

# *VOICES FROM THE HOME:*

## *STORIES OF THE GREAT WAR FROM NORMAL, ILLINOIS*

A TOUR OF SITES RELATED TO WORLD WAR I ON THE GROUNDS OF THE  
FORMER ILLINOIS SOLDIERS' ORPHANS' HOME  
IN NORMAL, ILLINOIS



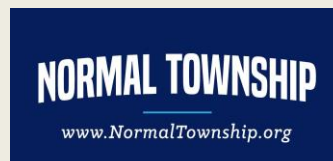
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WORLD WAR I



## ***Voices from the Home: Stories of the Great War from Normal, Illinois***

A tour of sites related to World War I on the grounds of the former  
Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Normal, Illinois

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

**Street address: 1110 Douglas Street, Normal, IL 61761**

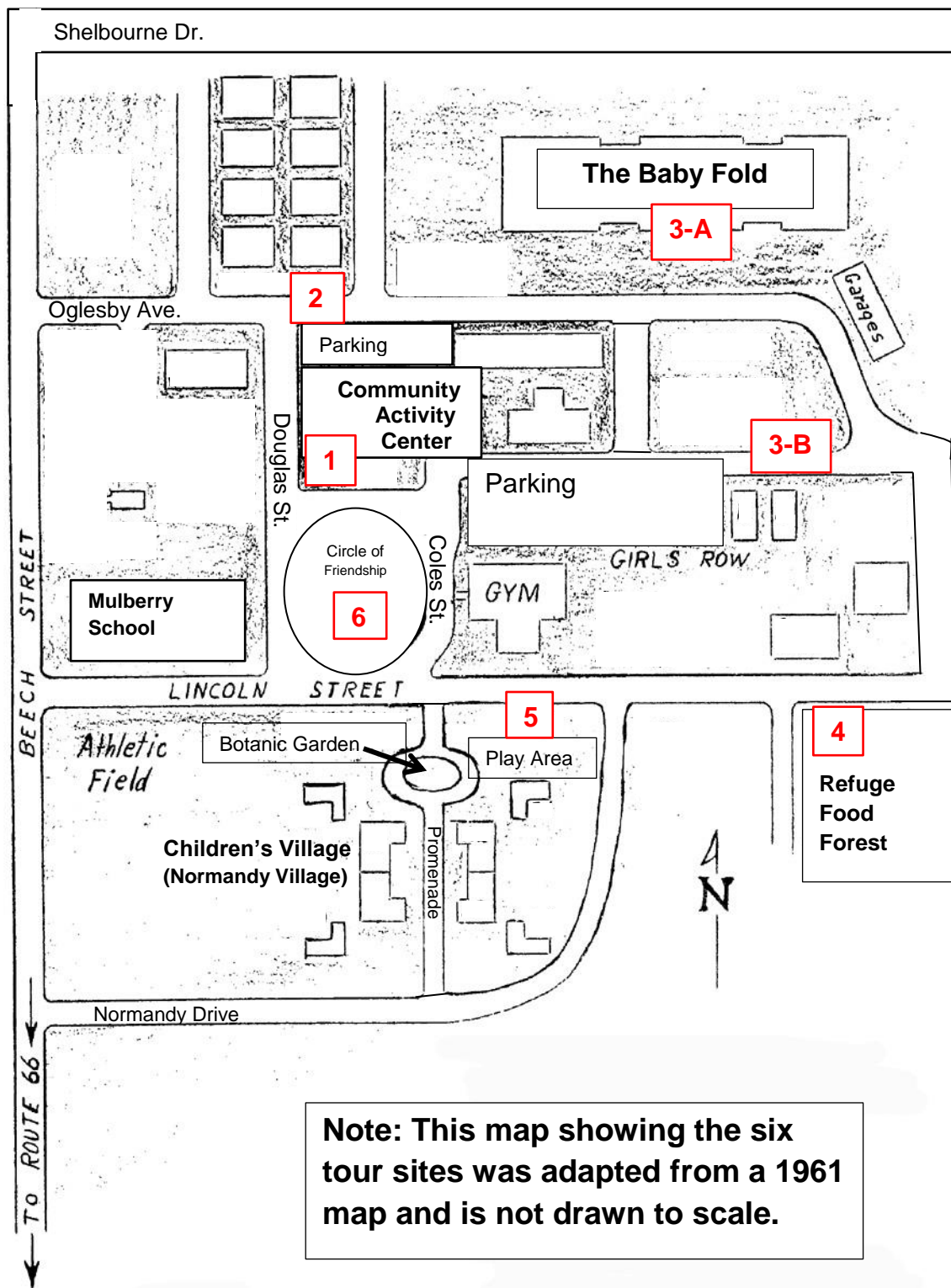
The Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home opened in 1869 to care for the orphans of Illinois soldiers after the Civil War. It was the first public child welfare institution in the state. The name was changed to Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School in 1931. Over the years, the mission expanded 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.

