he still had over one hundred dollars in an account for his former ward. Clarence had not lasted long living with his father, and had moved back to Montevideo. On August 4, 1914, in a poorly-written letter that demonstrated his lack of schooling, he wrote to Merrill asking him to send twenty-five dollars at once. He explained that he had been without work, and owed money for room and board. Merrill sent Clarence a check four days later, along with a note wishing him well. On October 29, 1914, Merrill sent a check for $109.89, the balance of the account, to Clarence, addressed in care of Mrs. Betsy Nelson. That payment ended the association between Clarence, Merrill, and the MNSPS.24

23 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, February 18, 1914.

24 Ibid., letter from Clarence Nelson to Merrill, August 4, 1914; letter from Merrill to Clarence Nelson, October 29, 1914.
CHAPTER V

JOSEPH NELSON, CASE NUMBER 3978

Upon Joseph Nelson’s arrival at the MNSPS, a physician performed a standard examination on the eight-year-old child. The doctor noted that the 4-foot tall boy had brown hair, hazel eyes, clean but chapped hands, and poor teeth. According to the report, Joseph had a normal shape and size of head, had “indistinct” speech, could use playthings, but could not read or write. Other than enlarged adenoids, the child exhibited no abnormalities or deformities. He received his vaccinations, and officially entered the MNSPS system.¹

The MNSPS received thirty-four new children during the month of February, 1910, including the three Nelson brothers, bringing the total of enrollment in residence at the school to two hundred and thirty-five. In addition to the children living at the school, 1336 children lived in foster homes across the state under the terms of an indenture contract. A child, on average, lived in a cottage on the grounds of the MNSPS for eight months.² The superintendent maintained full control over the fate of the school’s inmates through his authority to match students with applicants looking for a foster child. A good match did not always occur, however, and some inmates, such as Harvey Ronglien, spent their entire childhood at the school. Merrill found a placement for Joseph Nelson in less

¹ HOTC, case 3978, Physician’s Report, February 17, 1910.
² Facts of Interest From State School, Owatonna Journal Chronicle, March 5, 1910.
than average time, but for a few months, Joseph experienced daily life as an institutionalized child.

Like every child in residence at the school, Joseph had to learn the rules and adapt to the routine of living in a state-run institution. The staff assigned each new student to a large building called a cottage, which typically housed around thirty-five children of a certain age group. A matron and two assistants managed each cottage, and controlled the day-to-day existence of their inmates with firm precision. Children woke up at 6:00 a.m., competed for bathroom usage, and ate breakfast. Everyone had to participate in chores such as scrubbing floors, making beds, or cleaning bathrooms, before the school day began. After school came playtime, and then supper. Students stood in line after supper to take a shower, after which they said their prayers and climbed into their beds promptly at 7:30 p.m., year round.3

Cottage matrons and their assistants strictly enforced rules and regulations, often doling out harsh punishment. Crying at any time of day, including at night in bed, brought at least a slap on the face, if not a few whacks across the legs or buttocks with a radiator brush.4 In response to bad behavior, matrons forced children to sit in a corner, go without supper, and kneel and pray for hours on end. Matrons would use soap to wash out the mouths of students using bad language. In her memoirs, Helen Bowers described her experience with a matron who administered a particularly harsh punishment. Bower wrote, “A common punishment was for her to put a broomstick across the seat of a chair

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3 Ronglien, RTC, July 18, 1996, 12.

4 The use of the radiator brush for punishment was so common throughout the years at the MNSPS, that the MNSPS Orphanage Museum chose “The Radiator Brush” as the title for its newsletter.
and then with my face toward the back of the chair kneel on the broom stick for three or more hours. When I got off I couldn’t walk.”

Joseph had five months to adapt to the routine at the MNSPS before Merrill made arrangements to send him to a new home. On July 14, 1910, W.F. Atcherson, a twenty-eight-year-old farmer living with his wife Bertina in Medo, a small town fifty miles east of Owatonna, completed an Indenture Contract, agreeing to become Joseph’s guardian. Atcherson consented to the standard terms of the contract, which included “maintaining, educating and treating him properly and kindly as a member of the family.” He would teach Joseph the occupation of farming, provide him with clothing, see that the child attended church, and allow him to attend public school enough days of the year to “comply with the compulsory school law of Minnesota.” Once Joseph turned eighteen, Atcherson agreed to “furnish the child with two good suits of clothes,” and to pay him seventy-five dollars.

Atcherson wrote to Merrill two weeks later to clear up an error involving the paperwork, which indicated that Joseph would turn eighteen in 1918 instead of 1919. He described Joseph as a very nice boy who seemed pleased with his new home, and therefore, would most likely remain with the Atcherson family for the full term of his indenture. The guardian asked Merrill to change the date on the contract now to avoid any disagreement later, which the superintendent did. Atcherson also inquired about

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another MNSPS child named Ray Rivers, who had recently left the care of a neighbor. Having heard that the sixteen-year-old was a good boy and a hard worker, Atcherson told Merrill he would consider taking Rivers as well as Joseph, and would pay wages to Rivers. Two weeks later, Atcherson filled out another contract with the school to take custody of Rivers, with the stipulation that he would pay Rivers eighteen dollars a month from April through November. He agreed that Rivers could attend school for the remaining four months of the years, but stated that the youth had to furnish his own clothing.7

