

THE ROAD TO HOME:

STORIES FROM A SHARED PAST ON ROUTE 66

A TOUR OF SITES ON THE GROUNDS OF THE FORMER
ILLINOIS SOLDIERS' AND SAILORS' CHILDREN'S SCHOOL
IN NORMAL, ILLINOIS



CREATED BY
RUTH COBB

FOR THE
EIGHTH ANNUAL
MILES OF POSSIBILITY
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The Road to Home: Stories from a Shared Past on Route 66

A tour of sites on the grounds of the former Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School in Normal, Illinois

Tour location: The former ISSCS campus – now known as One Normal Plaza

Street address: 1110 Douglas Street, Normal, IL 61761

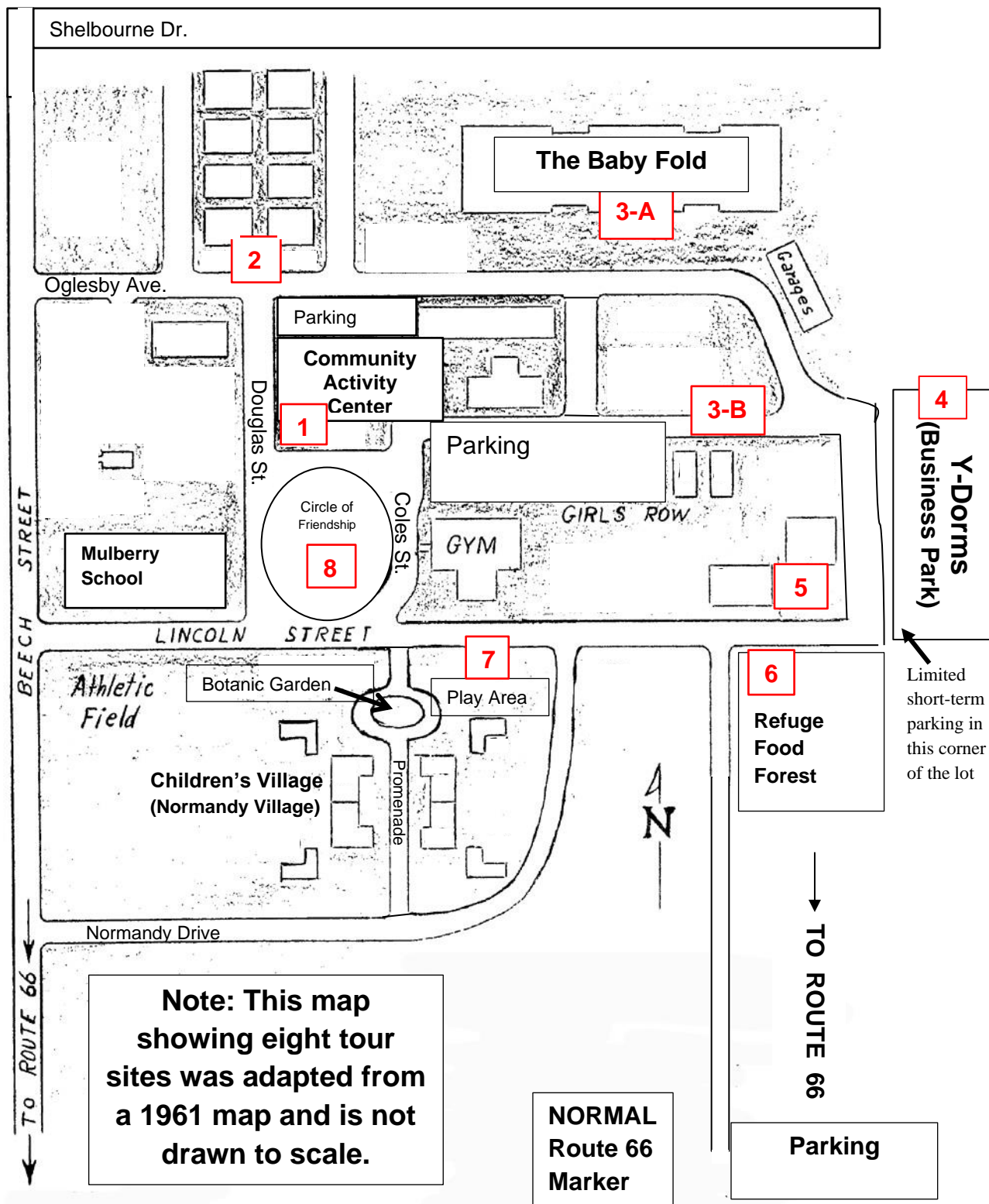
The Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home opened in 1869 to care for the orphans of Illinois soldiers after the Civil War. It was the first public child welfare institution in the state. The name was changed to Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School in 1931. Over the years, the mission expanded and adapted as the needs of neglected youth increased, until the institution was closed by the state in 1979. During the 110 years of its existence, thousands of children were sheltered, fed, clothed, schooled and cared for at this Home right here in Normal. For those who once lived here, this place will always be "the Home." At one time, being called a "Homer" was a shameful put down, but now the alumni of ISSCS proudly claim their heritage as Homers.

