

The Annie Wittenmyer Home

During the Civil War, approximately 76,237 Iowa men fought in the Union Army. The Iowa Sanitation Agency had the responsibility of overseeing the needs of these soldiers, making sure they had proper food, clothing, and medical attention. [Annie Turner Wittenmyer](#), a Sanitation Agent for the state of Iowa and one of the most well-known women of her time, received a letter from wounded and ill soldiers recuperating in a southern Iowa hospital. The letter read in part:

“We are grateful for all the kindness shown us . . . but we prefer you should forget us . . . if you will but look after our wives and children, our mothers and sisters, who are dependant upon us for support . . . Succor them, and hold your charity from us.”

Mrs. Wittenmyer read this letter to a convention of soldier’s aid societies and sanitation organizations on September 23, 1863. By February of 1864, a board had been organized in Des Moines to establish and operate a facility for the orphans of Iowa soldiers. Mrs. Wittenmyer, who was appointed to the Board and named a trustee, used her connections with Ladies’ Aid Societies and Iowa newspapers to advertise the need for such a facility and to begin raising money. Contributions from civilians and soldiers alike came flooding in to support the cause; Iowa soldiers alone managed to contribute a total of \$45,262.62 from their tiny salaries. The first Orphan’s home opened in the summer of 1864 in Farmington, Iowa.

The Civil War left almost 13,589 Iowa men dead and many more so sick or badly wounded that they were unable to take care of their families. By 1865, there was a long waiting list of needy children, and the Farmington Home became ridiculously overcrowded. A second home was already under construction in Cedar Falls, but the Board also decided to look for larger facilities for the children in Farmington.

Possibly because of its proximity to the Rock Island Arsenal, Davenport had been a center for Union volunteer units. After the War, several of the camps used to house and train soldiers were no longer needed. The government donated the deserted buildings of Camp Kinsman (on present day Eastern Avenue) to the Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Association. On November 11, 1865, more than 150 orphaned children traveled on the steamboat *Keithsburg* to live at the new [Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home](#). Annie Wittenmyer herself oversaw the Home as matron until 1867, and established a dietary kitchen system, forerunner of the present day school lunch programs, that she had originally invented for use in army hospitals.

The State of Iowa took over the Home as a tax-supported institution on June 6, 1866, and made the children wards of the state. This gave the Home financial stability and also helped to protect the interests of the orphans.

By the mid 1870s, most of the Civil War orphans had grown up and left the Home, but there were many other children still in need. The Home began accepting orphans from all over Iowa, and well as children from poor or broken homes and lengthened its name to the “Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home and Home for Indigent Children.” Over the next few decades, the facilities of

the Home were expanded and redesigned to accommodate the new arrivals, as well as promote newer theories in child management.

One significant early change was the replacement of the barracks-style dormitories with smaller home-like 'cottages'. Although the cottage system, which housed the children in small groups, was considered innovative, its adoption was strongly influenced by the scattering of the original buildings; it was much less expensive to use the old foundations than to redesign the entire layout of the grounds. However it came about, the system was deemed beneficial to the children. A married couple or a matron was in charge of each cottage to further provide a family-style setting and more individual attention and care to each child.

Certain practical advantages of the cottage system were shown during three fires that broke out over the next few decades. In 1877, the engine room of the laundry building caught fire and both it and the schoolroom were destroyed. In 1880, the dining hall, kitchen and bakery burned to the ground; only the large ovens were salvageable. That these fires did not spread to the cottages was partially credited to the separation of the buildings: the firemen and the older boys of the home were able to keep the nearest buildings dampened down. Although there was extensive property damage, no one was seriously hurt, and temporary facilities were quickly thrown up until permanent, redesigned buildings could be constructed.

The third fire threatened more than dining halls and empty schoolrooms: on November 9, 1887, at three o'clock in the morning, lightning struck the main building, where thirty staff members and children were sleeping. The bolt punched through the roof and made a hole in the ceiling of a teacher's bedroom. She immediately raised the alarm and all escaped without injury. The building itself, only about three years old, burned to the ground, along with most of its contents. Even with an estimated \$49,000 worth of damage (more than \$882,000 today), and only \$10,000 covered by insurance, the fire could have been much worse. As the next day's *Morning Democrat Gazette* pointed out, if the cottage system had not been in place, all 350 of the children would have been homeless, and some probably would not have been able to escape. As it was, the children were safe, if a little crowded, and plans for a new main building were soon underway.

The Home had its own chapel and its own grammar school, which was in session 10 months out of the year. The state legislature charged the Trustees in 1876 with finding legitimate employment for the residents after they were discharged, so beginning in the 6th grade, students spent half of each school day in the classroom, and the other half learning a practical trade from staff members. There were several trades from which to choose; the Home had its own tailor shop, dry goods 'canteen', and extensive farmlands. The farm eventually grew to almost 300 acres along what would become Kimberly Road. The main barn and outbuildings, constructed in 1927, were considered to be the leading edge of modernized farming.

In 1890, the Home was given custody of the children to avoid placing the children with unworthy relatives and to facilitate placement and adoptions. Before this, children with living family members could not be fostered or adopted without the consent of these relatives. The Home employed its first social worker in 1898, to supervise and protect children away from the Home.

Although the Home was self-sufficient and virtually its own little village, it was a part of the Davenport community as well. In the early 1900s, the “Orphans Band” marched in local parades and gave concerts. The annual summer picnic on the grounds of the Home was a real Davenport event, enjoyed by all. Children were fostered out or adopted by local families, and many of those who were not chose to remain in Davenport after ‘graduation’. The city was proud of the Home, and there appears to have been little stigma attached locally to being a former resident. At least two former residents became very well known. Billy Sunday, who transferred from another orphanage when he was 12, became a professional baseball player for the White Sox (1883-1888) and for Philadelphia before becoming a Christian evangelist. Wayne King entered the Home in 1908 at the age of seven because his parents could not care for him or his siblings. Once his parents were back on their feet, they were able to take him back, and he became an orchestra leader during the big band era.

In 1949, the Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home was renamed by the Iowa State Legislature in honor of Annie Wittenmyer. Eleven years later, the Home, which had always changed with the needs of Iowa’s children, had made the transition from an orphanage to a residential facility specializing in special education and behavioral counseling for troubled youth. Changes to Iowa Code 232 in the mid-sixties opened the Home to all dependent and neglected children under the age of 12 with emotional, mental, or delinquency problems. In 1966, a Mental Health Unit was built, financed by the sale of unused land. The farm, by now state-run and no longer needed by the Home, was completely sold off by 1970.

In 1975, after more than a century of service, the Annie Wittenmyer Home closed. In 1976, the city of Davenport bought the buildings and the grounds. The Annie Wittenmyer Complex buildings have been remodeled for a variety of purposes. The main building housed a branch of the [Davenport Public Library](#) until November of 2005. Several children’s organizations and state funded juvenile programs have also been headquartered in the Complex.

It is estimated that well over 12, 000 children were helped by the Home during its 115 years of operation. Although none of the original Civil War Camp buildings have survived to the present day, the long history of the Annie Wittenmyer Home will always be remembered, especially by the children for whom this institution cared as a sacred trust for over a century.

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