When the United States entered the World War in 1917, employees and former residents of the Home were called to serve in many ways, including military service, 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 to accommodate more residents and employees, a new school, larger gardens and other facilities were eventually added to grounds of the Home during the war and in the years that followed.

Many of those structures remain on the campus today, along with a number of historic markers and other reminders of the effects of the Great War. 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.

This tour highlights the physical spaces here, and offers some experiences of those whose lives were entwined with this place as the world went to war.

**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

### Tour of World War I Sites Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School

## Tour Site One: Site of the Original Administration Building



Eagle monument, 2017. Photo by Ruth Cobb.

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 Town of Normal transferred the eagle to the McLean County Museum of History. In 1998, the former ISSCS*

*Historical Preservation Society and the Town of Normal restored the monument. 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. As more wars and hard times came along, the number of children at the Home continued to grow. By 1917, the number of children living there reached 500 – the highest number recorded up to that time.



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

In 1917, it was still called the Soldiers' Orphans' Home, and William H. Claggett was the superintendent. The Home had its own school and hospital, and functioned very much as a "city within a city" in the northeast part of Normal, surrounded by farms.



W.H. Claggett

As superintendent, Mr. Claggett was responsible for the oversight of every aspect of the care of the children sent here from all over the state, in addition to managing an average of 68 employees.

Before Gov. Lowden appointed him to head the ISOH in 1915, Mr. Claggett had been engaged in his family's dry goods store and farms in nearby Lexington. His business and political experiences prepared him to run the institution during the uncertain times as the world went to war.

After the United States entered the war, a huge parade was held in Bloomington in April of 1917 to rally citizens to the patriotic cause. Professor H.O. Merry and the boys in the Orphans' Home Band played a key role in that event. A group of 250 older children and employees marched with the Home Band.

In December 1917, a Service Flag was dedicated at the Soldiers' Orphans' Home to recognize 58 boys from the Home who were in the service. One of them, John Henry Bowers, died fighting on the western front with the French troops. Death also took its toll at the Home in 1917. Frankie Jackson died of tuberculosis at age 16, and Mr. George Washington Brown, who had been in charge of the Home laundry for 38 years, passed away in August.



The Orphans' Home Band, ca. 1917. (Photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History.)

To relieve overcrowding, Mrs. Ida Claggett helped place some of the children in good homes. Some went to live with relatives and others moved in with local families to learn a trade or help with farm work. The old hospital building was remodeled into a nursery for 22 babies, and plans were made to use the old chapel as a boys' dormitory.

*The building on this site 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) and turn right onto Oglesby Ave. 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 on the southwest corner and the surrounding property to the south and west are also off limits to visitors.**



Boy's Row cottages, 2005.  
Photo by Ruth Cobb

The foursquare brick cottages on the northwest end of the campus did not exist during the First World War. Five of the eight

cottages were named in honor of people or battles associated with that war, and were dedicated and supported by veterans' groups. The Illinois American Legion promoted legislation to get the state to build more cottages at the Home after the war. Legion posts and auxiliary units provided other support to the children at the Home for more than 50 years.

The eight Boys' Row cottages were constructed over a seven-year period in the 1920s to provide better living quarters for boys at the Home. 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 names of five of these cottages offer an informal history lesson on the Great War.

**Harbord Cottage** (visible from Oglesby Ave. on the southeast corner of Boys' Row) was the first cottage constructed on the site. It was dedicated in 1924 by the local departments of United Spanish War Veterans and named in honor of Bloomington native Maj. Gen. James G. Harbord.

