

All through the 1930's, Father Flanagan became an acknowledged expert in the field of child care; he toured the United States discussing his views on juvenile delinquency, the responsibilities of parents and society to help those who had been abandoned. He began a weekly radio broadcast that was carried throughout the United States. He wrote numerous articles for publication on various topics related to the care of children.

"I have had many murderers in my Home, something like one hundred entirely during the past twenty-six years, also some bank robbers and car thieves, and others guilty of major crimes. I have been very successful in dealing with these children and restoring them to a normal state of mind after they became familiar with a different kind of teaching and training, and learned that the world was really not as bad as they had experienced. I do not take these children for any other purpose other than to just try to save them. Unfortunately, the newspapers grab this kind of story and play it up. This is the part of a sensational press and I suppose like many other disagreeable and disconcerting matters in our social life—we have to meet these things and do the best we can under the circumstances. Only ten per cent of our boys have ever been in any trouble, ninety per cent come from broken homes or the homes of bad and neglectful parents. I do not know of any other way whereby I could save a child from a life of crime in a penitentiary other than to offer the facilities of my Home. If that is going to hurt the good name of my Home, then I suppose my Home must suffer, for it will suffer for the same cause for which Christ suffered." (*Letter to Mrs. Pearl B. Woodworth, October 17, 1944*)

Father Flanagan was named to a national panel for study of the problems of juvenile delinquency by U. S. Attorney General Tom Clark in February of 1946. He was appointed a member of the Naval Civilian Committee by Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal on April 7, 1947. In 1947, he was invited by General Douglas MacArthur and the U.S. War Department to go to Japan and to Korea to study child welfare problems. He presented his completed report to President Harry S. Truman later in 1947.

Impressed by Flanagan's work, President Truman requested that he conduct a similar tour of Austria and Germany to help construct a program for the many children orphaned by the years of war there. Father Flanagan left for Europe in the spring of 1948. During his tour, he suffered heart failure and died in Berlin, Germany on May 15, 1948. There were memorial ceremonies in Germany so that the international community could pay tribute to this great man. Father Flanagan's body was flown by a military plane to Omaha where funeral services were held in Dowd Memorial Catholic Chapel, located at the heart of his beloved Boys Town, and the site of his final resting place.



Father Flanagan League: Society of Devotion
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The Story of **Father Edward J. Flanagan** Founder of Boys Town, Nebraska



Father Edward J. Flanagan, founder of Father Flanagan's Boys' Home at Boys Town, Nebraska, was born on July 13, 1886, in Leabeg, County Roscommon, near Ballymoe, County Galway, Ireland. He was the eighth in a family of eleven children. He was very frail at birth, so his grandfather held him, keeping him warm by the fire. His parents were hard-working farmers, intelligent and very devoted to their religion. Many years later, Father Flanagan wrote of his home:

"The old-fashioned home with its fireside companionship, its religious devotion and its closely-knit family ties is my idea of what a home should be. My father would tell me many stories that were interesting to a child—stories of adventure, or the struggle of the Irish people for independence. It was from him I learned the great science of life, of examples from the lives of saints, scholars and patriots. It was from his life I first learned the fundamental rule of life of the great Saint Benedict, 'Pray and work.'"

As Edward grew older, his father commissioned him to take complete care of the sheep and cattle. Edward's duty was to keep the animals from wandering into the dangerous peat bogs that bordered their property on two sides. This pastoral work gave him much time to think, to study, to read and to pray. He noticed his father saying the rosary as he worked, and he too, began to pray the rosary.

He attended his neighborhood elementary school in Drimatample and entered Summerhill College, Sligo, Ireland in the Fall of 1900, for his secondary education. In 1904, Flanagan graduated from Summerhill with honors and sailed for the United States. He wanted to become a priest. Later, in answer to the question as to why he wanted to become priest, he responded: "I presume that what caused me to become a Priest was because I wanted to help people – spiritually – I wanted to teach people, and it was that desire that took hold of me and I never had any other desire at any time in my life." (*Letter to Miss Betty Ann Weis, January 21, 1947*) In the United States, he enrolled in Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Maryland, and graduated in June, 1906. He entered Saint Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie, New York, in September, 1906, and left in the

the spring of 1907 due to poor health. Following a period of recuperation with his family in Omaha, Nebraska, he left to study at the Gregorian University, Rome, Italy. Again poor health forced him to abandon his studies. He returned to Omaha to rebuild his health, and in this period worked as an accountant at the Cudahay Meat Packing Company.

