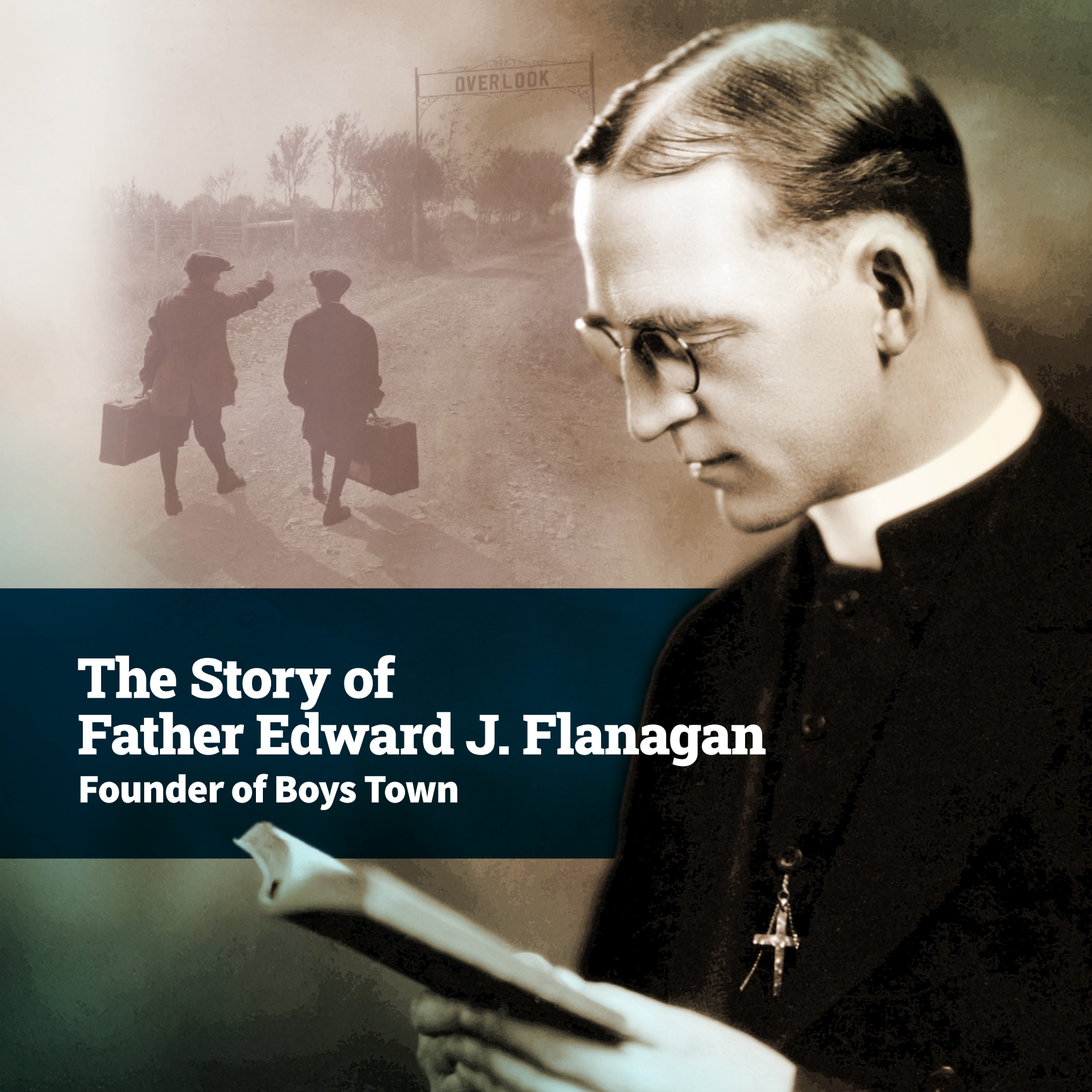

The Story of Father Edward J. Flanagan

Founder of Boys Town

The Flanagans' ancestral home was a typical gem of old Ireland. Its walls were of white limestone, with a rough exterior. The roof was thick-thatched and sturdy, and two slender chimneys stood like sentinels watching over the land.

