

Odd Fellows Enchanted Orphanage

by Jenny Gordon



Jenny Gordon is a senior at William Jewell College and plans to graduate in May 2012 with a Bachelor of Science degree. She is majoring in Elementary Education with an emphasis in English and is a proud member of the International Education Honor Society, Kappa Delta Pi. After graduation her goal is to teach in an elementary setting close to her hometown of Independence, MO.

For seventeen years, a thick layer of dust collected on the once glossy wooden stairwells speckled throughout Odd Fellows Home in Liberty, Missouri. Dilapidated corridors and rooms with peeling wallpaper, which once permeated with children's laughter and dreamy chatter, were left abandoned. The four brick buildings cast a foreboding shadow on the plush 36-acre field off 291 highway. A cracked and dried circular fountain is positioned at the bottom of the hill where the lengthy concrete walkway leads up to the massive structure of the administration building. The architecture is magnificent with its deep scarlet bricks, gable roofs, and lofty windows. A spring fed lake sinks into the deserted grounds; it was once used by the orphans as a source of leisure and activity.

It is no wonder that the eerie figures of the four abandoned buildings intrigued local high school and college students before it was restored. The sense of adventure, a hint of a ghost story, and romance behind the Jacobethan framework drew them in for a closer look. For years, curious college students would coast their cars down the side road leading to the mystifying site in an effort to get nearer to the imposing grail, only to be chased away by pesky security officers determined to defend the historical site.

History reveals the origins of the stately manor, tracing the land back to 1880 when it was merely farmland owned by John D. Reed. The key to the land's worth was the spring fed lake on the property. The cool, clear waters of the spring contained minerals that favored any who drank it. It was this water, in fact, which brought the attention of investors from St. Louis looking for land to build a grand hotel. The hotel cost \$60,000

and exuded wealth and luxury. The Reed Springs Hotel, as it was later named, was distinguished by the three pointed towers that extended slightly from the three story building; it had a wraparound porch, white washed exterior, and 108 rooms with wall-to-wall carpeting and lavish furnishings. The hotel had its very own water works, steam heating plant, and electric plant built on the grounds. It afforded more services to the hotel than any building, house, or shop in Liberty. Reed Springs Hotel was a beacon, a glistening jewel in the surrounding rural landscape complete with not only elegant rooms, but also delectable food and drink. The grand pavilion held thousands of guests as they twirled and swayed to the melodic tunes spun from imported orchestras and bands. Guests could also take full advantage of the glistening springs which made the hotel's existence possible. As they strolled the stone pathways connecting the springs, they could venture to the boathouse to rent a boat. In the summer months, the long oars caused ripples in the shining water as guests took spins on the lake.

The hotel changed ownership in 1891 when Willard Winner, a budding entrepreneur, bought the land and grandiose structure, renaming it the Winner Hotel. At the time, Winner was well known for his contributions in building Kansas City. Among his long list of achievements that earned him great wealth and fame were his introduction of Kansas City's first electric streetcar system and his work in the real estate market. His work on the eastern side of Kansas City alone brought him \$2,655,000 profit. Under his ownership, the hotel gained twelve more acres of farmland with the promise of a race track and other businesses on the grounds. Winner's dreams, as well as his ownership, were severed within a few years of his purchase when the region underwent a deep depression. Winner was one of the most affected Americans in history, losing not only his business investments and precious hotel estate, but also more money than any American man his age.

After Winner's misfortune, the land changed hands through the purchase of a men's fraternity group known as the Odd Fellows, an order dedicated to giving back to their community through monetary donations and support. In 1883, the Odd Fellows of Missouri sought a residence for their elderly and sick members, the Rebekahs (their sisters), and their orphaned children. On October 15, 1894, the Odd Fellows purchased the Winner Hotel and transformed it into the Odd Fellows Home.

After the building caught fire in March 1900, the old hotel was reduced to ruins. The four new buildings seen today rose upon the ashes of elder, like a phoenix. With sturdy layers of bricks, glossy new window panes,

and modern gabled roofing, the new structures had the same charm as their predecessor, but with a homey quality that suited its new residents. The most captivating stories and adventures that took place on the grounds came from the orphans. Children from all over the state came to live at Odd Fellows, which provided them with a wealth of education and years of exploration and adventure.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, a surly yet devoted man served as superintendent at the home. He was known fondly by some, and infamously by others, as 'Pop Rogers'. Paul Rogers and his wife took charge of the tenets of Odd Fellows home in 1923. Under his strict care, the orphans of the home learned hard work and discipline in addition to their school studies. Every morning, the orphans would wake up around six o'clock and make their bed before doing their morning chores. Boys would trudge out to the barn to milk the cows, feed the chickens, and clean, while the girls trailed down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. After morning duties were finished, they washed themselves before walking single file into the dining room, wherein they sang and prayed before eating. Chatter while eating was not tolerated unless it was with the person directly next to the child. After the food was cleared away, the boys scattered about the house and grounds to go about their daily work, while the girls cleaned dishes and prepared lunch. After about two hours of work, the children were released for a few hours of play time.

The lake, for which the land was founded, became the children's main attraction during the long winter months. When it froze, the orphans glided across its smooth surface on ice skates, cutting wintry patterns with their blades. In the summer, when the ice melted, the children swung from a 40 foot rope that was fastened to a tree or they plunged into the exhilarating pool from handmade diving boards. Near the lake, the boys built a small clubhouse where they could discuss their troubles without the disruption or eavesdropping of others. The brief hours of precious playtime were sacred, but were inevitably interrupted by afternoon chores and dinner, after which they prepared to curl up in their beds to sleep before the next day's work.

