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Early Days of the State Reform School Juvenile Distress and Community Response in Minnesota, 1868-1891

Origins: “The Penitentiary and the Gallows”

Juvenile crime wracked the city. Seven major gangs -- 200 boys or more -- operated in St. Paul, infecting families and the public schools. They stole tobacco, vehicles, tools, money, and construction equipment, by stealth and by force. Some went about armed. Many were no older than ten.

Let anyone not hardened by by crime step into our city prison and see these little children cast shivering and weeping into a prisoner’s gloomy cell, and he must say that it is a sin to longer delay action in this matter -- a sin that will be visited on the heads of all the people before many years

This dire portrait came from the pen of City Attorney Isaac Heard in a letter -- a plea, really -- to the St. Paul city council. Today a wave of gang crime would probably provoke calls for stiffer policing, firmer prosecution. But this was a gentler

era, and Heard called instead for guidance, correction, and mercy.

That prison, instead of improving them, only tends to fix a stigma upon their character from which they will seldom recover. . . . The expense which the city would incur in the erection of a House of Refuge must be of small moment in comparison with the salvation of a generation which is now slowly but surely fitting itself for the penitentiary and the gallows.

Guidance, correction, and mercy because the House of Refuge was to be a place of protection and education, not punishment. Heard’s letter set off the movement to create the first institution of juvenile justice in our state, the State Reform

Photo: The oldest known image of the Reform School, from 1875. The original house with the first addition, right. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society (MHS.)

School. The date was November 9, 1865.¹ From January 1868 through October 1891 St. Paul was home to the State Reform School. In that span some 1250 boys and over 100 girls served time there. Every inmate left a record -- often a minimal one, but enough to give us today a peek at juvenile crime, family distress, and government response in the early decades of our state.

The roots of reform school in the United States go back to East Coast reformers, and to England beyond, in the early 19th century. People observed then -- still true today -- that children ought not be put in adult jails and prisons; that young criminals were often as much or more victims than malefactors; and that some parents were so neglectful or abusive that children needed protection from them. Furthermore, that existing institutions, such as the courts and private charities, were not meeting these needs. Something new was needed, hence reform school -- reform for behavior (and protection of society), school to prepare the child for a self-sufficient life.

The first Houses of Refuge sprang up in New York (1825), Boston (1826), and Philadelphia (1828). Massachusetts opened the first state reform school in 1847, followed by Pennsylvania (1851), Maine (1853), Ohio (1856), Wisconsin (1860), New Jersey (1864), and Indiana (1866.) People and their leaders tended to see these as manifestations of sound, progressive government.²

On January 1, 1866, a St. Paul city council committee issued a report proposing a state-chartered juvenile House of Refuge, to be supported by the city and paid for by taxes "taken

from liquor licenses and licenses for public shows, and from other sources of a like nature" -- these, the report implies, feeding the contamination of St. Paul's youth.³

The Law

The report appeared just in time for the opening of the 1866 legislative session, and got quick results (which suggests that Heard and St. Paul were not alone in assessing problem and solution.) The bill creating a House of Refuge became law on March 1, and set up goals, structure, and operations of the place that changed only slightly over the next quarter century. It was to be independent, run by a Board of Managers appointed by the governor, with money for operations to come from the counties that sent the inmates. The law gave the Board a broad charge and plenty of discretion -- to provide facilities and regulations "respecting the religious and moral education, training, employment, discipline, and safe keeping of its inhabitants, as may be deemed expedient and proper."

The law created three categories of young people (boys under 16, girls under 15) subject to commitment:

1. Those, brought to court by a parent or guardian, whose "incorrigible and vicious conduct . . . made it manifestly requisite that from regard to the morals and future welfare of such infant, he or she should be placed under the guardianship of the Managers of the House of Refuge." Vicious here means "characterized by vice." These were the out-of-control kids.
2. Those who were were vagrant or vicious or incorrigible as a result of the "moral depravity, or other insuperable obstacle, on the part of the parent . . ." In other words, bad kids on account of bad parents.
3. Those convicted of vagrancy or crime.

¹ *St. Paul City Council Proceedings 1863-1883*, pp. 86-87. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), pp. 424-426.

² For an excellent account of the beginnings of the reform school movement see Robert M. Mennel, *Thorns & Thistles, Juvenile Delinquents in the United States 1825-1940* (Univ. of New Hampshire Press, Hanover, 1973), pp. 1-76.

³ Council proceedings.

The Legislature appropriated \$5000 for land and facilities, on the condition that St. Paul contribute an equal sum, which it soon did.⁴ The school's board of managers bought a 30-acre farm, residence, and outbuildings in Ramsey County's Rose Township, just west of what is now Lexington Avenue.⁵

The Place

Whether by design or happy accident the board chose well, both practically and symbolically. Practically, the site lay directly between Minneapolis and St. Paul, on the Minneapolis-St. Paul road, an old track once used by the Pembina ox cart caravans squeaking their way toward St. Paul's river landing. Symbolically, it was high ground -- to get there the boys had to ascend. And it was isolated. A journalist looking back from 1884 recalled that the first to reach the new reform school "bid farewell to civilization . . . [and] all along the breezy route to the reform school, from the river on the south to the north as far as the eye can see, scarcely a dwelling house could be discovered."

One can imagine the freshly committed inmates in their nervous carriage ride up, up from the corrupting riverside streets of St. Anthony, St. Paul, Stillwater, and Lake City, up to the prairie where, our journalist noted, the wind traveled "at about a thousand miles a minute, and each wind from the north, south and east having in its hand a razor-cutting right and left." Up, the boys climbed,

to have that razor, and the rigors of reform school, scrape them clean of their vicious ways.⁶

Today this is space familiar to many, a rectangle bounded by I-94 on the north, Marshall Avenue on the south, Hamline and Lexington Avenues on the west and east. The old Minneapolis-St. Paul road is now Concordia Avenue, probably understood by most people as the service road on the south side of I-94. Concordia University, playing fields, tennis courts, and Central High School occupy the former Reform School grounds.

The scene that greeted the first inmates would have struck them, correctly, as rather incongruous. The place had been a farm but the main building was an elegant French Second Empire style stone residence that would have fit well in the fashionable districts of downtown St. Paul. The builders, Lucius and Miranda Burt, were said to have been wealthy.⁷

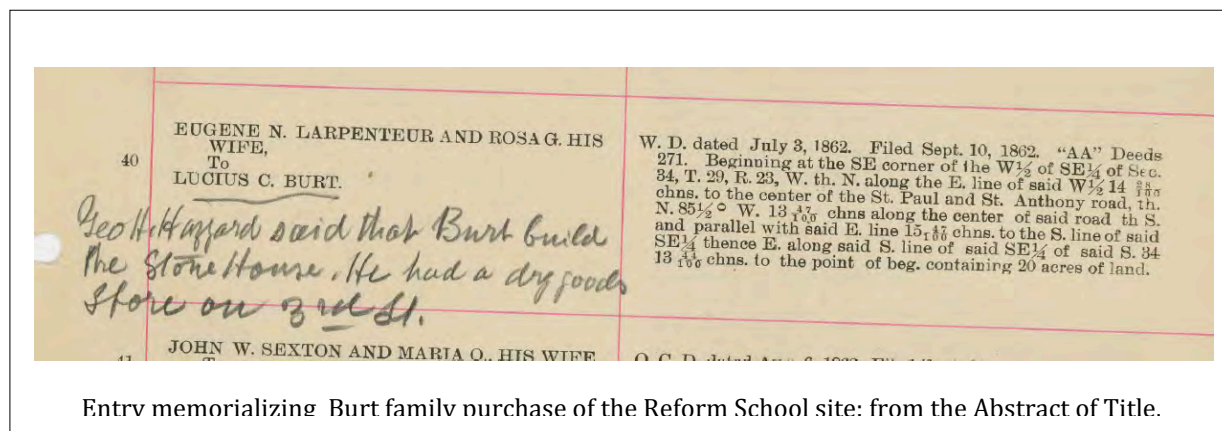
The main floor was reserved for the superintendent and his family, but they did not have the house to themselves. The attic was fitted out as a dormitory for the inmates: two rows of six beds (at first, later nine) beneath the sloping roof; in a room just 20 by 30, this left just three feet (and two boys) per bed. Of course this was an era before privacy as we think of it today, but for the small

⁴ General Laws of Minnesota, 1866, Ch. VII, pp. 22-29.

⁵ First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the House of Refuge of the State of Minnesota (St. Paul: Press Printing Co., 1868), pp. 3-4; Orville Pung, *The History of the State Training School*, undated typescript, State Archives Notebook, Red Wing State School, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 31 August 1884 p. 2.

⁷ Oswald B. Overn, *History of Concordia College*, (St. Paul: Concordia College, 1968), p. 8; a typescript in the archives of Concordia University by Tim Frusti gives a more complete (but unverified) account: Eugene Larpenteur owned the land from 1840 until selling it to one James Lee in 1856 (just in time for the 1857 real estate collapse); it reverted to Larpenteur in 1861, then passed to John Sexton and then to Minerva Burt. By this account, the state acquired the land from her. *St. Paul Dispatch*, 6 Jan. 1875, p. 17. And this account is confirmed by the abstract of title to the land, held now in the archives of Concordia University.



Entry memorializing Burt family purchase of the Reform School site: from the Abstract of Title.

or sad or frightened boy bedtime must have brought as much fear as relief, at least at the beginning of his term. Indoor work would be done mostly in the basement. This and a few outbuildings comprised the first state reform school.

The board, chaired by St. Paul businessman Daniel W. Ingersoll, appointed as superintendent the Presbyterian minister John G. Riheldaffer. Riheldaffer moved his wife and children from their busy downtown home to the country and the Reform School opened its doors January 15, 1868.⁸

Let us step back for a moment and set the wider scene. Minnesota has been a state for less than ten years, and the first decade had not been a triumphant one. Statehood came during the devastating financial panic of 1857. Many fortunes had been lost, cash and commerce dried up, and immigration nearly ceased. Then came the Civil War, the Dakota Conflict of 1862, and the ensuing removal of most American Indians, people who had been a mainstay of the early economy. With war's end, better times were at hand, but Minnesota was still dependent on the steamboat for (seasonal) connection with the outside world -- rail connections had not yet arrived.

And though St. Paul was the region's leading city (and not by much), it was just a scruffy river town less than 30 years old and with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants in a state of around 400,000. Ours was a fledgling and rough-edged society on

the edge of the frontier. Reform school planners anticipated a first-year class of no more than 25.⁹

Getting In.

The legislation that created the Reform School set up criteria -- vague ones -- for commitment to it. Any crime (later, any crime less than murder) could put a boy or girl in; and so could "incorrigible and vicious [here meaning "characterized by vice"] conduct." The former was clear -- the legal system knew how to define and adjudicate crime. But incorrigibility was a protean concept. From the Latin *corregire* (to correct), it means uncorrectable. Yet the very premise of Reform School was that these young people were in fact capable of reform -- that is, correction. The real problem was they had not been corrected yet. Hence, at least for those not by depraved nature lost, what made them subject to incarceration was less their behavior than their circumstances. Their circumstances and what amounted to a state-sponsored guess about their capacity for improvement. And so it proved in practice, as we shall see.

Inmates trickled in for the first few months; it took county authorities, families, and courts a while to figure out what to make of the new institution. But not long. By July the number of inmates had reached the stated capacity of 25, and the boys just kept coming. By year's end 39 young people had been committed, 27 from Ramsey County, 9 from Hennepin, a scattered few from rural counties.¹⁰

⁸ *Second Annual Report* (St. Paul: Press Printing Co., 1869) p. 3; *Pioneer Press*, 15 January 1868, p. 4. Also Concordia history.

⁹ Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul*, pp.379-387; census of 1870; *First Annual Report*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Second Annual Report*, pp. 3-4.

The First Inmates

Readers will be interested in meeting the entire Class of '68, but this must wait a moment while we meet the first inmate, a figure so singular, so anomalous that she would merit a history of her own, if only sufficient facts had survived.

Ellen James had been born a slave in Missouri. How she got to St. Paul no one now knows, but it is plausible that she came north by raft with the Robert Hickman party of escaped slaves in 1863. She was placed with an African American family in St. Paul, but things did not go well. When she came to the attention of authorities, who took her in late 1867, she had "been badly abused and neglected by a colored family in whose hands she had been placed . . . The nails have been frozen from her hands and feet and her body covered with sores."¹¹

That she was the first admitted to an institution designed primarily for boys suggests that St. Paul authorities were waiting, waiting for the Reform School to open to get her off their hands. But so far as the scanty record permits us to discern, Reform School worked well for Ellen James. After a few years she found work in St. Paul as a servant, and married. Then she disappears. Alas -- to know what became of her!

Here are the rest of that first year's Reform School inmates:

Name	Age	Charge	Details
Albert Stencil	14	Incorrigible	Adopted. Sent to the country to live with a farmer, then ran away.
Thomas Truen	14	Incorrigible	Father dead, mother remarried.
Patrick Kelley	14	Vagrancy	Orphan, went from orphan asylum to a farmer, ran away, sent to poorhouse, now

¹¹ State Reform School inmate ledger. Ellen James's file is lost, so the facts reported here come from the ledger, probably handwritten by one of the Rihel-daffers. For a brief account of the Hickman story see David V. Taylor, *African Americans In Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), pp. 7-8.

