

6/6/81

Since 1906, boys find help at Optimist Home

(15th in a series)

By Roger Swanson

Several years ago a uniformed policeman was among a group of people being shown around the Optimist Boys' Home in Highland Park. Asked if he would like to see a certain area, the policeman commented, "I'm familiar with it; I was a resident here several years ago."

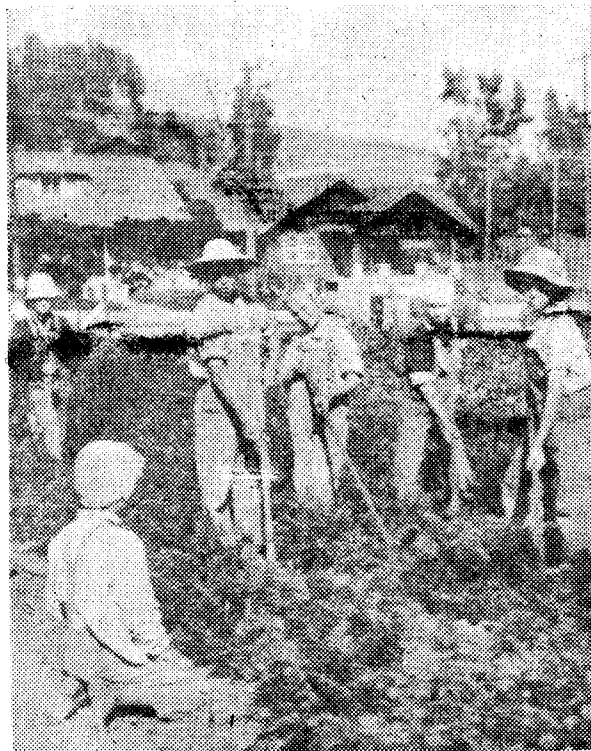
It was no surprise to the home official. Numbered among the more than 6000 boys who have been wards at the home since its founding in 1906 are physicians and dentists, a college professor in Arizona, a former California assemblyman, policemen and scores of other professionals.

Today, in the 75th anniversary year of the home, 79 boys between the ages of 13 and 18 are residents.

STRICKLAND

The home traces its heritage to Jacob Strickland and his wife, Julia, who in 1906 bought approximately 10 acres of land which included the present five-acre site and additional land across North Figueroa Street where Anandale Elementary School is now located. The Stricklands set to farming the land with the help of their daughter and adopted son, Robert.

In his younger years Strickland had been a handyman, blacksmith and taxidermist, the latter a profession he pursued at the Cawston Ostrich Farm in nearby South Pasadena. Strickland had operated his farm for only short time when a new career was thrust upon him — that of caretaker for boys who



GROWING OWN VEGETABLES — Boys at Strickland Home on North Figueroa, which later became Optimist Home, cultivate vegetables in this 1914 photograph.

needed special attention.

Judge Curtis Wilbur, presiding judge of Los Angeles County Juvenile Court, persuaded the Stricklands to accept a young ward. The only alternative for boys who had to be removed from their homes because they were abused or in trouble with the law was reform school.

Judge Wilbur wanted to try a home atmosphere and in a short time 13 boys were in residence. Girls were accepted from 1906 until 1910, but after that date only boys were referred to the Stricklands who managed their charges with affection and not a small amount of discipline, usual-

ly meted out by "Auntie Strickland" as she was known to the boys.

In the 1960s, Henry C. Dean, the first boy brought to the home in 1906 by Judge Wilbur, visited the Optimist Home on a nostalgic pilgrimage and said he remembered Mrs. Strickland.

"Auntie Strickland knew how to handle us. She had to whip some boys because they wanted to play all hours of the day. We all had chores. I used to feed the cows and help in churning, and I sold butter and eggs to neighbors."

FUN TIMES

There were also fun times in the early days of the Strickland home. Summer included trips to beaches and there were Christmas parties given by the downtown Elks Club.

By 1914 the Stricklands were aging and an accident to Mrs. Strickland persuaded them to sell. She fell in a bathtub, breaking her hip, making it unable for her to continue her strenuous work routine.

The Stricklands sold their farm — now down to about the present five acres from earlier sales — to O.T. Johnson, a Los Angeles philanthropist.

Johnson leased the property to a board of directors and the home was chartered as a non-profit corporation. Juvenile Court Judge Wilbur Curtis was elected president of the corporation.

Succeeding Curtis as president in 1918 was Frank B. Silverwood, known as "Daddy" Silverwood to the young charges but better known in the southland as founder of the Silverwood clothing store chain. Silverwood served as president until 1923.

The Stricklands retired to San Diego and both died in the 1920s.

OPTIMIST SUPPORT

It was also during the 1920s that Southern California Optimist clubs assumed financial support of the home and the name was changed to the Optimist Boys' Home in 1940.

That support has continued unabated, according to Howard Nariman, executive director of the home. Some 150 Optimist clubs from San Diego to Santa Barbara contribute approximately 25 percent of the home's operating cost, supplementing money received from the county.