When MNSPS Agent Swanson visited the Atcherson farm to check on the two boys the following November, he found that Joseph was faring well. The agent wrote that the Atchersons provided an excellent farm home, and that they treated Joseph as their own child. He listed the child’s physical condition as “fine,” and his moral condition as “good.” He noted that the child attended church regularly, and that Joseph was well-liked by his guardian. Under the “Recommendations and remarks” section the agent stated,

Joseph is a bright little boy and is very happy in his home. He wanted to know about Clarence and Arden and expressed the hope that they would find as good homes as he has found. Joe has been made the caretaker of a little pig which will be his if he takes proper care of it and judging from its looks he has not failed to do his duty by it so far.8

Rivers, on the other hand, had experienced some trouble. Agent Swanson described an accident that had taken place a few days earlier in his report to the school:

Ray Rivers had an accident a few days ago which might have proved serious. He was driving a team alongside of a cornhusker when his team stopped suddenly, throwing him head first to the ground between the team and wagon and both wheels

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7 HOTC, case 3978, letter from W.F. Atcherson to Merrill, July 30, 1910; HOTC, case 2751, State Public School Indenture of Ray Rivers to W.F. Atcherson, August 8, 1910.

8 HOTC, case 3978, State Agent’s Report, November 11, 1910.
of the loaded wagon passed over his limbs. As the ground was very soft no bones were broken.9

One year later, Agent Harpmann returned to the Atcherson farm for an inspection and to write a report on the condition of the two MNSPS wards. The visit was prompted by the fact that Merrill had received a letter from Rivers in which he voiced his dissatisfaction with his living arrangement and stated his desire to speak to an agent. Merrill promptly sent Harpmann to investigate the situation. The agent found that Joseph had done well during the past year, with a couple of exceptions. He wrote that the child “is fine. A bright boy, large for the age of 10.” He reported that Joseph continued to be content living with the Atchersons, and described the house as “a good farm home, neat and cheerful.” He was well-liked by his foster parents, who treated him as their own child. However, although Joseph had excellent attendance at school, the best of all sixteen students attending the one-room schoolhouse, he had only reached the level of a second grader. The agent noted one other cause for concern: he felt Joseph was “too easily influenced by his associates,” namely Ray Rivers. Evidently, the relationship between Rivers and the Atchersons had soured. The agent remarked in the recommendation section of the document, “They [the Atchersons] fear that Ray River’s influence upon Joseph is not what it should be and give that as one of the reasons for

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9 HOTC, case 2751, State Agent’s Report, November 11, 1910.
wishing to return Ray. I do not think it serious enough to need to transfer or return Ray.”

In his report to Merrill regarding Rivers, Agent Harpmann described an incident that illustrated the type of behavior the teenager had recently displayed:

Ray Rivers was noisy and misbehaved at a church fair and social. He told Mr. Atcherson to mind his own business when he reprimanded him. Ray Rivers wants to go back to the SPS and study engineering. I told him no and that he must start behaving like a man and live up to his contract.

Harpmann informed Merrill that the Atchersons were not happy with Rivers, and that they wanted to return him to the school. When Rivers turned eighteen a few months later, he was released from both the indenture contract with Atcherson and the MNSPS’s guardianship.

Agent Elizabeth McGregor paid a routine visit to the Atcherson farm a year later, and found that Joseph, no longer under the influence of the older Rivers, had made some satisfactory improvements. She listed his physical and moral condition as good, and stated that he continued to be content and liked by his guardian. He had taken on chores appropriate to a child his age, attended church and Sunday school regularly, and had missed only one day of school during the past year. He had also made good progress in

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10 HTOC, case 2751, letter from Ray Rivers to Merrill, November 7, 1911; State of Minnesota, Common School Teachers’ Term Report to the County Superintendent, 1911-1916—Blue Earth County, District 61, location # 128.1.1.8F, April 7, 1911, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota State Historical Society (hereafter cited as BEC Teachers’ Report); HOTC, case 3978, State Agent’s Report, November 11, 1911.

11 HOTC, case 2751, State Agent’s Report, November 11, 1911.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., notation on file card, April 20, 1912.
school, achieving a fourth grade level in his studies. The agent had no further comments, except to write that Joseph lived in a very good home.\textsuperscript{14}

Since Joseph’s placement at the Atcherson home had worked out so well for both the ward and the guardian, no agents were dispatched to the farm to check on the child after Agent McGregor’s visit in December 1912. Blue Earth County school records indicated that Joseph maintained his excellent record of school attendance, missing only a few days during the 1912-1913 and 1913-1914 terms. Joseph’s MNSPS case file contains no correspondence or entries during those two school years, except for a short note from Merrill to Atcherson indicating that a correction had been made regarding Joseph’s date of birth.\textsuperscript{15}

No problems or circumstances caused Merrill to open Joseph’s file again until June 10, 1914, six days after the boy’s thirteen birthday. At 11:30 a.m. that day, Merrill received a telephone call from Atcherson, giving the superintendent the sad news that Joseph had been killed that morning in a farming accident. Atcherson asked Merrill how he should proceed, and the superintendent instructed the guardian to make arrangements as if the boy were his own child. Atcherson told Merrill that he thought Joseph’s mother should be notified.\textsuperscript{16}

Merrill sent a letter to Atcherson the next day, telling him he did not know Joseph’s mother’s current location, but that he would send a letter to her last known

\textsuperscript{14} BEC Teachers’ Report, April 27, 1912; HOTC, case 3978, State Agent’s Report, December 19, 1912.