			Reform School.
Wade Riley	14	Larceny	Son of slaves, separated from parents, came to St. Paul during the Civil War.
Charles Milliken	8	Incorrigible	Orphaned by his father's suicide, living in a boarding house.
George Robinson	16	Larceny	Stole \$16.15.
Jacob Hoffman	13	Incorrigible	Father dead, found begging on the streets of St. Paul.
Fred Crow	12	Incorrigible	Son of Clarinda Crow, a widow.
John Simpson	15	Incorrigible	Bad influences at home..
Leonard Coggsell	15	Incorrigible	An orphan, had been living on the prairie 4 years; ran away from Cathedral School.
George Simons	15	Larceny	Stole \$140 from his employer.
Franklin Mooney	12	Incorrigible	An orphan: "I couldn't keep him from the society of bad boys."
John Casey	11	Incorrigible	Truant, runs away, steals.
William Hart	11	Larceny	With three other boys (Casey, Simpson, and Travers) stole a load of candy.
Nicholas Simpson	13	Larceny	With three other boys (Casey, Hart, and Travers) stole a load of candy.
James Travers	13	Larceny	With three other boys (Casey, Simpson, and Hart) stole a load of candy.
John Tole	11	Incorrigible	No details recorded.
Walter Hatch	10	Vagrancy	No details recorded.
Jacob Klinger	15	Incorrigible	Stole a silver watch worth \$40. Brother of Nicholas Klinger.
Nicholas Klinger	11	Incorrigible	"He runs much about the street with bad boys." Brother of Jacob Klinger
Ira Grant	14	Incorrigible	He steals and his mother can't control him.

William Walters	12	Incorrigible	Won't obey his widowed mother.
Jacob Hooper	13	Vagrancy	Abandoned by father, found wandering the streets of St. Paul, illiterate.
Frank Stiles	11	Incorrigible	Mother dead, father in California, sister put in Reform School.
Frank Illingsworth	8	Larceny	Stole \$1.50 from his father's saloon.
Franz Vogel	11	Incorrigible	"He runs about continually with bad boys."
William Connor	11	Larceny	Stole \$14, won't go to school. Father dead.
Daniel Belado	12	Incorrigible	Stole \$50 from a local business.
William Strackbier	10	Incorrigible	"Ran away with the circus to Minneapolis."
Frank Davis	10	Incorrigible	Disobedient and won't go to school.
Carl Moe	11	Incorrigible	He drinks and runs away from home, father dead, mother tying of consumption.
Orrin Parker	13	Incorrigible	No details recorded.
William Fenton	10	Incorrigible	Abandoned by parents, truant.
William Petran	15	Arson	Set fire to downtown Minneapolis.
Patrick Dorsey	15	Arson	Set fire to downtown Minneapolis.
Edward McGirk	15	Arson	Set fire to downtown Minneapolis.
William Campbell	10	Incorrigible	Truant.
John Henrickson	15	Larceny	Stole books, magazines, and tobacco worth \$18.05.

The profile: Male, average age 14, shattered family, guilty more of being at loose ends than of crime. This profile never substantially changed.¹²

¹² To avoid repetitive citations, further references to individual cases will not be footnoted unless additional sources were used. All inmate information comes primarily from their intake files and from the inmate ledger book.

The cramped attic dormitory could not cope with so many. The legislature responded with a prompt appropriation for a new main building and by late 1869 it was up, [describe]. And the youth kept coming, with more outstate counties participating, and few boys leaving. In fact the only inmates who left during the first two years were either returned to their parents (with conditions) to relieve overcrowding, or escaped.¹³ More about escapes later.

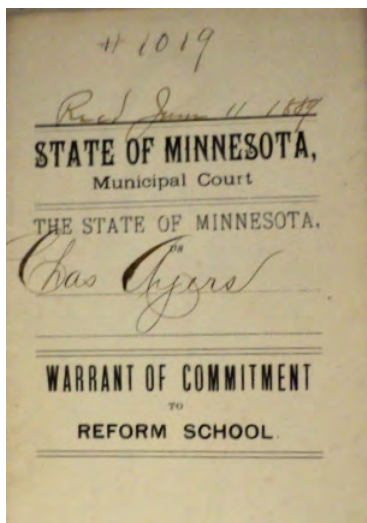
Procedures

The procedures by which these young people (and many after them) were consigned to Reform School were minimally defined in the law. For incorrigibility and vagrancy the statute required a "complaint and due proof thereof," thus leaving the crucial question of what constituted "due proof" entirely up to the magistrate. In practice this meant that every jurisdiction, whether county (district) court or the lower-level municipal courts (sometimes called police courts) and justices of the peace worked out their own ways of dealing with the cases. What these were can only be partly discerned from the surviving records. Felony cases were the simplest: the boys who did not plead guilty (rather few) were tried by juries in district court and, if convicted, sent to Reform School in lieu of conventional sentencing. But the mass of cases, misdemeanors and incorrigibility cases, seem to have been handled by most courts informally. Rarely was there anything we would recognize as a trial, and the youthful accused almost never had lawyers.

Anticipating, perhaps, that the law could be abused by parents simply wanting to get rid of troublesome children, the legislature added one procedural safeguard to incorrigibility and vagrancy cases -- it required the magistrate to record the names and addresses of witnesses, and to annex their testimony to the court file. But in

¹³ *Third Annual Report* (1870), p. 4.

most counties this provision was ignored. The majority of files contain no testimony, and in St. Paul and Minneapolis the courts fairly quickly (after a little more than 300 commitments) adopted one-page, fill-in-the-blank forms for both complaint and adjudication.¹⁴



Parental Passivity

One of the striking things about the documentary record is the almost complete absence of evidence of parental resistance or protest. Children were shipped off to Reform School for all manner of offenses that would today be considered trivial - theft of a few coins, truancy, creating a disturbance, running away from home. Applying today's attitudes to a different time, we might expect that many parents would resist such state intervention. But no. Of the more than 1200 commitments for which some documents exist, parents are recorded putting up a fight in . . . two.

One of the most touching stories that emerge from the record is one of these. Warren Muck, age 13, got caught stealing a plank from Benjamin Thurber's yard in Worthington, in the early spring of 1886. And though the boy was clearly guilty of larceny, the case went to trial because he had a

defense -- of sorts. His father, Stephen, came to court to say that he had instructed Warren to take the plank because the family needed it for firewood, and the elder Muck seemed to find no harm in this, as the entire family lived on the charity of the county. Mr. Muck was blind and could not work. "Do you mean to say that you instructed him to take the wood?" asked the prosecutor. "Well, yes, you may call it a kind of stealing," answered Stephen. Warren was the eldest of the Mucks' four children, hence the one most likely, soon, to be able to help support the family. No matter -- off to Reform School he went.

It seems cruel, and a case perhaps for philosophers as well as jurists: Should a boy be ruled a criminal and taken from his family for the act of obeying his father and providing warmth in winter -- even if it is by petty theft? Yes, it seems cruel, but there may have been another story here, as there was in many such cases. The Mucks were well known in Worthington -- the Stephen Muck and his brother had in fact been the Nobles County's first white settlers -- and the county authorities must have recognized the irony of taking a boy from a family dependent on the county and shipping him to Reform School, where the cost of his care would be born by that same county.

This may have been an example of town fathers using the Reform School statute not to punish the boy, and not to protect the community, but rather to give the boy a better chance in life. Perhaps they reasoned that taking Warren from the squalor of his home and placing him with the upright and caring Rev. Riheldaffer in an environment of order, cleanliness, and adequate nutrition, was an act of mercy. And they may have been right, though we can never know. We do not know how long he stayed in Reform School, but he was certainly back in Worthington in 1891, and

¹⁴ A one-sheet form first appears in the files, for Minneapolis, in 1878.

still living with his family in 1895. He died, still in Nobles County, in 1932.¹⁵

This was an extreme case, but there were many others that suggest a sort of collusion among the governing authorities, or between the authorities and the parents. Where, for example, the crime alleged is theft a dollar, from a parent or step-parent in the home, and the crime is several months old by the time a complaint is made, it is evident that the larceny charge is a pretext.¹⁶ One or both parents wants the child out, and the police and judge agree. There are so many such cases in the record that one gets the impression that many people in and around the justice system quickly understood that the Reform School statute could be used in a consensual way to reduce family misery, even in situations where there was no real crime, and where neither child nor parents were really incorrigible. In almost all such cases the child returned to the family after two or three years, usually upon the petition of the same parents who had sent the boy away; Reform School had served as an extended time out.

Parental Resistance

But there was also parental resistance, and official resistance too, that does not show up in the

¹⁵ Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of Nobles County Minnesota*, (Worthington: Northern History Publishing Co., 1908), pp. 329-330. [Obituary]. The other case of parental resistance at trial was Harry Elms of St. Paul in 1890. Accused of stealing knives from a store, he not only had a lawyer and a vigorous defense, but his mother testified that he was a good boy. To no avail -- he was convicted and did nearly two years. Young Harry was not without blemish; he had been arrested once before for "throwing rocks at a Jew." File #1116.

¹⁶ The case of John Vinton, age 9, serves as a good example. He was accused by his mother in September 1877 of having stolen \$.50 from her . . . four months earlier! He was returned to his parents two and a quarter years later. File #317. A brother went into reform school as well.



Reform School grounds, probably 1880s.
MHS image.

files. It shows up in the press. The *St. Paul Globe* covered the local courts closely in the 1880s and late 1870s, and the reporters looked for human interest stories. Reform School offered them.

John Foley, a small boy . . . recently stole \$51 in cash from his father, who is a poor man and earns a living with his shovel He very quickly spent the whole amount, and yesterday all he had to show for it was a velocipede. He was brought before Judge Cooley and sentenced to the Reform School, but the father interceding in the boy's behalf, the case was discharged.¹⁷

Fred Parson and Gottlieb Bohn "belong to a gang of young desperadoes making it warm for the store keepers of the Sixth Ward." Caught and brought to court, they confessed their crime, but "quite a pathetic scene took place, the grief and sorrow of their respective mothers being quite painful to witness. The mother of Freddie testified that she had to make her own living and that if her boy were sent to the reform school it would break her heart." Sentence suspended.¹⁸

So the official record of Reform School commitments – where parental resistance rarely shows up – probably masks a more complicated

¹⁷ *Daily Globe*, 31 Oct. 1882 p. 2.

¹⁸ *Daily Globe*, 22 Nov. 1884, p. 2. Though the news report stated that Bohn was sentenced to reform school he was never in fact admitted.

reality. Where parents resisted the courts may often have given in. No commitment, no official record.

Judicial Discretion

Here we see examples of that pervasive yet silent element of the judicial system -- discretion. The statute gave courts the power to commit children to Reform School, but in no circumstance the positive duty to do so. Regardless of the facts of the case, all power rested with the justice of the peace or judge.

One might call George Dilley the poster boy for judicial discretion. He was the son of a St. Paul policeman. Every time he got in trouble with the law put the system to a test. And there were plenty of tests, until finally his father had had enough and turned the boy in himself, for incorrigibility.

The father's testimony gives a peek into the way things worked (for some at least.)

About four weeks ago he began staying away again and remained away four or five days, when the police arrested him and brought him here. The Judge gave him a good talking to, and he promised to go home and stay there and behave himself. He was arrested again after that and brought into court and was given a reprimand and let go home on his good behavior. Then he was arrested again for the larceny in the Drug Store of Frederick Kult; that time he was locked up in the county Jail for one week and again reprimanded by the Court and allowed to go home"

The father had him arrested again a few days later after he ran away. He got sent to Reform School, but it took persistence.¹⁹

In the 1880s there were many cases where judges issued warnings or sentenced boys to Reform School, then suspended the sentence.

- A "piratical kid" named Yesenshek brained Harry Lazarus with a rock, then pulled a knife on him. Warning.

- Charles Drum and John Flynn pled guilty to stealing newspapers. Sentence suspended.
- George Ward stole a ride on a streetcar (with car company owner Tom Lowry aboard!), and when caught threw rocks at the streetcar. "Little George had repented by yesterday and his sentence to the reform school was suspended."
- Patrick Lallier and Christian Olson stole \$52 from Lallier's grandfather and squandered \$12 of it. Sentence suspended.²⁰

Hundreds of other boys were sent to Reform School, and stayed there for years, for similar and in many cases much milder offenses.

Of course every system of criminal or juvenile justice relies, for better or worse, on the exercise of discretion: police may give a citation or a warning rather than arrest; prosecutors may charge a crime or decline to do so, and these decisions will be invisible.

What may be different about Minnesota at this time, compared to today, is simply the scale of things. In the towns and rural counties especially the populations were so small that police, prosecutors, and judges were likely to have some personal knowledge of the boys, or at least their families, that came before them. This would have made a less punctilious approach to legal proceedings, and one that leaned more on

Longtime Board of Managers chairman Daniel A. Ingersoll.



¹⁹ File 1051.