Optimist clubs donate money according to their size and ability to raise money, usually a sum ranging from \$50 to \$250 each month.

Optimist Home in 75th year

FARM GONE

Nothing remains of the original Strickland farm. The farmhouse was enlarged to accommodate the growing number of boys assigned to the home and later the farmhouse was razed, replaced by a growing number of dormitories and an administration building which also houses the dining room and kitchen.

A chapel was constructed in 1957, followed by a physical education building in 1960. In 1969 a residence hall was completely renovated, dividing the rooms to allow two boys to a room instead of five boys.

A high school was built on the campus in 1975 and is operated by the county school district. Fully accredited, the school pro-

vides a full range of academic subjects plus a vocational program which teaches important skills.

The home is not a detention facility for hard core delinquents or boys in serious trouble but a refuge for youngsters with a wide range of problems including learning disabilities, chronic truancy and severe adjustment problems.

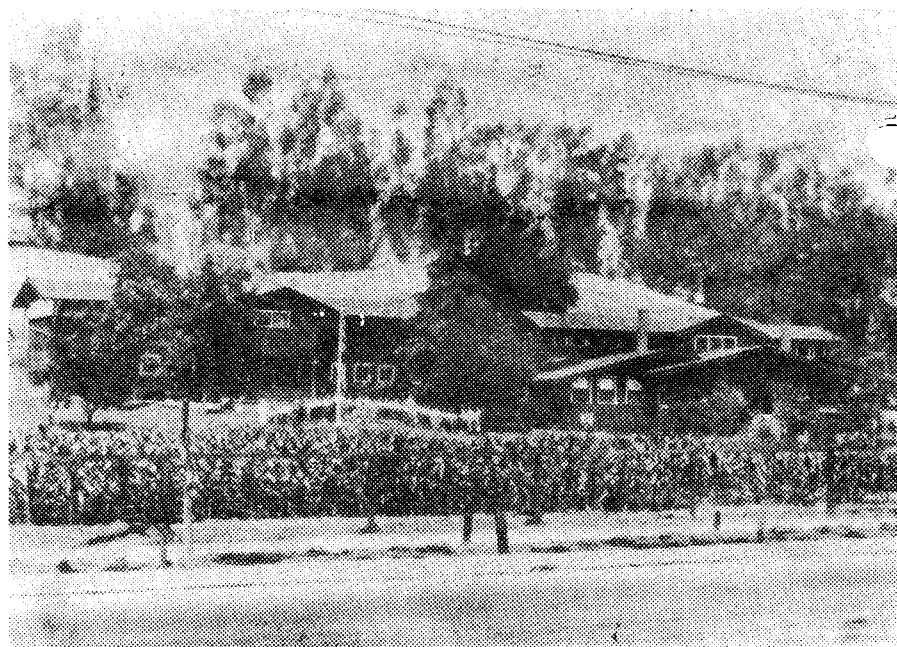
LIMITATIONS

The home is not able to serve actively psychotic boys, those with physical or mental problems which require 24 hours supervision and those who are classified as mentally deficient or retarded.

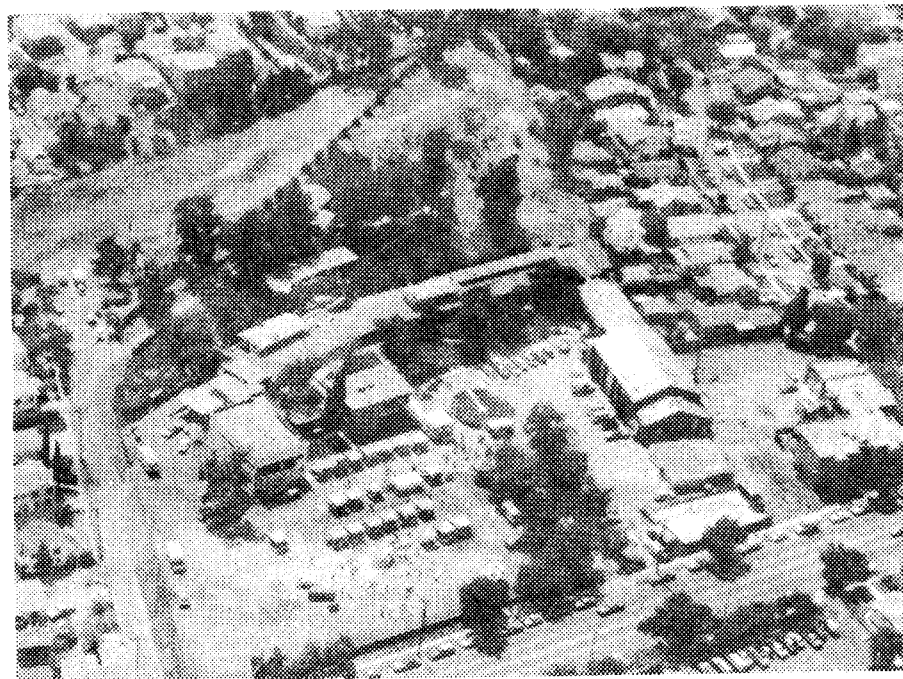
"Our program is basically one of schooling and family counseling and group therapy," says Nariman. "The family may be together but need counseling to develop closer communication. We try to help the boys find a place in the community."