\textsuperscript{15} BEC Teachers’ Report, April 28, 1913; BEC Teachers’ Report, April 27, 1914; HOTC, case 3978, letter to Atcherson from Merrill, August 6, 1913.

\textsuperscript{16} HOTC, case 3978, typewritten note by Merrill, June 10, 1914.
address. He also asked Atcherson to send the details of the accident, and then informed him that no one from the MNSPS would attend the funeral. Merrill informed Atcherson that he could not get away from the school, and that all of his agents were away in other parts of the state. Merrill also composed a short letter to Joseph’s mother Betsy, addressing it, “Mrs. John Nelson, Montevideo, Minnesota.” He wrote:

Dear Madam: We have tried to find your address to inform you of a sad accident which occurred to Joseph yesterday. He has been living with Mr. William Atcherson of Mapleton, Minnesota. Mr. Atcherson called us by telephone yesterday and told us that a team ran away with Joseph and injured him so that he died. These are all of the particulars of the accident we have. We shall probably hear further from Mr. Atcherson soon. Yours Truly, Superintendent.17

The following day, the Blue Earth County Enterprise in Mapleton, Minnesota, ran an article describing the accident on its front page. According to the newspaper’s account, Atcherson had allowed Joseph, for the first time without supervision, to manage a full team of horses pulling a weeding machine. Because of his relatively short stature, handling the long reins proved difficult and Joseph made the fatal mistake of tying them around his waist. The whiffletree, a mechanism holding the reins together, broke apart and spooked the horses. His inability to control the horses frightened them, and they dragged Joseph to death. The reporter wrote that the boy had come to the Atcherson farm about four years earlier from the state school at Owatonna, and had “made such an impression upon Mr. and Mrs. Atcherson that he was regarded as one of their own. He was a young man of good habits, industrious and careful.”18

17 Ibid., letter from Merrill to Atcherson, June 11, 1914; letter from Merrill to Mrs. John Nelson, June 11, 1914.

18 Dragged to Death: Little Joe Nelson, State School Boy Meets Untimely End in Runaway Accident, Blue Earth County Enterprise, Mapleton, Minnesota, June 12, 1914.
Atcherson sent Merrill a final letter regarding Joseph, in which he enclosed the newspaper article. The guardian also wrote his own description of the incident:

Joseph had been using the weeder for several days, and was immensely pleased to think he could work in the field with a team. He got along so well that I felt safe in letting him use them.

I went to the creamery that morning and had got back to one of the neighbors when they called by telephone telling me that the team was running away with Joseph. I was in the field within five minutes but that was too long.

The little fellow would not have been hurt at all had he not made the terrible mistake of fastening the lines about this body. He had never done this before, consequently it had not occurred to me to warn him of the danger of so doing.\(^{19}\)

Atcherson went on to say that Joseph had $37.58 on deposit at the local bank, and that he would use those funds for funeral expenses. Merrill replied a week later, sending his regrets regarding the “sad occurrence,” and agreed that Joseph’s bank account be applied to his burial expenses. After recording a summary of the events on Joseph’s file card, his case record was closed and filed away.\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) HOTC, case 3978, letter from Atcherson to Merrill, June 13, 1914; letter from Merrill to Atcherson, June 22, 1914.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER VI

ARDEN NELSON, CASE NUMBER 3979

Arden Nelson, like his brothers Clarence and Joseph, underwent a physical examination upon his arrival at the MNSPS. The physician found nothing out of the ordinary during the examination on the five-year-old, noting the child displayed no abnormalities or deformities. According to the report, the boy could use playthings, could not read or write, did not appear to be destructive, and had clean personal habits. The doctor entered a question mark under the Enuresis (bedwetting) category. Upon completion of the examination and vaccinations, Arden became an official ward of the state.¹

Arden lived in a cottage on the grounds of the MNSPS for eight months, the average-length stay according to Merrill’s statistics, before the superintendent found a placement for the child. Arden appeared to perfectly match the criteria listed in an application for a child that Merrill received on October 20, 1910. On the application form, John G. Carlson, age fifty-nine, and his wife Kate Carlson, age fifty-five, listed some particular requests regarding the ward they wished to take in; they specifically wanted a Scandinavian boy, four to six years of age.²

¹ HOTC, case 3979, Physician’s Report, February 17, 1910.
² Ibid., Application For a Child from the State Public School, October 20, 1910.
The school promptly dispatched State Agent Swanson to inspect the Carlson home, after which he related more details of their request. Swanson found that the Carlsons lived in an ordinary farm home in fair condition, attended church regularly, and had a good reputation in the neighborhood. In the “Further Remarks” section of the report the agent stated,

This family is very fond of children and though they are well advanced in years they are both in excellent health and think they are none too old to take a small boy. As they have no relatives to leave their property to they want to raise a boy to inherit their property. I recommend the home for Arden Nelson.3

Nine days later, Merrill wrote to John Carlson, informing the potential guardian that his application had been approved and that Agent Swanson had selected a boy for him. Merrill described Arden as a “very bright and attractive child,” with light complexion, light brown hair, and blue eyes. He also mentioned the fact that Arden was of Norwegian parentage. The superintendent enclosed an indenture contract form, and told Carlson that he should return the completed paperwork, along with $2.00 to “help defray the expense of transportation,” if the couple decided Arden was a suitable choice. Carlson complied with the instructions, and on November 14, 1910, he met Arden (accompanied by a state agent) at the local train station to take over guardianship of the child.4