The thread of connection between ISSCS and Route 66 really began when the United States entered the World War in 1917. Employees and former residents of the Home served in the military, the ranks of the nursing corps, and in civilian support roles. The war also meant a great increase in the number of children who arrived here from all over the state. Additional housing for children and employees, a new school, more farmland, and other facilities were added to the grounds during the war and in the years after Route 66 was aligned through Normal, just south of the Home.

Many of those structures remain on the campus today, along with several historic markers and monuments. From the beginning to the end, this "city of children" reflected the state's response to the needs of young ones whose families were torn apart by war and poverty. From 1926 to 1977, the road to the Home in Normal was part of the emotional upheaval in their lives, but also offered a potential path to stability. In many ways, ISSCS was part of "The Great American Road Trip" on Route 66.

This tour highlights some of the physical spaces and offers insight into the experiences of those whose lives were entwined with this remarkable place beside Route 66.

Note: The grounds of the former Children's School are now a mix of public and private property that includes businesses and single-family homes. Certain areas are posted as "private" areas, so please respect the wishes of the property owners, and maintain a proper distance as you view the structures and landscape. Please obey all traffic laws and parking restrictions.



Map

The grounds of the former Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School

Tour Site One: Site of the Original Administration Building



Eagle monument, 2017. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

Preservation Society and the Town of Normal restored the monument, and the eagle was refurbished to its original look in 2008.

The eagle once topped the center parapet of the four-story building that opened in 1869 to house 180 orphans of Illinois Civil War veterans. With more wars and hard times, the number of children at the Home continued to grow. In 1923 a total of 447 boys and girls from 79 Illinois counties were in residence, and by 1933, more than 8,000 children had lived here and learned the lessons of life.

The tour begins at the eagle monument in front of the Normal Community Activity Center at **1110 Douglas Street, One Normal Plaza**. Parking is available in the lots on the north and southeast sides of the building.

This building may be open to the public weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call (309) 454-9779 to confirm access. A special exhibit of the history of ISSCS is on display inside.

The cast iron eagle atop the brick plinth marks the site of the former Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home – later known as the Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School. The original building was razed in 1961, and an earlier monument was erected. When ISSCS closed in 1979, the eagle was transferred to the McLean County Museum of History. In 1998, the former ISSCS Historical



The Orphan's Home Administration Building, ca. 1896. (Photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History.)

In 1926 it was still called the Soldiers' Orphans' Home, and Ralph Spafford was the superintendent, or managing officer. The Home had its own school and hospital, and it functioned very much as a "city within a city" in northeast Normal, surrounded by farms.



