

Interview with Edwin Charles Colleer
November 20, 1984
Jackson, Michigan

Edwin Colleer: My name is Edwin Charles Colleer. I was born December 30, 1937, and the date of this interview is November 20, 1987.

Joanne Colleer: How old were you and at the orphanage then, how long were you there?

EC: I think I was eight or nine years old when I entered the orphanage, probably close to nine if I remember. And it seemed like I was there... we were there two times, I was there the first time a little over a year and the second time a little over a year, so it was almost three years we were there, I was about 12 when we left the orphanage.

JC: Approximately how many children were in the orphanage when you were there?

EC: Well, it's hard to remember, but I think, I know we were broke down into at least two groups of older children and younger children, and it seems like there was about 25 of the boys, maybe not that many, but it seemed like there was 25 or more of the boys and 25 of the girls and the older ones were maybe almost the same, so I would say there were probably at least 100 in there.

JC: What were the circumstances of why you were put into an orphanage?

EC: We had to go into the orphanage because my mother was in a car accident and was in the hospital for a long time, and my father couldn't take care of us, apparently none of the grandparents, aunts, or uncles had the facilities or the money to take care of us, so my father had us put into the orphanage, then he'd visit us on weekends.

JC: What feelings, anxieties, or expectations did you have about being put into the orphanage?

EC: It seems that when I was going to go into it I thought it was unfair that I had to go into the orphanage and there was other relatives that probably, in my opinion, could have kept us, but I suppose just the way I felt, I felt they should have taken us and they didn't, when I think about it today it was probably that they didn't have enough money at the time to survive without taking somebody else in to feed and clothe.

JC: How did these feelings change after being at the orphanage for a while?

EC: Well, I think I got to the point where I accepted being there, it was something that wasn't a lot of fun but that we had a place to stay, food to eat, and there was some entertainment and recreation that we could participate in.

JC: What types of arrangement were necessitated to facilitate all of the children? Sleeping arrangements, dining, schooling?

EC: Well, the older boys and the older girls, if I remember right, we were on the top floor of the orphanage on opposite ends of the building. I was with the older group, seemed like some of

those boys were at least 18 or close to age 18, probably 17. I was nine or ten, nine years old, and the girls were probably in the same age category, so we slept on the top floor of the orphanage as dormitory, showers, bathroom, and it was separated, it was not together, the nuns slept in an area between the two dormitories, they had rooms also. And then the younger children slept in the, we never were in their area, but I think it was the floor below us, it could have been on the same floor but it was probably on the floor below us, and there was a nursery also where there were some babies that were included in with the younger children. When we ate we went to the dining room in the age group that we were with in the dormitories, or if you went to do anything recreational or whatever it was always in the age group that you were placed in. The dining room was separated, boys ate in one group of tables, girls at another, again the same age groups and then younger children were separated, I think, by boys and girls eating at tables separately. Went to school every day, we had classes the same as any academic program or primary school system. We had math and – all in the same class, we didn't change classes. We were in, if I remember right, I was in grade four or five, whatever it was, and we received all of our classes in the same room, the older students were in other grades, but if I remember, it was probably two grades or more in each room, not a single grade, it was several grades in the room, and the nuns were the teachers, and you spend a portion of each day on all the subjects as you did in any single room schoolhouse, where you had reading, practice penmanship, math – arithmetic –, English, history, geography. The thing I hated the worst about was I was left-handed and every time I wrote with an ink pen I smeared the words and then I'd get smacked on the knuckles and they'd tell me to write with my right hand and I didn't know how to write with my right hand.

JC: What types of recreation were available to you?

EC: For recreation I remember in the springtime the last days of school we were taken by bus to go on a large picnic, we packed a large bag with sandwiches, peanut butter sandwiches, and we were taken out to what I think was called St. Joseph's Retreat, it was on the Big Bay Road, just beyond Sugarloaf Mountain. Today when you go by there I think it has a large fence on it, it was right on Lake Superior but it was a retreat for the nuns and the priests in the Upper Peninsula, it was used as a playground and a picnic area for us at the orphanage, I think we'd go there once a year that I can remember. We also would go on hikes, we went on several hikes that I remember, when the weather was nice in the fall and in the springtime and in the summer, we'd hike from the orphanage south to what was called the stand pipe, a big water tower on I think it's Mount Marquette. You could look down at the prison, you had to cross through at that time there was a place called the county farm or the old folks' home, which was on the road, we walked through that property, I remember talking to some of the people sitting around. And that was an all afternoon hike, we'd take some sandwiches. In cold weather they would allow us to go to south Marquette where the ski hills and toboggan runs were, we could go there skiing, sleigh riding, tobogganing, so they would take us there, and some days we'd just go on short hikes and pick blueberries. There's a place, today it has a lot of houses in it, but it was called giant's foot, it was a large rock that looked like a giant's shoe. And then we had a playground that we could play on in the back where the south side of the orphanage.