²⁰ Yesenshek, *Daily Globe* 17 October 1880 p. 1; Drum, 14 March 1884, p. 2; Ward, 14 October 1884, p. 2; Lallier, 28 June 1883, p. 5 & 30 June 1883, p.2;

judgments about best interests of individuals and the community, tempting and perhaps wise.

Official Reluctance

And there was still another level of political decision-making that affected these boys. During the first fifteen years of the Reform School, the inmate's county of residence had to pay for his transportation to St. Paul and then his care and feeding. And often the county commissioners preferred not to pay, so the boy would languish in jail, or perhaps be quietly released, even though the court had sentenced him to Reform School. Superintendent Riheldaffer complained about this practice many times, and certainly it was perverse: the Reform School had been created to keep children out of jail, yet children were being held in jail to keep them out of Reform School.

In his 1878 report to the legislature Riheldaffer, already past being diplomatic on this subject, wrote this: "But it is not fair that a law should be suffered to exist that puts it in the power of the short sighted and penurious to entail the evil fruits of their neglect of duty upon the community at large." Short-sighted, penurious, evil fruits, neglect of duty: Did he make himself clear?

Clear, but not persuasive: it took till 1885 for the legislature to give the whole bill, for every boy, to the state.²¹

Bad Enough for Reform School.

As noted above, there were two main categories of commitments -- crime and incorrigibility. Over time, crime accounted for about one-third of the total. Of the crimes, the

²¹ *Eleventh Annual Report* (1878), p. 8; *Daily Globe* 16 September 1880, p. _ (Ramsey County refusing to pay for boys sentenced to Reform School, languishing instead in jail, "mingling with the hardest criminals in the country." General Laws, Chapter 83, 8 March 1885.

overwhelming majority were petty theft -- a few dollars in cash, a bundle of newspapers, a box of pencils, a book, a fishing rod, canned goods, a handful of apples. One boy was committed for a theft whose value was calculated at six cents.²²

One marvels at a juvenile justice system where the consequences seem so vast compared to the offense. As we shall see, the average term in Reform School was about two years. To take a boy from his family for so long for, say, shoplifting a toy (as happened to several) would be unimaginable today. But it was acceptable then, which suggests very different popular attitudes.



John G. Riheldaffer. MHS image.

Rev. Riheldaffer wrote often that the offenses that landed boys in Reform School would otherwise have sent them to prison -- and that most were surely headed to prison but for this intervention.²³ Standards of juvenile behavior may

²² This was Sam Williams of St. Paul, who was committed, ostensibly, for stealing three newspapers. But this was not the record: Oscar Nelson of Anoka went in for stealing a nickel's worth of apples from a grocery. Files 813 and 814. Williams's was an unusual and ultimately tragic case. His father was J. Fletcher Williams, a pioneer (and pioneering) historian whose *History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* is still in print and invaluable. Not long after Sam got out of Reform School he and a brother drowned in Lake Como. *Pioneer Press*, 1877, p. _.

²³ In the *Fifth Annual Report* (1872), p. 5, Riheldaffer wrote: "Let it be remembered that a large proportion of

have been much more strict, and acceptance of harsh (by today's standards) consequences more common. Many of the families were immigrants and/or broken in some way, so there may have been a general sense of inability to resist the forces of authority, accompanied by a sincere fear of boys going wrong. And very likely for many the Reform School was seen as less punishment than what its name implied -- school plus the hope of reform.

Getting into Reform School was not simple, nor did any boy or girl do it alone. It took poor judgment, bad companions, family dysfunction, or some combination of these. Getting in also required conscious decisions by people in authority, decisions that might have been different. One feature, though, remained consistent -- speed. In most cases the boy was arrested or brought to court by a parent and packed off to Reform School within 24 hours.

Incorrigibility.

Most boys were sent to Reform School on the charge of incorrigibility. The range of behavior encompassed by this word was vast -- truancy (extremely common), running away, hanging out with a bad crowd, verbal abuse of family members, refusal to work, disobedience, and, quite often, theft. There were hundreds of cases where crime and incorrigibility were interchangeable. In many commitments for incorrigibility there were no specific acts alleged. Within just a few years of creation of the Reform School both St. Paul and Minneapolis municipal courts developed fill-in-the-blank commitment forms that required no details of the juvenile offenses. One gets the impression of a system run largely on consent; if the boy is in court he must belong in Reform School.

Most of the incorrigibility cases were initiated by a parent, step-parent, or other family member.

those youths who become inmates of a reform school, would if left to themselves become inmates of jails and penitentiaries"

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This too strikes today's observer as perverse. What parent today would go to court to have his boy taken away, for an indefinite period, for skipping school and hanging around downtown? Yet this happened hundreds of times during the period covered here, 1868-1891.

We have to be careful about drawing conclusions from the fragments of evidence that survive. Few files contain actual testimony, and the boys' voices are rarely heard. We cannot know the tenor of proceedings, nor the long train of events that brought people to court. Still, the cases are so many and so similar that they invite informed guesswork.

There was a great deal of family stress and breakdown. In fully one-third of all commitment cases there is evidence of family fracture -- one or both parents missing because of death, divorce, disease, or abandonment. Where there had been remarriage often the stepparent initiated the commitment. It is easy to imagine the situation; a young widow remarries, her 10-year-old son resents the new figure in his life, he acts out, tensions rise. In an era with few social services, Reform School -- especially one run by an esteemed clergyman -- became an acceptable solution.

There were also many cases where incorrigible really meant, "I can't cope. Please help us." These often involved poverty-stricken widows who had several children but not enough income (usually from "washing out") to support them all. A fair example would be that of Susan Clark of St. Paul. At age 31, in 1873, she had the third of her four children (ages 15, 13, 9, and 8) sent to Reform School. In 1875 she went back to court, this time for the youngest, for truancy and bad behavior: "He associates with a class of rude boys who hang among the depots, elevators, and river banks. . . His language, is rough, profane, and filthy. When he swears he uses the most profane oaths." We can only guess at the distress of so young a woman, so

burdened, alone, with no social safety net.²⁴ There were many like her.

Boredom

Boys were bored. The record includes scores of cases where boys were charged with skipping school. Though one has the sense that sometimes this was just a cover -- you can imagine the sympathetic court clerk whispering, "Say that he won't go to school, that always works." -- it also makes perfect sense. In a time when it was common for 14 and 15-year-old boys to be in the work force, a boy that age stuck in school, which probably was crushingly boring, might understandably prefer to do something more adult and more interesting -- like, in the case of Theodore and Charles Oakes. Their widowed mother had them committed at ages 11 and 13 for incorrigibility: "they remain out in the streets until very late at night, spending their time about the steamboats in the daytime, about the Opera House at night."²⁵

The Rev. Mr. Riheldaffer saw such lives as morally polluted. "These boys have been educated on the streets, the wharf, about saloons, at the market house, following circuses, hanging around theatres and other traveling exhibitions of immorality and human depravity."²⁶ But from this length of time, you see not *Gangs of New York* but *Tom Sawyer*.

And boys were bored as much by work as by school. There is a reason, after all, that people have been leaving farms for cities for thousands of years -- farm work is tedious. Lots of rural Minnesota boys were sent to Reform School for refusing to do

what, really, hardly anyone wants to do, manual farm labor. By refusing to work they became a burden to their families and, when boredom turned to resentment, they became agents of disorder. Packing them off to Reform School was a rational community response.

And it would not be surprising if many of the boys also welcomed a change of address. Leroy Powers of Otter Tail County at age 15 was a well-known idler. His mother was dead, father run off, he'd gone to live with a sister, his brother-in-law petitioned to declare him incorrigible, and his grandparents testified against him: They tried and tried to get him work, but he never stuck.²⁷

Beer and Brickbats

Rural boredom plus alcohol, maybe enhanced by testosterone, sent Liberty Horton on his way. He was 15, a Wright County farmboy, invited to a chum's drinking party (shades of today's bad parenting, put on by the chum's father!) Here, in Liberty's own words, is a part of the action:

By god they had a hell of a dance over the river last night [I] was there they had 16 gallons of beer and X gallons of clear stuff and they had to pay 25 cents to dance and drink and by god I tell you they had a hell of a fight I got so god damn full I couldnt stand up I dranked so dam much whiskey and then a hell of a lot of beer and it dam near killed me well I must tell you about the fight I was laying by the window when it started and a fellow got to fighting right in the house and all the rest started a lot of the Howard [Lake] kids went outside and there was a brick pile there and they commenced to fire them in the window and they broke every window and almost killed - and a lot of others got stabbed and - of others boys from out way got me and pulled me up stairs and I got there and puked all over myself and I was as sick as a hog and I cant rite any more this time so goodby.

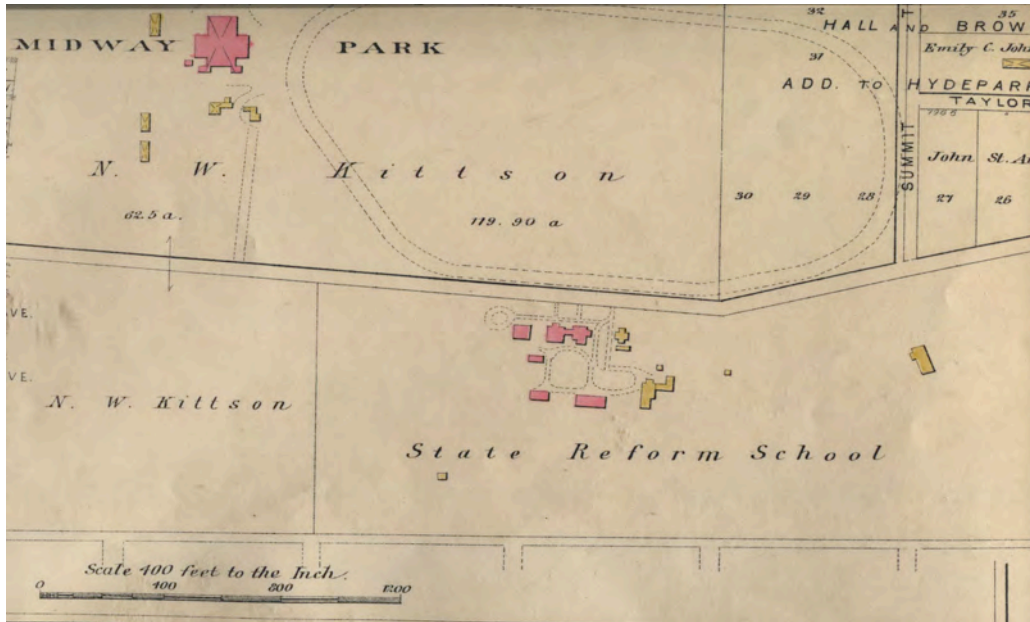
²⁴ Files 191 & 249, John and Edward Pitheon. The first reported that the parents, Lennox Pitheon & Mrs. S.M. Clark were divorced. The second listed her as a widow, then that word was crossed out.

²⁵ Files 126 & 127. The boys' father, David Oakes, had been killed in the Civil War. Both boys were released after three years, in April 1874.

²⁶ *Second Annual Report* (1869), p. 6.

²⁷ File 1078.

were not the products of a juvenile justice system as we think of it



The *Howard Lake Tribune* called this “A Beer and Brick-Bat Dance” and reported that Liberty’s father Levi instigated legal proceedings, against his son and others, not for crime but incorrigibility. Liberty had written a letter describing the events, and the letter made it into evidence against him. It is still there, in his Reform School file.²⁸

The Safety Valve

The term Reform School brings to mind images from film of the early and mid-20th century: young street toughs, prone to violence, many of them bound sooner or later for adult prison. St. Paul’s reform school was nothing like that. With a few exceptions the boys sent there

Plat map layout of Reform School grounds, courtesy of Donald Empson. The road at bottom is now Marshall Ave.

today, a truly adversarial court system aimed chiefly at punishing crime. The Reform School served chiefly as a societal safety valve -- it took the pressure off families, schools, and communities both rural and urban by removing troublesome boys, in most cases just long enough for them to mature a bit before going right back where they came from.

In the 1865 report that spurred creation of the Reform School the St. Paul city council committee affirmed that

no system . . . will be tolerated in this community or by this Council if, under cover of an honorable title, it should become a mere instrument of domestic tyranny and for subverting the foundation of society [that is, the family unit.] . . . Nothing but criminality of the most positive and incorrigible description

²⁸ File 1100; *Howard Lake Tribune*, 27 Feb. 1890, p. 2. After a few years in Reform School Liberty Horton enlisted in the Navy and did two hitches before deserting, in 1908. After nearly 30 years AWOL he turned himself in on the eve of World War II, in Oakland, California. The Navy, preoccupied with other matters, discharged him without punishment. [citation]

on the part of these natural guardians, legally punishable delinquency on the part of the child, or his being intimately and helplessly involved in criminal associations, will authorize the interference of others with the claims of parental authority.²⁹

In practice the citizens of Minnesota took a much more flexible and less moralistic approach.

