

Roscommon in America

Father Edward Flanagan of Boys Town

One of Roscommon's greatest sons, Father Edward Flanagan was born in 1886 to John and Nora Flanagan near the town of Ballymoe. Recently I had the opportunity to visit his Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska. It had been a lifetime wish to go there, or one might say "a bucket wish".

I was always fascinated by the movie "Father Flanagan of Boys Town" starring Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney, which really put Boys Town on the map. Fr Flanagan being from Roscommon, and we having gone to the same Secondary School and with similar names in our families, I was most interested to see first hand, how one man could have changed the lives of so many people for the good.

I received a very special welcome from the local Knights of Columbus in Omaha, and we had a most enjoyable lunch and with the present Executive Director Fr. Val Peters. They remembered Fr. Flanagan and shared many stories during our conversation. Afterwards, I was given a tour of the town. It has its own Post Office, Police and Fire Departments, schools, churches, ball fields, museum and numerous historic venues. It has streets like Flanagan Boulevard, Walsh Drive, Monsky Drive, Miller and Heroes Drive.

Presently 550 boys and girls live in the village receiving care and treatment for a wide range of behavioral, emotional and academic issues. The youth now live in a regular home, typically eight kids to a residence with a family teaching couple. Some were from Ireland. Fr. Flanagan had great respect for the individual child and wanted to get them away from an institution-like complex. The couples also have their own children, caring for them and nurturing in addition to their extended family. The program is called "Boys Town treatment family homes", and there are almost one hundred of these very large houses. In this community of hope, boys and girls change their lives, and prepare to go out into the world as confident people of good character.

The kids go to school on campus, attend church services (not all are Catholic), celebrate the holidays, and for most, find out for the first time what it is really like to live as family. They get to experience the things many children take for granted, like family gatherings, outings, participating in extracurricular activities at school or simply having a family dinner. They also have opportunities to do community service projects, which teach them how to give back to the community and help others.

I was very impressed by the young people I met and especially with their respect and good manners. It is little wonder that Boys Town has been named "One of the

best communities for young people" by the "America's Promise Alliance." As we walked and drove through the town, this became more and more evident, as I thought of and prayed for the man of vision and courage who started it all.

Boys Town, nestled on the outskirts of Omaha, is now a National Historical Landmark. Thousands of people from all over the world visit it every year. I felt the healing of Boys Town as I walked through the house where Fr Flanagan lived and drove through the historic town where the children live, pray and learn to love. More than ever, I am more impressed with the man who began this mission of love: Msgr. Edward J. Flanagan. He was its founder and visionary. He had a dream that every child could become a productive citizen, if given a home, love, education and a trade. He accepted boys of every race, color and religion. Father Flanagan firmly believed "that there were no bad boys. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example and bad thinking." His legacy of love, concern and caring for the wayward has continued for almost a century.

Edward Flanagan was one of eleven children born to John and Nora Flanagan. The family were devoted Catholics where prayer and the family rosary were recited daily. It was also a happy home, where music and song were encouraged, and where every child played a musical instrument. From his earliest years Edward suffered from ill health, so his job was tending and herding sheep on the farm. He attended the local National School, and when fourteen was sent to Summerhill College in Sligo, about fifty miles away. It was his first introduction to institutional life: discipline was sometimes harsh and it could be a lonely place for a boy away from home for the first time. I had exactly the same feeling, when I went there almost fifty years later.

Having completed his studies at Summerhill, Edward Flanagan set sail for the United States at the invitation of his older sister Nellie who lived in New York. His brother Pat was ordained the same year for the Diocese of Omaha, Nebraska. Fr Flanagan entered St Mary's Seminary, Maryland and Dunwoodie Seminary in Yonkers, New York. His health had gotten worse, and he went to join his brother and family in Omaha. He then entered Gregorian University in Rome and came back to Omaha where he worked for two years. Now that his health had improved, he entered the Seminary Of Innsbruck in Austria, where he was ordained in the Jesuit House on July 26, 1912. This July 26 will mark the 100th Anniversary of his ordination.

His first assignment was to a parish in O'Neill, Nebraska and one year later was appointed Assistant Pastor to St Patrick's Church in Omaha. It was here that his mission began with a house for homeless men. After two years he realized that these men had come from broken homes and were now broken men. He was determined to change their lives while they were still young and Boys Town was born. In 1917, Fr Flanagan opened his first Boys Town in a run down mansion in

downtown Omaha. Four years later, the Boys Home moved to Overlook Farm, its present location near 139th Street and Dodge Road. He became an acknowledged expert in the field of child care and toured the United States discussing his views on juvenile delinquency.

The federal government called on Father Flanagan to help children both nationally and internationally. After World War II, President Truman asked him to travel to Asia and Europe to help children displaced during the war. During a tour of Europe, he got ill and died of a heart attack in Berlin, Germany on May 15, 1948. The magnificent Church, Dowd Chapel, in the heart of his beloved Boys Town is the site of his resting place. Shortly before his death he said "The work will continue, you see, whether I am there or not, because it is God's work, not mine".

I saw at first hand that his prophecy is completely fulfilled as are the thousands of lives that have been changed by one very unique and rare individual. This good priest from Roscommon has left behind an imperishable memory and a wonderful example of faith and hope. His cause for canonization to sainthood has already begun.

Fr. Kevin Flanagan