Ralph Spafford (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History, Pantagraph Negatives Collection)

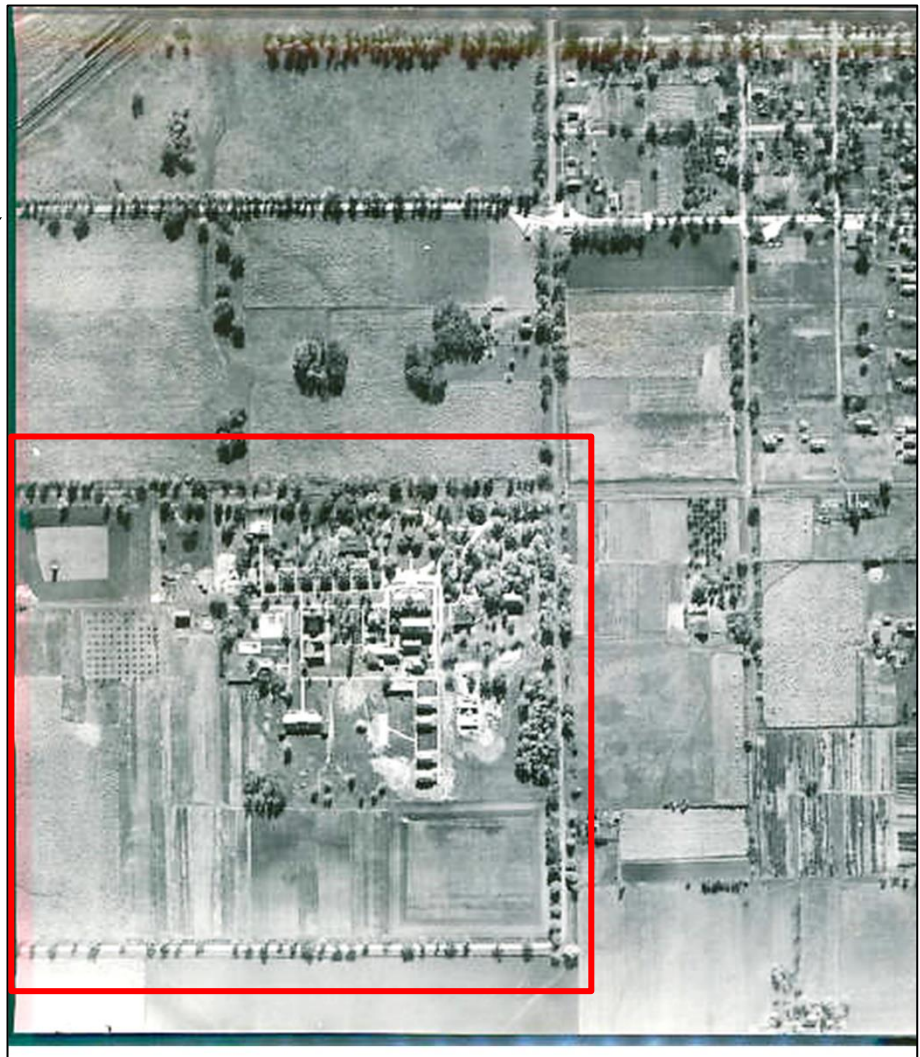
When Route 66 was created in 1926, it was aligned through Normal on the existing Illinois State Route 4. In 1941 a four-lane "bypass" was built around the eastern edge of Normal, and the existing stretch of the road next to ISSCS became part of "Business 66" until it was decertified in 1977.

A 1928 aerial view, taken from a plane flying south over north Normal. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History, Pantagraph Negatives Collection)

Route 66

Grounds of the Soldiers' Orphans' Home in 1928

The building on the site of the original Orphans' Home today was completed in 1971 for use as the ISSCS recreation center and industrial arts shop. The Town of Normal acquired the property after the closing of ISSCS, and in 1998, the building became the Community Activity Center.



Tour Site Two: Boys' Row Cottages

Move to the left of the Community Activity Center building and turn right onto Douglas St. (going north) then turn right onto Oglesby Ave. (going east). Park with flashers on the right side of the street next to the rear of the Activity Center building.

PLEASE NOTE: This tour site is on private property, so DO NOT venture beyond the wall that runs parallel to the street to avoid trespassing. The buildings formerly known as Boys' Row are now private residences and are not routinely open to visitors. The private residence to the left (on the southwest corner) and the surrounding property to the south and west are also off limits to visitors.



Boy's Row cottages in 2005.
(Photo by Ruth Cobb)

The foursquare brick cottages on the northwest end of the campus were built during the early years after State Route 4 was designated as Route 66.

