

ST. FRANCIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER
PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY
July 2006 Issue

This interview was done by Mary Becker with Robert Jansen, a former resident of St. Aemilian's Orphanage in St. Francis on May 30, 2000.

Bob, 87, is now a resident of Friendship Village on Milwaukee's Northwest side. He's had a full life as a broadcaster on a cable network, a realtor, an investment counselor, an after dinner speaker all over the United States, and a free lance writer.

His memories of the orphanage are strong. His mother, Irene, died in the influenza epidemic of 1917-18 and his father, Anthony Robert Jansen, was left with four children. (Previously, two children had died at birth.)

Bob had two older sisters and a brother, Daniel, who was born when his mother died in childbirth. Anthony couldn't care for the children – he had to work – so the two girls, 6 and 10, were placed in a girls' orphanage and Daniel at a county children's home for newborns.

Bob remembers vividly the day his father brought him to St. Aemilian's. He remembers sitting on one of the long, cane-covered seats in the streetcar. His father was crying and Bob said, "Dad, you don't have to cry. Why don't you take me home again?"

Anthony replied, "I can't, I have to work." He was then an auto mechanic and chauffeur for a family named Grau. The father was owner of the Red Star Yeast Company.

When Bob arrived at the orphanage he was put in a little room by himself for a short time because he was considered contagious with the flu. He lived with a nun, who spoke German. Bob could speak the language because his grandmother was German. He says, "The nun did tattling and told me about her life. She had become a drug addict after taking too much prescribed morphine and was in a drug center when she decided to become a nun."

Incidentally, all the nuns at the orphanage spoke German. Because Bob could understand it, he told the other boys what they were saying if they gave him a handful of marbles. The nuns caught on, and wouldn't talk German in front of him.

He says, “Here I was, a short, fat, dumpy, red haired kid with freckles down my back.”

Bob thinks that the orphanage had formerly been the home of a wealthy family, but the Archdiocese records dispute this, saying that it was built in the 1860’s. Bob does remember that the property included a farm.

“We had six or seven cows” he said. “We milked them and made cheese. We plowed the fields and picked the apples. The nuns let us eat the green apples when they thought we needed a physic.”

The boys – 60 in all – slept in two dormitories. Each bed had a hook at the top to hang clothes. To keep the boys quiet at night, the nuns would tell ghost stories and the hooks added to the spookiness.

The communion host was sacred, of course, and the nuns told about a boy who stole a wafer and kept it in his pocket. The baby Jesus jumped out of his pocket and chased him!

The schooling was thorough. Each grade had it’s own classroom. The nuns taught year around, and by the sixth grade, Bob had learned geometry and algebra. The alphabet letters were posted high on the walls around the room, and penmanship was taught by the Palmer method.

He says, “We were given holy cards as gifts: We really didn’t like that.” There was mass every morning, led by Father Joseph Kroha and Father Joseph Felsicker, a recent Seminary graduate. Both lived at the orphanage.

There was plenty of work for the boys to do. They waxed the floor with a big chunk of wax, then rubbed them with an old pair of pants until they shone like a mirror. They patched the sheets by hand, using old sheets. They darned socks and mended pants. They worked in the laundry with big metal tumbler washers and spinner dryers. The bigger boys hung the clothes in the gymnasium.

The nuns did all the cooking and baked all the bread with the boys’ help. Everyone ate oleo, which was purchased as a white spread and changed by kneading it with a bean that broke open and gave the oleo a yellow color.

Bob remembers that when Cardinal Stritch visited the orphanage once a year, real butter was served. He also remembers, “The Cardinal had gone to Europe, and when he returned he brought us a relic from Aemelian. Nobody wanted to kiss it. We thought it was Ed Bzezinski’s toe, which he had gotten cut off in the washing tumbler.” Incidentally, Ed had a thing going with his toe. For a handful of marbles, he would take off the bandage and let you see the toe with the tip cut off.

There were other shenanigans. Bob said he once climbed on the statue of St. Aemilian and knocked off the finger. Instead of the saint pointing to heaven, it looks as if he's shaking his fist at the sky! The statue is still standing at the home's present headquarters, 8901 West Capital Drive. When he and another boy were caught stealing cookies, the nuns made them eat all the cookies until they couldn't stuff any more in their mouths.

The boys were given red "farmer" hankies that had to last them a week. They were supposed to hand them in before they had their weekly baths. If one boy had lost his, they would tear a hankie in two so he'd have one to present. If a boy wet his bed, he had to stand in front of the dormitory room, holding up the wet sheet. When the boys finished sixth grade, they were adopted by families who could use the help, but halfway through that grade, Bob's grandmother agreed to take the family in. She raised all four – his younger brother and two sisters and Bob himself. But because of the good schooling by the nuns, Bob was pushed up a grade.

The family home was at 814 62nd Avenue, which became South 70th Street, in West Allis when the Metropolitan Numbering System was adopted in 1937. Bob inherited the house, and sold it when his father died. For ten years, Bob served on the board of St. Aemilian's, now St. Aemilian-Lakeside, Inc. (The old orphanage had burned in 1930.) While serving, he wondered if his father had incurred a debt for his care. He was told, "He doesn't owe anything. You were adopted by the Catholic Church."

One of his fellow orphans, Francis Kovac, became a priest, and he and Bob attended the funerals of many of the nuns who had cared for them. Bob says, "I gave the eulogy for Sr. Arcadia, who died at 95. Just before she died, I visited her, and she said, "I prayed for you just this morning."

- **Banging your head against a wall uses 150 calories/hour. (Don't try this at home, maybe at work.)**
- **The catfish has over 27,000 taste buds. (What could be so tasty on the bottom of the pond?)**
- **Butterflies taste with their feet. (Something I always wanted to know.)**
- **If flying is so safe, why do they call the airport the terminal?**
- **Why don't sheep shrink when it rains?**
- **Why is the time of day with the slowest traffic called rush hour?**
- **Why does the sun lighten our hair but darken our skin?**
- **Only in America do we buy hotdogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.**
- **Only in America do drug stores make the sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions, while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front.**