

Father of Thousands of Boys

by Katie O'Brien



"There are no bad boys. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example, bad thinking!"

These were the words that Fr. Edward Flanagan uttered over and over again to policemen and judges. Boys that authorities deemed too bad to be reformed were often sent to adult jails or reformatories after committing petty crimes or not attending school. Fr. Flanagan was disgusted as he sat in the back of the courtroom as child after child was sent to these jails for hardened criminals. He knew that all these boys needed were some love and caring, and because they did not get that, they turned to trouble.

One day in the courtroom, Fr. Flanagan could not let this go on any longer, and he requested that two young boys be turned over to him rather than to the state reformatory. The two boys' parents were alcoholics, and so they left

home, lived on the streets, and did not attend school. Fr. Flanagan had no place for the boys to stay but told them to go home and meet him once a week and report on their school work and everything they did. They met him each week and reported that they were going to school and not getting into trouble. Soon Fr. Flanagan began taking in more troubled boys. He realized he needed to establish a home for them.

With a small amount of donated money, he opened his first home for boys in early December, 1917. He began with 5 boys, but within a week he had 15, and by Christmas he had 25 boys. The boys were happy with their new home even though in the first few years Fr. Flanagan tried to make do with what little he had. Their first Christmas dinner consisted of sauerkraut donated by a local grocer. But even though Fr. Flanagan did not have money to buy presents for the boys, he always managed to come up with some used bats, balls, and toys. He even got the boys a dog, Carlo, who lived with them for many years. When Carlo died he was stuffed and placed at the entrance of the boys' home. Each boy would give him a pat on the head for good luck when entering.

He soon moved to a larger home with some land where the boys could play. But even that was not enough to house the dozens of boys and the hundreds more he had to turn away. He finally bought a 9 acre parcel of land in Omaha, Nebraska, in March 1922, which became the present site of Boys Town.



*Apartment building
for the grade school boys*

Grade school art room.



At Boys Town there were no fences, no locks, no guards. Boys Town was to be run by the boys, serving as mayor, commissioners, judges, and even a postmaster after Boys Town acquired its own official post office. When a boy broke a rule he appeared before those elected as commissioners. They would hear the case and decide the nature of the punishment. One of the worst punishments was being forced to watch the weekly movie with your back to the screen.

The boys were educated through high school, learning the basics such as history, math, English, and science. The Catholic boys had two periods of training in religion each week. Protestant boys were taught by the local minister, and Jewish boys went into town for religious services Friday night and Saturday morning. (Boys Town welcomed boys of all creeds. Fr. Flanagan's only requirement was that you must thank God, your God, in your own way.) In addition, the boys learned trades such as carpentry, barbering, baking, automotive work, shoe repair, and printing, among others. The boys learned to farm and raised most of their own vegetables. They also milked cows, raised sheep, pigs, cattle, and 600 laying hens.



Cottages in the high school section

Learning the barbering trade



Football Team

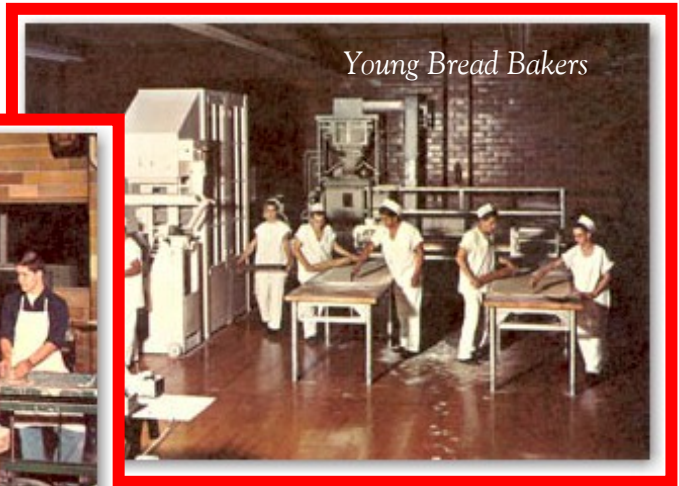
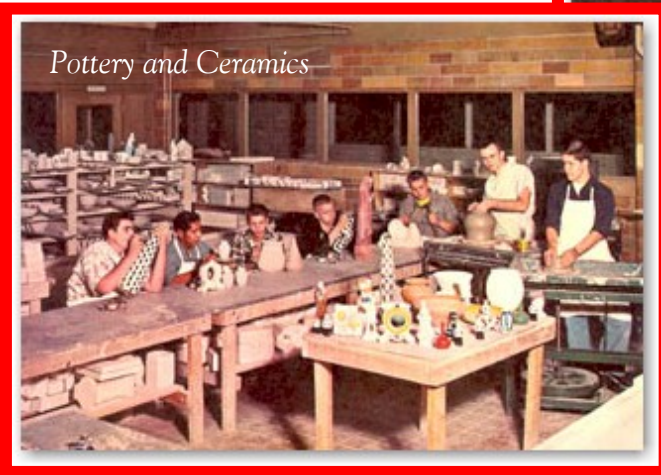
It was a true home for these boys. There were many sports available to them, and one could often see nuns dressed in habits cheering on the boys at football games. Black and white boys played together, which was rarely seen in the early 1900s. Boys Town had an outstanding choir, which played at Symphony Hall in Boston and Carnegie Hall in New York. They even put together a traveling circus where the boys showed off their many and various talents.