These separate cottages for boys reflected the expanding population of the Home, and new ideas about institutional care of children. The Home's continued growth provided steady employment for state workers and local contractors. The hard road (as locals called the paved highway) nearby made delivery of building materials and movement of work crews easier and more efficient. Five of the eight cottages were named to honor people or battles associated with World War I and were supported by veterans' groups.

Boys were placed by age groups under the care of married couples who served as cottage parents or house officers. The buildings were more like homes, and each accommodated up to 30 boys. Each cottage had its own kitchen, dining room and the basement included a playroom.

The cottages on Boys' Row remain in good condition. Most are now private homes.

The Boys' Row cottage names were:

Harbord

Bell

Chateau Thierry

Pershing

Roosevelt

Wilson

Lawton

Cantigny

Tour Site Three: Felmley School and Girls' Row

Proceed east on Oglesby Ave. to face the brick building on the left, east of Boys' Row. This stop includes The Baby Fold's Hammitt Junior-Senior High School building at **612 Oglesby Ave.**, and the two-story brick-and-frame private home at **703 Oglesby Ave.**, across the parking lot to the south.

Please note that these buildings are private property and are not routinely open for public tours. Parking is available in the lots to the north and south of the Community Activity Center, but NOT in the lots closest to these two sites.



Hammitt Junior-Senior High School, 2018. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

The last school built on the grounds of the Home opened in 1921. With 10 rooms all on one floor, it was the first school in the state to feature this newly mandated design to improve safety. By the time it was finished, the student population had already outgrown it. A west wing that later housed the junior

high school, and an east wing with a modern auditorium were added in the early 1930s.

The school at the Home became a formal training site for student teachers from Illinois State Normal University in 1916 at the urging of University President Dr. David Felmley. The junior high school was named in his honor in 1936. After 1964, ISSCS students in junior high and high school attended other schools in the community, as well as University High School on the ISU campus.

The building is once again used as a school by The Baby Fold, another long-time child welfare institution in Normal. Hammitt Junior-Senior High School moved into the renovated space in 2018. The former auditorium at the east end is now a chapel.

(Photo of Clara Kepner courtesy of Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois)



Clara Kepner

ISSCS teacher Clara Kepner grew up at the Home and dedicated most of her adult life to the students at ISSCS. Clara arrived at the Home as a child in 1914. After graduation from University High School, she was awarded a scholarship and lived at the Home for two more years while she earned her teaching degree at ISNU. For nearly 50 years, Clara taught every grade at the school at ISSCS. She also led the Girl Scout troop and the Lucky 4-H Club at the Home and would have witnessed the effects of the opening of Business Route 66 next to the Home, and its later decommissioning.

Follow the curve of the street south to view the two-story brick and white frame house southeast of the parking lot on the right side of Oglesby Ave.



Lincoln and Wood Cottages in 2017. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

Clara Kepner was also among those who lived in the cottages on Girls' Row.

By the early 1900s, overcrowded dormitories in the main building were a big problem. The state began efforts to house children by gender and age groups in separate, home-like cottages. Funding and progress were slow. The first five cottages were completed between 1904 and 1916. World War I intervened and the last three were finally opened by 1927.

These eight cottages were called Girls' Row. Clara and the other older girls learned homemaking skills by doing housework and caring for the younger girls. The later cottages could accommodate up to 38 girls. The first floor included a living room, dining room, kitchen, and pantry, plus a locker room, shower room, toilets, and sinks. The dormitory and private quarters for the matron (housemother) were on the second floor. Five of the cottage names honored Illinois governors.

Only two of the structures stand today. The two-story brick-and-frame cottage was the last one built and was originally named Illinois Cottage. At some point after 1955, the names of the first and last cottages on Girls' Row were switched. With that change, the last cottage at the east end of Girls' Row became Lincoln. The first six cottages were razed in 1969, but the last two (Lincoln and Wood) were still deemed structurally sound. Lincoln Cottage is now a private residence and Wood Cottage is a garage.