Not long after settling into his new home with the Carlsons, Arden received a postcard from his mother Betsy, as did Mrs. Carlson. Somehow Betsy had not only discovered the identity of Arden’s new guardians, but had also acquired their address. In

3 Ibid., State Agent’s Special Report, October 20, 1910.

her card to Arden, Betsy wished him a happy Easter. She also expressed her hope that he was well and happy, and told her son she wished Mrs. Carlson would allow him to write back to her. Her postcard to Mrs. Carlson read:

Dear Friend Mrs. Carlson, Excuse me for writing to Arden but I long so to hear from him. Will you please be so kind as to write me a few lines so I can hear if he is well? A happy Easter to you from your friend Mrs. Betsy Nelson, Montevideo, Minn.5

Since the MNSPS basically prohibited contact between its wards and their family members, the correspondence created cause for concern, both for the Carlsons and Superintendent Merrill.6

Merrill sent Agent Harpmann to investigate the situation three months later. According to his report, Arden was a “fine, very active spirited boy,” who was too young for chores or school, but attended church and Sunday school regularly. The agent wrote that Arden behaved fairly well, but that he threatened to run away every time the Carlsons tried to discipline him. Harpmann’s assessment of the “guardian’s treatment of the child” read, “Good. They are inexperienced but I am safe in saying they are getting experience in training Arden. Arden is a quick tempered impulsive boy and will require considerable tact to control him.” In the recommendation and remarks section he wrote:

Arden’s mother in writing to Mrs. C. and Arden (together with the trouble they have had in controlling Arden) makes them hesitate in adopting him. Arden remembers his family history and has told them of having a brother in the Red Wing Institution.7 Should they ask for permission to adopt it might be well for them

5 Ibid., postcard from Betsy Nelson to Arden Nelson, April 15, 1911; postcard from Betsy Nelson to Mrs. John Carlson, April 15, 1911.

6 Ibid.

7 The brother Arden was referring to was most likely his older brother, Walter, who probably spent time at the Minnesota State Training School for Boys and Girls, an institution for older juvenile delinquents located in Red Wing, Minnesota.
to wait until the next agent calls. I told them to pay no attention to any letter from Arden’s mother.8

Over the course of the next two years, as evidenced by state agent’s reports, the Carlsons’ parenting skills improved, but Arden continued to challenge them. In her June 1912 report, Agent Elizabeth McGregor described Arden as a very bright boy who had started first grade the previous fall and had made good progress. Arden also attended church and Sunday school, and now had daily chores to perform. McGregor observed that the Carlsons showed considerate and good judgment in raising the child, and that they had “the right idea of the importance of proper early training.” However, she noted that Arden was hard to manage and “takes what does not belong to him.”9

Not much had changed when McGregor returned to the Carlson farm sixteen months later, in October 1913. She reported that Arden was still in good health, regularly attended school and Sunday school, and performed his daily chores. On the other hand, she noted that the child “is hard to manage, untruthful, and needs to be watched.” She also wrote that the nine-year-old “uses tobacco every time he can get it.” In spite of these behavioral issues, McGregor remarked that the Carlsons “dearly loved” Arden, treated him as their own child, and used good judgment in governing him.10

More than two years passed before circumstances at the Carlson farm required the attention of the MNSPS staff. On February 9, 1915, John G. Carlson died, leaving the sole responsibility of raising Arden to his wife Katie. State Agent Swanson arrived at the Carlson home a few weeks later to check on the recent widow and her ward. Arden, in

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8 HOTC, case 3979, State Agent’s Report, July 12, 1911.

9 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, June 24, 1912.

10 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, October 17, 1913.
good health, attended school regularly, and never missed Sunday school. In fact, the agent reported that Arden’s behavior had improved greatly since the previous winter when he had “testified” at a church revival meeting. Swanson had some concerns, however, which she posted in her recommendations to the MNSPS:

There has been some doubt as to Mrs. Carlson’s ability to control Arden after Mr. Carlson died but she tells me that so far she has been very successful and that there seems to be a desire on his part to help her in everything that did not always exist while Mr. Carlson was alive.11

Agent Swanson’s doubts proved to be well-founded. On July 18, 1916, Superintendent Merrill received a letter from a distraught Mrs. Carlson. She wrote that Arden had become unmanageable since her husband’s death. She could not even send him to school, since he had been expelled for continuously disruptive behavior in the classroom. Mrs. Carlson told Merrill she had tried her best to talk to Arden, but his conduct had only worsened. Replying four days later, Merrill expressed his concern over the matter, and told Mrs. Carlson that he would send Agent Harpmann to visit in the near future. Possibly feeling that Merrill did not understand the urgency of the situation, Mrs. Carlson asked a neighbor, Otter Tail County Commissioner Thore Glende, to write to the superintendent on her behalf. Merrill received Glende’s letter, in which he told Merrill that Arden was out of control and that steps needed to be taken to relieve Mrs. Carlson from the caring for the child.12

On August 16, 1916, following his visit to the Carlson home and an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Glende, Agent Harpmann composed a long report regarding Arden’s

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11 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, April 20, 1915.

situation. The agent described Arden’s behavior, at home and at school, as impulsive, disobedient, unruly, and ugly. One example of Arden’s out-of-control actions involved his abuse of a nine-year-old boy named Roland. According to Harpmann, “he [Arden] will throw Roland down, drag him around by the heels, and sometimes has drawn him around the yard by his head.” In another incident, Arden stole a gun from a neighbor, and then called a local store and ordered cartridges. When ordering from the store clerk he pretended to be the neighbor, but asked that the ammunition be delivered to the Carlson’s address. Since the small town clerk most likely knew all of the store’s customers, he became suspicious and notified the gun owner, who soon discovered Arden’s deception. Harpmann ended the report by writing, “He needs a firmer hand than Mrs. C’s and as there is no home here for him, I returned him to the S.P.S.”