Still growing, the home now includes three outlying group homes which provide a community living experience for 18 boys, six in each home. Located in Altadena, Mission Hills and Anaheim, the homes also provide counseling and an opportunity to attend school in the local community.

The most recent addition to the main facility on North Figueroa Street is the Merlin Adams dormitory, completed in 1979. Architect of the addition was Peter Pyle who graduated from the home 25 years ago.

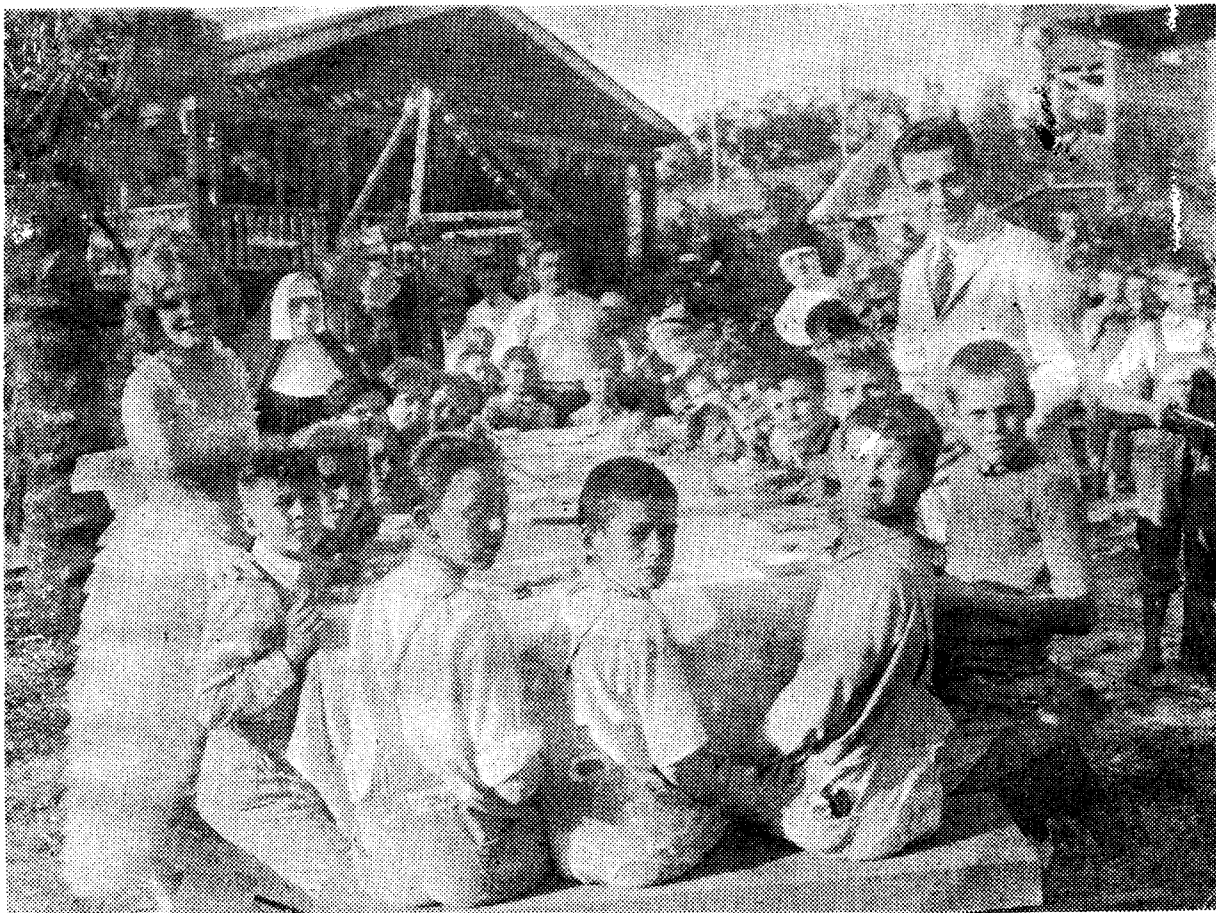


STRICKLAND HOME, 1914 — Optimist Home for Boys on North Figueroa St. was known as Strickland Home in 1914 when this picture was taken of youngsters and staff participating in flag-raising ceremony on front lawn.



OPTIMIST HOME TODAY — This aerial view shows current layout of Optimist Home, marking its 75th anniversary this year. Fiesta at home, which helps raise needed funds, will be held today and Sunday at site, 6957 N. Figueroa.

(Photos courtesy Optimist Home)



OPTIMIST BOYS VISIT UNIVERSAL, 1919 — Silent screen star Jack Mulhall (right) greets boys from Optimist Home (then Strickland Home) in Highland Park during visit to Universal Studios lot back in 1919. At far end of table is Frank Silverwood, founder of department store chain, who served as president of home. Actress at left is unidentified.