Concert Choir

Throughout his life, Fr. Flanagan continued to rescue troubled boys from the court system. In 1931, while resting in bed after a severe illness, he began a battle for a 12 year old boy. He read a story about the "Barefoot Boy" who had been convicted of murder and sent to jail for life. The boy had a troubled childhood, and Fr. Flanagan offered to take him into Boys Town rather than see him spend the rest of his life in prison.

Fr. Flanagan wrote to nearly every state official in Oregon, pleading that he be given custody of the boy. The priest even went to Oregon to ask the governor personally to allow him to help the boy, though still quite weak from his illness. Despite his many pleas, the boy was not released. Although this was one battle Fr. Flanagan did not win, as a result of all of the attention given to the case, the laws in Oregon were changed, requiring juveniles convicted of murder to be sent to state training schools rather than penitentiaries.



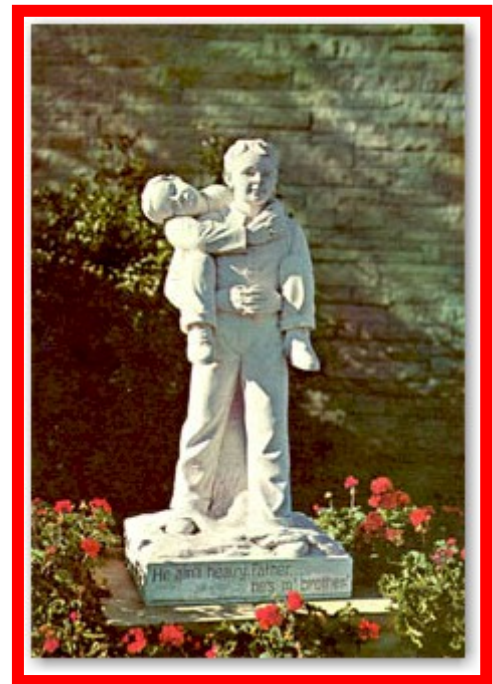
When the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, dozens of Boys Town residents signed up to serve their country. A total of 1,000 former Boys Town residents served in the war. Father Flanagan was named "America's No. 1 War Dad." After the war he was asked by the U.S. government to help in Europe and Asia in caring for the many orphans left after the war. Because of his help, many orphanages modeled after Boys Town were set up throughout the world. On May 15, 1948, while visiting war-torn Berlin, Fr. Edward Flanagan died suddenly. His body was sent back to Boys Town, where he was buried on the chapel grounds. Boys Town still flourishes today, serving over 24,000 boys and girls through its various programs in the year 1994 alone.

No one will ever know how many boys' lives were changed because of Fr. Flanagan. Even when there were obstacles in his way, such as a constant lack of money and critics who said he did not know what he was doing, he never gave up. He believed that all boys needed was a loving, caring atmosphere and in it they would grow to be productive American citizens. To his dying day Fr. Flanagan believed that "There are no bad boys."

For more information:

Fr. Flanagan: Builder of Boys by Clifford Stevens

Boys Town (movie on Fr. Flanagan's life)



Official Emblem of Boys Town