Although Arden had turned into such a troublesome child, Mrs. Carlson had grown fond of her ward after taking care of him for six years. Soon after he returned to the custody of the MNSPS, she wrote a letter to Merrill telling him that she “would be thankful if you would kindly send me a few lines telling me how Arden Nelson is getting along.” She also asked if he would allow her to write to Arden, and if he would be allowed to write back to her. She even volunteered to provide stationery and stamps. She closed by expressing hope that Arden would become a good boy. Evidently Merrill’s rule of no contact with an inmate’s family member did not apply to former foster parents, since he told Mrs. Carlson in his reply letter that he had no objection to her request. He told her that Arden was in good health and attended school regularly. He also said the school would provide Arden with writing materials and stamps, if he wanted to send a

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13 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, August 16, 1916.
letter. Evidenced by the fact that the case file contains no further communications with Mrs. Carlson, she most likely never heard from Arden again.\textsuperscript{14}

Arden’s return to the MNSPS in August 1916 coincided with the school receiving a top-notch rating from a team of state inspectors sent by the governor’s office. In a report submitted to the governor, they stated, “Careful inspection leads us to believe no home for dependent children in Minnesota compares in any way (sic) with the State public School at Owatonna.” The four inspectors examined such things as the care of the children, the methods employed by the staff, and the cleanliness of the buildings, pronouncing them all excellent. Arden was one of 211 boys and 107 girls in residence at that time, and he ended up living at the school for approximately the average amount of time, which had increased from eight months in 1910 to ten months in 1916.\textsuperscript{15}

On July 12, 1917, Merrill received an application for a child from Roy Miller, a twenty-nine-year-old farmer of German descent. Miller lived with his wife and infant daughter in the small town of Dover, about sixty miles from Owatonna. In contrast to previous applicants for the three Nelson brothers, Merrill took special care in vetting Miller. The superintendent sent letters to all four of the references Miller had provided in his application, requesting information on Miller’s “moral and financial ability to care for and educate a boy of twelve or thirteen years of age in a proper manner.” Miller’s references included two bankers, a minister, and a neighbor, three of whom responded by letter. One of the bankers wrote a short note telling Merrill he could not recollect any

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., letter from Mrs. Carlson to Merrill, September 18, 1916; letter from Merrill to Mrs. Carlson, September 19, 1916.

dealings with Miller. The other banker stated he was not familiar the Miller’s home life, but considered him “a good thrifty young man of good habits and [knew] of no reason why his home would not be as good as the average farm home for a boy.” He then informed Merrill that Miller, although currently renting his farm, owned personal property worth approximately $2500 as well as 160 acres of land in North Dakota. Miller’s neighbor gave the farmer a positive reference, stating, “He was always spoken of well, considered a good worker, and is now married and rented a farm.”

In addition to seeking character references for Miller, Merrill sent Agent Harpmann to conduct the usual inspection of a home that took place before a child’s placement occurred. In his report, Harpmann rated the general appearance and condition of the house as fairly good. The farmstead was located six miles from the Lutheran church, which the family attended “fairly regularly.” In the “Further Remarks” section, the agent wrote,

Mrs. August Zarling, Plainview, who has one of our boys is a sister of Roy Miller. They will expect a boy to be of some help to them but on the other hand I believe they will give the boy a pleasant and profitable home. If their application is approved they will come and see our boys, and make a selection.

A week later, Merrill sent Miller a letter approving his application. The superintendent told Miller, “We shall be glad to have you come to the school and see our available boys

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16 HOTC, case 3979, Minnesota State Public School Application for A Child, July 12, 1917; letters from Merrill to William Spencer, Reverend Shave, J.A. Reagan, George Pheffercorn, July 12, 1917; letter from Spencer to Merrill (no date); letter from Pheffercorn to Merrill (no date).

17 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, August 9, 1917; letter from Merrill to Miller, August 13, 1917.
and make a selection. The school is open every day but Sunday and we shall be glad to see you.”

Miller wrote back to Merrill a month later, explaining that he had not responded earlier because he had been harvesting his crops, and asked if the school still had a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy available. Merrill sent a return letter, telling Miller,

In reply to yours of the 7th instant, let me say that we have several boys of the age you want and there may be one among them that will please you. You may if you wish, come over to see the boys and if you find one that suits you, you may take him home with you.

On the bottom of the letter, Merrill penciled in the names and ages of six boys, including Arden Nelson, presumably choosing suitable options for Miller in anticipation of his visit to the school. Two days later, Miller selected Arden as the child to fit his needs, filled out the standard Indenture Contract, and brought Arden home with him.

