

Women on a mission in 1882

■ WCTU opened county orphanage in Mishawaka.

By **CONNIE JOHNSTON**

Part one of three

Today's Family and Children's Center began as an orphanage in 1882 through the hard work of many women.

The women all belonged to Mishawaka and South Bend's Women's Christian Temperance Union, a group that defended the interests of women and children against a perceived enemy — alcohol.

Local WCTU members Julia E. Work, Myra Clark and Mrs. Henry Milburn attended a state WCTU convention in Indianapolis in May 1882. There they heard the dynamic speaker Frances Willard, president of the national WCTU.

The women returned to Mishawaka fired up because they had learned of a state law that allowed the county to donate \$5,000 toward a county orphanage and would then require the county to support the inmates at 25 cents a day.

Since WCTU members emphasized the damage that drinking caused to families, starting an orphanage that could include children rescued from alcoholic parents made sense. They now had a mission.

The idea for an orphanage received strong support from Palmer C. Perkins of the Perkins Windmill Co. He donated \$2,000 to establish an orphanage in Mishawaka, provided the town would contribute the same amount. The St. Joseph County WCTU acted on Perkins' offer within the next few weeks.

Soon Robbins Battell, owner of a large oak grove, promised one and a half acres for the home. The WCTU also received building fund pledges of \$5,000 from Mishawaka residents, which explains why the orphanage was built in Mishawaka instead of South Bend.

With a constitution, bylaws, a board of managers and an advisory board, the women were ready to start what became known as the St. Joseph County Orphan's Society.

Julia Work was chosen to be the president of the Orphan's Society. The other officers and the board of managers consisted of a cast of prominent South Bend and Mishawaka women, with one representative each from New Carlisle, North Liberty and Walkerton. The board included the wives of a former



Image courtesy of the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library

Ladies of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and St. Joseph County's Orphan's Society, with their 22 charges, are in front of the newly established Faith House orphanage at 911 Lincoln Way West in Mishawaka, circa December 1882.

THROUGH THE YEARS is a Michiana history column. This week's column is provided by St. Joseph County Public Library's Local & Family History Services, www.libraryforlife.org/localhistory. Are there any buildings in the county whose history you've wondered about? Are there local people or events you'd like to know more about? E-mail Libby Feil, manager of LFH, at l.feil@sjcpl.org with your questions about local history. We'll answer as many as we can in future columns.

U.S. vice president and a returned Gold Rush forty-niner as well as of successful farmers, doctors and businessmen.

The home's constitution stated that the object of the Orphan's Society was "to give relief from want, to provide for the physical comfort, the moral elevation and the intellectual improvement of the orphans of this county."

The constitution also stipulated that all the officers had to be members of the WCTU, although no specific religion or club was to control their organization. The constitution also made clear that while the children were in the orphanage, they were to be supported and educated at the home's expense as well as trained with

good work habits.

There were several ways for a child to be placed in the home. One route was through a township trustee order; these children were often from the county poor house. A second avenue was via a quitclaim — that is, children officially abandoned by their parents. A third group of children in the home were boarders. These children were generally from a single-parent home where the parent could only work if someone took care of the child.

Finally, some children came to the orphanage from abusive, poverty-stricken or otherwise "unfit" homes. (To the WCTU members, with their beliefs about the evil of strong drink, the children of alcoholic parents were viewed as especially at risk.) Clearly, then, many of the children in the orphanage were not orphans at all.

On July 10, 1882, the orphanage opened officially at 911 Lincoln Way W. in Mishawaka. Called Faith House, with five little girls from South Bend as its first charges, the home had a former missionary as its first matron.

Numerous community fundraisers such as concerts and lawn parties were held over the next few months. On Aug. 21, 1882, Frances Willard came to Mishawaka to deliver a benefit lecture on WCTU's relief work; the cost of admis-

sion to the lecture went to the home.

The WCTU women worked together to make clothes for the children and teach Sunday school. People in the community donated clothes, furniture, food and money. Dr. Huntsinger donated his time to provide health care. John Oliver gave a cow so the children could have milk.

The first few months, the home was so well supported by the community that no funds were needed from the county. By December, the home had 22 children from the ages of 6 months to 13 years living there.

Money was an ever-present need, though, so the WCTU continued its fundraising efforts with a series of benefit lectures that winter. One "lecturer," surprisingly, was a female impersonator named G. Paul Smith. The Mishawaka Enterprise reported that Smith was quite good and gave impressions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anna Dickenson, Sara Bernhardt and other prominent women.

The St. Joseph County Orphan's Home was off the ground and running. But could it be successful over the long term?

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