

County Home System and County Homes

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Tolland Pioneer County in welfare work—First home in state started in Andover in 1893—Moved to Vernon Center shortly thereafter—Second home former tavern and famous landmark—present. Home building erected in 1900 attracts much attention—How the children live and fare.

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Hundreds of people who motor daily over the state highway through Vernon Center, once the “hub” of the Town of Vernon and at one time occupying a more conspicuous place on the map than Rockville, are attracted by a large three story frame building with basement painted a pleasing shade of yellow. Located well back from the pretty main street, dignified by stately maples and a few beautiful elms, this structure, which is imposing and impressive, has been frequently taken for an inn or hotel. During the spring and summer season, the expansive and neatly kept lawn, adorned and given an exquisite setting by flower beds and shrubs roses featuring in season makes an irresistible appeal, drawing the favorable comment of people near at home and far away. Many from a distance stop to admire the building and grounds. Through the fall and winter months, after dusk sets in when building and grounds are lighted, an atmosphere of good cheer is radiated in which many passing motorists bask in real delight for a few fleeting moments. Some have stopped to inquire the way here or there, others to use the telephone and still others have even sought quarters for the night. This building, however, is neither an inn nor a hotel. It is a home, a large family home. At present it houses a family of 55 school children and seven adults. It would not be strange if some person were led to exclaim “some family this” and another, without definite information of a somewhat curious turn of mind, might be pardoned for interrogating “Where did you get them all?”

Its Official Designation

To satisfy the curious and set people right, it should be said at the very onset that this large building, which stands as a beacon of love and light day and night, year in and year out, is officially known as the Tolland County Temporary Home for Children. The stranger or visitor will find neither sign nor name plate. Perhaps there should be some inconspicuous designation, for in addition to taking this building for a hotel and inn, it has been frequently called an orphan asylum. There have been orphans in the family, but it is by no means an orphan asylum, as some people are wont to believe, nor can children be unceremoniously left there like so much human freight.

Not a Permanent Residence

The writer, who has spent much time at this home, meeting and mingling on frequent occasions with the members of the large family, youngsters and grownups, has acquired a firsthand and intimate knowledge of just what this home is and what it is seeking to do. Having made the uninitiated acquainted with the fact that it is the Tolland County Temporary Home for Children, it would seem almost superfluous to state that it cannot become the permanent residence of any child. It has been from its very beginning a "temporary home", though some children, it is true, spend much more time there than others. Only a few weeks ago a girl, who had been at the home since she was 4 years old, having reached the age of 18, was returned to the home of her mother in a nearby town, said home having received the official OK of the State Bureau of Child Welfare. This girl hated to leave her "temporary home" and had several crying spells because she was compelled to go. The building at Vernon Center had been a real home to her in every sense of the word.

Pioneer County

These temporary homes, which primarily house neglected and dependent children, are located in each county in Connecticut. All told there are eight of them. The county home system in Connecticut dates back a little less than half a century, to be exact, 47 years. Tolland, though the smallest in the state in population, is the pioneer in child welfare work. It blazed the way, setting an example for the other counties. It started in November, 1883, before any legislation had been passed looking to the welfare of neglected and dependent children and the establishment of county homes. It was not long, however, when the formidable array of facts and figures which had been gathered, presented an unanswerable argument, leading to the passage in January, 1884, of imperative and much needed child welfare legislation. Each county in the state eventually established a county home.

First Home in Andover

The first county home in Tolland County, which became the first county home in Connecticut, was located in Andover, one of Connecticut's so-called towns, but making up in quality what it lacks in size. Mrs. William T. Smith was the first matron. The home remained in Andover but a short time, however.

Locates in Vernon Center

Purchasing the property of the late Edwin Bill in the early eighties, the Tolland County Temporary Home has remained in Vernon Center from that day to this, and the location and surroundings are considered ideal by everybody. The Bill property, long a landmark and at one time a tavern, housed the post office for a period and Mr. Bill was postmaster. This man, who died some years ago, was one of Vernon's well-known residents. He was a brother of the late Benezet H. Bill, a leading member of the Tolland County Bar and for several years state's attorney for Tolland County. Benezet H. Bill had 2 daughters, one of whom was the first wife of Hon. Charles Phelps of Rockville, former state's attorney of Tolland County and Connecticut's first attorney general. The other is the wife of Dr. Thomas Rockwell of Rockville, dean of the medical profession in Tolland County.