Superintendent Riheldaffer bristled at both over- and under-use of his facility. He complained repeatedly that many counties were not sending potential inmates just to save money -- they would rather keep them in local jails for a few days than send them off to Reform School for years.³⁰ Eventually the Legislature followed his advice and made paying for inmates a state, not county, responsibility. Riheldaffer also complained that boys were sent to him on pretexts; they were not criminal or incorrigible but sick, feeble-minded, or merely troublesome, or too young (one came in at age 3) for Reform School. "Many are committed upon complaint of their parents who, to avoid the disgrace involved in a charge of larceny, complain only of incorrigibility." He urged that an additional safeguard -- review of every case by a district judge -- be added. When this was done (1881) the number of incorrigibility cases fell dramatically.³¹

²⁹ *St. Paul City Council Proceedings* 1863-1883, p. 107.

³⁰ *Thirteenth Annual Report* (1881), p. 13. This occurred even in Ramsey County. At a meeting of the Ramsey County Board in September of 1880 the St. Paul City attorney complained that "four weeks ago a boy had been sentenced . . . to the reform school, since then he has laid in the county jail mingling with the hardened criminals," all because the county declined to pay for his care in the Reform School. *Daily Globe*, 16 Sept, 1880, p. 1.

³¹ *Ninth Annual Report* (1875), pp. 14-15 (sickly and feeble-minded children); *Fourth Annual Report*, p. 17 (1870) (committed for larceny to avoid embarrassment.)

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Serious crime and deviance.

We include in the category, "serious crime," crimes of violence, sexual assault, robbery, burglary, and major theft (something more than casual pilfering), and in "deviance" violent, abusive, and self-destructive behavior. These categories are not self-evident, so all calculations are faulty and approximate. Still, the conclusion offered by the evidence is inescapable. Of the more than 1250 boys' cases, not more than 135 involved serious crime or deviance, by today's standards.

These cases break down this way:

- Major thefts (meaning, high value of property, burglary, forgery, indictment for grand larceny, or crimes requiring a degree of planning): 63.
- Deviance (displaying violent or self-destructive behavior, though not charged with a crime of violence): 23
- Burglaries (breaking and entering for the purpose of committing a crime): 16
- Assaults: 15
- Arson: 9
- Sex crimes: 7
- Manslaughter: 2

By far the single biggest category was theft. Some count as serious crime in this reckoning because they were charged as grand larceny in district court, some because of the value or nature of property stolen (a horse and buggy, for example -- analogous to car theft today), some because of the apparent planning and organization involved.

Theft (and thieves)

Theft comes in endless and sometimes amusing variety, simple or complicated, clever or stupid, heavy or light. William Murry, 15, of Albion in Wright County, stole a neighbor's red ox. He did it with his father, who ended up in Stillwater Prison for the crime. John Coyne, age 10, of Minneapolis, stole a horse and buggy. How far was he going to get? Some boys were ambitiously



muscular. Albert Anderson and Emil Larson, 14 and 15, of Minneapolis stole 50 pounds of copper scraps from a manufacturer. Henry Parmelee, age 10 of St. Paul, stole 18 gas burners from a plumbing business. What was he going to do with them?³²

Clarence Winch of St. Paul, age 16, looked to be training for a career perhaps as a cat burglar: He stole a gold and diamond pin, a silver watch, 5 rings, 2 other pins, a string of gold beads, 2 bracelets, a gold chain, and a gold spoon, total value \$124, from Mary Baldy at her residence, 411 Ashland (the house is still there.) In his case, the intervention of the law appears to have worked: the 1900 census shows him in St. Paul working (honestly, we presume) as a machinist.³³

Some boys may have been doing the gang work that Isaac Heard lamented in the letter that set the Reform School in motion. Eby Applin and Michael O'Leary stole 14 boxes of cigars and 25 pounds of tobacco from SW Bell. Arthur Gardner and Michael Churchill stole 400 cigars worth \$10 and 8 pounds of candy worth \$1. When Marcus and Oscar Nelson, ages 9 and 12, were booked into Reform School for stealing a bicycle, three pocket books, two tape measures, and 34 pocket knives, total value \$21.50, from Iver R. Anderson's shop at 313 Cedar Ave. in Minneapolis, they were asked, as a matter of routine, who their chums were. The answer: the Curley Oakes Gang. These all have the look of organized and orchestrated thefts. Curley Oakes, the Fagin of South Minneapolis?³⁴

³² Files 206 (Coyne), 285 (Parmelee) 488 (Anderson) & 489 (Larson).

³³ File 1252.

³⁴ Files 397 (Applin), 398 (O'Leary) 420 (Gardner), 421 (Churchill), 1062 & 1063 (Nelsons.)

It is an irony that the most serious theft recorded in Reform School records was committed by a boy who later became thoroughly trusted. At age 14, in 1877, Napoleon Ganyaw was accused (in an incorrigibility petition) of stealing as much \$1000 from the office of his next friend, St. Paul lawyer Francis Wilde, then escaping to Racine, Wisconsin. By some calculations that sum is equal to over \$20,000 today, and a despicable breach of trust with Wilde, who had taken him in after Ganyaw's father died. And yet upon the end of his term in Reform School (two years) he was given a job there by superintendent Riheldaffer, and ten years later held the position of deputy clerk of district court for Hennepin County -- working for lawyers again, and probably handling money.³⁵

Deviance

The comparatively large number of commitments based on disturbed and disturbing behavior (probably under-reported and formally described as crime in other cases) illustrates one of the Reform Schools' greatest challenges. Its charge was to reform behavior, not cure mental illness or repair the damage done by abuse. Some of these boys came to Reform School simply because no one knew what to do with them.

Ernest Lohman of Cottonwood County. His parents were separated, but he did not live with them anyway, but with Dick and Minnie Johnson of Windom. They sent him to Reform School. He had killed sheep, sets dogs on a bull, threatened to poison Dick Johnson and, the final straw, whipped a pony to death. He came to Reform School at 14 and got out only when he reached 21.³⁶

Lewis Constantine of Stillwater. His father petitioned to send him to Reform School on these facts: The mother died three months before. Lewis had threatened to kill his brother Luther with a

³⁵ File 319.

³⁶ File 1169 (he was also known as Ernest Johnson.)

razor; he had put kerosene on the stove and boiled the kettle until it burst; he had put shavings and kerosene in the stove and blew the top off. And this was just at home.³⁷

Frank Ringer of Fair Haven in Stearns County. Not even pious families were immune. Adam Ringer was a Methodist pastor with a very troubled son. It is a measure of the Ringers' desperation that Adam and his wife Jane brought five witnesses to the commitment hearing (whereas in the huge majority of cases the testimony of two witnesses was enough.)

They told a harrowing tale of a boy progressively aggressive and uncontrollable. Always disobedient, violent temper, abusive language, lies, steals. Mother says, "The more I do for him the more he grows worse. . . . When any thing displeases him he becomes very violent in his language and conduct." Another witness testified he saw him beat some cows violently with a club. Another testified that he disrupted a church service by throwing stones in the sanctuary. "I believe the safety of our community, the safety and good of everybody requires that he should be placed in the State Reform School." Reform School, no surprisingly, did not seem to bring much reform. Ringer went in just in time for Christmas 1888 and was furloughed in time for Thanksgiving 1890, but returned ten months later. He escaped, got caught after a few months, returned, and got out for good at age 19, after five years in and out.³⁸

Orphan Train Boys

Several boys who ended up in Reform School came to Minnesota from New York on "orphan trains." Leaders of some east coast orphanages believed that the best thing for their urban youth was the healthy, vigorous, outdoor life on Midwestern farms. So they loaded groups of them onto passenger trains and sent them west,

sometimes with plenty of advance preparation, sometimes not. When they stopped in the rural towns of destination, the locals took their pick. Some of these placements worked well.

For William Howard, it did not. According to the record, he came to Worthington in about 1881, a toddler of two years, "from the Builders Aid Society of New York City through the agency of Rev. Matthews." George Jay, a young bachelor farmer, took him. He stayed with Jay six or seven years, then -- about the time Jay had married and started a family of his own -- went to a Mr. Hollis, then David Bates, then back with Jay, then briefly with another farmer, then back with Jay again for just a week until Jay had him committed to Reform School. Apparently young William, now 12, did not welcome another tour of duty on the Jay farm. He pulled up over 100 plants in the garden, destroyed dishes in the kitchen, and took out his rage on Jay's young daughters [two and five] "by taking up their cloths and handling their private parts." Another witness says that the boy is known as a "New York boy."

Howard may have been on of the many orphan train children adopted less as family members than as indentured servants. But life takes odd turns. After four years in Reform School William was furloughed back to the same Mr. Hollis he had lived with ten years before. And ten years later he was still in Nobles County; he wrote cheerful, chatty letters to the superintendent of the Reform School in late 1904 and early 1905, from Wilmont, Nobles Co. mentioning in passing that he had not been eager to be released.³⁹

Assaults.

There are assaults, and then there are assaults. Six of the fifteen boys committed for this offense went in for beating someone up. The degree of violence cannot now be gauged. Only five cases involved weapons. Charles Schelefoo of St. Paul stabbed

³⁷ File 247.

³⁸ File 966.

³⁹ File 799.

another boy with a butcher knife. He was very young, only eight, and he stayed inside for six years. Ferdinand Vitchey (or Ritchey) of Isanti County, age 14, shot his neighbor's ox with a rifle when it wandered onto his family property.

James McCloskey of St. Paul, 16, attacked his widowed mother. She had found a pack of cards in his pocket. "He found that I had taken them and he seized a knife and assaulted me with it endeavoring to stab me. He seized a number of dishes and broke them. Said he would shoot me if I ever had my hand on any thing of his. He has assaulted me in a similar manner last spring he actually did stab me in the back but the knife was dull and did not inflict a severe wound." McCloskey was out in two years.

Edward Herman, age 11, of Wabasha County, was committed as incorrigible -- and so he was -- but the core of it was violence. He had stabbed another boy with a knife, "calculated to kill." In Reform School he escaped twice. The last entry in his ledger: "Killed in jail at Devils Lake No. Dak. while resisting officer May 25th 1891." He was 19 years old -- not a Reform School success.⁴⁰

Arson.

In the period covered by this article, nine boys went to reform school for arson or attempted arson. We have details of seven, seven of the more interesting cases.

Charles Armstrong was another "New York boy," who had come to Cottonwood County on an orphan train and ended up with Ann Scott of Windom. Was he a firebug or an inconvenient, rootless lad for whom Reform School appeared as a community solution? He was charged with a destructive fire that started in a mound of flax straw and burned up 1200 fence posts, total damage \$150 and a huge amount of labor lost. Rare among such cases, Armstrong had a lawyer and the case went to a jury trial. The testimony there

⁴⁰ File 165 (Schelefoo), 313 (Vitchey), 229 (McCloskey), 557 (Herman.)

showed that his crime consisted of no longer living with Ann Scott, hanging out with a friend and smoking a cigar, and tossing the lit cigar into a flax field. Carelessness or malice? No matter; his disruptive presence was removed from Windom to St. Paul for the next three years.⁴¹

Clodmer Nino Roos -- the name alone might drive one to crime -- may have had some adjustment issues. When he went into Reform School at age 16 he could read no English, his father was 78 years old, he had tried to whip his mother and burn down the family barn. Clodmer stayed in Reform School until he was 20, and despite the family problems was furloughed then to his father back in Goodhue County.⁴²

Henry Fredericks and Theodore Barker, both 14, were St. Paul firebugs, part of a gang of four that set fire to barns around the city. Barker was one of the handful of African-American boys who came to Reform School. He stayed there less than 18 months, and was still living and working in St. Paul, as a painter and paperhanger, over 20 years later.⁴³

The worst arson fire, and arguably the most dangerous crime associated with the Reform School also yielded its most inspiring tale of later success.

On the night of 13 July 1868 a suspicious fire destroyed a big part of downtown Minneapolis. No one was hurt, but this must have been luck. Authorities soon arrested three teenage boys, and it came to light that this fire had had a motive -- intra-family anger. The ringleader was William Petran, age 15. Despite the enormity of the crime, young Petran found sympathy from superintendent Riheldaffer, who wrote, "Father kept a grocery store, made this boy deliver all the goods sold, on a hard cart, was very cruel to him. The boy with two others planned and executed the burning

⁴¹ File 711.

⁴² File 412.

⁴³ File 434 (Fredericks) and 435 (Barker) and city directory or census

of his fathers store, along with which several other buildings were burned." And despite the enormity of the crime, consequences were light. Petran and his accomplices served less than a year.

And that was not the end of the story. Petran was welcomed back into the family, went on to take over the family business and the family wealth. As an adult he lived in a mansion at 1700 Kenwood Parkway in Minneapolis. There is more still. In 1887 he left the family business to found the Christian Workers Mission in the Gateway area of downtown Minneapolis (at 29 Washington Ave. So., to be precise), and ran that mission until his death in 1920. Skid Row by day, Kenwood by night. William A. Petran lived up to what John Riheldaffer wrote of him in 1873: "He is one of the best young men in his town."⁴⁴

Sex crimes.