JC: What type and variety of foods were served?

EC: Seemed like we had a lot of spaghettis and macaronis, that's hard to remember, I do remember we had a lot of hot cereals for breakfast, oatmeal, cream of wheat, not much in cold cereals. I think when we had eggs the eggs were baked in an oven, they were not fried, they were put on a large tray and baked. We had a lot of homemade bread, I remember there was an area on the bottom floor where they baked their bread and then we would go in, once or twice I can remember going in and helping slice the bread in a machine, you'd just shove the loaf in and it would slice the bread up. Very hard, hard, crusty bread. But the food was good, a lot of vegetables and a lot of dishes that included beef, which would be like a stroganoff or a stew, or a vegetable beef soup.

JC: Tell me about clothing.

EC: Clothing was provided there, there was a place, and I'm not sure which floor it was on, that had a lot of clothes, seems like it was down again on the lowest floor, a lot of clothes hanging in a large room, I believe it might have been even the same room where you got your hair cut, one of the nuns also cut hair. It wasn't a barber chair, it was a large stool you'd sit on and get your hair cut. And the clothing was issued to you depending on the time of year and how badly you needed the clothing, and then also your parents had to provide, like my father had to provide some clothes, winter coats if he could get them. But, uh, your underwear, socks, and everyday clothes and pants had your number, I believe we were given a number, and then you had a square shelf up in the dormitory, and when the laundry would come in they'd dump it out in the floor in a large bag and then you would sort out, pick out your socks and your underwear and your t-shirts and your pants and fold them all up and put them in the drawer, not a drawer but it was a shelf that would be with all your clothes, and at the end of the week when it was laundry time all this would be put in a large laundry box next to the shelves and then on whatever day laundry was done, or how many days a week it was done, somebody would have the chore of sorting out the laundry by items, by underwear, by socks, and by shirts, and by pants, and then would be put in separate bags, taken down to the laundry room, which again was downstairs on the west end of the building, you could get to it from the ground floor, and some of the residents or the kids there would help, the older kids would help do the laundry.

JC: What restrictions were enforced? With chores, bedtime, dinnertime?

EC: Well, I remember we all had to help, in the morning you had to make the beds, everybody had to make your own bed. You had to help dust mop the floors in the dormitory, and then by the time you got that done we'd go down to, there was a main room that was used for recreation on the ground floor, usually we'd go to breakfast and then to church, and then you would have, I never had to help with dishes so I don't know what dishes were done, who did the dishes, but we would have to go out and pick up papers or debris or trash that was out in the yard that might have blown in, we had to clean up the area around the building, clean up the hallways, they had to be dust mopped. Other than that I don't remember doing too many chores. What I remember, the most work was we would walk out to the farm, they had a farm out west and a little south of Marquette which is now real near the Acocks Medical Center, it was the TB sanitarium at that time, and we'd walk in single file, a large group of us, to that farm quite a few times in the fall because they'd raise their own cabbage and their own carrots and their own potatoes, and we'd

have to pick potatoes behind the horse drawn potato digger that would dig the potatoes, there was an old, looked like a camp, but it was where a man that worked on the farm lived, we would carry bags of peanut butter sandwiches out there and for lunch we'd get water out of the crick out of tin cups and sit and eat our sandwiches either inside his little shack or outside if we wanted to. We'd get a half hour or an hour for lunch, doesn't seem like it was much time then we'd be back picking potatoes or cutting cabbage or picking carrots, pulling carrots, spend all day there, probably was on Saturdays, I don't remember what day it was. But they had horses, some dairy cows. I don't remember any other animals. I also remember they had a slaughterhouse next to the orphanage, and we could go down there and watch them slaughter the cattle and the pigs that they would process for our food. Of course, bed time, everybody in our group had to go to bed at, I'd assume it was probably around 9:00 or 9:30, but you could make, it was called a crystal radio, we would take a cardboard tube from a roll of toilet paper and wrap wire around it, the wire had to be very even, very close together, and that was, we made those during recreation time, they had things for us to do such as making crystal radios and airplanes, model airplanes, and if everybody had enough money to buy a crystal, which was probably less than a dollar, and then a dollar for the earphones, they would get all the materiel for you and cut a board, and you would wrap the piece of cardboard from the role of toilet paper with wire, so it would be very even, very straight, and glue it all on and they would show you how to build a radio and you could lay at night and listen to radio stations while you were upstairs in bed, there was no time limit that I remember that you had to discontinue using it, but I suppose everybody would get tired of listening and fall asleep, but they had a main aerial, or fine piece of wire that ran all along the beds, the head of the beds, and you could clip your antennae to that so everybody would receive through an antennae all the radio stations. Dinnertime, or mealtimes, I don't remember what hours they were, but I'm sure they were scheduled regular hours of breakfast, probably at seven, and lunch was probably at noon, and again our dinner was probably at four or five o'clock but I don't remember.