He was second in command of the American Expeditionary Forces in France under Gen. Pershing during the World War. Harbord led the action at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood to smash the German offensive directed at Paris in June 1918.

**Wilson Cottage** honored President Woodrow Wilson, who led the U.S. during the World War.

**Pershing Cottage** was dedicated in 1928 and named for Gen. John “Black Jack” Pershing, the overall American Commander in Europe during World War I.

**Chateau Thierry Cottage** was also dedicated in 1928. This name recognized a significant battle in 1918 in which American forces under the direction of Gen. James Harbord halted the progress of the German troops headed for Paris with a fierce counter attack.

**Cantigny Cottage** was the last one built on Boys’ Row and was dedicated in December 1929. The name commemorated the first American offensive of the war in a French village by the same name.

In addition to being a safe haven for children, the Orphans’ Home was also a steady source of employment, especially during hard times. While many jobs at state institutions were political appointments, some employees here stayed on for many years under numerous different administrations.

John Dekins was hired as night watchman in 1877 by the first superintendent, Virginia Ohr. Twenty years later, he married Belle Jennings, another employee at the Home. John Dekins watched over the boys and

the grounds at night, while his wife watched over the girls’ dormitories. When John left the Home in 1920, he was the longest-serving employee to date, with 43 years of faithful service. After his death in 1922, Belle continued to work at the Home until 1928, giving her a total of 30 years in various positions there. While her husband died before these cottages were built, Belle got to see the difference it made for the boys at the Home once they were able to move out of the cramped quarters of the old Administration Building.

*The cottages still stand on Boys’ Row and remain in good condition, despite their age. Most are now private homes.*



Cantigny Cottage, 2010. Photo courtesy of former resident Lou Williams.

## Tour Site Three: Felmley School and Girls' Row

Proceed east on Oglesby Ave. to face the brick building 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.**



The Soldiers' Orphans' Home school in 1923. (Courtesy of Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) Collection, Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.)

The last school built on the grounds of the Home opened in 1921, just after the end of the war. 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 featuring 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.

*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 the fall of 2018. The former auditorium at the east end is now a chapel.*

ISSCS teacher Clara Kepner grew up at the Home and dedicated most of her adult life to helping countless students at ISSCS. Clara arrived at the Home as a child in 1914.



Clara Kepner



Clara and others from the Home marched along with the Orphans' Home Band in the patriotic parade in Bloomington in April 1917.

After graduation from University High School, she was awarded a scholarship and was allowed to remain at the Home for two more years while she obtained 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.

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



Lincoln and Wood Cottages, 2017. Photo by Ruth Cobb

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

By the early 1900s, overcrowded dormitories in the main building had become a problem. The state began an effort to house children by gender and age groups in separate, home-like cottages. Funding and progress were slow for this project. The first five cottages were completed between 1904 and 1916. The war intervened and the last three were finally opened by 1927.

An October 12, 1903 article in The Pantagraph newspaper noted that all the doors, window frames and casings were made by the boys at the Home as part of the manual training provided to teach them practical skills and trades.

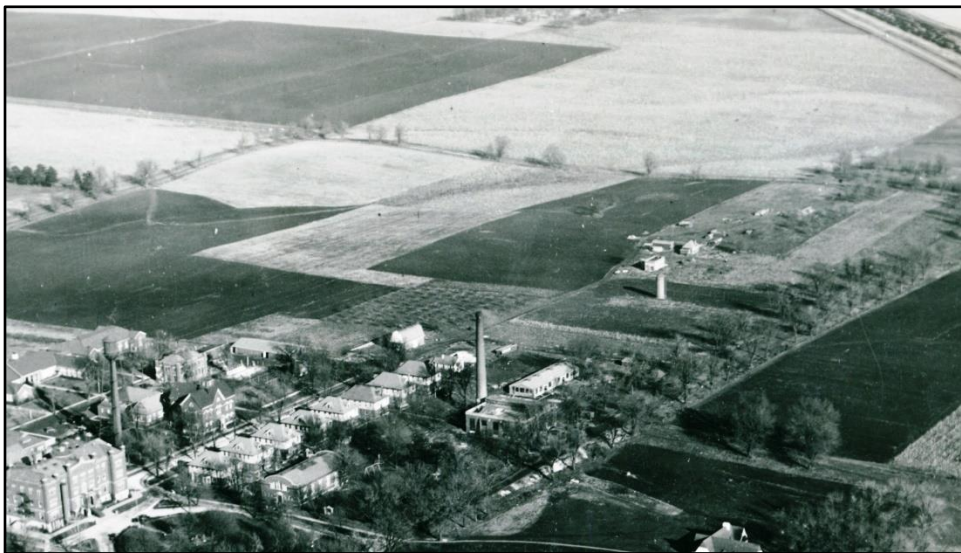
These eight cottages were called Girls' Row. During the war years, Clara and the other older girls learned homemaking skills by doing housework and caring for the younger girls. The later cottages could accommodate up to 38 girls. The first floor featured a living room, dining room, kitchen and pantry, plus a locker room, shower room and toilets and sinks. The dormitory, toilet, closets, and private quarters for the matron (housemother) occupied the second floor. A spacious attic was used for storage.