Present Home Built in 1900

The present building at Vernon Center, officially known as the Tolland County Temporary Home, was erected in 1900, a little over 30 years ago. The architect was J. Henry McCray of Rockville, who has designed some of the finest and largest buildings and residences in this section. Mr. McCray is still active and interested in building operations. The late Frank Hutchinson was awarded the contract for the building, which was erected under the administration of County Commissioners John Thompson of Ellington, John H. Buell of Hebron and Amos "Colonel" Pease of Somers. These men, long prominent and active in Tolland County, are all dead. Commissioner John Thompson's son, Morton E. Thompson, is a representative in the General Assembly from the town of Ellington. With the erection of the present County Home building at Vernon Center, the famous landmark, which formerly stood on site, was moved to Rockville, located on Vernon avenue in that city, approximately thirty years, it has served as a tenement house.

Some Changes

As County Home buildings, not only in Tolland County, but in every county throughout the state, have been enlarged and improved, new and more modern buildings taking the place of old buildings in some cases, so there have been changes in the county home system or managerial policy of these homes, though these changes have not been numerous or marked. Brief reference will be made to some of these changes later.

An Inside View of a County Home

Though the Tolland County Temporary Home is open to the public at all reasonable hours, meal time and bedtime exempted, unless the emergency is pressing and great. It is really surprising what vague ideas people generally have of this home, and how few visit the home. Entering the Tolland County Temporary Home at Vernon Center, the staff correspondent of the Leader was courteously and cordially greeted by the Superintendent, Mrs. Martha Weeden, a womanly and kindly woman, a real mother to every member of this family, who loves her work as she does every member of her large family. Greeted by all the children with a lusty and hearty "Hello", which was returned, a hand shake all around, the writer proceeded immediately on an inspection trip.

The Layout

Entering the building from the main door, once inside, on the right as one enters is the parlor, while on the left is the Superintendent's office. This breathes an atmosphere of real business. In addition to office, where the board of management holds its meetings at least one in three months. There is a large safe, a desk, table and chairs, and numerous filing cabinets. Off the office is a family sitting room and a medicine closet. A door at the rear of the front hall leads to the children's dining room. Commodious and cheerful briefly but aptly describe it. There is an abundance of light from three large windows and the room is warm in winter and cool in summer, really inviting at any and all times. There are several long tables where the children's meals are served, and a small table where the superintendent, employees and teachers eat. Off the dining room, with a serving room between, is the kitchen, a large room, with plenty of light and a large hotel coal range. It is here the cook of the home, Miss Anna Burke, as a good cook she is, too, provides. She has been at the home for about seven years, and suffice to say, she knows just what's what and who's who. She does her work without any ado. Both the girls and

boys, that they may learn some of the fundamentals that enter into home-making, assist the cook in various ways, making themselves useful rather than ornamental. A door from the kitchen opens into the rear hall across which is the stock room whose provisions and foodstuff are kept and in the words of Amos and Andy "check and double check" feature here that there may be no shortage of the necessities.

Boys and Girls Playrooms

At the rear end of this long hall are the boys' and girls' play room, a necessity, as everybody must know in a home of this kind if the family should decrease to a great extent, these rooms might have to be enlarged. They are neatly furnished with a view to utility and convenience. Particular attention is paid to light and ventilation. There are boxed floor seats for the children's playthings and benches and tables. Conspicuous in the girls' playroom was baby carriages and "babies", and some of the girls were mothering these "babies", when the writer dropped in to say, "Good Morning."

Valuable Souvenir

In the boys' playroom, conspicuous among other things which at once caught the eye of the visitor, were two league baseballs, autographed by nearly every member of the New York Yankees and the former Hartford Eastern League team. They were tied together by a red ribbon. If any visitor at the home desires to know anything about these baseballs all he needs to do is get the ear of one of the older boys who attended the big game between the New York Yankees and Hartfords. This was a real thrill that comes but a few times in a life time, and the boys who were there will remember it as long as they live. A large bat the gift of the local Moose that tops the tallest boy in the place, attracts much attention. Games and books were among the things noticed in the playrooms. The boys and girls of this hopeful, helpful and happy family play and read and enjoy numerous privileges. Life in this large family home is no treadmill of dull, drab monotony. There are many good times throughout the entire year.

