The Home of Nobody's Children

About the Farm Where the State Sends Its Neglected Boys and Girls and Gives Them Less Attention Than Criminals

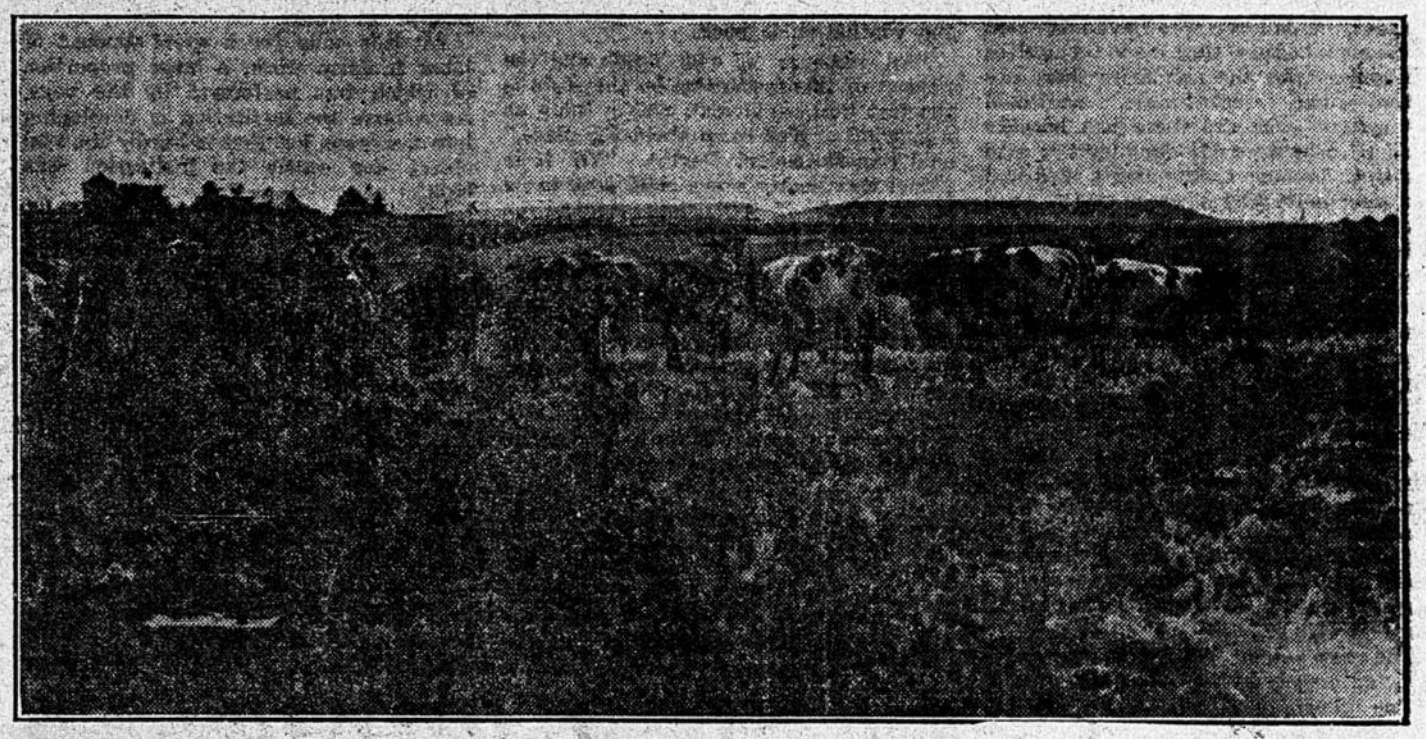
THERE was a family somewhere in North Dakota whose children were not getting the right sort of attention. The father used to get booze from the blind pigs whenever one was in operation and much of the rest of the time he loafed around town. The mother had to go out and work by the day to feed the family.

All this was bad for the children. The neighbors thought "something ought to be done" but they didn't know just what to do. The children were showing the results of neglect. The boys became known as the "bad boys" of the neighborhood. They used to throw stones at windows and do other damage to property, they "played hookey" from school and finally took to stealing.