"Leabeg House, ancestral home of the Flanagans in Ireland, was not unlike other rural homes of the day in Southern County Roscommon. There were eleven of us children, four boys and seven girls. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone was still a curiosity. The automobile was unknown, as was the airplane, the radio, the 'talkies,' and a great many other modern conveniences we look now upon as necessities," Father Flanagan once said of his youth in Ireland.

In a photo from around 1908, John and Honora Flanagan pose with eight of their eleven children, including (front row, from left) Edward, Michael, Patrick, (back row, from left) Delia, Theresa, James, Nellie, and Susan.

Father Edward J. Flanagan, Founder of Boys Town

Born on July 13, 1886, Edward Joseph Flanagan was plagued by poor health from his first days. Unable to play or work as hard as his siblings, he became a reader and an observer. John and Honora Flanagan, people of modest means and deep faith, hoped their son would one day become a Catholic priest. Honora instilled in her children a deep sense of morality and devotion to the Church. They strived to educate Edward in the best schools. He attended Drimatemple School in Ballymoe, and The College of the Immaculate Conception, Summerhill College, in Sligo.

...was plagued by poor health from his first days.

In rural Ireland, the impact of the Great Famine and the fight for independence and land reform permeated the environment. Young Edward saw both the suffering of the Irish people and their spirit of resistance. Edward's grandfather Patrick Flanagan would tell his grandchild stories of the ancient kings of Ireland and the centuries long suppression of the Irish faith and culture while sitting near their cottage's fire. Young Edward would develop a lifelong empathy for the oppressed and the marginalized.

In the summer of 1904, at the age of eighteen, he immigrated to America with his older brother Father Patrick Flanagan. Within two years, he had earned his undergraduate degree from Mount St. Mary's College in Emmetsburg, Maryland. Once in New York at St. Joseph's Seminary, however, Flanagan found his goal would not be obtained easily, a lesson he would learn over and over again in his work.

A St. Joseph's staff member judged him in 1907 to be a "nice little gentleman, but delicate health… just fair in talents." A bout with double pneumonia kept Flanagan out of classes for months, and the weakened state of his lungs eventually convinced the seminary he could not withstand the rigors of another term.

Flanagan's parents had emigrated in 1906 and were also living in New York. They and Edward decided to move to Omaha, Nebraska, where their older son Patrick, was a parish priest. Following Patrick's introduction, the local bishop saw more promise in Edward, and the diocese gave Flanagan an opportunity to study at Gregorian University in Rome in the fall of 1907. A cold, wet, treacherous winter in Rome, however, brought on a recurrence of respiratory illness, and by February 1908 Flanagan was forced to return to Omaha to recuperate.

For more than a year, the dispirited young man struggled to regain his health, working in the accounting department of the Cudahy

Meat Packing Company in Omaha. In 1909 the Bishop of Omaha sent young Edward to the dry mountain air of Innsbruck, Austria, where he enrolled in the famous university's department of theology and resumed his quest for the priesthood.

Three years later on July 26, 1912, Edward J. Flanagan was ordained a priest in Innsbruck. Father Flanagan returned to Omaha and served at St. Patrick's parish in O'Neill, Nebraska, and later St. Patrick's in Omaha.

"I have yet to find a single boy who wants to be bad." Father Flanagan

Young Priest Sees Need

In 1917, Americans nervously scanned casualty lists from faraway Europe. For months the nation had been committed to war—many people felt for the last time. In the cities and in the heartlands, muscles, minds and emotions labored to help end the world's most inclusive conflict. However reluctantly, America had willed to pay whatever price was necessary in lives and in goods to secure a world at peace.

In Omaha, Nebraska, a young Irish priest reflected that such a world probably would never exist. For he knew that long after the last battle there would be casualties—the casualties of peace. The lost and homeless ones were ever present more often in times of social crisis but never absent even in the times of booming prosperity.

