

December 23, 1001

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Interview Dec. 13, 2001 by Clare Carr and Maynard Ham with Edna Hunt Erdamo, , Hamden, Conn.

Maynard Ham and I traveled to a senior citizens assisted living facility at Hamden, just outside Hartford, Conn. on a recent rainy and overcast day in December.

The purpose of our visit was to interview Edna Hunt Erdamo, an elderly lady who was acquainted with Maynard's father, Maynard Ham Sr., when she was a resident of St. Margaret's Home in Red Hook, the Red Hook "orphan assylum" built by Margaret Astor on the Albany Post Road south of the village in the mid-19th century. Edna was resident there between 1919 and 1929. Maynard Ham Sr. used to court her as a young man, and visited "my sweet Edna" at least several times that we know of around 1928, according to some passage's in his diary of the time. The two had stayed in occasional touch over the years, as both he and Edna married others and raised families. A phone call received from Edna by Maynard Jr. in 2000, inquired after his father, now deceased. Thereafter, Maynard Jr. kept in ocassional touch with Edna.

St. Margaret's Home was threatened to be sold or destroyed in 2000, after Hannaford Supermarkets bought purchase rights and planned a large store on part of the parcel. The Egbert Benson Historical Society argued for the preservation of the building. In the meantime, we decided to research St. Margaret's Home as thoroughly as possible, including contacting any living residents, in hopes that it some day would be saved for the community as one of its most significant historic sites. Maynard contacted Edna and arranged the visit..

When we arrived at her small apartment, we were greeted by a frail but lively, elderly lady. She was slender, strait and quick in her movements. At first she was slightly confused, but when she remembered this was Maynard's son, not her Maynard, she sat down with us at the kitchen table and seemed happy to talk to us. I turned on the tape recorder, however it was either turned on incorrectly or was not working, for most of the interview was lost on the tape. Just a few minutes remain. This is a write-up of our two hours with Edna, from notes, memory and some oral tapes.

Edna was born in 1910 in . Her father died young. There were five siblings in the family, and her mother was not able to care for them. The two girls, Edna and her sister Ethel, her younger sister, were

brought to St. Margaret's in 1919. Edna remembers she was eight years old. "They were good to us," Edna insisted throughout the interview. But she seemed ambivalent in recalling the whole period. Several times she spoke of how "hard," it was to be without her mother. It was, she said, a good thing to be there because they took such good care of them, but it was also a very bad time in her life. After attending school in Red Hook village every day (the girls from St. Margaret's would walk to the public school, District #4, which was located where the Old Soap Factory Paint Store is today, about a mile down the road), "everybody else would go home to their family, and we would be walking back to St. Margaret's.... Sometimes I would ask myself, 'why me?... why do we have to be walking back to the home (and not our own homes)'" Her mother came to visit her and her sister regularly, she said ("It was a big deal"), but she hated to see her leave, driving back to Poughkeepsie where she lived. "Many times I would stand on that porch and watch my mother drive away," said Edna, with tears in her eyes at the recollection. She pointed to an old picture of the house that Maynard brought to show her. "I used to sit up here in this window and look out and think, 'why do we have to be here.'"

However, she insisted more than several times that the care was very good. She remembered Dr. Cookingham as the doctor who came regularly to treat the children. One deaconess, Deaconess Stephenson, was in charge of between 13 and 18 girls, Edna recalled. There was a hired cook and hired men to take care of the animals and grounds. A large barn in back held four or five milking cows. There were chickens, and perhaps some other animals. She did not recall exactly what. She remembers when it was her turn to feed the chickens. And she clearly remembered a large vegetable garden. "Many is the time I knelt down there, pulling weeds," she said.

The children helped in all aspects of running the house, although by the 20th century, there were apparently no more "teachers," as were listed in the 19th century registry book. The girls learned cooking, baking, canning, ironing, sewing, washing, cleaning from the deaconess and the hired cook. If there were any other hired women for inside work, Edna did not say. There was a list of household chores each week posted for the girls.. She said the house was "spotless... you could eat off the floor, they kept it so clean."