JC: What about discipline?

EC: Well they were good at discipline, the nuns would usually have a stick or a ruler that they could whack you with on the knuckles, but I don't remember anything other than that, I don't remember ever being disciplined while I was there other than, I was in the choir, church choir, and I always laughed all the time so the nun always would hit me with her knuckles, her knuckles felt like they were made out of hard maple, finally she wouldn't let me be in the choir anymore because I laughed too much, I would laugh at everything.

JC: Under what circumstances were you allowed to leave the grounds of the orphanage?

EC: Well we were allowed to leave if we had a nun or somebody from the orphanage to accompany us. I don't remember leaving anytime when my dad came, he would visit us, but... We were allowed to go down to the crick and play, where the crick is today there's a highway that goes through there. We were allowed to go south, away from the orphanage where you could ski and play on the hills, but, uh, that was the extent of it, you always had a time when you had to be back.

JC: Were guests invited to the orphanage?

EC: Yeah, I can remember one time we had a Christmas, seemed like it was a Christmas play, and I was in the play, and our Aunt Beatrice and Patty, Uncle Patty, we invited everybody, we were allowed to send letters to everybody we wanted to to invite them. They came to the play, Beatrice and Patty Garroll (??) came, but I don't remember anybody else coming, but sure, you could invite people to come and visit and there was always, as I said, they would have you in plays or skits for entertainment.

JC: How did the children relate to each other in _____?

EC: I think everybody got along, I don't remember ever having any problems with anybody, because you were always kept very busy, you didn't have much idle time, you always were either in school studying or helping clean or you were out in the yard playing, and when you're out playing in the playground you were kept busy, there were skis and toboggans you could slide down the hill, I'm trying to remember one time in the wintertime, 'course now there's a road down below that hill, but it had a lot of trees and we found a piece of tin off of a barn and I was going down the hill and hit a tree and cut the tip off of my finger and I just left my mittens on because I was afraid to look until I got back up to the top of the hill. That's a scar that still shows up.

JC: How were children outside of the orphanage viewed?

EC: Oh, I think the other kids sometimes, if I remember right, used to come and sleigh ride with us in the neighborhood when we were sleighing, there was a popular hill all through that area to sleigh ride or toboggan. If I remember right some of the kids would come over there because we always seemed to be having fun and, uh, we didn't look down at them or have any bad feelings toward them, I don't think they did towards us.

JC: Do you have stories to tell about trouble or fun times?

EC: I don't have any about trouble, I don't remember any trouble, but I remember on two different years I was allowed to go to boy scout camp, now the boy scout camp I remember going to is not the one that is over near Harlow Lake because we went up past Negaunee, I remember going past the big rock near Negaunee, it was up, to me it seemed like it was closer to Republic, and at one time somebody told me it was Fence Lake, or a lake similar to that up near Republic near Witch Lake. But we would go on a bus with Father Beyers (???) and we'd spend at least a week that I know of, maybe longer, at the boy scout camp, and it was a lot of fun because you got to swim every day, you'd go on hikes every day, you could fish, we stayed in cabins, the girls stayed on one side of the lake we stayed on the other, almost every night we'd have a large bonfire and Father Beyers (???) would tell spooky stories and try to scare everybody. And I remember one time one of the priests, I don't remember his name, was there visiting, fishing out of a canoe and it tipped over and he couldn't get back in and I jumped in the water and swam out and helped him get to shore and then pull the canoe to shore and then later in the day I went out looking for his fishing pole and tackle box and I found that laying a little ways down in the water, probably was only four or five feet deep, it wasn't very deep because I