The Girls' Row cottage names were:

Lincoln	Logan	Fifer	Wood
Grant	Yates	Oglesby	Illinois

Tour Site Four: Y-Dorms

Around the curve to the left are the two one-story buildings known as the Y-Dorms (the three wings of each building form the shape of a “Y”). **Short term parking may be available in the far southwest corner of the parking lot for the south building at 705 E. Lincoln Street (closest to the curve of Lincoln Street).** These buildings are privately owned and are not routinely open to visitors.



The north building of the Y-Dorms complex in 2007. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

These new “cottages” were built on land that was once part of the Home’s farm and were dedicated in 1969 during the centennial celebration of ISSCS. The names of the demolished Girls’ Row cottages and the residents were transferred to the six wings of these two buildings. The buildings had air-conditioning and other modern features.

Within a few years, the population at ISSCS was reduced and the south building was designated as housing for boys. Under the Department of Children and Family Services, emphasis was on foster homes, especially for younger children. In the final years, ISSCS only accepted teens aged 13 to 18. Younger “cottage life supervisors” were hired, and social workers and therapy staff oversaw treatment and emotional support.

These buildings did offer the youthful residents a view of Route 66, and as often happened over the years, some teens ran away. The late Illinois State Police Lt. Chester Henry noted that he and fellow officers patrolling the hard road between Dwight and McLean were often called upon to bring the errant “Homers” back to ISSCS.

The buildings were repurposed as a small business park in 1998 and now include private offices, non-profit organizations, and other enterprises.

Tour Site Five: Laundry, Power Plant, and Water Tower

Just around the curve to the right on Lincoln Street, you will see two brick buildings.

The long one-story structure was the Home's laundry and is now privately owned.



Demolition of the power plant smokestack in 2005. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

The two-story brick building to the west is now Mirus Research, located at **618 E. Lincoln Street**. This structure was built in 1923 and was the second coal-fired power plant that provided steam heat and electricity for all the buildings at ISSCS through an extensive network of underground tunnels. The Home's water tower once stood to the west of the power plant. The water tower and the power plant smokestack were often cited as beacons for motorists traveling Route 66, and for the children as they returned from occasional trips away from the Home.

This was the second water tower at ISSCS, constructed in 1951 and dismantled in 2000. The smokestack was removed in 2005 and the main power plant building has been renovated several times since then to serve as both residential and office space.



The power plant (seen from the north with smokestack between the trees) and water tower in 1999. (Photo by Trisha Paresa) **For more, see www.scharnettarchitects.com/portfolio/mirus-research.**

Tour Site Six: The Farm and Gardens

To the immediate left on the curve of Lincoln Street is the Refuge Food Forest at **701 E. Lincoln Street** (across the street to the southeast of the Mirus Research building). This area is a park and community garden and is open to the public. **Parking is available along the drive beside the garden, or further south near the picnic shelter.**

The area around ISSCS was still mostly small farms and orchards into the 1950s. Local farmers cultivated truck gardens for produce they sold door-to-door, to local grocers, or at small stands. Many ISSCS boys earned pocket money working for the farmers. From its earliest days, the Home had its own farm and gardens to produce food for the children and employees. The farm was originally at the east end of the property. Over time, the State purchased additional tracts to the north and south of the campus, for a total of 120 acres devoted to farming.