At least seven boys showed evidence of disturbing sexual deviance. William Howard and Joel Swanson, 12 and 13 respectively, were accused of indecent contact with young girls who were sisters or household members. George Spence, age 11, displayed a pattern of conduct perhaps even more appalling: He beat up Ada Haley, age 6, on 20 January 1882, in Fridley. She testified that he came over when her parents weren't there and said, "Do you want to play Norwegian?" Then he put a cloth over her face, had her lie down, and removed her clothes, "and what he done he called playing Norwegian he said he done that to lots of girls." Spence did not dispute the accusation. For reasons unknown he spent just four months in Reform School.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ File 35, and *Minneapolis Tribune*, 14 July 1868, p. 4 (downtown fire); *Minneapolis Journal*, 3 December 1905, editorial section, p. 3 (work of the Christian Workers Missions); *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, 23 July 1920, p. 16 (Petran obituary)

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⁴⁵ File 496.

The Henry Schaberman case was unique. He and his adult brother, Frank, were indicted and tried in district court in Olmsted County, on a charge of intent to poison, for administering the aphrodisiac "Spanish fly" to the daughters of Henry Horton. The trial ended in a mistrial, with the vote 11-1 for Henry Schaberman's conviction. He then entered a plea of guilty, apparently in a deal to secure dismissal of the charge against his brother.⁴⁶

John McElligott, 15, Sam Cronk, 15, Jacob Schmidt, 15, and William Buchel, 12, were all found guilty of rape or attempted rape, and the facts reported show that these were extremely serious crimes, with very young victims.⁴⁷

Homicide

Intentional murder cases were excluded from Reform School jurisdiction, but lesser homicides were included. And in the 23 years of the St. Paul reform school just two such cases appeared.

In the fall of 1879 Charles Seig, age 13, killed a neighbor who was walking through the Seigs' land. These facts are clear; the rest were very much contested.

The companions of William Buckman, the victim, testified that they had merely been taking a shortcut through the Seig farm, near Albion, on their way to work, when they were confronted, ordered off, and Buckman was shot -- by Charles on his mother's orders -- without further warning.

The Seigs had a different story, which they recounted at length (in German, as they spoke no English) in the Ramsey County jail, where they were taken upon arrest. The incident culminated a period of rising tension between the Mrs. Seig and the young men. They had taken a dislike to her, and she had reciprocated with lots of disparaging talk ("she certainly has a lively tongue," observed the reporter) about them. That day they had come for

⁴⁶ File 499; Wright County criminal court files, MHS.

⁴⁷ File 244 (Cronk), 481 (Buchel),

vandalism and revenge, taking advantage of her husband's absence. They came with sticks beating down crops and wrecking a fence. She engaged with them, and they turned on her. In a panic she called on Charles, who got a shotgun and came running. "He gave them both barrels, and the result was what might be hoped for from the most heroic school of power and shot treatment." Buckman took the first blast, got up and went after Charles, absorbed the second, got up again, but not for long. He died the next day.

The Seigs were tried for murder, but the jury settled on a compromise verdict of manslaughter in the fourth degree for Anna, upon which time Charles took a plea to the same charge. She got two years (a reflection, perhaps, that the jury believed her story), he got Reform School. We don't know how long he stayed inside, but the incident does not seem to have affected his life adversely. He married at age 20, had eleven children (three of whom survived him along with 21 grandchildren), and died in Wright County at the age of 81. His obituary made no mention of the homicide.⁴⁸

The other homicide took place in Winona County in September of 1881. Anna Martin, age 18, was walking along a road near Wiscoy with two sisters, when a voice called, "Where are you going?" "Home," she answered. "You can't go by this road," came a reply, and then a shotgun blast that struck her square in the middle of the body; she died quickly of blood loss. The gunman turned out to be Jacob Brucha, age 13.

He was tried the next month for murder, but as in the Seig case the jury would not accept so serious a charge, and convicted him instead of fourth degree manslaughter. Press report suggest that he had been out shooting the gun aimlessly, then when the sisters happened upon him,

⁴⁸ File 392; *St. Paul Dispatch*, 8 July 1879, p. 1; *St. Paul & Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, 9 July 1879, p. 3; *Wright County Eagle*, 10 July 1879, p. 4, 20 November 1879, p. 4; *Wright County Journal*, 31 October 1946, p. 1. Court file.

concealed by vegetation at the roadside, thought only to frighten them with his challenge and then gunshot. Boys with guns. He got out of Reform School five years later.⁴⁹

Insofar as youth crime is concerned, the Reform School record paints a surprising picture. This was a rough-edged time. It was still pioneer life in rural Minnesota. In the decades covered here St. Paul and Minneapolis went from frontier burgs to boomtowns, with all the disorder and dislocation that rapid growth brings. The Civil War was recent memory and Indian wars still went on. Work was dangerous and life was too -- people often died young from childbirth and disease. It seems a breeding ground for anger and violence, especially among young men. And yet, in terms of youth crime, it appears gentle compared to today.

Long Stays

In some cases Reform School served as an orphanage. A remarkable portion of the boys -- about 11% -- spent five years or longer inside. They went in as children and came out young men. As almost none of these were committed for a serious offense, the long commitments suggest that their problems lay less with them than with their families; that the parents did not want the boys back, were too poor or otherwise distressed to be able to receive them, or the authorities did not trust them.

The most extreme case was that of the Easthagen (also spelled Estagin in the records) brothers of Minneapolis. In September of 1873 Fred and Charlie Easthagen stopped by Schaefer's bakery in their Minneapolis neighborhood, hoping for some ice cream. Fred, the younger brother, went in while Charlie waited outside. Fred had gone in with ten cents for ice cream; he came out with no ice cream but more than ten cents. He had

⁴⁹ File 471; *Winona Herald*, 16 September 1881, p. 3, 23 September 1881, p. 3, 26 October 1881, p. 3; Winona County District Court criminal case file #689.

found the counter unoccupied for a moment, and out of curiosity or bad judgment (or perhaps a vicious and incorrigible nature), reached his hand into the cash drawer and drawn out some coins. The two were caught a short time later by the proprietor, but most of the money was gone. "We spent some and dropped some," explained Charlie.

These look like innocent boys whose mischief might have been handled with a willow switch. Instead, they were taken to court and removed from their parents and home. Charlie, who was nine, spent the next nine years in Reform School, released, at last, to take a job running sheep in Montana. Fred, who went in at age six, stayed fourteen years, released to join Charlie out west. In the meantime, in 1875, brother Peter, age seven, joined them in Reform School as well. He was released in 1886. Among them, the Easthagen brothers spent 34 years in Reform School while their parents continued to live in Minneapolis.⁵⁰

But 34 years does not hold the family record. George Rice of Freeborn County went in at age 5 and got out ten years later. Brother Sam, age 6, did a ten-spot also. Albert Rice, 7, served nine. The eldest, August, 8, got reformed in just eight years. These were the sons of Herman and Mary Rice. According to the authorities, Herman had been in jail for abusing his family; his profession was listed as "idleness." The boys spent a total of 37 years in Reform School.⁵¹

Kannti and Kristene (or Chrysta) Tollefson, Norwegian immigrants, had four children. In November of 1888, when they came to Reform School on petition of the Evansville (Douglas County) town authorities, Kannti had been sent to jail for fighting, then abandoned the family. Kristene was judged to be morally depraved and the children "guilty" of vagrancy. Lars, then age 7, was released at age 14, furloughed to John Bjornstad of Minneapolis. Theodore, 5 when he

went in, died of typhoid five years later. Carl holds the record for youngest reform school inmate: he went in at age 3 and stayed, with one brief and unsuccessful furlough, for more than ten years. (A sister, Anne Marie, may have gone to Reform School too, but no record of her beyond a single mention survives.)⁵²

Hard cases, saved from lives of crime? Maybe. More likely, they were children disastrously unlucky in their choice of parents. Reform School was not designed for them but it may have been the best of very few options.

Such cases were anomalous, as Superintendent Riheldaffer preferred much shorter stays. Still, nearly 60 boys -- one of every 21 -- stayed in Reform School (in some cases off and on) seven years or longer.

Life Inside

We long for the discovery of, say, Warren Muck's reform school diary, scribbled furtively at bedtime, hidden among his meager possessions, miraculously preserved. Alas, nothing like it has come to light, so we have no inmate's view of life in the Reform School. We are left with only the official word, a description that must be approached with caution. Everything we have probably comes from the pen of John Riheldaffer; sincere, no doubt, but also written for an official audience. We could not expect complete frankness or the admission of major failures.

Still, the description that comes from Riheldaffer's pen has the ring of conviction and truth, and we can do no better than to reproduce it in full.

One Day in the Reform School

At six o'clock in the morning, the rising bell rings. Boys rise immediately, dress themselves and make their beds; then they

⁵⁰ Files 200, 201, and 258.

⁵¹ Files 731-734.

⁵² Files 952-954.

fall immediately into line and march in military order to the wash-room; wash and comb; no conversation is permitted during these duties. They again fall into line and pass to the school rooms; here they join in singing a few verses; the officer in charge reads a portion of Scripture, then all rise, and standing repeat, in concert, the Lord's Prayer. Again they fall into line and pass quietly to the dining hall where breakfast is in waiting; all sit down at the same time, and eat their breakfast in an orderly and quiet manner, in the presence of an officer, who sees that each is suitable provided for, and that proper decorum is observed.

Breakfast over, all pass in the same order to the wash-room, where they stand in line until detail for the forenoon is made. Half of

the boys are sent out to their respective school-rooms, where they are met by their teachers, and proceed at once to the duties of the school; the shop boys are sent out, under the care of the foremen of the shops, to their respective places of work; the rest are detailed to the various branches of domestic and out-door work, as may be required. This arrangement continues until half past eleven o'clock, when the bell rings and all report in line; from which they pass to their wash-rooms to wash and prepare for dinner.

Dinner over, one hour is given to play in the presence of the officers in charge, when line is again called and the detail made as in the morning. Those who were in school in the morning become the work force of the afternoon.



This image from the Concordia University archives purports to show the college from the 1890s; but the size of the boys suggests that this may be a Reform School photo from near the end of its days. This looks south from what is now Concordia Ave. at the center of the Reform School campus.

At five o'clock the bell rings for the close of school and work. After supper, in winter, the boys assemble in the large schoolroom where time is spent, until half-past seven, in hearing reports, study, and reading. At half-past seven the bell rings for evening devotions, which are conducted by the Superintendent, or some one called upon by him, and consists of reading a portion of Scripture, singing, and a prayer. At this exercise the whole family is assembled.

The work of the day is now over and the boys proceed in military order to their dormitories, where each one takes his position beside his bed, and at a given signal all kneel down, and each one utters a silent prayer according to his own desire or previous training.

All now retire to rest, and no talking or disorder is permitted until they leave the dormitories the next morning. This day is substantially the same as every other day of the year.⁵³

Also, "no week passes without a thorough ablution." Thus, he wrote on another occasion, "a whole year of active joyous life is filled up with study, work and play, with wholesome restraint, a condition of life that must be productive of health."⁵⁴ Riheldaffer maintained that his boys were among the happiest and healthiest anywhere, and that the Reform School was also a place of boyish mirth and playfulness. Maybe so. But certainly at first this routine must have come as a

shock to the many boys used to a life of idleness or truancy.

Work

Riheldaffer refers to their places of work. Work was just as important as school, for discipline, for training boys for a life of labor, and for maintaining the place itself.

There was a farm, about 30 acres (later expanded) of fields, gardens, orchards, and fruit. If the reports are to be believed, the school produced all of its own vegetables, oats for the livestock, potatoes, beets, onions, carrots, beans, and cabbage. Some years it had as many as 10,000 strawberry plants, 150 crabapple trees, and 500 grape vines. It kept small numbers of horses and cows, up to 18 pigs, and produced as much as 4000 pounds of pork in a year. The boys provided almost all of the labor.

And that wasn't all. The boys also did most of the kitchen work, under the supervision of a cook, plus the laundry and cleaning. Starting in 1870 the school added shops; first a shoe shop, a tailor shop, a tin shop, then a carpenter shop and a greenhouse. For a few years the shoe shop made and repaired the boys' shoes, the tailor shop likewise their clothes. The tin shop made items for sale, and the school employed as many as two peddlers to sell the goods, some years at a profit. The carpenter shop made toys, such as sleds, and sold those. The greenhouse supplemented the farm.⁵⁵

The Reform School was, in short, a 21st century ultraconservative's dream institution -- rote schoolwork, compulsory labor, compulsory Christian religion, no option but obedience, and minimal taxpayer support.

In every annual report Riheldaffer boasted of how happy and well-behaved his boys were, the

⁵³ *Ninth Annual Report*, 1876, pp. 7-8. A schedule like this seems ordinary for reform schools of the time. Michigan's reform school in 1869 prescribed on average 6.75 hours of work, 4.5 of school, and 2.5 of play every day, and bed from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. year-round. By-laws of the Michigan State Reform School, 1869, Library of Congress.

⁵⁴ Manuscript (undated), "Sanitary Aspect of Reform School," John G. Riheldaffer Papers, MHS.

