

The Way We Were

Children found home with Florence Beland

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MARQUETTE — In a time when people jam stores so they might "adopt" a Cabbage Patch Doll, Florence Beland can recall the real kids she provided a foster home for.

She may not remember all of their names, but that's understandable. After all, there were about 100 of them.

A visitor entering her Marquette home is struck by the vast collection of baby photos displayed on her foyer wall. As Beland, 82, shows those photos, she remarks "Look how cute they are."

When someone shows interest in her years spent as a foster mother, she remarks "I shouldn't get any credit; you should talk to the Children's Aid Society."

That society, founded in 1893, merged with state-run agencies in the 1960s. Bill Vercauteren, coordinator for Child and Family Services in Marquette County, said the number of children cared for by Beland is unusual: "That's a lot of kids."

He provides a little history:

"In the 1880s and '90s, different societies were founded to take care of kids. Organizations sprang up like the Catholic Aid Society." He explains that orphanages established by those organizations usually housed older children. "The kids most easily adopted were the babies."

In Marquette, the Holy Family Orphanage at 600 Altamont opened in 1915. At its peak, more than 200 children were housed there. Infants lived on the top floor, the fourth. Catholic sisters who staffed the orphanage lived on the third floor and older children lived on the second floor. Administration offices, a chapel and a gym were on the

who worked for the city. He died six years ago. "He was a very good helper — good with the children."

Beland said she and her husband had no special problems disciplining her foster kids, noting that most were babies. Chores, like dishwashing, were doled out to the older ones. "We spent a lot of time with them. We'd go to the beach together, go sledding together."

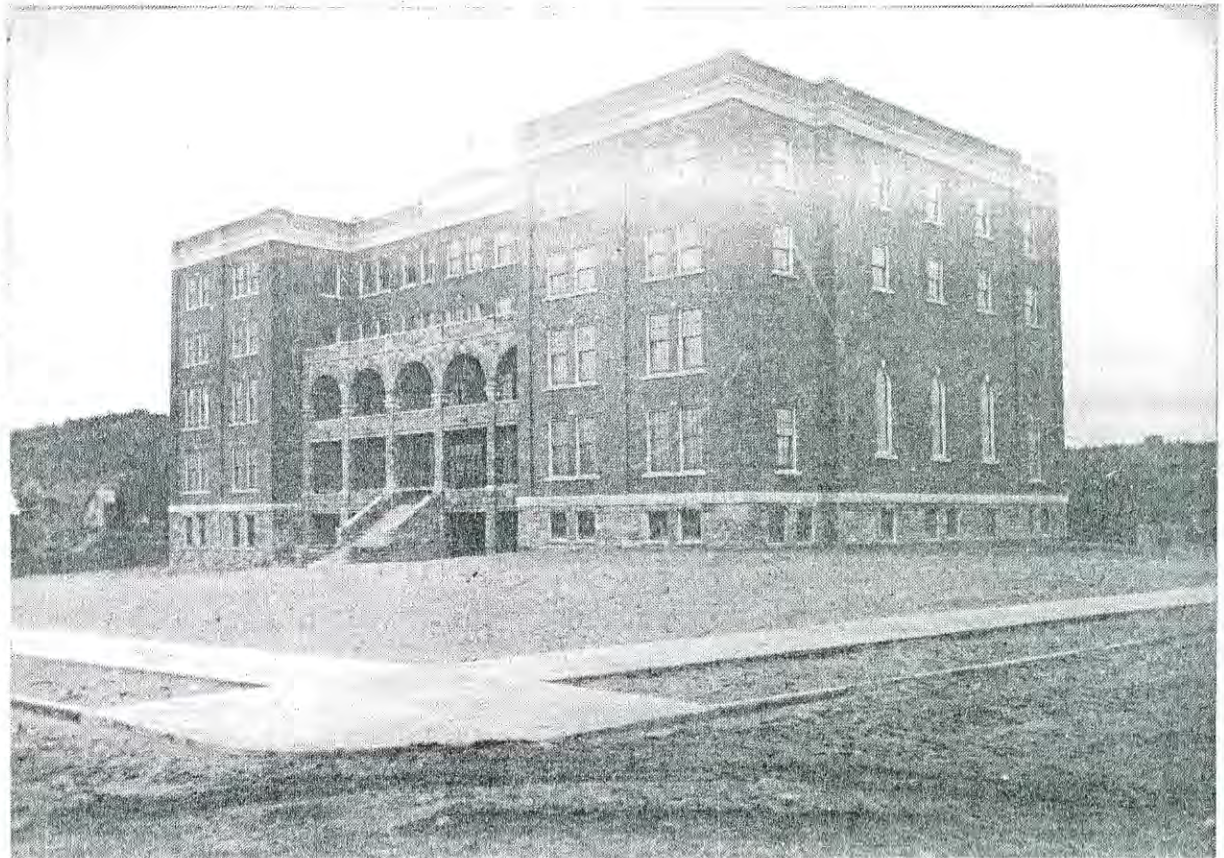
When asked how many children she and her husband cared for at one time, Beland says, "You were supposed to have only four at once," emphasizing the word supposed. But she adds that her four-bedroom home provided enough space for the kids.

Today couples willing to share homes with adopted children must wait 5-7 years for a child, explains Jerry Kedzierzawski, child welfare coordinator with Catholic Social Services. Back in the '40s, "people would actually go into an orphanage and select a child." Now prospective couples are asked to provide information on their education, religion and hobbies; write a brief autobiography and provide references — a study process that includes a visit by the adoption agency to the couples' home.

"There were more children available," says Kedzierzawski. "Today, it's very difficult to adopt a healthy, normal child." Kedzierzawski says he has noticed more couples asking to adopt children with special problems today than in the past.

While looking over a Christmas card from one of three children Beland raised to maturity, she talks of one, a daughter: "She does things for me; she comes and takes me shopping."

Beland looks back on her years as a foster mother with fondness: "I feel richly blessed," she says.



Although she may not remember all of their names, 82-year-old Florence Beland has provided a foster home for more

than 100 youngsters over the years. Below, a sampling of the baby photos that are on display in the Beland home illustrates

the dedication Florence showed for helping orphans. Above is the former Holy Family Orphanage that is still standing on Fisher St.