...long after the last battle there would be casualties— the casualties of peace.

Among these were the orphans, the rejected children, the young rebels whom society didn't understand and, therefore, didn't want. Daily, the now 31-year-old Father Flanagan saw and read about these youthful castoffs. They were a living fact, and growing in number. Their enemies were neglect, indifference and ignorance. Survival for them was uncertain, and the future was bleak even for those clever and strong enough to make it to maturity.

Father Flanagan too often had observed the young and vulnerable attempt to escape despair through lives of crime. He vowed a personal war against afflictions of the young, especially those of homeless boys. He realized that spiritual needs could not be separated from material rehabilitation.

His Leap of Faith

On December 12, 1917, the world was exploding in a hundred places. On the same day, Father Flanagan opened the door of a modest house in Omaha, Nebraska to about a half-dozen boys. The story of Boys Town had begun.

Father Flanagan was already known in the city of Omaha as the lanky young priest who ran the Workingmen's Hotel, a haven for down-and-out workers not far from St. Patrick's Church, where he served as assistant pastor. At the hotel, he had repeatedly traced the tread that leads from neglected child to delinquent, drifter or criminal. It was pure street knowledge that impelled him to announce to his superiors that he wanted to redirect his energies toward the problems of boys who were heading for trouble or, in some cases, were already there.

Armed with Archbishop Jeremiah Harty's blessing, Father Flanagan searched for quarters. He found what he was looking for, agreed to take it and then set out to find money to pay the first month's rent. He collected $90 during a visit with a friend whose name is unknown, but very likely was local Jewish attorney Henry Monsky. He moved a handful of boys into a drafty Victorian mansion at 106 N. 25th Street.

Convinced that the new work was of great importance, Archbishop Harty relieved Father Flanagan of all pastoral duties. He was now free to concentrate on his new home for boys. Harty also "loaned" Father Flanagan two nuns and a novice from the School Sisters of Notre Dame. But he counseled, financial support was out of the question.

The home's first residents scarcely had time to get settled before a steady stream of additional boys began to arrive. They were sent by the court, referred by sympathetic citizens and often simply wandered in on their own. Father Flanagan had resolved that one of the prime requirements for residence would be "wanting to be there." So the front door was never locked, and any boy who came was allowed to enter.

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By Christmas Eve, Father Flanagan's "family" likely numbered 25. But he had hardly enough money to buy an ordinary meal, much less a traditional holiday feast. According to the Home's lore, an Omaha merchant sent over a Christmas gift—a barrel of sauerkraut—which provided the main course for the first Christmas dinner served at Father Flanagan's Boys' Home.

Yet the boys received stronger nourishment than food—nourishment they hadn't received anywhere else. They received love, care, patience and understanding in rich quantities, and they thrived on it. Although the Home was on a shoestring financially, it continued to grow, evidence that members of the community recognized the need for such a place. Judges continued to send Father Flanagan as many cases as he could handle, and boys continued to come from other sources. By January's end, there were about 50 boys living at the Home, and he was forced to pick and choose boys on the basis of what situation were most desperate.

Food and a warm place to sleep took care of immediate problems, but Father Flanagan knew that a sound education was essential to the future of his boys. Education for many of them had been an occasional thing, sometimes entirely neglected. But the Home was so immersed in the problems of fast growth and small income that it could not assume this burden as well.

Since many had been in trouble with the law, public schools were reluctant to deal with his problem charges. But eventually, school officials accepted a guarantee of the boys' conduct and agreed to take a chance. Father Flanagan hired a horse and wagon, and in it, the boys traveled back and forth to school. Recreation consisted mainly of supervised sports on the back lot.

The spring of 1918 found the new home for boys in a somewhat more stable, although hardly solid, condition. The house was filled to bursting and, through a few regular donations from friends and other occasional gifts of money, food, clothing and supplies, life was certainly getting better.

