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**The German St. Vincent Orphan Home
and the Americanization of German Catholic Immigrants**

In literature, “orphan stories” have always had their appeal. Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* famously presents English orphan asylums as foreboding, cruel places; Oliver’s plaintive, “Please sir, can I have some more?” has become an iconic representation of the abuse and neglect orphans systematically (at least in theory) faced at the hands of distant caretakers. Similarly, the musical *Annie* presents a girl who sings with plucky optimism about her perennial desire to meet a family who will take her away from the orphanage.¹ Stories such as these have popularized — even romanticized — a harsh image of orphan asylums.

However, many historians are beginning to question this narrative, and my own archival research has confirmed my suspicion that nineteenth and twentieth-century orphanages are often portrayed more negatively than the lived reality. The German St. Vincent Orphan Home, founded in 1850 to serve the German Catholic immigrant population of St. Louis, kept copious records. Letters, institutional histories, anniversary programs, and donation records paint a surprisingly positive image. One particularly touching poem showcases this Catholic community’s affection for their orphanage:

*“Are you sad, depressed, or weary?
Does the world seem dark and dreary?
To Normandy, then, wend your way —
And see the sprightly children play.*

¹ For a more thorough treatment of literary orphans, see Bonnie Stepenoff, *The Dead End Kids of St. Louis: Homeless Boys and the People Who Tried to Save Them* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 2-4, 36-37.

*Listen to their bouyant laughter,
All your gloom will quickly scatter.
Sweet melody your heart will make,
As blithesome steps you homeward take.”*²

This sunny description of “sprightly children” and “bouyant laughter” defies characterizations of orphanages as inherently oppressive institutions.

A similarly positive account was penned by Sister Apollonia, a girl who entered the orphanage as Helen Dorothy St. Clair in 1860. She wrote affectionately of the religious sisters who ran the convent, depicting them as compassionate caretakers: “And kind, dear Mother Angela and Sisters worked very hard and persevering. May God bless them.”³ It was perhaps the sisters’ kindness that inspired Sister Apollonia to join the religious order. She was not alone in this devotion to the sisters; there were at least eight other girls who eventually entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet,⁴ and Sister Apollonia named three boys who became priests or religious brothers (while acknowledging that there were “some more, but I don’t know them anymore”).⁵ She additionally stated that some girls entered other religious orders.

Like Regina Madeleine Faden’s dissertation, *The German St. Vincent Orphan Home: The Institution and its Role in the Immigrant German Catholic Community of St. Louis, 1850–1900*, this paper will focus on the Catholic nature of the German St. Vincent Home. However, while Faden treated the first fifty years of the orphanage as an expression of ethnic unity, my narrative will move into the first half of the twentieth century to explore the “Americanization” of the Home. My exploration of the Americanization of Catholic immigrants continues conversations begun by historians such as Christian G. Samito (*Becoming American Under Fire*), who

² Frank L. Rogles, *The German St. Vincent Orphan Association 125th Anniversary Souvenir Program* [ca. 1925], Folder MO-sl-45, Box 225, Carondelet Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis, MO.

³ M. Apollonia, letter [ca. 1919], Folder MO-sl-45, Box 225, Carondelet Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis, MO.

⁴ “Zoglingen die Orphanflissen Find” [undated], Folder MO-sl-45, Box 225, Carondelet Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis, MO.

⁵ M. Apollonia, letter Carondelet Archives.

articulated how Catholic immigrants sought to prove themselves as citizens in an Anglo-Saxon dominated country.⁶ Unlike historical narratives that rely heavily on military and political involvement as the spheres in which minorities worked out their citizenship, my paper will demonstrate how Catholics also used charitable initiatives to prove their worth and loyalty.

Initially formed to serve the German Catholic community and perpetuate German culture, the German St. Vincent Home eventually broadened its focus and affiliation. No longer a site for the continuation of German ethnic identity, by 1950 the Home proudly asserted itself as a “melting pot,”⁷ abandoned the use of the German language, and articulated itself as an intentional mold of healthy, American citizens. In the midst of the suspicions generated by the two World Wars, this immigrant community articulated the Home as proof of their positive citizenship.

My paper therefore assumes that the Catholics who shaped and supported the German St. Vincent Orphan Home saw orphan asylums as good for society, and thus joins recent historical work which has sought to reclaim a positive image of American orphan asylums. I join scholars such as Kenneth Cmiel, who assert that the Progressive condemnation of orphanages undermined the good work of volunteer women.⁸ The words “asylum” and “institution” have taken on an ominous tone and conjure up images of disease, malnutrition, and sanctioned cruelty. While abuses certainly did exist, characterizations of orphanages as tyrannically run institutions are incomplete. Increasingly, historians are uncovering the human side of these institutions.⁹ Dulberger does this by showcasing letters between parents and Albert Fuller, the compassionate and meticulous superintendent of the Albany Orphan Asylum between 1879 and 1893. Bonnie

⁶ Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁷ Essay, J. Jos. Herz, “Musings on the Past,” *German Saint Vincent Orphan Association Centennial: 1850-1950 Souvenir Program*, 1950, German St. Vincent Orphan Association — 100th and 125th Jubilee Books, 1950, 1975 (RG05D02), Box A757, Folder 6, Archdiocese of St. Louis Archives.

⁸ Kenneth Cmiel, *A Home of Another Kind: One Chicago Orphanage and the Tangle of Child Welfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

⁹ Regina Madeline Faden, “The German St. Vincent Orphan Home: The Institution and its Role in the Immigrant German Catholic Community of St. Louis, 1850–1900” (Order No. 9973341, Saint Louis University, 2000), 3-4.

Stepenoff tells the story of Father Peter Joseph Dunne’s home for newsboys, which was inspired both by Father Dunne’s personal experiences as an orphan and by his encounter with newsboy “Little Jimmie” Fleming.¹⁰ Regina Madeleine Faden chronicles the first fifty years of the German St. Vincent Orphan Home, which was established by German Catholics who wanted to provide better care for their parish communities’ children than they felt existing institutions could provide.¹¹ And while Kenneth Cmiel acknowledges that institutional conditions at the Chicago Nursery and Half-Orphan Asylum would not pass today’s standards, he stresses that contemporary reporters consistently praised the asylum for creating a cheerful atmosphere for its children: “Another reporter who arrived unannounced could not get himself heard on the porch as the children were making so much noise playing. Once inside, he saw not only real affection for the matron, but kids running, jumping, and yelling with glee. ‘This lack of restraint,’ he noted, ‘was the best possible witness to the fact that the little waifs are well treated.’”¹²

St. Louis Orphans

In 1849, the city of St. Louis lost one-tenth of its population to cholera. Fires added to the death toll and damage, and unsurprisingly, impoverished citizens and immigrants were affected the most.¹³ Parental deaths brought about unprecedented numbers of orphans; in 1860 alone, St. Louis was “home” to more than fifteen hundred orphans.¹⁴ The cruel working conditions of industrialized American cities caused further deaths, as did poor health and malnutrition. Tragically, many children were left to fend for themselves on unfriendly city streets . . .

*The complete essay is available upon request. Please email
eroyal712@gmail.com to receive a full-length copy and bibliography.*

¹⁰ Stepenoff, *The Dead End Kids of St. Louis*, 74.

¹¹ Faden, *The German St. Vincent Orphan Home*, 63.

¹² Cmiel, *A Home of Another Kind*, 23.

¹³ Regina Madeline Faden, "The German St. Vincent Orphan Home," 60.

¹⁴ Stepenoff, *The Dead End Kids of St. Louis*, 5.