This was too much to endure, so the neighbors got together and resolved to take these boys and girls out of the hands of their parents.

"We don't want to punish these children," they said; "because we don't believe they are really bad children. The trouble is, they have never had a chance. They haven't had the right sort of home—they never really have had any home at all. What they need is home and schooling and we propose to give it to them."

This appears to have been good judgment on the part of the neighbors. One would say that this was the right sort of resolve to make in a case like this. The question then became how to put it into effect. It is one thing to have a good and praiseworthy impulse. It is another thing to carry it through. Lots of people have the impulse to do noble deeds. Unfortunately many spoil them in the performance. You know the old saying about good intentions.



The dairy herd at the Mandan school.

"Everybody's children are nobody's children." That seems to be a fact in North Dakota. If the state's wards are neglected the responsibility rests with all the people of the state. Can the state afford to give its orphans and neglected children as good care as it gives to criminals?

GOOD INTENTIONS SELDOM EXCUSE BAD CONDUCT

If, for instance, these neighbors we were speaking of simply asked a farmer to take charge of these children and agreed to pay him something every year for their care; if they began to get tired of paying out so much money and cut the amount down year by year; if, finally they ceased paying any attention and ceased caring what happened to them beyond kicking about the expense; if they said "Oh, let this farmer take care of these boys and girls; he's paid for it; we don't need to worry about it," what would think of the people of this community?

And suppose you discovered that as a matter of fact this farmer had so many boys and girls on his hands, sent to him under similar circumstances, that about all he could do with them was to keep them at work about the farm. Suppose it developed that they lived in unsanitary buildings where the danger of fire was always present and there was little means of protection. Suppose that these children were not allowed to leave the farm to go to school and that the farmer and the help he was able to hire with the funds available could not give them even the average instruction obtained in the country school.

Supposing all these things you'd begin to be a little indignant, wouldn't you? Indignant at whom? Probably not at the farmer if you found he was doing about the best he could with limited facilities. More likely your indignation would begin to stir at the neighbors who took these children out of their parents' hands and sent them to this farm.

You would say: "Nobody has any right to take children away from their parents and keep them unless he gives those children a real chance, a real home and a real education."

You might not criticise the action of the neighbors in taking the children away from their parents, but you certainly would condemn their failure to take an active interest in these children after they were taken away.

Now the fact is all these things have happened very much this way in North Dakota. They have happened in the past and they are happening still. Would you like to know what community did this? The answer is easy: the community is the whole state of North Dakota. The "neighbors" are all the people of the state. You who read this are one of them.

"The state ought to be ashamed of itself for the way it is treating its dependent children," says one man who has visited the Mandan school. Is he right? Maybe it would be a good thing to inquire and to distribute the blame where it belongs.

NORTH DAKOTA AND CHILDREN IN ITS CARE

It is easy to dodge responsibility when it is distributed among several hundred thousand people. Everybody's business is nobody's business. "Let the legislature attend to it," or "let the board of control take the blame," or "let the superintendent look after these children; that's what he's paid for"—that's the way everybody looks at it.

Regularly complaints are being made about children in North Dakota. They are "bad boys" or "wayward girls" the neighbors say. The court holds a hearing and then it sends them out to Mandan, to an institution known by the rather unpleasant name of "reform school." We speak of "reforming" boys 10 or 12 years old just as we speak of "reforming" thieves and murderers 30, 40 or 50. What the boys need usually is not to be "reformed," but to be taught.

A boy or a girl can't be taught a great deal in school, you know. Home is where the real education takes place. And of course if a boy or girl doesn't have a real home he or she can't know much.

The name "reform school" is going out of fashion, for these reasons. Other states have institutions known as "state training school," or "state farm for children," or "state industrial school."

Our last legislature was asked to change the name of the state institution near Mandan to "State Farm and Mechanic Arts School." But the bill failed to pass. The legislature was too busy squabbling over whether the insurance companies should be regulated and telling the farmer to "Go home and slop the pigs" to care much about any such trifling matter as the care of children who are dependent on the state for their education and their material and moral future.