"There are no bad boys. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example, bad thinking." Father Flanagan

More Room for More Boys

Father Flanagan was unwilling to accept the limits the size of his facility imposed, so he began house hunting again. On the other side of town, he learned, a spacious two-story building ten times the size of his present home, was available. It had a large porch and plenty of ground around it. And the rent was low. He investigated and excitedly agreed to rent it.

The building was the German-American Home, which in the rage of war had become the most despised building in the city. It was closed for the duration of the war with Germany. Now, serving a new purpose, it would provide the foundation for a juvenile rehabilitation program that was to achieve world-wide acclaim.

During the first week in the new quarters, as many as 30 additional boys were accepted, and in no time, the population of Father Flanagan's Home soared to more than 100. The priest's concepts were proving themselves—positive changes were visible in the boys.

Several sports were taught and friendly competition was encouraged—the boys learned the valuable lessons of winning and losing graciously. Music had always been part of the Home's life, and now a band was organized with donated instruments, including a pile of tarnished bugles, a bass drum and a slightly dented French horn. An Omaha music teacher volunteered to teach the boys.

The first farm operations were started with a vegetable garden and a few chickens. A farmer drove up one morning, opened the back door of his truck and led forth a cow. "Can't afford the money," he said, "figured I let you and the boys have Lucy." All the boys learned to milk Lucy and care for her.

Helping Hands

Father Flanagan was pleased. His conviction that most of these boys could be helped by providing a homelike atmosphere, complete with love and warmth, was proving true. In the nine months the Home had been open, not one boy had relapsed into his old ways. Yet these were the boys society had given up on.

Tending to the needs of a hundred boys was no small task, but Father Flanagan's enthusiasm quickly attracted helpers—neighborhood men and women who volunteered their evenings and weekends.

Key volunteers included William "Bill" P. Lynch and Con Heafey, each of whom offered a variety of services to the young priest.

The few nuns who worked at the home soon had too much to do. Again, the neighborhood came to the rescue. A "Mothers' Guild" was formed to help the good sisters, and 20 additional women helped with the washing, ironing, mending and other needs of the boys.

Public Response

To help tell their story, Father Flanagan and the boys started a magazine, "Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal." Besides news of the activities at the Home, the magazine acknowledged gifts that arrived, many in the form of food, blankets or other household necessities. Financial gifts also came, not from major foundations or charitable groups, but from ordinary people who made sacrifices in their own budgets to help the enthusiastic priest with faith in little men.

However, support for the Home was far from universal. In some instances, there was considerable opposition. Father Flanagan's policy was to admit boys without regard to race, religion, background or circumstance. Some people reacted out of prejudice toward the mingling of races, and others to the presence of juvenile offenders in the community. Father Flanagan stuck to his principles, accepting the criticism that only time would overcome. He insisted that society bore a collective responsibility for the welfare of its children and that reform, not punishment, was the path to true rehabilitation.

"I do not believe that a child can be reformed by lock and key and bars, or that fear can ever develop a child's character." Father Flanagan

Caring for Young Minds

As the home grew in size and importance, the problem of education grew as well. Some boys began to have trouble in school, for often, other students would taunt them as “thieves” and “gangsters.” Their educational needs were diverse and not necessarily attuned to the patterns of regular schools. So, the first summer at the German-American Home, Father Flanagan made plans for the boys’ own grade school, with the faculty made up of himself and the sisters from the home.

the problem of education grew

Out of that summer’s effort has grown the present Boys Town school system with its middle school, later named Wegner School (grades 3-8), Boys Town High School and the Career Center, all comparable to the best anywhere.

Day-to-day operations at the Home and school went on in a continued atmosphere of wants and needs, but none of the participants ever acknowledge anything other than success. Within less than two years of its founding, Father Flanagan’s enterprise was holding its own and growing, relying on small donations from many people as its main support. By this time, a great number of Omaha residents had begun to take a sort of possessive pride in the fact that they were helping the courageous and farseeing priest accomplish his miracle.