*Only two of the structures still remain. 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 has been converted to serve as a garage.*

## Tour Site Four: The Farm and Gardens

Proceed around the curve to the east and then south back to Lincoln Street. This stop is at the Refuge Food Forest, **701 E. Lincoln Street**, across the street to the south of the Mirus Research building. Parking is available along the driveway beside the garden, or further south near the picnic shelter. This area is a park and community garden space and is open to the public. The picnic shelter has tables and portable toilets are nearby.

The area around the Soldiers' Orphans' Home was still mostly small farms and orchards during the World War. Most of the plots were owned by local families who cultivated truck gardens to raise vegetables and other produce they sold door-to-door, to local grocers, or at small stands.



The farm and garden areas extended to the north corner of Normal and east to Henry Street, as shown in this cropped image from a 1932 aerial photo. (Pantagraph photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History.)

The Orphans' Home had its own farm and gardens and already produced a fair amount of food for the children and employees. In April of 1917, all state institutions were instructed to use every available inch of ground at each location to grow more food to cut costs and to support the nationwide food-conservation campaign. Shortly after those orders, head gardener Anthony Ottes was sent to another institution.

At this time, the Home covered 96 acres, with 20 acres occupied by the buildings and playgrounds, and the remainder primarily devoted to the raising and feeding of hogs, and large amounts of sugar beets, sweet corn, potatoes and other vegetables. There was also a cherry orchard and some pear trees. Lunnie Robinson was hired as the new gardener, but in July, he was among the many McLean County men who were drafted for service in the Army. Superintendent Claggett organized the remaining staff and older boys to continue the work of growing more food for the Home.

Preservation and storage of all the extra food was equally important. Carrots, turnips, onions and cabbages were stored in the winter cellars. Hundreds of gallons of other

vegetables and fruit were steamed in large iron or copper kettles and then sealed in cans. Fruit preserves and jam were enjoyed by all later in the year. Food waste, and the green tops from turnips and beets were steamed and fed to the hogs instead of corn. This produced plenty of pork for meals and took care of the garbage, too. In 1917, the cooks at the Home prepared 1,800 meals a day, so their food conservation efforts had a sizeable impact.

*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. This small section of the ISSCS grounds 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 anyone who wishes to come here. Volunteers help 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.*

*In the fall of 2016, 99 years after an acre of turnips was planted east of this spot, a curious thing happened. University of Illinois Extension Educator Bill Davison was doing some weeding when he discovered the remains of turnips in the middle of everything else! Turnips had not been planted in the Refuge Food Forest, and no gardening had been done on this spot since ISSCS closed in 1979. He speculated that when the ground was tilled to create the Food Forest, turnips sprouted from seeds that had been dormant in the soil for many years.*

*Davison planted some of the vintage turnip seeds in a small test plot in 2017. The seeds did produce classic purple top turnips, with a purple top and white bottom. This would likely have been the variety planted at the Home during the World War and later on. He combined seed from the new turnips with the original seed and will make some of this “heritage blend” available at the Seed Library at the Normal Public Library.*



University of Illinois Extension Educator Bill Davison with turnip seeds he discovered at the Refuge Food Forest in 2016. (Photo courtesy of Bill Davison.)

