

“STUCK WITH A BUNCH OF NUNS”
MARQUETTE’S HOLY FAMILY ORPHANAGE

by
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In *Superior Heritage*, the third volume of The Marquette Trilogy, Thelma Bergmann adopts Jessie Hopewell, but no one wants to adopt Jessie’s sister, Lyla. Consequently, Lyla is sent to the Holy Family Orphanage. Years later, as an adult, Lyla remains bitter over the situation and complains, “She [Thelma] went and adopted Jessie, but she stuck me in the orphanage with a bunch of nuns. . . . if the old woman didn’t want me, what right did she have to stick me in a Catholic orphanage? We were good Finnish Lutherans until she stuck her nose in our business.”

Whether or not, Thelma Bergmann made the right decision in not adopting Lyla--you’ll have to read The Marquette Trilogy and decide for yourself--Lyla did end up in the orphanage. She did not view her experience there as very pleasant, but then, Lyla is not a very pleasant person.

What was it like to be a child in the orphanage, or even one of the sisters who cared for the children? Whenever I drive past the abandoned building on Altamont and Fisher Streets, I can only wonder what stories it would tell if its walls could talk.

The Holy Family Orphanage was built in 1915, the dream of Marquette Catholic Diocese Bishop, Frederick Eis. He wished to have a place that provided a shelter to the children, as well as be a school to prepare them to enter the adult world. The cost to build the orphanage ranged somewhere between \$90,000 to \$120,000, an astronomical sum nearly a century ago, but the welfare and care of the children was priceless.

Doubtless, it was far from a perfect life, but in most cases, the orphanage was all that stood between these children and being on the streets. The building was built to be sturdy, filled with concrete with sandstone arches in the front for decoration. Nuns from the Sisters of Saint Agnes came to instruct, feed, clothe, discipline and love sometimes as many as 200 children at a time.

The orphanage stayed open for more than 50 years. At the end, its inhabitants were a group of Cuban children, refugees from Fidel Castro’s Revolution. Imagine the thoughts of those boys, fleeing their warm native tropical land to experience their first winter in Marquette.

No one can speak for all the children who passed through the orphanage’s doors. Many of them probably felt bitter, abandoned by their parents, or grieving over parents’ deaths. Others may have wished to be adopted but knew the orphanage was all that stood between them and starvation. It was not Park Avenue, but it was a home, an inbetween place, perhaps a place that gave them hope to go out and find a better life when they were old enough to leave it.

Today, the orphanage is in a dilapidated and abandoned state. It remains, looming on the hill as people drive by on US 41, scarcely noticing it is there any longer. It should be noticed. It was the home to thousands over the course of its lifetime. A million dreams were dreamt by its children. Does the old orphanage have its own dreams of a brighter future? It has passed through about a dozen owners' hands in the last twenty years, awaiting development or destruction. After providing a home to thousands, it is now itself an orphan abandoned by its city and owners.

The Holy Family Orphanage is a Marquette landmark. But its future is less important than the story of all those who passed through it. These are the real life stories which are greater than fiction, the stories that bear remembering, the truth about what life was like in Marquette nearly a century ago. Who can count how many people's lives today would be different if they, their parents, or grandparents had not found at the Holy Family Orphanage a family when they had none?

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