

History of the Wisconsin State School for Dependent and Neglected Children / Wisconsin Child Center

Written by Monroe County Local History Room & Museum Staff; Revised 2023

Where does a child go when they are orphaned, neglected, or dependent on others for their care? If you were a boy or girl living in Wisconsin between the years of 1886 and 1976, you would likely go to the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children in Sparta. At its height of operation in the 1930s, the State School, later renamed the “Wisconsin Child Center,” was home to over 500 children and occupied 25 buildings on its campus.

The establishment of the Wisconsin State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children was the result of changing attitudes about caring for at-risk children during the 19th century. The mid-1800s witnessed a social movement to protect children who did not have a structure to properly care for them. These children (some orphans) were placed in institutions away from the effects of crime and deviancy and taught “discipline and character building traits.” In 1846, the first orphanage in the state opened in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

At this time most at-risk children lived in county “poor houses.” Monroe County had a poor house at least by 1871 in Adrian Township. A new county poor house was opened north of Sparta in 1900. Many of the children who lived in these poor houses were simply without families. They were healthy and mentally capable, but they lived among those who were not. Wisconsin also had industrial schools where some at-risk youth were sent to live.

In 1885 Wisconsin passed a law establishing a State Public School for “dependent children,” that is, children who needed state assistance with having their basic needs met. The purpose of the State School was defined by the State Board of Charities in 1878 as being the following: “This institution shall not be an orphan asylum nor a reform school; but every dependent and neglected child who has not committed a crime shall be admissible whether orphan or not. It shall not be a permanent home but a temporary one until a home can be provided in a family...”

Multiple locations in the state were considered to be the site of the new institution. On November 13, 1886, the State Public School was officially opened at Sparta. According to a Milwaukee Sentinel article from August, 1885, the State Board of Supervisors chose Sparta because of its “central location, its good railroad facilities, general healthfulness, and liberal offer (of subsidies).” 97 children moved into the State School during the first year.

Who were the children living at the State School in Sparta? In the earliest years, both boys and girls ages 3 to 14 and of “suitable condition of body and mind to receive instructions” were brought in from around the state. In 1901 the age limit was widened to accept infants. The children lived at the State School until they could be placed with a family or returned to their own. Those who could not find a home stayed at the State School. 16-year-old children could be returned to their home county, as could those children needing special care. After 1911, a change in legislature admitted “crippled” children to the State School.

The State School officials were authorized to place these children with families that agreed to provide education in the public schools and teach the child a “useful occupation.” In return, the

children placed with a family would be expected to assist with family and farm chores. During the early years this “indenture contract” was the main method of placement, except for those children who were adopted. “Indentured” children lived with foster parents who assumed full financial responsibility for the care of the child until he/she turned 18. Since the children were expected to “earn their keep,” there were instances of the child being exploited and not provided the meager education and training stipulated in the contract, saying nothing about being denied emotional care.

In the early 20th century, child reformers began to scrutinize the indenture system. They shifted to a belief that the institution must focus on each child’s needs and reintegrate them into everyday life with their own family or through foster care. The point was to get them out of the institution and back into society.

Until a child was placed with a family, they would experience family and community life in the “cottage setting” at the State School. Children lived in “cottages,” or house dorms, placed with children of similar age, gender, and needs. In each cottage, a “family” of children ate together, shared chores, and socialized with one another. Chores were assigned to contribute to the running of the cottages. Children might help serve meals, do laundry, wash dishes, sweep floors, and work on the farm which grew some of the food the children ate. There was also recreation time built into each child’s schedule. The State School scheduled physical activity and sports, organized social events like parties or dances, and a variety of leisure activities like fishing or craft making. Students could also attend church services in town. Additionally, children at the State School met with caseworkers and counselors.

The State School provided food, clothes, and medical care to the young people in its charge. A large function of the State School was to serve as a school. Many of the children coming to live at the State School had little or no previous education and arrived deficient in basic academic skills. In the earliest years, children living there were at least taught to read and write. Additionally, boys and girls were also taught skills to prepare them for work—farm work, domestic science (sewing, cooking), gardening, and woodworking for example. In later years, children below high school age attended a school on the State School grounds, but the high school aged students went to Sparta High School.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the population of children at the State School began to rise. The most children living at the State School was 550 in 1936—a result of the tough economic times of the Great Depression and tightening restrictions on the indenture system. Additionally, there was a growing population of children who were more difficult to place with a family due to physical or cognitive disabilities. Nationwide, state public schools were changing from being a temporary home for “normal” healthy children who were placed out to alternative homes, to a facility providing long term, individualized care for those with special mental or physical needs. As a result, the buildings, staffing, and programming at the Wisconsin State School were slowly altered to meet these needs.

In 1947, the official name of the Wisconsin State School was changed to the “Wisconsin Child Center.” The Child Center began housing and providing care on-site to developmentally disabled children in the Northern Colony Annex in 1951.

By this time, the average age of a Child Center resident was 13 and the length of stay was 2-4 years. Many of these children were removed from parents or home situations that were deemed neglectful, while others came from foster homes or other institutions before coming to the Child Center. About half of all children admitted to the Child Center were ultimately returned to their own home, while others lived in foster homes or group homes. The other part of the Child Center, the Northern Colony Annex, provided care for children with intellectual disabilities, from 1951-1967.

By the mid 20th century, some state officials began to see Sparta as a less than ideal location for the Child Center. Sparta's geographic location was deemed inconvenient for housing children as a growing percentage of the institution's population was coming from Milwaukee and Madison. With Sparta being a small city, it could not support the vocational training nor wide recreation opportunities that a metropolitan area could. Plus, it had become difficult to attract and retain professional staff. The Child Center buildings were also in need of extensive repair and updating. Ultimately, the State closed the Child Center in 1976 after 90 years of operation.

In 1976, Wisconsin sold the Child Center property, complete with buildings, to the City of Sparta. Some of the buildings were rented out, others were demolished. In 1977, ten of the twenty-two buildings were rented out. In 1980, several of the abandoned buildings were demolished. As of 2023, five of the original State School/Child Center buildings still stand.

Thousands of children passed through the Child Center until its doors closed in 1976. For some children, going to the Child Center was the first step to a better life. For others, living at the Child Center was just another sad chapter in an already traumatic childhood. The State School/Child Center was a significant institution to Sparta, Monroe County, Wisconsin, and to the thousands of people who lived and worked there during its 90 years of operation.