**Visit [www.normal.org/1372/The-Refuge-Food-Forest](http://www.normal.org/1372/The-Refuge-Food-Forest) to find a downloadable brochure and link to the Refuge Forest Facebook page.**

## Tour Site Five: The Children's Village

Move west from the Refuge Food Forest along the south side of Lincoln Street to the grass beside the play area to view the Children's Village situated to the south.

**Please note that 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 St. Parking is available in lots on the south, west and east sides of the complex. The public is also welcome to stroll on the promenade that runs north and south between the groups of cottages, and to 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.)

The Children's Village was not yet part of the Home during the World War, but several of the cottages commemorate people who played important roles

during the conflict and in its aftermath. Construction on the Village began in 1930 as more younger children were sent to the Home. At the time, the enrollment of World War veterans' children totaled 433, with an additional 113 eligible for placement in foster care. In 1931, the name of the institution was changed to Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School.

The eight Tudor Revival cottages were designed to be inviting to 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 exteriors were painted white and the cottages had red tile roofs and red window shutters with animal cutouts. Four playhouses were symmetrically placed at the north and south ends of a central promenade. Spacious playground areas and trees surrounded the cottages.



Drinking fountain memorial dedicated in 1937 by the American War Mothers. Photo by Ruth Cobb.



A.L. Bowen

Bloomington native A.L. Bowen was executive secretary for the State Charities Commission during World War I. Bowen spent most of his time visiting state institutions and making investigations of the conditions at each site. This included at least once a month to the Home at Normal during 1916-17. He was later appointed superintendent of charities for the state's Department of Public Welfare, and he oversaw the project to design and build the Children's Village.

Mr. Bowen strongly supported the state's efforts to provide a better life for orphaned and neglected children. He proudly noted that the Children's Village at Normal was "unique among institutions of this character in the United States."

**Alice French Cottage** was the first to be completed of this group of eight. It was named in tribute to the founder of the American War Mothers organization, who attended the dedication in April 1931. Mrs. French and the American War Mothers helped spearhead the national effort to conserve wheat, meat, fats and sugar during the World War. At the time, Alice French Cottage was on the southeast corner. 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.)

**Jane Delano Cottage** honored the tireless efforts of the nurse who served with the Army Nurse Corps and volunteered with the Red Cross Nursing Service during the Great War. Miss Delano helped recruit and train nurses for service on the battle front, and wrote textbooks and taught classes to prepare nurses to provide skilled nursing care and health instruction in remote areas of rural America. For many years after her death in 1919, McLean County Red Cross nurses and veterans' groups held a memorial service in her honor.

**Roth Cottage** was dedicated to the memory of Col. Charles L. Roth by members of the Chicago Voiture 220 of the 40 & 8 Society. The 40 & 8 Society was founded in 1920 by American veterans returning from France after the First World War. American troops were transported to the battle front on French trains in boxcars that could hold either forty men or eight horses.

*The Children's Village was purchased by Bloomington developer John Tornquist in 1987. The cottages became a small business park called Normandy Village. Hile-Broad Properties bought the property in 2016, and 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 owners are actively working to preserve and restore the cottages, and they invite the public to enjoy the beautiful area around the Village.*

## Tour Site Six: Circle of Friendship and the Gymnasium

Proceed west on Lincoln Street and turn right onto Coles Street. The final tour stop is next to the sculpture of children in the center of the lawn 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 Circle of Friendship memorial to the children of the Home was erected on the site where the flagpole once stood in front of the original Administration Building.*



The Circle of Friendship memorial at ISSCS, 2009.  
Photo by Ruth Cobb

A new gymnasium and amusement hall was completed in the summer of 1917. The \$25,000 building had modern direct lighting and heating and was designed to serve both recreational and assembly

needs for the growing population. Dressing rooms, shower and toilet facilities for both sexes were located on each side of the entrance hall, and the stage could be extended to accommodate the band. The gallery seated 250 and included a moving picture booth, and the main floor was used for basketball and dances. The children of the Home enjoyed the benefits of the facility that provided space for physical education classes and gatherings for more than 60 years.

The building still stands, but has not been used since ISSCS closed in 1979.