Mottoes on Walls and in Hearts

Each playroom is supplied with mirror, sink and toilet, towels, brushes, combs, etc. And there are framed mottoes on the walls containing lofty sentiments. And some of these mottoes have found their way into the hearts of the boys and girls.

Playyards Too

If playrooms are a necessity in a large family home, such as the one at Vernon Center, playyards are an even greater necessity. For children, especially growing boys and girls, they are to remain healthy, must breathe in plenty of God's great outdoors. In other words, they must spend as much of their spare time as possible in the open out in God's beautiful country. That's just who the boys and girls at the Tolland County Home do. They use the playyards freely. There are swings and other apparatus. There is supervised play on a small scale, the two school teachers acting as supervisors. A well laid out baseball diamond, where several memorable contests have taken place, is the pride of the older boys, while there are three croquet grounds and three croquet sets, which interest the older boys and girls, and there are numerous family parties on these croquet grounds, the superintendent and employees joining in and trying their skill, along with the boys and girls.

Dormitories Provide for 64

The dormitories provide for 64 children, 26 girls and 38 boys. The girls' dormitories are located on the second floor front, while the boys' dormitories are located on the second floor rear and the third floor. They are light and airy and the acme of neatness. System is everywhere in evidence. There are linen closets, where the linen is kept and there is a place for everything and everything has its place. There are three sets of clothes for the children, everyday, school and Sunday, or best, and everything is marked or so arranged as to save time and avoid confusion. In addition to the dormitories, there are several bathrooms and other facilities for the boys and girls. On the second floor, where the girls' dormitories are located, are the superintendent's quarters, the matrons rooms and rooms for the teachers and cook and a private bath room, and a guest room. On the third floor there is an isolation room and two other rooms which were formerly used for school purposes. These were abandoned when the modern and model schoolhouse was built.

Health Average High

The Tolland County Temporary Home has a library, which contains a goodly number of volumes. The children have the services of a barber, a barber shop, with a regular barber's chair being located in the home. There is a house physician, a house dentist and a house oculist. The general health, eyes and teeth of all the members of the family receive regular and careful attention, and there are tubercular tests every six months. Not since the present building was opened in 1900, had there been what might be called a serious epidemic. This speaks well for the home. In the words of the house physician, Dr. Francis F. Rockwell of Rockville, loved by the entire family, who takes a personal interest in the boys and girls, the health of the children has been remarkably good.

The Daily Routine

The daily routine at the Tolland County Temporary Home is much the same as in any large family home. The children rise at 6:30 o'clock. The older girls and boys act as "little mothers" and "little fathers" to the boys and girls of more tender years. Breakfast is served at 7:00 o'clock. Dinner is served at 12:15 and supper at 5:45. There is a slight change in the Sunday hours. Breakfast is served at 7:15 on Sunday and dinner at 1 o'clock. The younger children retire at 7:30 and the older children at 8 o'clock, though this schedule is not rigidly enforced. The meals are substantial. The food is carefully prepared and well cooked under the direction of the superintendent and cook. There is an excellent variety and fruits and vegetables feature. There is an abundance of milk, each child having a quart or more a day. The milk is supplied by a good dairy farm. There is plenty of butter for all the children. On numerous occasions throughout the year are special menus, ice cream being the favorite dish of the children. On Thanksgiving roast pork and all the fixings comprise the menu, and on Christmas turkey is king, as might be expected. Many of the vegetables for the children's table are raised by the children in their own garden, and they will compare favorably with the products that come from the best market gardens.

Welfare Work Features

Welfare work is being constantly carried on and everything is being done at this home at Vernon Center to contribute to the profit, pleasure and well being of every member of the family. The superintendent herself sets a fine example in welfare work, and all others connected with the home, including the matron, teachers and cook, join in. Churches, organizations and individuals, interested in the Home and children, have cooperated most generously, giving of their time and talent and supplying gifts too

numerous to mention. Under the direction of the superintendent, there are picnic parties, field days and hikes throughout the year. Numerous entertainments are held in the school auditorium and the children enjoy dancing occasionally. Some of the entertainments are given by the superintendent, some by the teachers and others by the children themselves. The boys and girls compete to see who can put on the best show, with very gratifying results. The Home has two pianos and a Victrola, the gifts of kind friends and an Atwater Kent radio, purchased by the county and a splendid investment.

