

## LOCAL HISTORY

# Orphanage's legacy lives in testimonials

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George Tucker had a gang before gangstas were cool.

In the late 1920s, he ran the streets in the West End of Cincinnati. "It was tough," he says. "I learned to steal before I went to school."

Tucker, 84, lives in Milford. He's a long way from the days when he would steal meat from a charity truck. But in those days, he was almost an orphan. His mother died before he was 2.

"My father didn't take care of any of us," he said.

So he was farmed out to a sister whose husband abused him. "He never hit me, but he made me kneel on (heat) registers until my knees would bleed."

So at age 7, he told a social worker he wanted to live at the Cincinnati Children's Home.

"I'd probably still be a thief if it hadn't been for the Children's Home," he said. "They taught me a lot of respect—yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am. The most important thing they taught me is that nothing in this life is free. If you want it, work for it."

He learned the lesson well. He worked 25 years at G.E., attending night school to earn promotions. Although he had only an eighth-grade education when he left the Children's Home at age 17 in 1940, he retired from G.E. as an engineer.

His story echoes testimonials from thousands of children who lived at Cincinnati's best-known orphanage.

On Saturday, the Children's Home on Madison Road celebrated its 145th anniversary. The first orphan was taken in on April 4, 1864, on Park Street, west of downtown.

The home remains a ref-



Provided

**The Children's Home** of Cincinnati on June 2, 1917, opening day at the campus on Madison Road. No children have lived there since 1998.

uge, but it's no longer an orphanage.

The home moved to 40 acres on Madison Road in 1917. It still has the residence cottages where boys and girls lived. No children have lived there since 1998.

Children visit for school and treatment every day, however. The home still serves 7,000 children a year on campus and in the community, offering help for abuse, mental illness or behavior problems. It's one of the region's largest mental health providers for children, specializing in education, treatment, adoption and early childhood programs.

"It's nothing like it was," said Tucker. "We had 450 of us in there at one time."

Public relations coordinator Stacy Sill heard the same thing when residents came from all over the country to the 140th reunion five years

ago. "Every single one wanted to know 'Are the tunnels still there?' They said, 'All I want to see is the tunnels.'"

Both of her parents lived at the Children's Home, so she's heard stories about the dark concrete-walled maze that connects all the buildings. Arrows are painted on the floors now, to keep visitors from getting lost in the thin electric light.

"There's some mystique about the tunnels for people who lived here," said Vice President of Development Janet Burns. "We may not know the whole story."

Tucker explained: "We just had a good time going to meet a girlfriend down there from time to time. It was nothing that would get us into deep trouble. Just puppy love."

When he was at the home, the definition of an abandoned child was more flexible.

"It certainly did not refer

solely to those children whose parents had died," says "One Child at a Time, a History of the Children's Home" by Daniel Hurley. "Many city children had parents who were 'too poor ... or too indifferent and vicious' to care for them properly. These children were 'moral orphans.'"

The Children's Home of Cincinnati is no longer an orphanage for waifs from the mean streets of the Depression — but it's still a refuge for "moral orphans."

Many will agree with Tucker: "You don't appreciate things until you get older. And I really appreciate what the Children's Home did for me."

Send your suggestions for columns on local history to Peter Bronson at [pbronson@enquirer.com](mailto:pbronson@enquirer.com) or call 513-768-8301. Check out his new blog, "Bronson is Always Right": [www.cincinnati.com/blogs](http://www.cincinnati.com/blogs).