The gymnasium at ISSCS, 2018. Photo by Ruth Cobb



John W. Rodgers

John W. Rodgers succeeded W.H. Claggett as managing officer (superintendent) of the Soldiers' Orphans' Home in December of 1917. He owned the Rodgers and Gerhart Shoe Companies in Bloomington. He had also been a member of the County Board of Supervisors and served three terms on the Bloomington City Council. He ran for mayor twice, and was Illinois Gov. Frank Lowden's McLean County campaign manager.

As Mr. Rodgers took up his duties at the Home, the population was rapidly increasing and the aging facilities needed repair and expansion. He immediately ordered painting and plastering in the Administration Building and the hospital. He encouraged more individual freedom for the children, and believed the department heads should have autonomy over their areas.

On May 1, 1918, the Home had 505 "inmates" – and a capacity for 350. By July, after a concerted effort by the state, the number was reduced to around 400, but as the war continued, more efforts were planned to place children with relatives or in foster homes.

In June of 1918, the Home Band was again called upon to be part of a local parade. A reported 50,000 citizens came to a patriotic send-off of 565 McLean County men headed for training in Georgia before joining the American Expeditionary forces in France. The Pantagraph praised the band and noted that Supt. Rodgers "marched at the head of the band thruout the line of march."

The Service Flag at the entrance to the Administration Building had gained an additional 23 blue stars by June of 1918. Three were overlaid with gold stars, denoting the deaths of former residents of the Home who had given their lives in service to their country.

In his Annual Report for 1917 – 1918, Mr. Rodgers said, "I have tried to instill into the children the idea that this is their home and that they should consider it so not only while they are here but after they leave." That sentiment continues to this day. It will always be Home to those whose lives were touched by this place.

*From 1998 to 2009, the ISSCS Historical Preservation Society worked to preserve the site and the stories of those who lived and worked here. Thanks to their efforts, the eagle monument was restored and an exhibit highlighting the history of ISSCS was installed in the Community Activity Center. The group also worked with the Illinois State Historical Society to place a site marker recognizing the role of the Home in our state's history. A final project was completed in 2008, with the unveiling of the sculpture entitled "Circle of Friendship" to honor the children of the Home. The ISSCS Historical Preservation Society formally disbanded in 2009, but the work of saving the artifacts and the stories is carried on by the McLean County Museum of History and the Dr. JoAnn Rayfield Archives at Illinois State University.*

## **Acknowledgments and Sources for Additional Information**

I was honored and intrigued when my friends at the Normal Public Library asked me to create this tour as part of the McLean County observance of the centennial of World War I. More than a decade ago, I did a great deal of research and writing about the history of the Home. I continue to marvel at just how much more could and should be written about this “city of children” and its many roles in the lives of those who lived and worked there, as well as its important place in our local and state history.

In the years since my earlier research, many more resources have become more readily available. I have also met or corresponded with many more individuals who provided a wealth of additional insights, clues and information that helped in the process of telling this story.

I have spent countless hours roaming around the grounds of the former ISSCS campus in Normal since the late 1990s, and have become very familiar with its streets, landscape and buildings. One of my challenges with this project was to be mindful of the fact that this tour is intended to interest and enlighten those who know little or nothing about the Home. It was not an easy matter to condense the details and stories so this tour can be easily enjoyed in a comparatively short period of time, while still providing meaningful information and highlighting the many elements that relate to the Great War and its aftermath in the state of Illinois.

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 and The Pantagraph Photo Collection, McLean County Museum of History

Online newspaper accounts from The Pantagraph newspaper

Annual Report of the Illinois Department of Public Welfare, 1917 – 18 and 1920 - 21

The Illinois Collection, Bloomington Public Library

My thanks to the following individuals for their support and encouragement:

The staff at the Normal Public Library, Normal Township and the ARC, George Perkins at the McLean County Museum of History, Bill Davison at University of Illinois Extension Livingston-McLean-Woodford Unit, Bob Broad and Julie Hile, former ISSCS residents Lou Williams and Bill Merchant, Dr. Philip Hash at Illinois State University, and the numerous friends who previewed early versions or tagged along for the “reconnaissance runs” for this tour.

*Ruth Cobb*