All of the orphans were bright children, many of which continued their education through college. Girls were trained in piano starting at a young age, while boys were afforded the opportunity to join the home's marching band. The band, though small, looked sharp in their neatly pressed band uniforms as they traveled through the states to perform at other Odd Fellows organizations. A school was built on the grounds where grade

school classes were caring and respectable school teachers taught. When students left grade school, they traveled daily in the home's blue bus to Liberty High School, where they competed for top marks and high athletic achievements.

From the outside, the children looked well-mannered and disciplined, but those who lived inside the home were well aware of the mischief. A great deal of trouble accompanied the James children, who moved into the home in 1941. Bill James, better known to the children then as "Jesse James," (no relationship to the outlaw Jesse James) was infamous to Pop Rogers and the matrons of the home, but whom the children regarded as a hero. One memorable stunt James pulled involved sneaking into the girls' dormitory at night just to prove he could do it, for the boys' and girls' dormitories were located on separate wings of the home. The older girls had their own rooms decorated with various treasures from their past, their walls plastered with pictures of their families and idols from the big screen. They had their own living room complete with a radio, piano, and comfortable seating. The younger girls slept in one large room with several beds, much like the little girls of the famous Madeline books. The boys' dormitories on the other side of the building were also in large rooms lined with beds, complete with a living area holding lockers and a radio. Assigned to each dormitory was a strict matron who looked after and disciplined the children.

The boys' journey to the girls' wing was tricky and in the process, they had to pass through the rooms of sleeping matrons, known for punishing children with solitary confinement or scalding hot water. Once the boys made it to Ruth James's room, they flashed a light through the window to the boy's dorms, signaling triumph to their friends. Unfortunately, on the way back they were caught and given the paddle for disobeying the rules. Another time, "Jesse James" recalled stealing an old truck with a few friends, pushing it far into a hollow before starting it up and taking it for a joy ride around the grounds. He involved his sister in much of the mischief, although her actions went seemingly unnoticed by the matrons compared to her brother's adventures. He often bought the girls cigarettes at the drugstore, which Ruth would sneak up to the girls' rooms. The ladies would slide their windows open, watch the ends of their new treasures flare between the ashes as they puffed, and hung their heads out the windows blowing the smoke in the wind to disguise their scheme. Simple thrills such as these were

minor acts of rebellion make up some of the children's fondest memories. And although some children lived in fear of the matrons' wrath, most of the children who lived at Odd Fellows were grateful for their stay.

Rogers and his wife Pearl decided to leave the home after 21 years of service on August 1, 1944. In 1950, the home saw its last orphans, and one year later the children's school building, which was transformed into a hospital for the elderly, burned to the ground. The home still housed its elders until 1993 when the home was closed. It was abandoned for years. The only residents left were spiders and dust, and the longer the buildings sat, the more the beauty and grace it once had turned forlorn and foreboding. Local rebellious teenagers would dare each other to sneak onto the property, vandalizing its shell, breaking windows with baseballs and rocks until the place looked utterly eerie to any passerby. With the vandalism came security guards to watch over the place, especially at night when cruising college and high school students were abundant.

For 17 years, the buildings sat unloved and uncared for even by those who took shelter and comfort there for many years. It is only within the past few years that the once bolted doorways have been reopened, the floors polished, and the luxurious air been revamped; its heart beating once more. In 2010, Dr. John Bean transformed the Odd Fellows home into a lavish winery, the site of beautiful weddings and wine tasting, bringing life once again to its rich walls.

Works Cited

- Borgedalen, Angie A. "Property to Become Winery." *Liberty Tribune* [Liberty] 8 Oct. 2009: A1 A8. Print.
- Coleman, Daniel. "Missouri Valley Special Collections : Item Viewer." *Missouri Valley Special Collections : Home*. Missouri Valley Special Collections, 2008. Web. 28 Mar. 2012.
<http://www.kchistory.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/Biographies>.
- Hayworth Eldridge, Vera. "Odd Fellows Home Victim of Growing Old." *Liberty Sun* [Liberty] 18 Jan. 1983. Print.
- "I.O.O.F. Building Complete Loss." *Liberty Tribune* 1 Feb. 1951. Print. King, Norma. "Orphans Reunited." *Star Magazine* 18 Jan. 2004: 13-17. Web.
- "Life in the I.O.O.F. Home." *Liberty Advance* 5 May 1911. Print.
- Long, Allison. "Home of Wine and 'spirits'" *The Kansas City Star* [Kansas City] 30 Oct. 2010. Print.
- "Odd Fellows Home." *Clay County Archives*. 08 March 2012. Print.
- "Paul Rogers' Resign at Odd Fellow Home." *Liberty Tribune* 13 July 1944. Print.
- Simrall, H.F. "Early History of Odd Fellows Home." *The Liberty Shopper News* 15 June 1967: 14. Print.
- Simrall, H.F. *Early History of the Odd Fellows Home of Missouri*. Grand Lodge of Missouri, 1966. Print.
- "Story of the Odd Fellows Home- Devoted To Man Helping His Fellow Man." *Liberty Advance* 28 June 1943. Print.
- "There's Plenty of Fun for Boys at the Odd Fellows' Home." *Liberty Advance* 21 Aug. 1933: 3. Print.