



Orphan's pride replaces tears

By HARRY KILFOYLE

NAPANEE — Ada Allen was not always proud to be a Barnardo girl.

She has only come to grips recently with shaking "the terrible stigma" attached to being a child laborer in Canada after the First World War. And she came full circle two weeks ago in Toronto when she greeted other Barnardo girls and boys at an emotional reunion — the first held since the immigration of British children to Commonwealth countries was halted in the 1930s.

The resulting influx of parentless children began in 1869 and was known as the British Child Immigration Movement. Her story, like so many of the Barnardo boys' and girls' is a tale of loneliness coupled with incredible optimism.

Felt inferior

"It was not something you admitted," Mrs. Allen says. "You were made to feel inferior as a child and it carried over into adult life."

In England, four years ago, while visiting her three surviving brothers whom she had not seen in 44 years, Mrs. Allen was able to admit for the first time she was a home girl. She saw a Barnardo home donation box in a butcher shop and one of the employees admitted he was a Barnardo boy, and they exchanged memories.

More than 100,000 orphan children were brought to Canada by philanthropist Dr. Thomas John Barnardo. A recent book by Lady Gillian Wagner questions the myths surrounding his work with children and points out few men made as many enemies as he did in his lifetime. He was a prime suspect in the hunt for the notorious Jack the Ripper and Mrs. Barnardo, who outlived her husband by 40 years, worked hard to keep her husband's reputation as a reformer in child care.

The immigration ended with the Depression which brought an end to the market for child labor and for the Barnardo boys and girls; theirs was a harsh, unloving world most of the time.

Some, like Ada Allen, were fortunate and found good homes. Unlike a majority of the home children, Mrs. Allen was not really an orphan.

She and her younger sister, Avis, had been placed in the Barkingside Home in Ilford, England, following the death of her father during the First World War. Three of her six older brothers were soldiers and her mother gave up the young girls and kept the older boys who by then were able to financially support the family.

In 1923, at the age of eight, Mrs. Allen and her sister, 6, travelled by steamer to Canada where they were boarded at the Barnardo Home in Toronto. At the age of 21, she left the home with \$267 earned after 14 years of brutally-demanding work on Ontario's child labor scene.

She served as a domestic, milked cows, picked and polished apples at 5 a.m., shovelled rock-hard manure in spring from a stall untouched since fall, harrowed with a team of horses, chopped and stacked wood and handled white-hot tile from brick ovens.

Mrs. Allen has mostly good memories from the 14 years of loneliness and hard labor. Today she wears a stiff back brace to protect a deteriorating spine attributed to undernourishment and the tremendous strain she placed on it as a child laborer.

She finally found a home and friends in Stratford. She served as a companion to the mistress at 14 and as her death wish, the woman asked her family for Ada to remain. She did until she was 21 when she fell in love and was married.

But she can also remember moving from "pillar to post", community to community, job to job, for the meagre wage of \$8 a month while her sister remained at the home until she too was old enough to enter the child labor market. She recalled sleeping warmly covered in an attic room in one house where the frost lined the inside roof.

Through her English grandmother, Mrs. Allen was kept abreast of family happenings and sent snapshots. Her mother died in 1939 and the eldest brother took over the family responsibilities but was unable to because of financial circumstances to unit the whole family.

Severe punishment

Her years as a Barnardo child toughened her and helped her to survive first the death of her first husband after only seven years of marriage. She remarried a police officer and he also predeceased her.

"It was not that I was hard on my husbands," says Mrs. Allen looking at her present husband, Cecil, whom she met at a senior citizens' bowling event. Between them the couple have 38 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

"We were told to run, run, run everywhere and I have not managed to slow down," Mrs. Allen says. "If you did not do what they said you were punished and the punishment was usually worse than the original job."

Mrs. Allen knew early that life at the Barnardo house was going to be harsh and regimented. Her given name was Gwen but because her first name was Ada, she had to use it according to home rules.

It was also home and haven for her in the formative years of her life. Ada was determined and she never quit. "If you have the will, you will make it, if not, you won't," she says.

An unknown author said, "The saga of 'Yesterday's Child' would be incomplete without paying tribute to these children and their descendants who helped make Canada what it is today."