And a miracle it surely was. Before the Home was four years old, more than 1,300 boys from 17 states had been served. Some stayed only a few months, then returned to their families for a fresh start. Others were adopted by good families that had been carefully scrutinized by Father Flanagan. But one reality stood out boldly—another expansion was necessary.

A Town of Their Own

Land was an element vital to the Home's success. It was important to have a farming operation so that at least part of the Home's food could be grown. Further, despite strong public acceptance of Father Flanagan's program and goals, some elements of the Omaha community still feared the presence of his band of boys in their neighborhoods.

Several friends helped Father Flanagan buy a small farm in Florence, North of Omaha, but it was too small to be of much help, so it was sold and another, somewhat larger farm was purchased in the same area. That farm was not adequate either, and the prospect of building a home there for his boys met with opposition from the residents of suburban Florence.

Father Flanagan's thoughts turned to a particular piece of land some 10 miles west of Omaha, well away from any possible protestors, and large enough for growth and for any type of farming he could envision. The place was called Overlook Farm, and it was 160 acres of promise, complete with a house, barns, chicken coops and a small garage. Father Flanagan decided to see if it was for sale. It wasn't. But after an impassioned presentation by the priest, the owner, businessman David Baum, agreed to sell. He took Father Flanagan's 40 acres as a down payment with the remainder "to be paid installments to be arranged in the future."

"Your greatest business asset," Baum told the priest, "is your faith."

160 acres of promise

Moving day was October 22, 1921. During previous weeks, temporary housing had been constructed and a small network of roads laid. The housing consisted of a group of one-story buildings arranged like barracks in a quadrangle. The buildings included a school, dormitories, a chapel, trade school, dining room and Father Flanagan's residence: a one-story garage converted into a two-room dwelling. One room was a bedroom; the other was his office.

"The poor, innocent, unfortunate little children belong to us, and it is our problem to give them every chance to develop into good men and good women." Father Flanagan

The boys were kept busy. During the summer, some assisted the tenant farmer in growing vegetables and other crops. At the new home, they were able to build a baseball diamond and running track. Soon there was a full-sized field for baseball and football.

While all of this was going on, Father Flanagan shocked some observers with the announcement that he would not mark all this openness and freedom. There would be no fences around the farm, no locks on the doors. Reaffirming his feelings that it was important that the boys want to be there, he added, "I am not building a prison. This is a home. You do not wall in members of your family."

the whole city of Omaha took part

The original plan called for the temporary buildings to serve until all financial obligations were met, and sufficient money was on hand to fund construction of permanent facilities. But it soon became apparent that a delay was almost impossible. The town—for that's what it was now called—had grown to a population of more than 200 boys. Welfare agencies and charities continually appealed for the admission of others.

A group of leading Omaha citizens launched a campaign to raise $200,000 to build a great new building at Overlook Farm, Boys Town's first permanent building. It would be big enough to serve as a school, gym, dormitory and workshop.

