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Glimpses of Heartache, and Stories of Survival

By GLENN COLLINS

The letters, more than a hundred years later, are heartbreaking. Many are just rough notes, bearing pinholes where they had been attached to swaddling clothes. Here is a scribble that says, "My name is Rose — I am baptized — 1 year old." Another mother has dashed off, "Guard this little one and if things turn out as I hope I shall repay you for your trouble."

A more operatic missive dates from 1874: "I am a poor woman and have been deceived under the promise of marriage. I am without means and without relatives to nurse my baby. Therefore I beg you for God's sake to take my child and keep it. I remain your humble servant."

The notes arrived with abandoned infants, many of them left in a plain wicker basket at the entrance to what is now known as the New York Foundling, the 137-year-old family services agency in Manhattan. Now, the entire collection — a trove of documents, photographs and memorabilia that sheds new light on a dark chapter of the New York that was — is going public for the first time.

"The archive is teaching us about our past," said Sister Carol Barnes, a director of the Foundling, sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of New York, which also co-sponsors St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers. But the collection, called the Foundling Archives, "is also telling us much about ourselves," she said. "It is a heritage that is very much alive because the human needs remain the same."

The New York Foundling Asylum was created in an era of minimal child welfare bureaucracies, when newborns were routinely abandoned on the mean streets, in church entrances or on the doorsteps of the wealthy. It was a time when an estimated 30,000 homeless children populated the city.

In 1870, a year after the Foundling began, the State Legislature deemed the agency's work so crucial that it appropriated $100,000 for construction of a larger building. The Foundling began boarding babies with volunteer families almost immediately and initiated adoptions in 1873. For decades, it sheltered unmarried expectant mothers and their babies, and it established a pediatric hospital in 1881. By 1910, 27,779 children had passed through its doors.

The need has hardly evaporated. "At the turn of the century, the problem was poverty and, to a certain extent, alcohol," said William F. Baccaglini, the Foundling's executive director. "But now we are seeing children suffering from a complex of other problems as well — substance abuse, mental health issues, developmental disability."

Research in the Foundling's archives has been entrusted to Richard Reilly, 67, a retired management consultant and history maven. Since December, he has been reviewing and organizing the archive as a member of the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, a Jesuit-run program dedicated to service and spirituality. The Foundling intends to create an archival center and put all of the materials on its Web site in time for its 140th anniversary in 2009.

Steven H. Jaffe, an independent historian and curator who incorporated some of the Foundling's memorabilia in an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society four years ago, said the archive was important in tracing early child welfare reform efforts, when religious denominations took partial responsibility for orphans in the absence of a public safety net. Although the poorly coordinated system was later deemed Dickensian, it was a vast improvement over utter abandonment, he said.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Reilly cracked open a ledger book that documented 2,457 babies who were dropped off at the Foundling from October 1869 to November 1871 — many of them left in the legendary cradle that was placed outside its brownstone on East 12th Street off Fifth Avenue. "Infanticide," Mr. Reilly said, shaking his head, "was a widespread practice then."

New discoveries in the collection include an 1869 leather-bound ledger, with entries in the spidery black penmanship of Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbons, the founder of the institution. The ledger details the agency's minutes, fund-raising and construction plans, including drawings. More mundane items, like an 1891 electric bill for $100.16, have also emerged.

The archive includes admissions registers, annual reports, newspaper clippings dating to 1869, dozens of scrapbooks and hundreds of books and videotapes.

Especially poignant is the collection of baby ledgers, in which abandoned children's arrivals were noted in precise script. The Foundling's first baby, Sarah Kinsley, was left with the sisters on Oct. 12, 1869.

But it is the notes and letters — scraps of paper and bits of cloth, many pinned to the babies' blankets — that evoke the power of stories untold.

On a note from 1873 is written, "This child name is Marie John Dunn — 5 days old." Penciled the same year is a cryptic message, haunting for its brevity, "Child of Mary E. Farmer."

Some messages, like one from 1879, suggest life-threatening abandonment. “This infant was found on the sidewalk between 50th and 51st Streets,” it said.

And stark tragedy marked an 1882 note accompanying a quartet of babies conveyed to the Foundling by the commissioners of emigration on Wards Island, “The mothers of three of these children died of puerperal fever, and the fourth mother is hopelessly insane.”

Another adornment of the collection is a replica of the long-disintegrated 1869 wicker cradle where mothers left their babies.

On May 30, 1870, an article in The New York Times described the cradle “standing from morning to night and from night to morning to receive its human burdens.” It added, “A bell nearby gives warning to the attendant nurse when the cradle has an occupant.”

The Foundling continued the cradle tradition when it relocated to 3 Washington Square North. In 1873, the agency moved to a red-brick building (partially financed by the Legislature) that filled the block from 68th to 69th Streets between Lexington and Third Avenues. In 1958, it moved to 1175 Third Avenue, where the Foundling stayed for 30 years before moving to its current headquarters at 590 Avenue of the Americas, at 17th Street.

In the late 19th century and into the 20th century, the Foundling was a pediatric and maternity hospital and participated in the “orphan trains.” Starting in the mid-19th century, and continuing for 75 years, the trains shipped as many as 200,000 city children to do farm and domestic labor out west. Many city welfare agencies, including the Foundling, lauded the practice as wholesome rural salvation. Some of the children were trained in the trades, others were adopted.

Ultimately the child-protection system of which the Foundling was a part was assailed by child-development researchers, who said that institutional care deprived children of maternal care, and by reformers who saw rampant inequities in assigning children to religious-based agencies.

There was increasing pressure to place foster children in permanent homes through adoption. And the legalization of abortion caused a reduction in the number of babies, “so we had no need for large nurseries in a big building,” Sister Barnes said.

These days, the Foundling is the city’s second-largest foster home provider and the third-largest child welfare agency. Under city contracts, it has 13,000 children in foster care in 44 programs in the five boroughs. It also has programs for children and developmentally disabled adults in Rockland and Westchester Counties and in Puerto Rico.

The Foundling also runs a pediatric center for children with severe birth defects and neurological disorders, and it has a maternity residence, a respite care unit and a family crisis unit.

Most of the Foundling’s $88 million budget comes from private contributions, bequests and contracts for welfare services with government agencies. It gets a grant of $5,000 a year from the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York.

Now, the Foundling is renovating a former industrial building at 170 Brown Place at 136th Street, in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, hoping to transform it into a $26 million charter elementary school. It would combine academics and welfare services for 90 children.

“In these neighborhoods, we need a holistic approach,” Mr. Baccaglini, the director, said of the school, which could open as early as 2008.

To the orphans of another era, the archives are “our story,” said Mabel Anne Gruele Harrison, who is 98 and lives in Lincoln, Neb.

She did not know that she had been adopted until she was 27, when she learned she had been shipped from the Foundling on an orphan train to Colorado Springs at the age of 2 years and 4 months. She was adopted there and raised as a Catholic by a childless couple, John and Anna Gruele.

Long after Mrs. Harrison married, had two children and became a speech pathologist, she found the names of her birth parents in Brooklyn — Jenny Rubin and Mo Cohan — and learned that they were Jewish; her birth name was Mabel Rubin.

Although the orphan trains have been criticized for high-handedness in consigning some children to what critics described as indentured servitude, Mrs. Harrison termed the system “a wonderful thing.”

She added: “I got a good upbringing and landed on two feet. Why should I complain? It was good the Foundling was there to take me.”

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