Enjoy Feature Programs

In addition to their own good times throughout the year, this large family of contented children enjoy feature programs during the year, through the thoughtfulness and kindness of churches, organizations and individuals. Rockville Lodge No 1574, Loyal Order of Moose, sets a fine example in this respect. For several years each summer it has staged a big field day, with band concert, sports program including baseball and a real feed and various gifts. There have been band concerts by the Rockville Boys Band, Henry M. Schonrock director, and by Colt's Band of Hartford, and the Mothers' Club of Rockville Baptist church has made numerous visits to the home during the summer season, furnishing a big feed. Other organizations and individuals have also remembered the home and children frequently and most generously. Christmas is the biggest and best day on the home calendar, the will to do good being everywhere and the spirit will brightening and gladdening home and hearts for days, weeks and months. Fourth of July, with a big field day, fireworks and a generous supply of goodies, including ice cream, is not far behind. Nearly all the holidays are observed in some manner.

Not All Play

While there is an abundance of play at this large family home, as there should be, love and kindness ruling, there is work to be done and nearly every child has some task. They are taught to do things about the home, both inside and out, to become self-reliant, to make themselves useful, to assist in keeping the home up to a high standard of excellence. The children sweep and dust, scrub the floors, make the beds, assist in preparing the meals, wash and wipe dishes, mow the lawn, keep the buildings, home and school, and the premises neat and clean. In fact, they do anything and everything they are asked. In this way they get a clear insight into what enters into the making of a home. Though love and kindness are the ruling power, necessarily there must be both discipline and system, if such a home is to be successfully conducted.

Honor Roll System

An honor roll system is a feature at this home. Silver stars are given for good work and good deportment. Four silver stars entitle the child to a gold star, and a gold star means a treat, and the child who receives the largest number of gold stars gets a "big treat". The gold star children receive special privileges, such as trips to Rockville, Manchester and Hartford, including visits to the movie houses. The Palace Theater in Rockville is a favorite place with these children. The management of this theater has arranged several parties for the members of the entire family, and to say that these parties have been enjoyed is expressing it mildly. The children always look forward to these parties, with smiles and cheers for managers Mahoney ("Sunny Jim") and Norman French, both of whom have won their way into the children's hearts. Of course, not every child gets a silver star. There are black marks, and some children get more than others. This means the denial of certain privileges.

Progress and Improvements

Progress has marked the Tolland County Temporary Home at Vernon Center since its establishment some 46 years ago, and numerous improvements have been made. An entire chapter might be written along these lines. To make a long story short, it is enough to say that this home has made an earnest and honest effort, through the board of management, superintendent and employees to keep abreast of the times. The old school, which was in the home building, was abandoned and a new building erected, according to plans and specifications furnished by the State Board of Education and carrying out the recommendations of this board and the State Department of Health. It contains two class rooms and is featured by a large auditorium in the basement, where entertainments and various special events are held. It is also used for play purposes in bad weather. This building has been pronounced by state educational and health authorities the last word in a small schoolhouse. Its equipment is up-to-date in every respect.

Modern Septic Sewer System

In addition to the new school building a modern septic sewer system has been constructed on the premises, under the direction and supervision of the State Board of Health, and an extension has been added. A few years ago extensive improvements were made in the interior of the home building, at a cost of over \$5,000, and others are contemplated. There is an artesian well on the premises and has well water and water from a pure spring. The ice is furnished from a nearby pond and housed in the ice house on the premises. Eventually the board of management will install an electric refrigerator. The Home and School buildings are heated by steam and lighted by electricity and the Home building is piped for gas, this improvement having been made a few months ago. There are about nine acres of land, most of which is utilized to advantage, although there is no farm, but there are vegetable gardens, managed by the Home boys. Several of the boys, in their spare time do work for the people of the community, for which they are paid. The money they earn is placed to their credit in the savings bank. Rockville Lodge of Elks a few years ago gave all the children in this family who were without bank books a bank book and each Christmas this welfare organization gives each child \$1.00 to put in the bank. Several of the children have substantial to their credit in the savings bank. All of the children have acquired the habit of thrift.

