

The Magdalene Laundry of Indianapolis, part II
Hoosier Women at Work Conference
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By Lara Campbell

Minnie Morrison was born in 1897 and given to her grandparents due to the separation of her parents. She lived with them the first three years of her life until her grandma died. Her grandpa couldn't provide adequate care and thus took her to the Indianapolis Guardian Home where she resided for two years. Over the next two years, Minnie was adopted out by several families, but none were to her liking, causing her to always return to the Guardian Home.

She was finally adopted by a farm family in Fortville where she was shown love and given an education for around two years. Due to the loss of their farm, however, Minnie was once again returned to the Guardian Home. It was there that she was first told about the House of the Good Shepherd. Lured with promise of an education and sufficient work, she was taken at age 10 to the House of the Good Shepherd in Indianapolis.

In her later memoir, Minnie states that she "will never forget the creepy feeling I had when that door to the convent opened by these unseen hands," revealing a hint of the dreadful journey she was about to

embark on. She met with the dehumanization of being stripped and scrubbed by a stranger; and even worse, being stripped of her real name and identity, a means used to hide women and girls from their own relatives. Draped in an oversized blue and white striped garment, served food with roaches, trying to sleep in the presence of bugs, Minnie discovered this was only the tip of the life in which she was now trapped.

Having no religious upbringing or affiliation, Minnie had no inkling of the strict ways of Catholicism and was immediately punished because of this. Not knowing when to kneel, when to pray, or even when to be silent proved a hard adjustment, especially with no instruction behind the many tedious practices.

Despite the promises of an education and quality care, Minnie soon learned that her new home was more of a prison or sweatshop. Though not even tall enough to see over the ironing board, Minnie had to stand on a wooden box ironing her quota of 500 handkerchiefs a day with no previous instruction or experience. Women and girls froze in the winter and practically suffocated in the summer.

Only mail that made no mention of conditions at the House was permitted to leave the premises. They received one clean dress a month and underwear every two weeks. Minnie survived slaps, punches, floggings with sewing machine belts and many episodes of being beaten so violently she lost consciousness for several hours and sometimes days at a time. Minnie and the other women were punished for minor things such as talking by having to kneel for entire days, reeking havoc on their bodies, while withholding food. The House of the Good Shepherd also had what they called a dungeon where there was no light and no food, and where the girls could be kept for weeks if they disobeyed. As was true in Ireland, some women were kept there their entire lives, held in virtual slavery.

One incident that I would like to focus on is the time when Minnie was chloroformed by a Roman Catholic priest and taken back to the House of the Good Shepherd after being placed in a loving home. The head nun or “mother” told her that her foster family would return to get her in a few months. Minnie had been given rings with her initials engraved from her foster family, which happened to be the first jewelry she ever owned. The nun took the rings allegedly for safe-keeping until her family returned. Minnie found out the nun had lied and had an

opportunity to take back her valuable possessions, but was caught and dragged to the boiler room against her will. The nun strapped her to a water pipe and burned her with a hot poker from the furnace, while the engineer held her down. Four of her fingers were burned where the poker had melted the rings onto them. After the burning of her hand Minnie was told to lie and tell the rest of the prisoners her hand was caught in a machine. It is a bit ironic that the girls were severely punished for telling a lie by having to kneel for hours and days, but Minnie was told by the head nun to lie. She lost a lot of blood, lost consciousness for days, and almost died, but was finally taken to a hospital where her fingers had to be amputated.

Maiming her for life made Minnie less employable by having only one working hand, which lessened her chances of being placed with a family, thus providing a winning outcome for the HGS of keeping Minnie for the rest of her life.

One of the recurring themes of Minnie's story was the constant lying to the girls about having no family that cared or would claim them, while the families were being told they were "bad girls" and not fit to be in the world. This information supports the idea that the HGS was used as a sweatshop or prison to hold females against their will and

exploiting their labor under religious pretenses. Indianapolis factories and well-to-do families paid the House of the Good Shepherd for the production of uniforms and shirts, laundering and exquisite needlework, while in return HGS paid the girls nothing. It was a very profitable enterprise. Indeed, Rev. Bessonies noted in a letter to the editor in 1887 that the laundry work of the sisters and inmates had “liquidated the debt” incurred in building the House of the Good Shepherd, which, he noted, “was very heavy.”

We don't have to take Minnie's word for the conditions under which they worked. Listen to a letter to the editor of the Indianapolis News from a man who ran a commercial laundry that competed with the HGS and was facing complaints over treatment of his own employees:

In reference to working or overworking the girls in the laundries, I wish to say this: How can you expect me to do otherwise? The Sisters of the Good Shepherd come in direct competition with me. They canvass from house to house for laundry work, have a large number of girls to whom they pay nothing whatever, whom they compel to do men's work, and keep them at it all hours. Besides, they pay no taxes on their buildings, machinery or their business. This is the sort of competition I must meet. If my competitors, the House of the Good Shepherd, are made to pay taxes, I shall feel

justified in doing more for our girls. As it is, we must meet pauper labor.

After, many years of psychological, emotional, and physical abuse, Minnie escaped to make a better life for herself marrying, finding work, and having children of her own. Even in the midst of her finding a sense of normalcy, Minnie was threatened by the HGS to remove her child because she was not “fit to raise a child” and because her husband was not Catholic.

What can we learn from Minnie’s story?

First, even if parts of it were exaggerated, it is very sad. How can a 10 year old have fallen from virtue? She was an orphan and was punished for this.

Second, is the corrupting effects of secrecy in institutions. You may recall the concern that Nan reported among City Councilmen if they donated a building for the House of the Good Shepherd. “Neither the council nor civil officers could ever visit the institution if it was under the control of the Catholic church to know whether those who were there were kept by authority of law or against their will.” Whether an

institution is Catholic or not doesn't matter. Transparency is critical when people are being held against their will.

Third, is the economic exploitation of young females who never benefited financially or any other way. There was no education, no psychological counseling, no compassion; they gained nothing.

Fourth, the stripping of identity was terribly dehumanizing. As prisoner 130535, I can relate to this loss of individuality.

On that note, and as the last speaker, I want to thank the organizers of this conference for giving Minnie Morrison, Belle Ward, the Duchess of Stringtown—and us—a voice today.