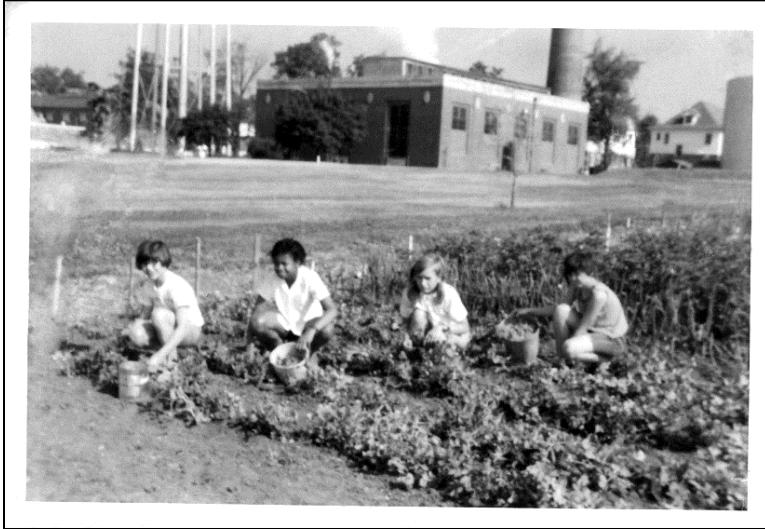


The north section of the ISSCS Farm shown during the 1955 Pantagraph Farm Day event. (Pantagraph photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History, Pantagraph Negatives Collection.)

On August 25, 1955, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people traveled City Route 66 to the ISSCS farm for the final annual Pantagraph Farm Day sponsored by the local newspaper. U.S.

Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson gave a major speech at the event, and other dignitaries included Illinois Gov. William Stratton and U.S. Congressman Les Arends. This area agricultural showcase featured field demonstrations, educational and equipment exhibits, and displays by local ag-related organizations and businesses.

Farming operations at ISSCS were discontinued in 1962 and the land was leased to Illinois State Normal University's Department of Agriculture. Part of the University Farm was based here until that operation moved to Lexington in 2000.



By the 1960s, the only garden at the Home was on this very spot, where Clara Kepner taught members of the Lucky 4-H Club about gardening.

Students at work in the ISSCS 4-H Garden, ca. 1962. (Photo courtesy of Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois)

The former 4-H garden was transformed into the Refuge Food Forest in 2015. Under the auspices of the University of Illinois Extension and the Town of Normal, volunteers planted fruit and nut trees, grape vines, berry bushes and other edible plants that are self-sustaining. The organic produce cultivated in this modern community garden is available to everyone. Volunteers maintain the site and fight the Japanese beetles. In a nod to the past, children from nearby Bloom Community School come here to learn about plants and gardening.



Visitors toured the Refuge Food Forest at ISSCS in 2018. (Courtesy of John Fischer, Normal Public Library)

Visit www.normal.org/1372/The-Refuge-Food-Forest to find a downloadable brochure and link to the Refuge Forest Facebook page.

Tour Site Seven: The Children's Village

Move west from the Refuge Food Forest along Lincoln Street (near the play area) to view the Children's Village cottages situated to the south.

These buildings are private property and are not routinely open for public tours. The exteriors of the cottages at this site may be seen from a closer vantage point by entering at Normandy Drive off Beech Street on the west side of the campus. The street address for Normandy Village is 1100 N. Beech Street. Parking is available in lots on the south, west and east sides of the complex. Visitors are welcome to stroll the promenade that runs north and south between the groups of cottages and enjoy the ISSCS Botanic Garden at the north end of the Village.



View of the Children's Village, now known as Normandy Village, in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Bob Broad, Hile-Broad Properties.)

Construction on the Children's Village began in 1930 as more younger children were sent to the Home. The enrollment of World War I veterans' children totaled 433, with

an additional 113 eligible for foster care. In 1931, the name of the institution was changed to Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School.



Drinking fountain memorial dedicated by the American War Mothers. (Photo by Ruth Cobb).

The eight Tudor Revival cottages were designed for young children from three to twelve years old. Up to 15 children, grouped by age and gender, and a matron were housed in each single-story cottage. The brick buildings were white with red tile roofs and red window shutters with animal cutouts. Four playhouses stood at the north and south ends of a central promenade.

(A.L. Bowen photo courtesy of Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois)



A.L. Bowen

Bloomington native A.L. Bowen was superintendent of charities for the Illinois Department of Public Welfare and oversaw the project to build the Children's Village as part of the state's effort to provide a better life for orphaned and neglected children.

Alice French Cottage was on the southeast corner of the complex and motorists could watch the construction progress from Route 66. It was named in tribute to the founder of the American War Mothers and was dedicated in April 1931. A drinking fountain placed as a memorial by the American War Mothers in 1937 is still next to the exterior south wall. (Note: The cottage name was later shifted to the building on the northwest corner.)