⁵⁵ Several of the annual reports boast about the school's productivity. *Sixth Annual Report* (1873) and *Tenth Annual Report* (1877) are good examples. [\[add page numbers\]](#)



Toys manufactured at the Reform School by the inmates. MHS image.

equal of any set of boys, of any station, in the state. Punishment was needed rarely. But he did believe in punishments. They began with demerits (which could delay release), then bread and water, the rod (“we are now admirers of the wholesome effects of a good whipping”), and finally the solitary lockup. The last he denied ever using, and there is no reason to doubt that the Reform School used harsh punishment sparingly. The Reverend Mr. Riheldaffer felt genuine affection for his boys. “My jewels,” he once called them.⁵⁶

Diversion

“This day was substantially the same as every other day of the year.” Almost. The holidays of Christmas, New Year, and Independence Day were observed, plus at least one day at the State Fair (and some years the boys were on display for their toy-making), and one week of camp every year in August, at Lake Johanna. It is impossible not to admire Mr. Riheldaffer for his complete devotion to his work. He lived with his boys, supervised them every day, took care of all the administrative tasks, and then took them camping.

⁵⁶ *Third Annual Report (1870)*, p. 7. He looked forward to the day when Reform School was seen, like a college, as an alma mater, one that could say, “Behold my jewels,” which I have gathered up from the dark mines of sin and corruption and polished to adorn my maternal brow.”

“[W]e have one culminating bright period in our calendar,” Riheldaffer wrote, for an 1883 speech, called the ‘Minnesota State Reform School Annual Encampment,’” one week in August. The boys started preparing for it in spring. “Then our boys begin to talk of the encampment, preparations are made, partnerships in the ownership of boats are formed, worms are dug in May to starve to death before the happy time arrives At last when the glad day comes all are in line, marching to the music of fife and drums, under the stars and stripes, seven miles away, on foot, to the camping ground . . .” on the shores of Lake Johanna.⁵⁷

In August of 1880 a *Globe* reporter visited the encampment:

The camp, which consists of six tents 12x14 feet in size, is pitched immediately upon the south shore of the lake in close proximity to the summer cottage of Mr. Riheldaffer. The boys, to the number of 101, were scattered around the shores or sailing or rowing upon the lake. They were having a glorious time wading in the water or fishing. . . . The lake abounds with pickerel, bass and other fish, and it is glorious fun for these youngsters to pull them in. While the party [the visiting party, including the reporter] was there a 12-year-old came in from a fishing expedition . . . with a five pound pickerel in either hand. Should that boy live to be President of the United States (and he may), he will never experience a prouder moment [I]t is doubtful if there could be a hundred of the best boys in any city of the state who would behave better or as well as did these waifs of society under the guardianship of the State.⁵⁸

This was the usual tone of newspaper articles about the Reform School. There was some boosterism in this, but also plenty of sincere respect for the Riheldaffers and admiration for their work.

⁵⁷ Manuscript (undated), “Sanitary Aspect of Reform School,” John G. Riheldaffer papers, MHS. The year he wrote this is calculable from events mentioned.

⁵⁸ *Daily Globe* 12 August 1880, p. 2.

When you think of the boys' regimented life, think also of the work life of the staff. It was never large: Riheldaffer and his wife, the teachers, the shop foremen, the matron, the cook, the laundress, and perhaps a few others. One or more of these had to ring the bell at 6 a.m., watch the boys in the washroom and the dining room, and in their play, their work, and their prayers, a 14-hour day every day.

Getting Out.

Though almost every inmate was committed, on paper, through his minority (that is, until age 21), most boys were returned to their families after two or three years. This was Riheldaffer's plan from the beginning. So far as the record permits us to see, it appears that the length of commitment was almost entirely discretionary with the superintendent. The ultimate authority belonged to the board of managers, which met monthly, and it appeared, as we shall see, that the board sometimes acted gave in to political pressure..

Until the mid-1880s the inmate population stayed small enough that the superintendent, who also lived at the school, would have known every boy well. And because both Riheldaffer and his deputy and then successor, J.W. Brown, were sincere and dedicated public servants, they took genuine interest in the progress of all of their charges. They released them when they thought the time was right.

There does not seem to have been a standard formal process for earning release, though at some point there developed a rule that one year of good behavior entitled a boy to consideration for conditional release. Many times families petitioned for their sons to be returned, and though the first petition usually failed, the second or third succeeded. Some of these releases were outright, but most were called furloughs -- that is, they had conditions. These conditions were not recorded, at least not in surviving documents, but Riheldaffer and Brown did not forget. Dozens of inmates were

forcibly returned from furloughs for failure to keep the terms of their release. While some of these were brought back by their families, and by the courts, in most cases the Reform School itself made it happen.

Some boys were released when deemed ready to make their own livings. The school tried to train as many as possible in useful trades, chiefly carpentry and tinning. And it did not stop with training; staff also tried to find them jobs before letting them go. This practice continued even as the school grew to several times its original size, and after its eventual removal to Red Wing. Sometimes, when a job placement worked badly, the boy would be returned to Reform School for another try. And sometimes the boys, having failed to become self-sufficient, would return on their own and be received. Reform School was not voluntary, but it was not a prison.

Habeas Corpus

Now and then courts ordered that boys be freed, through *habeas corpus* proceedings. The record reveals 13 such proceedings, several of which were successful and apparently uncontested -- tacit admissions of fatally flawed commitments.⁵⁹

The reform school statute made no provision for appeal on the merits of any case, so *habeas corpus* provided the only formal means for post-commitment review. In two or three cases *habeas* review got boys freed because of procedural error. Two more interesting cases probed the troubling contradiction that Reform School embodied: Commitment was not punishment, yet its central feature, forcible confinement, looked an awful lot like jail.

George Content of Blue Earth County, age 14, was caught robbing a store with an adult accomplice. Both were indicted and then pled

⁵⁹ File nos. 262, 385, 396, 497, 498, 517, 639, 640, 769, 971, 1232, 1233, and 1246. These cover 16 years, from 1875 to 1891.

guilty, whereupon the adult paid a small fine and went free, while young George was given the standard indeterminate commitment to Reform School, which could have meant up to seven years. This occurred in September of 1879. In May of 1880 he escaped from Reform School. When he was recaptured on July 11 his parents were with a lawyer and immediately filed a *habeas corpus* petition seeking his release.

The case went to Judge D.A. Dickinson, who seemed well-prepared for it, as he heard arguments and issued a tightly reasoned order on July 13: that George Content be immediately released. His opinion is so powerful and his deconstruction of the Reform School statute so complete, that one has the impression that Judge Dickinson had been waiting for the opportunity.

To him there was no doubt that confinement in Reform School -- for children charged with crime, as Content had been -- constituted punishment. "[It] is of course an imprisonment, for it be not that, then there has been no escape, and there is no right of rearrest or capture" The rest of his opinion and order followed from that conclusion. He then rejected Content's arrest and further incarceration on three grounds:

- 1 Minnesota law required criminal sentences to be "precise, certain, and fixed." Content's sentence, "during his minority," was anything but certain because the court never established his date of birth (how could it know when he was no longer a minor?), and the Board of Managers -- not a court -- had the power to release him any time before that. Dickinson called this "a legal absurdity."
- 2 The very nature of the indeterminate sentence made a hash of constitutional justice in two ways: a) It was the same sentence regardless of crime; b) The time to be served depended not on the offense but on the offender's age -- a nine-year-old

might serve twelve years for petty larceny, and a fifteen-year-old six years for manslaughter.

- 3 The criminal statute under which Content had been convicted, if applied to anyone sixteen years of age or older, prescribed a maximum sentence of three years. That statute made no separate provision for younger offenders, so there was no reason to believe that the Legislature had intended a longer sentence -- in Content's case, more than twice as long -- for someone his age.⁶⁰

Patrick McDonough had been convicted, with three St. Paul Irish chums, of petty larceny for stealing from a warehouse. The maximum penalty for that crime, for an adult, was three months in jail. But like George Content, and every other boy under sixteen, he was sent to the Reform School during the time of his minority. McDonough's lawyers, seizing upon the reasoning of Judge Dickinson, brought a *habeas corpus* petition to free him, on the ground that the Legislature cannot have intended anyone convicted of petty larceny, regardless of age, to serve more than three months of confinement.

In the coverage of this case we see the rejoinders to Judge Dickinson's reasoning. Minnesota Attorney General Start defended the law. Confinement in the Reform School was not punishment, he argued, because, well, it just wasn't. This is an argument he had to make, and had to win, or else every boy and girl in the institution might go free. Commitment to Reform School was like a guardianship. "The indictment, plea, and conviction of a juvenile offender is simply accepted as conclusive evidence that the State should assume the guardianship of the child."

⁶⁰ The basic facts of Content's commitment are found in his Reform School intake file, no. 396. For the district court decision see *Pioneer Press*, 17 July 1880, p. 7.

Conviction of a crime, then, simply equals incorrigibility.

Judge Dickinson had made a compelling point: incarceration is punishment. But Attorney General Start made a subtler and, in the end, more convincing one. His analysis converted a criminal proceeding -- which by nature results in punishment -- into a civil one, the adjudication of incorrigibility, an aspect of the law that Judge Dickinson had not touched. What is more, Dickinson had set up a conflict between statutes; Start found a way to harmonize them, and in statutory interpretation the courts always favor harmony over conflict.

We do not actually know what became of George Content's case. No final resolution appears in the Reform School record or in the press. The last note about him in Superintendent Riheldaffer's big ledger book is his escape. Because in most cases when boys were returned the ledger so records, it seems likely that Content went free. The state might have thought it wiser to let him go than appeal Dickinson's ruling.

State Supreme Court

McDonough, by contrast, did not go free. His case went to the Minnesota supreme court. Chief Justice Gilfillan resolved it, in a way, by evading it. On August 6, 1880, he issued an order declining to comment on the legal issues and simply discharging the writ of *habeas corpus*. But perhaps one word in his order said it all -- guardianship: That McDonough "be and hereby is remanded to the custody and guardianship of the Board of Managers of the Minnesota State reform school" McDonough was a ward, not a prisoner -- and so it had to be or the whole thing would crumble.⁶¹

The Minnesota supreme court came to precisely this conclusion when a constitutional challenge to a Reform School commitment reached it in 1892. In *State ex rel Olson v. Brown* the court

held that, sure enough, reform school was not punishment, that commitment to it was not criminal in nature but the state acting *in loco parentis*. Just as parents have lawful authority to restrain their children, the state has lawful authority to restrain children committed to its care.⁶²

Interestingly, a case that arose out of the same set of facts showed how vulnerable Reform School might have been to challenges that any competent attorney could have made. *State v. Brown* involved the partner in crime to the Olson of the case described above. Matthew Connolly and Emil Olson of Waseca had shown themselves to be accomplished criminals. There seemed to be no doubt that they were guilty of some serious offenses. Rare in reform school proceedings, there were more than a dozen witnesses brought against them. But the magistrate failed to comply with the Reform School statute -- he did not reduce the witnesses' testimony to writing and forward it to the district court judge. By order of the Minnesota supreme court, he went free.⁶³

As we have seen, ignoring the technical provisions of the Reform School statute was common practice. Had the boys had energetic legal representation, their lawyers could have brought the machinery of juvenile justice clattering to a halt. But few of them did have lawyers, and in any event this is not what most people wanted. Most people did not care about the legal niceties; they wanted the Reform School as it was.

Some boys were freed through political pressure, formal or informal. About a half dozen were pardoned or received less formal clemency. More, according to an exasperated Riheldaffer, were freed against his will by clamoring politicians. "Their discharge was procured by the persistent

⁶¹ *Daily Globe*, 26 July 1880, p. 1.

⁶² *State ex rel Olson v. Brown*, 50 Minn. 935 (1892).

⁶³ *State ex rel Connolly v. Brown*, 47 Minn. 472 (1891); *Daily Globe* 7 August 1880, p. 2.

importunities of their friends, backed up with petitions numerous signed, often by prominent and influential citizens Thus an almost irresistible pressure is brought to bear, and boys are furloughed whose best interests would be promoted by their longer detention in the institution.”⁶⁴

Escape

Reform School was not a prison, but lots of boys did not want to be there, and some lacked the patience to await the fulfillment of Rev. Riheldaffer’s plans for their improvement. Escape was a near-constant presence. During the school’s 23 years in St. Paul there were 89 documented escape attempts by 80 boys; at least one every year except 1868-69, 1881-82, and 1888. There were certainly many more escapes kept out of the official records, and who knows how many unsuccessful tries.

Escape could not have been difficult. The place had fencing but no walls and a small staff, none of them guards. The boys often worked on the grounds or accompanied staff on off-grounds errands. Rev. Riheldaffer boasted that escape was easy, but the boys were so happy that they had no interest in doing so.⁶⁵ This was only a slight exaggeration.

Some of the escape tales are fascinating, and you can’t help rooting for the boys. The escapees fit a certain pattern. They were older than the average inmate, and made their runs either very soon after arriving, or after a few years inside, probably frustrated by being held so long. For nearly all, the only record of their flight is a sentence, sometimes

just a word, “escaped,” in the inmate ledger. From just a handful we get more of a story.

