

better life

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Staff Reporter

For years they came by the thousands, homeless youngsters shipped to Canada in hopes of a better life.

For some it meant years of backbreaking toil on Canadian farms, for others it meant domestic service in middle and upper class homes.

But despite the bewilderment and hardships, most agree it was the best thing that could have happened to them.

Sunday many gathered together for the third time at the Hastings County Museum to reminisce about their lives, past and present, in their adopted homeland.

Most who attended Sunday's reunion lived for a while at Belleville's Marchmont House, a home for destitute children on West Moira Street. They all came to Canada through juvenile emigration schemes, the best-known founded by British social reformer Dr. Thomas J. Barnardo.

Dr. Barnardo used the Marchmont House through its founder Anne MacPherson and her emigration agency before buying the house while setting up his own organization in 1882.

By 1925, when the immigration of children ended, more than 80,000 youngsters, known as Home children, had arrived on Canadian shores.

One of them was Dick Terry, 73, of Trenton. In 1921 he stepped off the Minidosa after a long cross-Atlantic voyage, destined to work on a farm north of Shannonville.

Still only 11, Terry was often expected to do the work of an adult.

"At that age it was hard to do some chores

expected of us. We had to hay, clear stables and lift heavy loads. I didn't feel the younger ones should have to work like that."

For some the stigma of being a Home child hung heavy on some. Yet others are philosophical and even proud of the endurance and perseverance that made them Canadians.

Winnifred Smith of Belleville sailed the Atlantic aboard the Scandinavia, docking in eastern Canada in 1921.

After one year in Preston and two years in Chatham, she came to Belleville to work as a domestic - retiring only 11 years ago. Smith had been placed in an orphanage after her father died and her mother was unable to care for her. She had no choice about coming to Canada.

There were 11 children in her "new" family. That meant a lot of washing and ironing.

"It wasn't exactly rough, but it kept me busy."

But Belleville resident Charles West was one of the more fortunate Home children. After disembarking from the Aurania in 1925, he went to Marchmont House, one of the last to pass through its doors.

From there he went to a farm near Madoc.

"I was treated like a son and stayed 17 years in the one place. I had no complaints about coming to Canada."

After leaving the farm, West came to Belleville and worked for Stewart-Warner 35 years before retiring.

His sentiments about the strange land he came to as a youngster are echoed by Terry.

"I was glad to come ... Canada was a land of plenty. I'm glad it happened, despite the hard times."