Edna recalled church services each week at Christ Church in Red Hook, the Episcopal Church located a mile away in the village, where the girls walked each Sunday. There were prayers each morning before school in the large parlor downstairs, and prayers in the evening - "The Deaconess saw to it." Also each day the Deaconess read to the girls from the Bible. Edna indicated she was a little bored at times. "I learned too fast for my age," she said.

However, she said, "It was a good bringing up."

More than once in the interview she mentioned how careful the deaconess was with taking care of the girls. When it came time, at age 18, to leave for a job or a placement in a private household, the Deaconess was careful to see that they were good people and would not mistreat the girls. "She was very careful... she had to look into it first," Edna said. Another thing the Deaconess was careful about, Edna recalled, were the various hired men that were around the place. "Some of the young men who came to work there "were working their points with us too, so we had to look out... They (the Deaconess and any staff) were very careful."

Edna recalled that the life was not all chores and school. "Just because we were at the home, didn't mean we didn't do things." She recalled picnics. Sometimes visiting parents would take the girls out. When she was older, she could go to the picture show - the Lyceum in Red Hook Village. "Someone would have a car, or we would walk." She remembers using horse and wagon. There was little car traffic on Route 9 at that time, but she recalled the girls liked to sit at the big windows or sit on the porch and watch people or cars go by on the Post Road, now Route 9. The paved and widened State Route 9 was not built until the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Every Christmas, there was a big party put on by their patron, Mrs. Margaret Aldrich, descendent of the original Margaret Astor, who had the home built. There was a present for everyone, wrapped and presented under a big Christmas tree, Edna recalled. Her face lit up at the memory of Mrs. Aldrich, who presumably visited the girls at the orphanage more than once a year. "....."

Regarding the layout of the house, Edna recalled a large parlor downstairs in the left front room and the dining room on the right side. There were two kitchens: One in the kitchen space that exists today, right rear, and one in the basement. Both were used. The basement kitchen was used for large cooking jobs and for canning, which they did a lot of, with jars stored on shelves nearby. The four rooms upstairs were the

bedrooms. The girls shared the bedrooms. She didn't remember clearly what the small anteroom in the rear was for. We were interested to find out that the two bathrooms that are there currently, which look like they were originally carved out of the two upstairs front rooms, were in fact there in the 1920s. Edna remembers the double bathrooms were needed for so many girls.

Edna returned to visit the home a couple of times. The only photo of the house that she had, and which she gave us, is undated , but looks like it might have been taken in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is a color picture that shows the house before it was painted red, with the original sandstone moulding intact. Her sister was never comfortable talking about the years at St. Margaret's, and even tried to deny the experience in later years, Edna said. In fact, Ethel, "disappeared" in mid-life, breaking all ties with the family. Edna said she believed she was always ashamed of having been in a home, and never wanted her friends to know about it. She showed us a wonderful picture of a family reunion of all five siblings. "That's when we found Ethel again," she said.

Edna, however, said she felt they were lucky to have had a good place to grow up in, although at the time she said she didn't always appreciate it, and sometimes felt sorry for herself. At the end of the interview, she choked several times with emotion in remembering St. Margaret's.

"It was good and it was bad... I didn't realize (then) how lucky we were."

Edna Hunt Eramos
Addendum

The following is verbatim, taken from the taped interview of EHE, 12/13/10 regarding Christmas with Mrs. Aldrich, the Home's patron from the Aster family, and on Edna's feelings about the home. Most of the interview did not unfortunately record properly. This part remained intact:

Question: Do you remember Mrs. Aldrich?

"Mrs. Aldrich? You betcha! (laughter) She was great to us kids. We got our Christmas like nobody had Christmas – She put a big Christmas tree in the home, gave us all a present.

This was all her own doins'

We were lucky that we had the home to go to. Mother couldn't keep us (pause), she did what she could to help us (quiet laughter/sigh).

(Pause) It was a sad situation my childhood"

Question: And you went to Christ Church each Sunday?

"Yes. I sang in the choir when I was older. I thought I was a big shot! (laughter).