One of the first boys committed, Jacob Hooper, came to the Reform School in July of 1868, delivered to St. Paul by a stage coach driver who had found him wandering, alone, partially disabled. City authorities found him sleeping on the street. His mother was dead and his father had abandoned him, and he had infections of the eyes that impaired his vision. He was charged with vagrancy, but incorrigibility would have done just as well. Jacob Hooper was 13 years old when he entered Reform School. Seven years later he was still there, the oldest inmate. The last ledger entry for him reads, “Escaped from the school while at the state fair.” He disappears then from the historical record, but you have to hope that he found happiness somewhere.⁶⁶

William Ferguson’s is one of the oddest little stories in the record. He came to the school from the Minneapolis courts late February 1884 on a charge of stealing a shotgun from an office, to which he pled guilty. “His right foot is a clubfoot, walks with a crutch.” Two months later he disappeared . . . but not for long. On 23 June 1885 he “visited the school, was well dressed and had some money. Said he was peddling. Had lost the use of his right limb, said to be from a gun shot wound.” He might still have been young enough (his age was not reported) to be retaken, but one could understand that Rev. Riheldaffer and his staff might have concluded that against all odds Ferguson seemed to be making his way in the world, and the other lads ought to be spared his influence.⁶⁷

For some boys, persistence paid off. James Henderson was an 11-year-old African American boy from St. Paul with -- according to his mother -- a long record of theft before landing in Reform School in October of 1881. He began trying to

⁶⁴ *Ninth Annual Report* (1875), pp. 5-6.

⁶⁵ “When it is remembered that most of our inmates have been vagrants and incorrigible; that running away from their homes and going at will about the country has been their practice, it is a matter of surprise that so few show any disposition to escape from the Reform School.” *Fourth Annual Report* (1871), p. 5.

⁶⁶ File 24.

⁶⁷ File 573 and Ledger.

escape four years later, with dramatic flair. July 23, 1885: "Escaped [with another boy] by sliding down the ventilator." He was caught and returned two days later. The following May his application for a furlough was refused. He responded in late June: "Escaped again from the school on the night of June 29, 1886 by fastening sheets together, throwing them out of the window of the water closet of the dormitory of the second family building and sliding down the sheets outside." He was quickly caught again, but it seems the Reform School managers did not try hard to keep him. "Escaped again July 1st 1886 when out picking currants." There was no need to flee in the night when you could simply walk away. He was sixteen years old -- time to go.⁶⁸

At least one inmate was something of an escape artist, and probably had a bright future as a career criminal. Arthur Kavanagh was pinched in Minneapolis for grand larceny, a felony; he pled guilty but also represented his age as 15. The court gave him three years in Reform School. By the time he arrived there, more information had come to light. He was in fact not 15, but 20. Has already served one term in St. Paul workhouse and was committed to the Minneapolis workhouse, but escaped the next day. "July 5 1889 escaped from the dormitory in the night with Stephen Kramer by breaking window and jumping to the roof of the kitchen, thence to the ground. A few days after was arrested in Minneapolis for theft and committed to the workhouse for three months but escaped within a week and is now at large."

Among the last to escape from the St. Paul Reform School was a boy who defied the patterns. In May of 1889 Mata Gould of St. Paul had her son, William Bouquette, committed to Reform School for incorrigibility. He was seven years old, but a resourceful seven; a little more than a year later, in July of 1890, he escaped. He was the youngest ever to escape from the St. Paul Reform School, and he made a clean getaway. One has to suspect family

help, but the Reform School and police usually knew where to look in such cases, and he was never found.



Not a success story. Prison photo of Reform School grad Frank Myers, a.k.a. Frank Nelson, found in his Reform School file at MHS.

The St. Paul facility closed 16 months later, and the boy was probably given up or forgotten. But on April 14, 1896, William Bouquette appeared at the Red Wing facility, asking to be readmitted. "He wanted," the ledger recorded, "to learn a trade." The Reform School retained jurisdiction over him until age 21, so it took him in. A year later Bouquette was furloughed for good; he was 15 years old.⁶⁹

The first 24 boys to break out of Reform School, 1870 to 1880, succeeded. This is one area where, apparently, Riheldaffer could not bring himself to honesty in his official reporting. His 1880 report to the Legislature noted just three escapes without recapture in the school's history -- but its internal ledgers reported at that moment 22. Ten years later his successor, JW Brown, reported a cumulative total of nine escapes -- there had been over 40.⁷⁰

St. Paul's *Globe* newspaper also reported at least 23 escapes not noted in the inmate records,

⁶⁸ File 468 and Ledger.

⁶⁹ File 1013 and Ledger.

⁷⁰ Thirteenth Report (1881), p. 3; Eighteenth Report (1891), p. 3.

including a mass breakout by 11 boys in 1889.⁷¹ (And the *Globe* began publication in 1878, ten years after the Reform School opened.)

Lax security certainly played a role in the escapes, but pragmatic judgments may have contributed too; an unhappy young man desperate enough to escape was bound to agitate the others.⁷² Security got much better starting in 1881, and in the next ten years just 19 more (officially) got away. Still, of the 80 inmates who tried (not

Girls

Neither the statute that created the Reform School nor any of its amendments made any discrimination between boys and girls except one - for boys the maximum age for commitment was 15, for girls 16. But in practice they were treated very differently.

The arithmetic tells part of the story -- 1250 boys, 112 girls. We may speculate that different norms of boys' and girls' behavior played a major part. The acts and attitudes of court and county officials joined in. Superintendent Riheldaffer complained over and over that though girls had just as much need of reform as boys, and he could reform them perfectly well, prosecutors, judges, and county commissioners would not send them. The language surrounding all of this was always oblique, never direct.

⁷¹ *Daily Globe* 3 April 1880, p.4; 20 August 1880, p. 6; 21 September 1881, p. 3; 9 August 1882, p. 1; 27 August 1883, p.1; 27 October 1883, p. 8; 18 March 1884, p.2; 27 July 1884, p.8; 2 August 1884, p. 8; 24 March 1888, p. 2; 22 May 1889, p. 2.

⁷² Regarding the mass escape of 1889, the *Globe* commented on its ringleader: "The Reform School officers will be well pleased if Burke succeeds in getting out of the state." *Daily Globe* 22 May 1889, p. 2. The "Burke" referred to was Daniel Burk of Minneapolis, whose age upon admission was recorded as 21, reflecting an error somewhere along the line. File 987.

The fact that so few girls have been committed is not to be attributed to the absence of proper subjects among the female juveniles of the State. There are many who greatly need and would be benefited by the discipline and training of the Reform School, but the act, regulating commitments, is such as to make it almost impossible to secure the commitment of a girl upon a charge of incorrigibility; it is only when convicted of some crime that must be punished that they will be sent to the Reform School.

We have had frequent applications during the past year [Riheldaffer wrote this in early 1875], from mothers and other friends of incorrigible girls, for information, as to how they could secure their commitment; all we could do was to refer them to the law of the case; but in trying to follow the steps prescribed by the law they found it impossible to secure the consent of the County Commissioners, which is required to all commitments for incorrigibility.⁷³

There seem to have been two factors at work here. One was delicacy. For girls incorrigibility was associated with sex, and people did perhaps not want such things brought up in court and recorded in official documents. This may explain why even the records for those girls committed to the Reform School are so skimpy. Most record nothing more than the girl's name and the jurisdiction of origin. (The boys' files, in contrast, often contain details of their offenses.) Also, the county commissioners were notorious skinflints. Until the mid-1880s the counties had to pay the costs of inmates committed for incorrigibility, and for girls (many boys too) they were too cheap to do so.

Sixty-one of the girls came from Minneapolis and St. Paul and another dozen or so from other substantial towns -- Duluth, Stillwater, Lake City, Winona. The records reveal the charges in only 41

⁷³ *Eighth Annual Report* (1875), p. 10.

of the 112 cases: incorrigibility 22, larceny 17, fornication 1.

Fragments of a few personal stories survive. Ellen Sandry, the fornicator (probably not the only one), was put in by her father in 1879 “to save her from a life of shame.” Emily Lawrence of Minneapolis was committed in January of 1883 for “occupying apartments for immoral purposes.” Alice Hohns tried to poison herself; Mary Cabel of Winona tried to poison somebody else.

Cornelia Smith was committed by her mother the day after he father was indicted for having attempted a “criminal assault” on her. Mabel Vaness was released from Reform School, only to stay in Reform School, taken in by the Riheldaffers. They loved but lost her -- she died in their home of diphtheria in November of 1883.

Six of the girls were identified as African American (one, a “gay colored damsel.”) Five girls escaped, or tried to.⁷⁴

Only one story comes through in any detail, thanks to the *Globe*. Anna Ritter came to the Reform School in April of 1883. Her mother, she said, was alive but she had not seen her for a year. “My mother wanted me taken away to keep me from my stepfather. He treated me badly. He committed an outrage on my person and whipped me severely to keep me from telling.” She ended up in the Home for the Friendless, and early ancestor of the Union Gospel Mission, located on Railroad Island (where Eileen Weida Park is today). The people there tried placing her in employment but, said the girl, while in one home (as a servant presumably), “I was visited by a young man, and I was sent back to the home.” The trustees of the home sent her to Reform School.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Girls' ledger book; JGR diary p. 3; *Daily Globe* 15 July 1879 , p.3 (Ellen Sandry); 7 January 1883, p. 5 (Emily Lawrence); 17 May 1878, p.4 (Cornelia Smith); 1 April 1882, p.1 (Alice Reynolds, the “damsel,” committed for satisfying her “kleptomaniac instincts.”)

⁷⁵ *Daily Globe*, 8 April 1883, p. 6.

Her story (if accurately reported and true) may have represented some common themes among the Reform School girls. But we will probably never know, as it is unlikely that more records of these unlucky young women survive.

The Catholic Controversy

As we have seen, daily life at the Reform School included morning and evening prayer and scripture-reading. The original authorizing statute gave the Board of Managers the duty of “religious and moral education.” At the same time, the Legislature was careful to keep official religious observance nonsectarian; one hour per week was set aside for clergy of any inmate’s persuasion to “freely minister moral and religious instruction,” though always openly, within sight of staff. “[T]he right of conscience shall be scrupulously guarded,” and there was to be no chaplain, “either by appointment or in effect.”

No chaplain, and yet the Superintendent was a Presbyterian minister who led prayers and Bible reading every day. The line there looks very fine, and some Catholics failed to see any line at all. Many boys sent to Reform School were Catholic, immigrants or sons of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Bohemia. It was one thing to have your son in Reform School, still another to believe the family religion was under attack there. Stories reached the ears of local priests that the supposedly non-sectarian prayers and teachings at the Reform School had an anti-Catholic tilt. Could it be that the Rev. Mr. Riheldaffer, a committed Calvinist, could not help himself?

We get a hint of this in the very first months of Reform School operation. Jacob Hoffman, a German Catholic immigrant, came to Reform School on April 1, 1868, for begging on the streets of St. Paul. He was released 13 months later, then came back in 1871, this time for theft. In his ledger the superintendent lamented young Jacob’s early release, which had been agitated for by friends “for fear he would become a Protestant.”

On February 25, 1874, a letter appeared in the *Minneapolis Tribune* -- not quite 97 theses nailed to the Cathedral door, but with a similar accusatory intent. The writer, Father James McGolrick, made four charges against the managers of the Reform School:

- 1 Catholic boys there were taught “that the Catholic church had fallen into error at the time of the Reformation -- that it was a false church.”
- 2 The boys were required to memorize the Westminster Catechism, a 1640 product of English and Scots Protestants.
- 3 The only Bible permitted was the King James, “which we Catholics maintain to be a corrupt version of Sacred Scriptures.”
- 4 As prizes boys were given books, including one, *Young Christian Merchant*, which teaches that Catholic priests are liars and swindlers, and that Catholics are “brutal, bigoted, superstitious”

McGolrick also pointed out, reasonably, that if the superintendent of the Reform School were a Catholic priest proselytizing among the Protestant inmates, there would be an outcry.

McGolrick’s letter had a bigger context. It protested also the passage of the “Liberty of Conscience” bill in the Minnesota legislature, a bill offered in response, apparently, to similar complaints raised in other state institutions, such as the state prison. The bill passed, but late in deliberations the language, “no officer of any State institution, or other person, shall interfere with or attempt to control or change the religious belief of any of said inmates.” Without that language, argues McGolrick, the bill was a nullity.

The *Minneapolis Tribune* agreed: “[I]f it be true that any bigot in office is using his position for proselytizing ends, he is committing an outrage upon the rights of the people of the State”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ *Minneapolis Tribune* 25 February 1874, p. 2. The *Pioneer Press*, using less inflammatory language, agreed: 19 February 1874 p. 1.

How Riheldaffer reacted to this at the time, we do not know, but he still steamed about it more than two years later: he wrote in his diary that just a handful of things had detracted from the satisfaction of his work, one of them “sectarian bigotry on the part of the minions of the pope.”⁷⁷

McGolrick may have been right about the statute being a nullity, at least so far as Riheldaffer was concerned. In early December 1879, five years after the McGolrick controversy, a big and apparently popular Protestant revival took place in St. Paul. The *Globe* noted with approval that “the standard of Christian living is perceptibly higher than it was a couple of months ago.” “Five services are to be held daily, commencing today with a meeting among the boys at the Reform School”⁷⁸

The Riheldaffers

Let us pause for a moment to consider the remarkable couple who ran the Reform School for its first 17 years, John G. and Catherine Riheldaffer. John Riheldaffer was born in Western Pennsylvania in 1818, when that was still frontier country. His parents were farmers, and young John learned farm work. As people in that time so often did, they moved, first to Ohio, then to West Virginia, where Riheldaffer lost both his parents in 1830. On his own then, he worked, apprenticed as a gunsmith, got a smattering of education here and there, and studied on his own. His devotion to learning led him to Princeton Theological Seminary and graduation there in 1848. He married, took a pastorate in Indiana, then promptly lost his wife and then their infant son.