The choice of the Miller farm for Arden seemed to be a good one, at least for the first year the boy resided there. In December 1918, Agent Swanson paid a visit, and submitted a satisfactory report to the school. He listed Arden’s physical condition as good, and rated the ward’s progress at school as “ordinary.” The agent mentioned no behavioral or disciplinary problems, and reported the fourteen-year-old was well-liked by his guardians. Swanson’s further remarks included this statement:

Mr. Miller says that Arden has done very well and that he has tried to make him feel that he is one of the family. Mr. M says that he wants to treat Arden so that

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., letter from Miller to Merrill, September 7, 1917; letter from Merrill to Miller, September 13, 1917; State Public School Indenture of Arden Nelson to Roy Miller, September 15, 1917.

20 Ibid.
when he becomes of age he can have another boy. They have moved to another farm and are not as convenient to school as when Arden was placed.\textsuperscript{21}

Six months later, when Agent Bessie Terhune paid a visit to the Millers, she found that the situation with Arden had worsened. Although in good health physically, the fifteen-year-old had only progressed to the level of a seventh grader in school. He attended church, but not Sunday school, and helped with the farm work. For her recommendations and remarks, Terhune’s wrote,

Arden has an ungovernable temper, is disobedient and uses profane language; even swears at Mr. Miller when reprimanded. He had also been addicted to the use of chewing tobacco. Mr. Miller was successful in breaking him of this habit. I had a long talk with Arden and he has promised me to do different.\textsuperscript{22}

The agent’s heart-to-heart talk with Arden did nothing to change the teenager’s attitude, which grew more defiant over the course of the next few months. On January 12, 1920, Arden sent a simple letter to Merrill, asking the superintendent to send him his mother’s address. Merrill answered back with a short note that read,

My dear Arden, In reply to your inquiry, let me say that I do not think it best to give your mother’s address. If you wish to communicate with her, letters should be sent through this office. With best wishes for a happy New Year, Your Friend, Superintendent.\textsuperscript{23}

Arden displayed even more troublesome and disobedient behavior in the following months. In early August 1920, Agent Harpmann visited the Miller farm and described Arden’s manner as “very profane, sassy and impudent.” In the report, Harpmann described his encounter with Arden as follows:

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., State Agent’s Report, December 18, 1918.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, State Agent’s Report, June 25, 1919.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, letter from Arden Nelson to Merrill, January 12, 1920; letter to Arden Nelson from Merrill, January 20, 1920.
I found him working in the barnyard with their hired man. In conversation with Arden at that time, he claimed that both Mr. Miller and the hired man gave him orders and that it was impossible to please two task masters. This, the hired man denied and Arden and the hired man began a spirited dispute over the matter in my presence. I, of course, put an end to the argument, and told the hired man he was not to give Arden any orders. I also told Arden he was to take no orders from the hired man, that Mr. Miller was responsible to the school for his care and treatment, and was the only one who had authority to give Arden orders.24

Harpmann’s report contained further examples of Arden’s rebellious actions. He wrote,

I learned in Plainview [a nearby town] that Arden has been attending public dances, and at two different times has gotten into trouble which led to a fist fight. When Arden ran away recently, he went to the home of Mr. Radel and stayed overnight. Mr. Radel brought him back the next morning and told Mr. Miller he should care for him, and that if he did not care to do that to return him to the State Public School.

There is some criticism of Mr. Miller’s temper and some feel that he is a little too strict with Arden. The only criticism that I would make is that schooling is a little short. Arden was in the 7th grade last winter, but did not complete it. I found fault with Mr. Miller for keeping him out of school, and told him we felt he should make that up to Arden. He promised to send him to school this next year.

Arden is a boy that is hard to control, and I believe has as good a home here as we can keep him in. I had a long talk with Arden and he says everything is all right now, and wishes to stay. I believe a great deal of their trouble came from interference of this neighbor and the hired man. The hired man has gone now and Arden is much more content.25

Once again, Arden ignored the advice from a MNSPS agent, and reneged on his promise to behave. On August 28, 1920, Miller phoned the MNSPS to inform the staff that Arden had run away. Miller asked to see an agent, and also requested that someone at the school write to Arden who, according to Miller, had been influenced by others to leave the Miller farm. Merrill sent a letter to Arden that same day, reprimanding him for his actions. He urged Arden to “settle down and do what is right toward Mr.

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25 Ibid.
Miller.” He told Arden that he had a good home with the Millers, and that he should obey them. Merrill also reminded the ward that he was still under the guardianship of the MNSPS and was not at liberty to go wherever he pleased. He warned Arden that he should not listen to people who tried to influence him to do what was wrong, and encouraged Arden to instead heed his advice, and that of the school’s agents.26

Arden’s case came to Merrill’s attention again in April 1921, when he received a letter from Arthur Linda, another neighbor of the Millers. Linda told Merrill that Arden, following a beating administered by Miller, had come to him for help. Arden had told Linda that Miller “did not use him right,” and gave Linda his account of the altercation. On Sunday morning, two days earlier, according to Arden, Miller grew furious when he had called three times for Arden to get out of bed, to no avail. When Arden finally came down the stairs, Miller met him halfway, and dragged him down the rest of the way. Arden tried to run out the door, but Miller grabbed him, knocked him with a chair, and started beating him with a razor strap. Arden continued to try to escape, but Miller hit him in the face at least twice, giving the boy a black eye. Linda wrote that Arden had already found work with another farmer, Ed Green, and wanted to stay there. Arden promised Linda he would save money and behave, if the MNSPS allowed him to stay with Green. Merrill responded to Linda, telling him Agent Holden would visit Arden soon to assess his circumstances and, if necessary, make new arrangements.27

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26 Ibid., Note regarding telephone call from Miller, August 28, 1920; letter from Merrill to Arden Nelson, August 28, 1920.