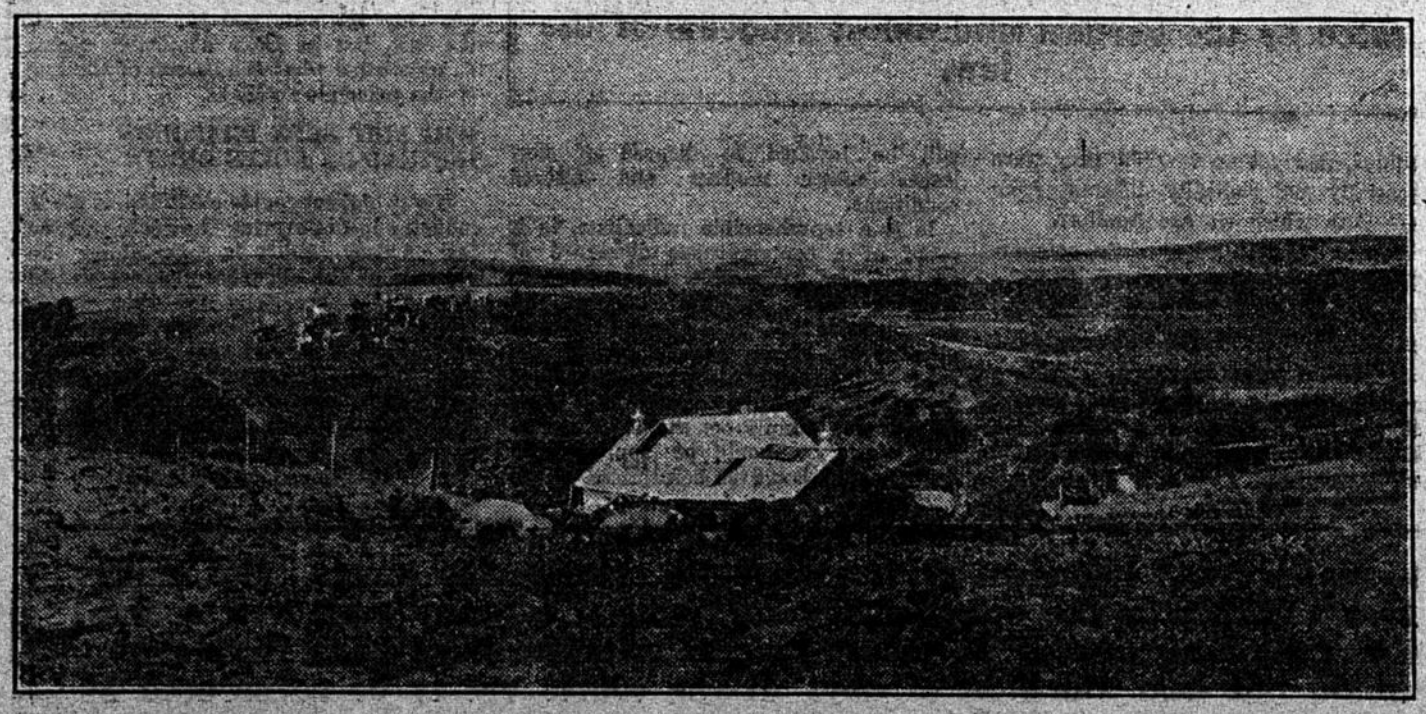
And what about the character of this institution out across the Heart river from Mandan?

There are 54 boys and 20 girls at this state institution, ranging in age from 9 years to 21.

Speaking of its equipment and its capacity for the proper training of the youth committed to it, Superintendent J. M. Devine shakes his head and groans. "It's fierce," he admits. He feels responsibility for these children—seventy-four of them—whose only hope is in the state and what it will do for them. He is bound to have that sense of responsibility. He would be scarcely human if he didn't.

REAL CRIMINALS GET MORE OF STATE'S ATTENTION

Eight or ten miles away from the state school—let's snub the legislature by refusing to call it a reform school—is



Hog house and a glimpse of the livestock at the state school at Mandan. The cattle and hogs are well cared for; the children not so well.