In the fall of 1909, he was accepted by the Royal Imperial Leopold Frances University in Innsbruck, Austria. The high altitude was good for his health, so he was able to continue his studies there, and was ordained with the Jesuits at Innsbruck in 1912.

When he returned to Omaha in 1912, he was assigned to the Diocese of Omaha, administered by Bishop Harty, who had also graduated from Sligo in Ireland. The new Father Flanagan celebrated his first solemn High Mass at Holy Angels Church, Omaha in August, 1912. His first parish assignment was Saint Patrick's in O'Neill, after which he was appointed Assistant Pastor to Saint Patrick's Parish, Omaha in March, 1913.

Seeing the streets of Omaha filled with unemployed migrant farm workers because of a great drought in the summer of 1913, Father Flanagan responded to assist the homeless workers. In the letter to Miss Weis, he wrote: "I was always interested in people and how they lived, and was always interested in trying to help people live better if they were not living well. Then, when the opportunity presented itself due to a great calamity in our city way back in 1913, I immediately entered the field of social service by establishing a home for unfortunate men."

In November of 1913, Father Flanagan opened the Workingmen's Hotel in downtown Omaha, where men could find shelter, a bed for the night and food. He helped many to obtain employment. As Father Flanagan listened to the stories of thousands of men, he heard over and over again, "It's too late for me now, Father. If only someone had helped me when I was a boy." Father said, "From that work I gradually went into boy work, because I realized that the neglected boys was what caused men to go bad and become neglected." (*Letter to Weis*)

Father Flanagan went out into the streets where he found homeless boys. He took in his first five boys: "My first two boys came from the juvenile courts, and three others, whom I had been befriending in my own small way to keep their bodies and souls together, I picked up off the streets. Those first five boys were the real beginning of Father Flanagan's Boys Home." (*Letter to Mrs. Harley J. Earl, July 15, 1939*)

"In December, 1917, I borrowed ninety dollars to pay the first month's

rent on a building in which to house homeless and abandoned boys, and give them the care, training, and education which I felt that they needed that they might be able to accept and bear the responsibilities of citizenship. I opened a home for them on December 12, 1917 in a rented boarding house on Dodge Street in Omaha. (*West of the Art Museum and present site of the Physicians Mutual buildings.*)

I decided to spend my life in saving boys from becoming misfits and recruits to the army of crime. I had studied the program of our courts dealing with delinquents, and as far as I could see the only results were the constantly growing number of boys sent to the reform schools, and the additional expense of making reform schools larger. Then, as now, at least ninety percent of our adult criminals had started their careers as children, and I felt that there must be something radically wrong with a system which produced so many criminals. The economic and social loss to society was abhorrent.

I felt that there must be another way—the way of love and kindness—of training and teaching—of learning to do by doing. I was certain that erring and neglected boys could be trained by a system other than by bars and the cat o' nine tails, and developed into worthwhile citizens, and I set out to do it in a most humble manner.

I had no financial backing, not even much sympathy, and certainly not much interest on the parts of local citizens, for our soldier boys were over in the trenches of France at the time, and mothers' hearts were with them." (*Letter to Mrs. Earl*)

By March of 1918, there were so many boys that Father moved to a larger home, The German American Home. (*Present site of the Catholic Sokol Hall on south 13th Street.*)

Throughout those years, Father Flanagan was studying to become a citizen of the United States. In 1919, he became a citizen and in 1921, he became a member of the Omaha Welfare Board. His Boys' Home was so crowded by this time, that he searched for property until he found the present site, Overlook farm west of Omaha, which he moved his Home to in 1921.

Father Flanagan and his boys had many difficult years in the building up of Overlook Farm. The boys never complained because they found love and safety in their new home. With the premier of the motion picture "Boys Town," in 1938, the Home became known internationally. Many people sent donations to Father Flanagan which he used to build up his Boys Home and help even more boys.