27 Ibid., letter from Arthur Linda, April 12, 1921; letter from Merrill to Arthur Linda, April 19, 1921.
Agent Elizabeth Holden interviewed both Miller and Arden the next day, and received a slightly different account of the altercation. She wrote,

Mr. Miller told me that all during the past year Arden had been increasingly hard to manage. He refused to do things and not only threatened Mr. Miller himself but told others that he would beat him up if he tried to touch him. On Sunday morning, April 10, Arden refused to get up when called, and when he finally did come downstairs Mr. Miller hit him over the head. This aroused the boy’s ire, and a fight ensued, after which Arden left. Mr. Miller went over to Mr. Green’s the next day to try and get him back, as he felt responsible for him, but he refused to go, and Mr. Miller would not take him back again now.28

As for Arden’s side of the story, Holden offered,

Arden said that Mr. Miller had been square with him until this last year, but did not deny that the fault had been his as much as his employer’s. He does not complain of cruel treatment. I told him that he was to be responsible for himself after this, and must not expect help from the State School in case of trouble.29

Although Arden had not reached the legal age of eighteen, the MNSPS officially discharged him from its guardianship two months later on June 3, 1921.30

Merrill heard from Arden one more time in March 1923. Arden wrote a letter from Fairmount, North Dakota, asking the superintendent to send him money he thought he was owed from his time under Miller’s guardianship. He told Merrill, “I think I am old enough to take care of it myself. Please send it as soon as you can or write and let me know right away cause (sic) I don’t think I will stay here very much longer.” Merrill answered Arden by telling him, “As you left your home before the contract expired, Mr. Miller does not owe you the full amount called for by the contract.” He told Arden that he would write to Miller and ask him to pay a portion of the $75 agreed upon in the original

28 Ibid., State Agent’s Report, April 20, 1921.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., file card for Arden Nelson, June 3, 1921.
contract, but since Arden ran away from Miller during the busy season, Merrill felt it would be difficult to collect any money from Miller. He closed by telling Arden, “I am very sorry you did not act fairly towards Mr. Miller.” Merrill then wrote to Miller asking him to pay the pro rata amount of $57.19, but the file contains no record of such a payment, or any response from Miller.31

31 Ibid., letter from Arden Nelson to Merrill, March 3, 1923; letter from Merrill to Arden Nelson, March 8, 1923; letter from Merrill to Miller, March 8, 1923.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Progressive Era reformers in Minnesota and elsewhere certainly had the best intentions regarding their child-saving efforts. They responded to the genuine need for innovative methods of dealing with the multitude of orphaned and destitute children that resulted from industrialization, immigration, and overpopulation. Undoubtedly, thousands, if not tens of thousands of children, fared better living with foster families or as inmates in facilities like the MNSPS, than they would have out on their own. However, child welfare advocates tended to ignore the emotional repercussions of separating children from their parents and siblings forever, or of transporting children far from home to live in a foreign place with strangers. Lost in the good deeds and noble intentions of progressive child-savers was the fact that special circumstances existed for each child and every family, factors that had caused their desperate plight. Reformers, judges and social workers could not possibly have had the time or the means to deal with an individual child or family, so instead they attempted to fix the larger problem.

It is also questionable whether the MNSPS fulfilled its intended mission of providing an ideal, temporary home-like setting for needy children. Certainly many of its inmates benefited from their experiences with the state school; others underwent abuse and neglect living in foster care, or suffered from emotional trauma brought on by institutionalization. For example, Harvey Ronglien described his eleven years in
residence at the MNSPS as “rigid, loveless, void of appreciation, and very similar to life in a prison.” He compared the lives of children residing in a large institution to animals living in a zoo, writing, “You feed them, bed them down and protect them. They are healthy specimens. But, after a few years of captivity, eighty percent of them fail to survive in a natural environment because they didn’t learn the skills outside the zoo.” He speculated that growing up without learning basic emotional skills caused problems for him throughout his adult life, as it did for many of his fellow MNSPS inmates. He wrote, “You don’t have to be an intellectual giant to realize that this unnatural stifling of emotions and feelings will forever affect the character of that child.”

Ordinary people such as the Nelsons did not ask for help, nor did they feel the courts had the justification to remove them from their home and place them with strangers. Many children grew up with drunken parents, or were abandoned by a father or a mother, but if they managed to stay with the remaining parent, no matter how dreadful the living conditions, it was still their own family that remained intact. Although the older Nelson brothers, Ben and Walter, both had trouble with the law and were considered troublesome by the community, they cared about their mother and brothers, and made sincere efforts to keep in touch with their younger siblings during their time with the MNSPS. Betsy Nelson evidently consumed too much alcohol, kept a dirty house, and failed to watch over her children, but it is debatable whether a potential permanent separation from three of her sons, and the brothers from each other, was a justifiable response. And even John Nelson, whose abandonment of his family led to his children’s incarceration, tried to take responsibility for his son Clarence.