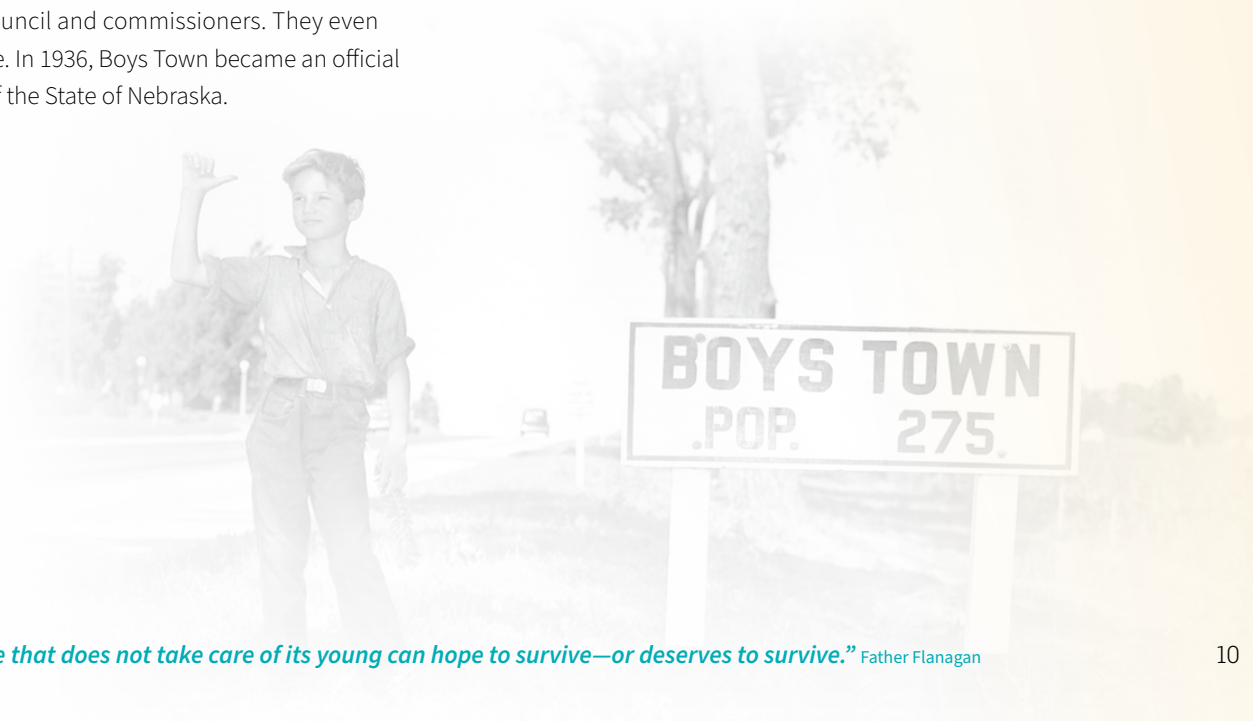
The capital campaign was turned over to professional fundraisers, but this effort showed signs of faltering. Into the gap stepped a team of men who would long remain friends of Boys Town—men who exemplified the fact that the goals and ideals of the "City of Little Men" cut a wide swath across barriers that often stood between religious groups. The men were J.E. Davidson, business executive and prominent member of the Masonic Order; Morris Jacobs, publicity and advertising executive; Henry Monsky, a prominent Jewish leader; and Francis P. Matthews, a respected Catholic leader who later became Ambassador to Ireland.

This hometown team organized a campaign in which the whole city of Omaha took part. It culminated in a "Women's Bucket

Brigade," in which platoons of women, dividing the city into sections, canvassed every business, home and apartment in Omaha. When the results of this last-day effort were in, the fund drive had exceeded its original goal. The total was $215,000, with many Omaha-area residents participating. In March 1922, ground was broken for the new five-story main building.

Now that Father Flanagan and his boys had a true home of their own, the community took on a definite character. Ratios remained fairly constant. Only about 20 percent of the boys had criminal records. Many others, however, had been dangerously close to crime because of various environmental influences in their lives. The population was about evenly divided between Catholic and Protestant boys, with a small percentage of Jewish youth. Chapel services were made available to the Christian boys and the Jewish boys were taken to services in Omaha.

As the home developed, the boys became more like citizens of a town than residents of a home. They elected their own government—mayor, council and commissioners. They even had their own post office. In 1936, Boys Town became an official municipality or village of the State of Nebraska.