He married Catherine Ogden of Michigan two years later, in 1850, and came to St. Paul in 1851, when it was little more than a muddy hamlet. In 1852 he founded Central Presbyterian Church (still thriving today), and in 1858 the St. Paul Female

⁷⁷ John Riheldaffer diary, p. 3, 16 Dec. 1876.

⁷⁸ *Daily Globe*, 7 December 1879 p. 2.

Seminary, a private academy devoted to a demure education for young ladies, a school that eventually attracted a sizeable clientele of St. Paul's prosperous families.⁷⁹

So when appointed first superintendent of the state reform school in 1868 Riheldaffer brought a propitious set of attributes to the position -- entrepreneurship, experience in education and agriculture, spiritual and intellectual training, and the memory of being abandoned in the world. He was 50 years old, married, had several children and a house and career downtown near the state capitol. He gave most of this up and to live with and supervise boys believed to be headed for lives of crime and dissipation. In choosing Riheldaffer, Minnesota chose well.

He approached his task -- creating an institution never before seen in our state -- with system and self-assurance. He and the Board of managers, chaired by Daniel W. Ingersoll, investigated other houses of refuge (as the reform school was first called) around the country, and sent an agent to visit the Ohio State Reform School, which Riheldaffer admired above the others, and on which he modeled Minnesota's.

He never wavered from certain principles:

- His charges were boys, not criminals, and not so different from other boys.
- Reform School was not a place of punishment.
- Education was foremost, as most of the inmates came in with low levels of literacy.
- Work came right behind education, as the boys needed to be prepared for a life of labor.

He also believed that he could succeed with almost any boy or any girl.

We know what he believed because he repeated his beliefs over and over in his annual reports to the Legislature (which are a major

⁷⁹ J. Fletcher Williams, *History of Ramsey County* (St. Paul: 1881), p.318 (Central Presbyterian)

source of what we know about the Reform School.) He wrote well, forcefully, and with a 19th century confidence that the combination of Christianity and discipline could conquer almost any defect of circumstance or character.

Facilities Manager

In part because there seems never to have been a long-term master plan for the Reform School, Riheldaffer had to lobby the Legislature every year for money for new facilities, improvements, and repairs. He usually succeeded, but it was a constant game of catch-up, responding to crises rather than planning for growth. New projects came relentlessly, all supervised by Riheldaffer: main dormitory, 1869; shops, fence, carriage house, 1870; tin shop, 1871; windmill, stables, well house, 1872; new dormitory, 1873; new heating plant, 1874; carpenter shop, 1875; greenhouse, 1876; well, 1877; after a destructive fire in 1878, all new shops, barn, and heating system; fencing, 1882.

With the exception of stone buildings, windmills, wells, and heating plants, all of the construction work was done by the regular employees of the school with the help, such as it was, of the boys.⁸⁰

Sanitation became a problem at the Reform School quickly. The farmstead had been occupied by just a few people, and of course this was long before municipal sewerage. Scores, then hundreds of boys, a team of employees, the superintendent and his family, and the farm menagerie generated lots of waste.

The state health department inspected the Reform School in 1872. "There is no system of drainage here. The cess-pool is 40 foot feet to the rear of the building, and is connected with it by an open drain, opening into (and on a level with the floor) of the laundry. . . . The water works throughout the building, we were informed, are a

⁸⁰ Annual Reports, 1869-1883.

failure and have not been in operation for more than a year; consequently the bath-room and the water-closets are useless and the boys bathe in tubs in the laundry." The health department recommended the complete rebuilding of the privies, repair of the water system, and the building of a cesspool at least 100 feet from the habitations. The Legislature took no action.⁸¹

Sacrifice

On August 29, 1874, typhoid fever appeared, and lingered into early winter. Eventually 22 boys - one-fifth of the whole population -- got sick with typhoid, and three died. And not only boys: "Two of the employees have had the fever, and one of the children of the Superintendents, a daughter seven years old, died of it, November 27th." The daughter was Helen, the fourth of the Riheldaffers' children to die very young.

Bad sanitation breeds typhoid fever. The bacterium *salmonella typhi* lives only in the human digestive tract, and spreads through water contaminated by human feces. Though Minnesota health officials did not understand precisely the etiology of the disease, there was a common understanding that human waste had something to do with it. In 1874 the inmates, staff, and families of the Reform School were poisoning themselves by polluting their water supply. As the Department of Health noted later in the year, a sample of the well water was tested "and found contaminated with sewerage. . . . There is scarce a doubt that the water in use when the fever broke out contained a considerable amount of organic matter, sufficient to render it entirely unfit for use."

Riheldaffer began campaigning for a new water system in his January 1875 report to the Legislature, but he mentioned his daughter's death just that one time; it took until 1877 for the state to

find the \$1500 needed to dig a new and much deeper well.⁸²

John Riheldaffer must have felt deeply a calling that survived so catastrophic a sacrifice. Leadership of the Reform School brought into play his multiple talents. He wrote, he lobbied the legislature, he managed the budget, hired and fired, released and retained inmates, managed business enterprises, supervised a farm, planned and carried out building projects, held religious services, led camping trips, led boys and girls. And also headed a family. So far as one can tell from the record, he never had a day off.

Catherine Riheldaffer

Just as we know little about the girls who came through the Reform School, its primary female figure, Catherine Riheldaffer, eludes the historical lens. She seems to have been the model minister's wife, the dutiful and devoted helpmeet; and a pastor's daughter, no less. It is hard to avoid cliché: behind every great man . . .

She accompanied him to the frontier hamlet of St. Paul in 1851, bore nine children and endured the loss of five, joined in his work as he founded a church, founded a school, founded and ran a state institution that was regularly visited by dignitaries. Her duties at the Reform School can hardly have been less demanding than his, for there was no rest from work or the public eye; plus she had their own children to rear (and to lose), and without doubt many of the inmate boys saw in her a mother figure.

We get just glimpses of her centrality. When daughter Helen died, Superintendent Riheldaffer's report referred to her as the "daughter of the superintendents" -- not singular but plural. And there survives one written record that was clearly hers. From 1870 to 1883 she kept a tiny ledger

⁸¹ *First Annual Report of Minnesota State Board of Health* (1871), pp. 89-91.

⁸² *Eighth Annual Report* (1875), p. 4; *Annual Report of the Department of Health* (1875), p. 15; *Eleventh Annual Report* (1878), p. 10.

book in which she urged boys about to be released to record a few thoughts as their days of supervised reform came to an end. It is a touching memento (one that resides with the Riheldaffer papers, rather than the Reform School files) with a certain form and formality that one can imagine came from her.

Almost every entry begins, "Dear friends." The handwriting is careful, sometimes elegant, as though the boys were eager to show how much they had learned. The text recounts when they entered, their gratitude, and their plans to be good boys in future. Not rarely they thanked Mrs. Riheldaffer for nursing them through illness.

This is a representative entry:

My Dearest Friend,
How much I owe You for your untiring efforts for my spiritual welfare words cannot express. My heartfelt thanks and prayers that your endeavors [sic] hereafter to lead others to Jesus may be abundantly rewarded. It is all the expression of gratitude I can now show you. I will always remember you with love and feel that it was you that placed my feet on the straight and narrow way that leads to Heaven.

Patrick Dorsey
20 April 1870

Eleven years later William Hutchinson included in his longish note, "And I am very thankful for what you did for me when I was sick and I am going to try to be a better boy and when I am strong enough to help my mother I will help her all I can and do all that my Parents tell me."

Then below his signature he added:
The rose is red
the violet blue
Sugar is sweet

and so are you⁸³

Resignation

For all their good works, the Riheldaffers might have stayed on the job too long. Over 17 years one is bound to make mistakes and enemies. In the official reports and in its presentation to the press and public, all was unity and harmony in the Reform School leadership. But this was appearance only. Privately, Riheldaffer considered Ingersoll to be a glory-hogging windbag.

I have known this man Ingersoll to get up before the visiting members of the legislature and in the face of myself to the school, tell the boys that he speaks to them so often . . . when he had not met the boys during the whole preceding year. So many times he has taken my words & ideas just given to him and presented them, with all the gusto and confidence of an honest man, as if they were his own ideas. . . . For 18 years I have worked along here & made this school all that it is, I have quietly permitted Pres. I[ngersoll] to take all the glory, so long as he would permit me to go on with my work.

I may, without fear of contradiction, say that I am not indebted to him or any member of the board for one idea, in the management of the Reform School. I have introduced the trades, arranged the school, ordered the discipline, managed all the affairs of the school with my own ideas, as fully as if there had been no board of managers in existence.

In early 1885 Riheldaffer detected a conspiracy against him, involving Ingersoll, board secretary Finley McCormick, and assistant superintendent J.W. Brown. According to Riheldaffer, Ingersoll had been frightened by a report suggesting that the Reform School had too many employees. He had McCormick take up residence at the school to keep an eye on Riheldaffer, and then recommended cutting wages

⁸³ Catherine Riheldaffer ledger book.

and firing an employee Riheldaffer considered blameless. Riheldaffer succeeded in protecting his people, but the damage had been done; it is not surprising that his wife wrote in her diary around this time, "I am heartily sick of the Reform School."⁸⁴

John Riheldaffer resigned as superintendent, effective July 1885. He then accepted the call to a pulpit in Redwood Falls, where he lived the rest of his life. After he died Catherine returned to St. Paul, where one of her sons resided, and lived with him the rest of her life, 13 years, at 638 Ashland Avenue, a house that stands today.



The End

Two kinds of growth brought about the demise of the St. Paul reform school. One was the growth of the school itself, in population and facilities. Inmate population boomed to 200 as both Minneapolis and St. Paul grew exponentially in the 1880s. [Pop. figures] though Superintendent Riheldaffer had pushed for facilities planning and building for that many inmates going back to the early 1870s [find exact date], the Legislature never planned, only reacted. Hence the physical plant grew only in reaction to pressures, and other building got done at minimal cost at the instance (and labor) of on-site staff. In other words, higgledy-piggledy.

⁸⁴ John Riheldaffer diary, pp. 81-87; Catherine Riheldaffer diary, vol. 4, p. 109.

The other growth was that of St. Paul. it expanded to the west, eventually overtaking and surrounding a site that in 1868 had been rural. Having lots of people live near the Reform School could only bring trouble -- gawkers and escapes to name just two -- and also severely limit expansion. What is more, growth made the land more valuable.

In 187__ the Legislature -- planning now -- authorized a commission to study the building of a new Reform School. The commission chose Red Wing. Building began there in __. Not surprisingly, the attention and investment directed there accelerated degradation of the St. Paul facility. The first boys moved to the uncompleted Red Wing site in the summer of 1891; the main move occurred in early November, and by mid-November was complete.

In the end the hoped-for redevelopment of the St. Paul reform school location never happened. Even today the site is largely open, consisting of grounds and playing fields of Concordia University, Jimmy Lee Recreation Center, and Central High School. Concordia College bought the land in 1894 and used the former main building of the Reform School for many years; it came down in 1962. Nothing on the site marks the location of Minnesota's first statewide experiment in juvenile justice and rehabilitation. It is fitting, perhaps, that the site remains dedicated to youth education and recreation.

Meanwhile the Red Wing successor motors on uninterrupted since 1891, though much changed. It is now in effect a youth prison. When the Reform School was in St. Paul a boy could be sent there for truancy, disobedience, petty theft. In Red Wing today the standards are, shall we say, higher: it takes a serious felony to be invited in.

A Reflection

Looking back nearly a century and a half to the founding of the Reform School, and then to its early years, three elements of the story stand out.

First, though in our national mythology our forebears took the prairies and populated the cities in sturdy, healthy families, by their own initiative, never thinking of government help, the Reform School story contains an alternate narrative. Families in fact were often shattered, unhealthy, and, when a government institution offered places for their children, eagerly offered them up. They put them in the state institution, often for years, for behavior we would today consider not much more than mischief.

Second, despite the undeniable roughness of the era, crime was much less violent then than now. The evidence of more than 1200 cases is strong. What remains to be investigated is whether a similar pattern holds for adult crime.

Third, juvenile justice seems to have occupied a more prominent and positive place in the public mind then than it does now. The Reform School was almost always positively portrayed in the press. Legislative delegations made annual visits that were covered prominently in the daily press.

The superintendent was an esteemed public figure. The place itself was open and easily visited. Newspapers reported openly who was sent there and for what. No doubt today's concern for the privacy of young offenders is correct, but it also has the effect of consigning juvenile justice to a place of mystery and incomprehension.

The Minnesotans who created the State Reform School in the early days of our state did so with very little of what we could call scientific knowledge of adolescent psychology and with very different ideas of how to educate and guide young people, but they were just as smart as we are. The Reform School they created seems to have worked reasonably well for them. And during its years in St. Paul the Reform School stayed true to the impulse that started it off -- [quote Gov. Merriam