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1 Harvey Ronglien, *A Boy From C-11*, 179.
Clarence and Arden both ultimately reunited with their parents and older brothers. Clarence, old enough to find his way back home at the time he entered the school, never really lost touch with his family. By 1920, he had moved in with his mother Betsy and his brothers, Ben and Orven. At that point, both Clarence and Ben worked for the railroad stockyards as a “laborer.” On December 25, 1921, twenty-five-year-old Clarence married fifteen-year-old Eva Coburn, a girl he had known since they lived next door to each other in Montevideo in 1905. The couple moved to Wheaton, Illinois, a few years later, where their only child, Larry (Clarence Lawrence), was born in 1931. Clarence worked various jobs to support his family, including truck driving and farming, and his wife Eva worked as a cook. Clarence died at fifty-eight years of age, in Wheaton, on September 23, 1954.²

Arden had a much more difficult time reconnecting with his mother and brothers and only located them due to a fluke encounter with a stranger. After the fist fight with his last guardian, Roy Miller, which led to his discharge from the care of the MNSPS, seventeen-year-old Arden led a nomadic and solitary life for several years. He found work and odd jobs wherever he could, which included laboring in the iron ore mines in the Mesabi Range area near Hibbing, Minnesota, and as a cowboy in Montana and North Dakota. By the early 1920s, he had made his way back to Minnesota. Throughout his wanderings, Arden wanted to locate his mother but because of his young age at the time he was separated from his family, along with Merrill’s strict rules

regarding parental-child contact, he did not know where to look. Reconciliation took place after Arden decided to follow up on an exchange with a fellow spectator at a softball game in a town near Montevideo. The man, evidently recognizing a resemblance, asked Arden if he was “one of Betsy Nelson’s boys.” Although skeptical that the woman in question could actually be his mother, Arden went to Montevideo to investigate and found that indeed she was.

Not long after he reunited with his family, Arden started a family of his own. On May 16, 1925, he married Eva (Effie) Henkels Tate, a divorced woman who was seven years older than he, and who had a seven-year-old daughter, Marjorie. Arden and Effie were evidently introduced by Clarence’s wife Eva, since Eva Coburn Nelson was Effie Tate’s niece. Arden, perhaps because of his childhood experiences, never led a routine domestic life. Although he and Effie had a comfortable and caring relationship, Arden retained his restless nature throughout his lifetime. The couple eventually had four children together: Elizabeth, born 1925, in Montevideo; John (Jack), born 1927, in Bartlett, Illinois; Norma, born 1930, in St. Paul, Minnesota; and Shirley, born 1935, in St. Paul. During their forty-four year marriage, Arden and Effie moved back and forth to South Dakota, California, and Minnesota several times, and also spent two years in Missouri. Arden, lacking a formal education or any professional training, tried many occupations, including as a farmer, a truck driver, and auto mechanic and a security guard. Other than the land the couple purchased for the short time they farmed in Missouri, Arden and Effie always rented their homes or farms until the early 1960s, when they semi-retired. Coincidentally (or not), the parcel of land they chose to purchase for retirement, happened to be located on Lake Ottertail in Minnesota, only a few miles from
the farm where Arden spent six years living with his first foster family, Mr. and Mrs.
Carlson. Arden and Effie lived on the Lake Ottertail property during the summer months
and in California during the winter until Arden’s death on May 27, 1969.3

It is difficult to evaluate the long-term impact the MNSPS and its methods had
on Clarence and Arden Nelson, or to speculate whether being “saved” improved their
lives. Like Harvey Ronglien, Arden seemed to lack the emotional guidance and training a
person normally gains growing up in a nuclear family, according to his daughter Shirley
which, in her opinion, caused difficulties for their family. For instance, she remembers
that her father had a somewhat harsh and combative relationship with two of her siblings,
and that Arden sometimes displayed unreasonable fits of anger, especially if he had too
much to drink. Neither Clarence nor Arden received the education or vocational training
that placement with a stable foster family might have provided, so neither settled into a
steady career nor fared well financially in their adult years. Both did, however, have a
long-term marriage with their respective spouses, and all the Nelson brothers maintained
a fairly close relationship with one another once the family had been reunited.4

While the State of Minnesota took custody of Clarence, Joseph and Arden, the
other three Nelson brothers remained in the care of John and/or Betsy. In retrospect, the
adult lives of the three raised by their parents did not much differ from the two who had
been saved. All five surviving brothers were barely educated, had problems with alcohol
at some point in their lives, and made a meager-to-modest income. The only child of the
Nelson family whose life may have improved significantly by removal from his family

3 Personal family history.

was Joseph, considering how well he did in his foster home, but he died too early to assess an outcome. In the end the Nelsons, like most families, would surely have preferred to stay intact and deal with their own issues and problems, without interference from city, county, and state welfare workers, regardless of the good intentions of the agencies.
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From Top to bottom: Clarence, Joseph, and Arden Nelson. (Author’s collection.)
The Owatonna State School Administration Building, 1900. (Reprinted by permission from the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.)

View of the Building and Grounds, Owatonna State School, 1890. (Reprinted by permission from the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.)
Exterior of Cottage Four at Owatonna State School, Owatonna, 1900.
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Cottage Number Two for Recreation at the Owatonna State School, 1905. (Reprinted by permission from the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.)
School Room at Owatonna State School, 1905. (Reprinted by permission from the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.)