"No race that does not take care of its young can hope to survive—or deserves to survive." Father Flanagan

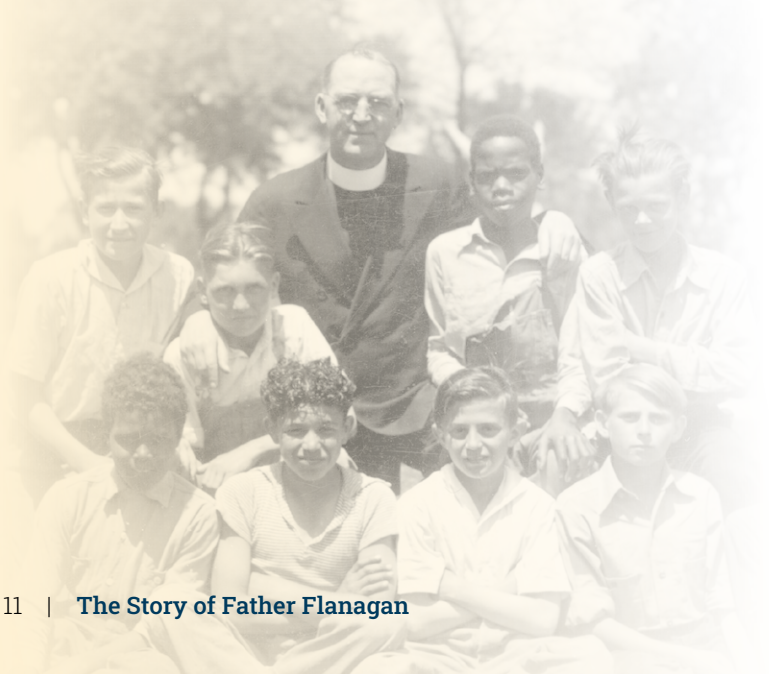
Winning America's Heart

During those years of development, times remained hard, and the struggle intensified as the national economy underwent the Great Depression. Various devices were tried to keep the Home and its mission in the public eye. Some were successful, others failed and were abandoned. One was a "traveling circus" with the boys billed as "The World's Greatest Juvenile Entertainers."

They traveled in three circus wagons on one Nebraska tour. Later, they toured the Midwest by train. Their last performance was at the Nebraska State Penitentiary, where the grateful convicts responded by calling for more, more and more. So, the boys did an encore—a long songfest featuring hymns that everyone knew and loved.

That concert may have been the impetus for the organization of the famed Boys Town Choir in the 1930s. In 1941, Father Flanagan brought in newly ordained Father Francis Schmitt, a singer and organist who had continued his studies of harmony and composition throughout his preparation for the priesthood.

Father Flanagan gave him his assignment: "I want you to build the finest choir of boys in the country."



The boys' first concert was in Omaha's Joslyn Memorial Museum. According to reports, few who came anticipated anything other than another "school concert." But what they heard was a "magnificently trained and disciplined choir, capable of holding its own against anything similar in the nation."

The choir sang throughout World War II at bond rallies and in Army camps, and afterward, with travel restrictions lifted, took on its first big tour. In 1946, 40 boys boarded a train that took them to the Municipal Auditorium in St. Paul, Minnesota. They sang to a house of 9,000 people, in a program highlighted by works of distinguished composers. They awoke the next morning to critical acclaim, and the experience was repeated in such places as Boston's Symphony Hall, New York's Carnegie Hall, Washington's Constitution Hall and in Pittsburgh, Peoria, Cincinnati and St. Louis.

Some profits were realized, but the real impact of the choir's activity came after they left town: many people who heard them became contributors. And even more importantly, the boys helped convince the public of the changes wrought at Boys Town.

Around this time, too, Boys Town's success attracted other attention, which helped further Father Flanagan's cause. Two motion pictures were filmed, the first in 1938, which dramatized the efforts that were being made to recover "lost" boys under Father Flanagan's guidance. "Boys Town," and then "Men of Boys Town" two years later, told the story to legions of Americans.

Actor Spencer Tracy won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Father Flanagan in "Boys Town," a film that has become an American classic. Tracy donated the coveted "Oscar" to Boys Town, where it is still on display today.

Taking God's Work Abroad

Father Flanagan continued to direct all aspects of the program and remained the "father" to all the boys. But he also belonged to society. As a result of the publicity generated by the movies, he was able to spend less time on fundraising and more time developing youth care policy. He became internationally recognized as the world's foremost expert on boys' training and youth care.

