

## **Institutionalized children lived in bleak conditions**

by [Luther Granquist](#) // October 10th, 2009



Minnesota has a long history of placing children in institutions. From January 1867 through October 1881 about 120 children were committed to Minnesota's first Hospital for the Insane at St. Peter. Most of the older teenagers were said to have mania or depression, and many of them were discharged within six months to a year. For them, the hospital may have served a purpose. About 50 of these children, most of them 14 or younger, were labeled "idiot" or "imbecile." Neither the trustees nor the superintendent of the institution wanted to serve them.

The brief patient records reflect the attitude toward these children. The physician wrote that Carry, from McLeod County, was one of the "most distressing & disgusting cases ever in the house" and that "fortunately for the attendants and the institution" her parents took her home. That same physician also wrote that a different child named Henry from Faribault County "on the whole was the most disgusting case ever admitted here."

For most of the children, the living area was a wide hallway, initially in the Ewing House, a three-story building in downtown St. Peter with an attached two-story frame building, or in the upper level of the south or north wings of the permanent hospital. Some of them did not even get a chance to live in a hallway. Two young boys, one 7 years old and the other 14, were confined to the same room and, it appears, to the same bed. The physician wrote that one of them "whines & sways his body and shakes his hands with fingers sprawling or pounds and scratches himself." The other was "in bed emaciated to a skeleton" with "limbs drawn up & muscles fixed." There is no record of any treatment. A commission established by the legislature said both boys should be sent back to their county, but both died in 1878 before that was done.

Of Pauline, a 10-year-old girl, the physician wrote "There is nothing of interest in this case" and that "she makes herself so disgusting to the other patients that she has to be kept isolated most of the time to avoid having her. . . abused by the other patients." William, a teenager from St. Paul, was confined to his room "owing to filthy habits." Eight-year-old John from Isanti County was "so restless and troublesome to the other patients that he was not allowed on the hall with them, for fear that they will knock him over and hurt him." He was confined to his bed all the time where he kept his head covered and whined and cried.

William and John died at St. Peter. Pauline and about 20 other children were moved to the Experimental School for Idiots and Imbeciles in Faribault in 1879. At that time, this move provided a better life for these children, but it established for a century the practice of keeping children like them in an institution.

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