Interesting Data

Only children between the ages of 4 and 18 can be committed to the home. No children under 4 can be committed and all children must leave when they become 18. To take care of this large family of 48 children, there is a superintendent, Mrs. Martha R. Weeden, who is the head of the Home, a boys' matron, Miss Roby Fuller, and a girls' matron, Mrs. Estelle Hyde, a cook, Miss Anna Burke, and a part time laundress, Mrs. Eva Neff of Rockville. One of the Home boys, Leroy Beaumont, is now acting as janitor. Four or five of the boys and girls are on the payroll, being allowed a small amount each month for assisting in the work.

Many in Foster Homes

Recognizing from the very start of the County Home system that these homes could best serve their purpose if they were made temporary residences, the board of management of the Tolland County Temporary Home has permitted many children to be placed out. At the present time there are 22 in

foster homes, the county paying the board. According to the Home population, this is probably the biggest percentage of any county home in the state.

These foster homes are licensed by the State Bureau of Child Welfare, which has supervision over them. Changed conditions have demanded a change in methods and the State Bureau of Child Welfare is doing a most important and valuable work. Kenneth L. Messenger, who is State Commissioner of Child Welfare, is a member of the board of management of the Tolland County Temporary Home at Vernon Center and meets regularly with the Board, which consists of the three county commissioners and the head of the State Department of Health, Dr. Stanley H. Osborn. In addition to Commissioner Messenger, Dr. William L. Higgins of South Coventry, who is in his tenth year as a county Commissioner, is chairman of the board of management of the Tolland County Home. His long experience in both the legislative and executive branches of the state government, combined with the service for an extended period as a county official and town administrator, makes him an especially valued man. Messrs. George Sitwick of Stafford Springs, completing twelve years of service, and Harry C. Smith of Rockville are the other members of the board of management. The former is chairman of the board of Tolland County commissioners, while the latter is secretary of both boards. Originally the state board of charities was represented on the board of management, but this board was eliminated when the State Bureau of Child Welfare came into existence. In the old days town committee members, consisting of both men and women and serving without pay, assisted the board of management, giving much time and attention to their work, especially in the placing of children in well selected private homes. This work is now done by the State Bureau of Child Welfare, with trained paid workers in charge. They investigate all cases brought to the juvenile and probate courts and arrange for the medical and physical examination of the children up for commitment. No child can be committed without due process of law and following a hearing, at which all interested parties are entitled to be present, including the county commissioners. No demented or idiotic child, or a child suffering from a contagious or incurable disease can be committed to any county home.

Not an Institution

While the Tolland County Temporary Home at Vernon Center may be classed as an institution, strictly speaking and in reality, it is a home with the home atmosphere prevailing throughout the entire year. The children constitute a hopeful, helpful and happy family. They have home duties and home privileges with responsibility and live no cloistered life. They take an active part in community affairs. The Protestant children attend the church in the community in which the Home is located, while the Catholic children are transported to Rockville, attending St. Bernard's Catholic Church and Sunday School. Tolland County contributes a substantial sum annually to both churches that these children may be educated in the religious faith in which they were brought up. This policy, it is understood, is followed by virtually all the counties.

An Outstanding Feature

An outstanding feature of the Tolland County Temporary Home, which cannot escape the attention of the careful observer, who visit the Home and becomes familiar with its operation, is the adherent desire on the part of the board of management, superintendent and all others in charge to bring the children into contact with the outside world, so to speak, to make them feel that they are human beings in a real

and vital sense and an integral part of human society. Not only do these children take part in community affairs, but they are permitted to go into the homes in this and other communities, accompanied by officials, or employees, not occasionally, but frequently. At such times they invariably look well, appear well and behave well, as scores of people in whose homes they have been, can readily testify. They are a likely lot, far above the average of so-called institutional children. Having had home training, home responsibilities, and a genuine home atmosphere, with an opportunity to get on and get up, with the homemakers bending every effort to develop them physically, mentally and spiritually and last, but by no means least, socially, the danger of the Tolland County Temporary Home becoming institutionalized is very remote, to say the least. What is true of this Home, is unquestionably true of all the smaller County Homes of Connecticut. In fact, there does not appear to be anything fundamentally wrong with either the County Home system of Connecticut or the County Home managements. Real progress it appears, has been made. If we cannot travel fast enough to suit some, let it be said that "haste makes waste." Good work has been done. Better work may be done. The sensible, sane and sure way to do it is for welfare workers without axes to grind to join hands and hearts and give themselves unselfishly to this great and noble task, which demands the best from all us, despite honest differences of opinion concerning methods.