One of Father Flanagan's international trips was to Ireland where he visited some of their most prominent children's homes and borstals. The borstals served vulnerable and troublesome children like those served at Boys Town. Father was appalled by what he saw and publicly criticized the Irish government for the evident abuse and neglect. The Irish government refuted his claims and asked him to leave the country. Father Flanagan vowed to return and privately stated he would spend his later life working to change the way children were treated around the world.

"When you help a child today, you write the history of tomorrow." Father Flanagan

As a result of this, he was asked by governments and private groups in the United States and abroad to consult on the problems and care of castoff boys of every description and nationality. After World War II, the suffering of the children in the war zones grieved him deeply. Father Flanagan offered to help these children and President Harry Truman requested he travel to Japan and Asia to explain what he had done at Boys Town and how he had done it. A trail of new homes fashioned after Boys Town followed his appearances.

In 1948, he went to Europe on a round of conferences, lectures, interviews, inspections and discussions. On May 14, the schedule led him to Berlin, and after a heavy day—for there was much to be done in that war-ravaged city—he retired to bed early.

He awoke about midnight to the pain of a heart attack and called for a priest and a doctor. Both came, but shortly after midnight, he died.

Father Flanagan was taken home to his beloved boys and entombed in Dowd Memorial Chapel in what was then the baptistery. In 1977, the Home dedicated a New Father Flanagan Tomb in memory of its beloved founder. The beautiful tomb, a final resting place for this saintly and determined man, adjoins the chapel and remains there today.

"God will send.
The work will continue you see,
whether I am there or not,
because it is God's work, not mine."

Father Flanagan

Shortly before he left for Europe, Father Flanagan was asked if there was anyone sufficiently dedicated to the welfare of children to carry on the work at Boys Town. He replied: "God will send. The work will continue you see, whether I am there or not, because it is God's work, not mine."

Cause for Sainthood

In 1999, a group of Omaha Catholic laymen and Boys Town alumni formed to advocate that Father Flanagan be named a saint in the Catholic Church. The Father Flanagan League Society of Devotion (FFLSD) includes a board responsible for administration and fundraising as well as a worldwide prayer group that supports Father Flanagan's cause and seeks his intercession. The FFLSD appointed a canon lawyer to petition the Omaha Archdiocese to formally initiate a cause for sainthood.

On March 17, 2012, the Omaha Archdiocese designated Father Flanagan as "Servant of God" and petitioned the Vatican to form a tribunal to investigate his life. As directed, the tribunal submitted its investigation materials to the Theological and Episcopal Commissions at the Vatican Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. Upon review of the materials, the Dicastery declared them as "valid and without error" in 2024. Prayers for the cause and for intercession continue. Reports of possible miracles due to prayers of intercession are reported to the Dicastery.

For more information on the life and ministry of Father Edward J. Flanagan, explore these resources:

- Legacy of Devotion by Father Clifford J. Stevens
- Heart of a Servant, available on Amazon Prime
- boystown.org

Father Edward J. Flanagan founded his Home for boys after first working to help "down-and-outers" and derelicts. He determined that he could do more good by helping boys before they became "lost men." He wanted to give them the opportunity to become productive citizens. Boys Town has done this for more than 40,000 boys and girls through its residential program—the "heart" of Boys Town.

Father Flanagan's approach was rooted in prevention and early intervention for troubled youth. In keeping with that philosophy, Boys Town established the Boys Town National Research Hospital and developed a wide range of programs and services, including in-home family services, foster family services, parent training, educational support, a national crisis hotline and more.

Today, Boys Town offers a continuum of care for troubled children and families in crisis. Not only has Boys Town developed new programs and services, but it has expanded across the United States. Boys Town now offers various prevention and remediation programs at several locations, many in major American metropolitan areas. Each year Boys Town programs touch the lives of millions of children and families all across America.

"I have yet to find a single boy who wants to be bad."
Father Flanagan

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