The eight cottages were transformed into a small business park called Normandy Village in 1987. The Children's Village was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2018. The cottages house a mix of businesses, non-profit organizations, and educational programs. The public is invited to enjoy the areas around the Village, including the ISSCS Botanic Garden north of the cottages.

The Children's Village cottage names were:

Alice French

Dewey

Sherman

Washington

Betsy Ross

Jane Delano

Bennett

Roth

Tour Site Eight: Gymnasium, Circle of Friendship, and Frandsen Hall

Proceed west on Lincoln Street and turn right onto Coles Street. The final tour stop highlights buildings and landmarks in and around the Circle across from the old gymnasium building at **22 Coles Street**. Parking is available in the lot next to the Gymnasium building or beside the playing fields south of this site on Lincoln Street.



The gymnasium at ISSCS in 2018. (Photo by Ruth Cobb)

The gymnasium / amusement hall was completed in 1917. The \$25,000 building was designed to serve both recreational and assembly needs for the growing population. Dressing rooms, shower and toilet facilities for both sexes were provided, and the stage could be extended for concerts by the Home's band. The gallery seated 250 and included a moving picture projection booth.

The main floor was used for basketball, dances, and physical education classes and gatherings for more than 60 years. The gymnasium has seldom been used since ISSCS closed in 1979. The attached indoor swimming pool is a privately-owned aquatic school.

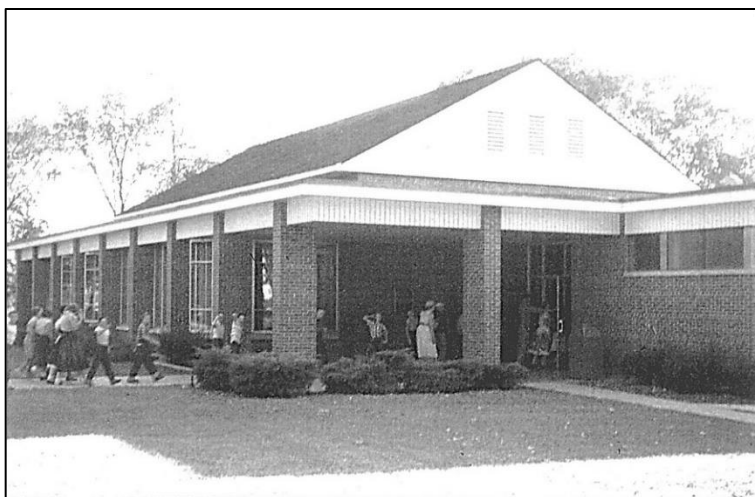
Proceed around the Circle to view the sculpture on the left (south) side of the street.

The Circle of Friendship memorial was erected on the site where the flagpole once stood in front of the original Administration Building.

The Circle of Friendship memorial at ISSCS in 2009.
(Photo by Ruth Cobb)



For more than a decade, the former ISSCS Historical Preservation Society collaborated with the Town of Normal to preserve the site and the stories of those who lived and worked here. The eagle monument was restored and an exhibit highlighting the history of ISSCS was installed in the Community Activity Center. An Illinois State Historical Society marker recognizing the role of the Home in our state's history was placed at the south end of the Circle on Lincoln Street. A final project was completed in 2008, with the unveiling of the sculpture entitled "Circle of Friendship" to honor the children and employees of the Home. The ISSCS Historical Preservation Society formally disbanded in 2009, but annual reunions are still held on the grounds of the Home.



Continue around the Circle and turn to the left (south) for the final stop at this tour site. The one-story building west of the Circle is the former Frandsen Hall at **602 E. Lincoln Street**. **Parking is available on the street in front, but not in the lot to the north.**

Students and staff entering Frandsen Hall, ca. 1960. (Photo courtesy of Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois)

Frandsen Hall opened in 1952 and included the campus dining hall, storage areas, and services until ISSCS closed in 1979.

Part of the structure is now a residence, and the rest of the space is occupied by Mulberry School, a private, non-profit school for students in pre-school through third grade. This building is not routinely open to visitors.