could see the bottom, and I dove down, got his tackle box and his fishing pole for him, and they wrote a story about me then at the orphanage for the paper, a newsletter that they had, about how I helped him get back into shore. We had fun at the scout camp because we ate in a large dining room, there was no separate eating groups, everybody ate together in a huge big dining room, to me it seemed like a big dining room, it was probably a small building, but everybody had to help do dishes at least once a week, the chore was to help do dishes for one meal so there was always something to do at the scout camp. There was a baseball diamond where we played baseball, they had gunnysack three-legged races and all kinds of games every day for you, if you weren't swimming, fishing, hiking, with the nuns - the nuns were there also at the camp - we were playing games out of the recreational fields, so there was something to keep you busy every day.

JC: Do you think that being an orphan affected your life? If so, please tell me in what ways.

EC: I don't know if being an orphan affected my life anyway, I guess the one thing I do remember that affected me was I didn't know my multiplication tables, and they told me I couldn't go to the island, they used to take kids to the island one particular day, but I was not allowed to go because I didn't know my sixes, I knew others but I didn't know the sixes, and one of the nuns wrote the multiplication tables down on the back of a tablet pad, she took the hard cardboard piece off a tablet pad and wrote all the multiplication tables down, and I had to stay on the second floor on the balcony, the balcony is still there on the front, you can see it, she told me I had to stay there all day, everybody got to go to the island swimming and for a picnic, and I studied them because she said if I didn't learn them, I couldn't go to the boy scout camp, which was then coming up very soon within the next weekend. And so I sat and studied them and I got so I memorized them, learned the multiplication tables and then she forgot to put my name on the list that I could go, so the following weekend when everybody was getting on the bus and leaving, my name wasn't on the list so I wasn't called off, so I remember standing outside the bus seeing it loaded up with everybody getting ready to leave and Father Beyers (???) asked me, "aren't you going?" and I said "no, my name wasn't called off," so he went inside and checked and found out that she had forgotten to put my name on, so I did get to go. I remember one other time we were out at the island swimming, and whenever we'd go out there of course Ronnie would come, sometimes we could call him from the telephone, or he'd usually be there, Ronnie Johnson, and we'd swim and play and run around and talk to the kids from the swamp that we already knew, and one time Ronnie and Tommy Glass and a bunch of us were going down the slide, not the large wooden one at the island but the smaller one that was near the changing house, and we were all going down standing up one at a time, and jumping off into the water, well, one of the times I went down, my feet went out from under me first and my head hit the back of the slide and when I hit the water I went right to the bottom, and that was all I remember, and Ronnie drug me out of the water, I'd split the back of my head near my ear, and I come to, and it sounded like there was a bumblebee nest inside my head buzzing around, and Ronnie said, "you almost drowned," well they took me back to the orphanage, they put some bandages on it and stopped the bleeding a little bit, took me back to the orphanage and they always took you to St. Mary's across the street, and the doctor put some, instead of putting stitches in he put clamps in there, they were like staples, he used a pair of pliers, and I had to have those in for about a week, and they bothered me for a whole week, those metal clips back there like staples, then

when he took them out it felt like he had unwired the back of my head, but everything was ok, I guess I didn't lose any brains.

JC: Do you know of any other people who were in the orphanage who may be willing to give me an interview?

EC: I can remember some names of a couple of them, but it seemed like one of the Lakenens were in there for a while. I remember a guy that was my age, his name was Doug Murray, he also went by the name of Douglas S_____, he was from over near Escanaba in the Hermansville area, Stevenson, Stevens area, somewhere around there. I haven't seen him in years, but I'm not sure how you would even get ahold of anybody like that. There's one other thing that I remember that happened while we were in the orphanage, they used to take us out swimming once in a while to the quarry in south Marquette, and one time while we were there one of the girls from the orphanage drowned, and I remember they made everybody get out of the water and they searched and finally found her, and then they had the funeral at the orphanage, I remember her casket and the funeral being at the orphanage. I don't remember, seemed like her name was June Getz, but I'm not real sure, I know she had another sister that was in the orphanage also, and I remember later when we went to Howard Junior High that her sister went there also, so I'm sure she still lives around Marquette someplace, maybe not. That was another incident that happened while we were there.

Unidentified Woman's Voice: Since I could not interview Edwin myself, Joanne Colleer, Edwin's wife, took my place. The interview took place in their home in Jackson, Michigan.