The Circle with the flagpole was also a key gathering spot for Legion Day, an annual event that brought thousands of visitors to the Home along Route 66. Between 1930 and 1978, members of Illinois American Legion Posts and Auxiliary Units from all over the state gave the students at ISSCS this very special day each summer. For the veterans and their families, it was a pilgrimage to honor the memory of fallen comrades. A 1948 news account reported “between 4,000 and 5,000 Legionnaires and their wives thronged the grounds” on June 14!



Eager ISSCS students crowd around the Pontiac 40 & 8 Voiture's replica locomotive on Legion Day in 1936. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History, Pantagraph Negatives Collection)

They brought picnic lunches and plenty of ice cream. The school band performed, and there were competitions and ball games. The students had great fun riding the 40 & 8 “trains.” The honorary 40 & 8 Society commemorates the World War I French troop trains that carried men and horses from the coast to the battlefield in narrow gauge boxcars that could carry either forty men or eight horses. Numerous area 40 & 8 Voitures (local units) traveled Route 66 to bring their motorized replica locomotives to ISSCS for Legion Day. Except for a few years during World War II, Legion Day continued every year until 1978, just before ISSCS was closed.

As we literally come full circle on this tour, the words of ISSCS resident Bill Merchant offer a fitting postscript. His first trip to Normal on Route 66 came in January 1952 when their dad was ordered by the court to drive Bill and his sister, Mary, to ISSCS from Chicago. He remained at the Home until June 1960.



ISSCS “Homer” Bill Merchant proudly displays Route 66 road signs he purchased after the highway was decommissioned. (Photo courtesy of Bill Merchant)

“I remember leaving ISSCS on a warm day in June 1960 only a few days after I graduated from U-High. After 8+ years, the day I left was nearly as traumatic for me as the day I arrived. I was barely 17 years old and on my own. I had \$40 cash and a new suit of clothes. (We used to compare ourselves to prisoners being released from custody.)

But mostly, I remember my brothers and sisters from ISSCS. We were and are family.”

Bill Merchant’s “road in life” continued to intersect with Route 66 and Bloomington-Normal. He worked for General Telephone Company of Illinois (later Verizon and Frontier) and lived in this area for a number of years. Like so many “Homers,” Bill (who is now a resident of Overland Park, Kansas) cherishes the memories of trips on Route 66 and his years at ISSCS in Normal. He has also been among those who have returned for the annual reunions.

Ryburn Place at Sprague’s Super Service in 2021 (Photo courtesy of Kevin Eatinger)



One local landmark that was familiar to many at ISSCS was Sprague’s Super Service on Business Route 66. The two-story, Tudor Revival café and gas station was built during the same period as the ISSCS Children’s Village cottages just down the road to the east. Sprague’s Super Service was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008. Today, travelers can visit Ryburn Place at Sprague’s Super Service and learn more about Historic Route 66.



One last stop...

This Illinois Route 66 marker was installed in 2023 at the far southeast edge of the ISSCS grounds, just south of the Refuge Food Forest. It's a perfect opportunity for photos. (Photo courtesy of Terri Ryburn)

Acknowledgments and Sources for Additional Information

More than a decade ago, I was asked to research and write a history of the Home. It continues to be my privilege to share the stories about this “city of children” and its impact on those who lived and worked here, as well as our local and state history.

The research for this tour included material and resources in the following collections:

Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University

Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Pantagraph Negatives Collection, and the Public Life in McLean County Collection, McLean County Museum of History

Accounts from *The Pantagraph* and *The Normalite* newspapers

Annual Reports of the Illinois Department of Public Welfare

The Illinois Collection, Bloomington Public Library

**This tour information is available in digital format on
the Normal Public Library website at: normalpl.org**

Thank you to: Terri Ryburn, Jack Keefe, Bob Broad, Don Meyer, David Hall, John Fischer and the staff of the Normal Public Library, the staff at the McLean County Museum of History, the staff of the Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives at Illinois State University, Bill Merchant, the late Lou Williams, Denise Higgs, Bernie Latta, Jeff Buhrmann, and all the ISSCS Homers who have shared memories about the place they called Home.

Ruth Cobb