

Nowhere Else to Go - Homes for Unwed Mothers in Canada during the 20th Century

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The difficulties faced by unwed mothers during the early part of the 20th century is a topic that is rarely discussed today, perhaps because the way that society sees unmarried mothers has changed significantly in the past 50 years and the stigma attached to single motherhood has lessened. Today, women are not only able to be single parents; single women can choose to have a child using a sperm donor. This positive change in attitude, unfortunately, means that the stories of unwed mothers from as recently as the late 1960s have all but been forgotten. Michèle Karch-Ackerman's exhibition, *Foundling*, inspired by her own grandmother, brings attention to the lives of these women and the difficulties that they faced because they found themselves outside of the acceptable norm during the first half of the 20th century.

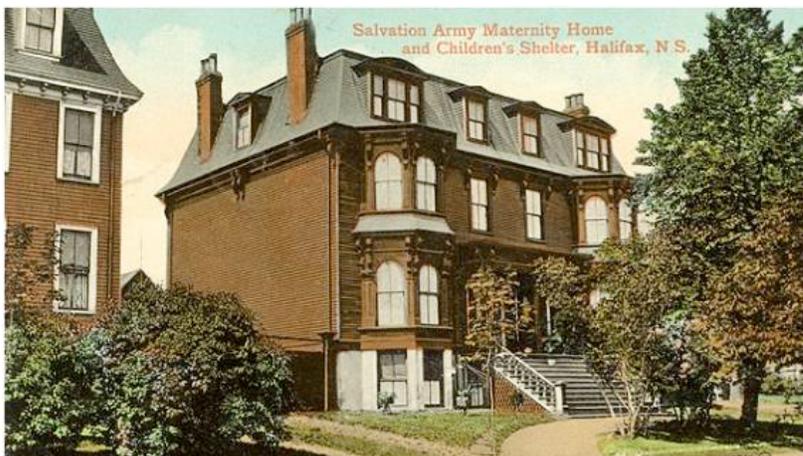


Bethany Home, Saskatoon, SK, established by the Salvation Army in 1938 – photo taken in 1994. One of the options for a pregnant young woman was to isolate herself by entering a maternity home like this one.

Regardless of how women found themselves pregnant and single, whether it was the result of a consensual relationship, rape, abuse, or even a lack of sufficient sexual

education, they were all seen as “disgraced” and their lives ruined. The young women were believed to be in need of reform and the pregnancies, and subsequently the children, were hidden to prevent their mistakes from leaking into the rest of society. The options for women who found themselves in this situation were either marriage or going into hiding until the baby was born and giving it up for adoption. Abortion was illegal in Canada and could result in life imprisonment for the mother and physician until 1969, making it a very dangerous and unrealistic option for most young women. Marriage to the father of the unborn child presented a different set of challenges, and most shotgun marriages broke down after a few years. Societal pressures made it very difficult for a young woman to stay home and raise her baby by herself and, as a result, many turned to maternity homes for help as they could stay there until they gave birth and then give the baby up for adoption. Considering the social stigma, it is not surprising that many young women chose to stay in maternity homes to protect themselves and their families from the stigma of having a child outside of marriage.

Maternity homes in Canada existed from the mid-nineteenth century, becoming more widespread during the first half of the 20th century due to an increase in illegitimate children after WWII. Most Canadian cities had at least one home for unwed mothers,



Salvation Army Maternity Home and Children's Shelter, Tower Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia, photo taken 1912.

with Toronto and Montreal having more than 5 each. The homes were usually run by religious organizations, such as the Misericordia

Homes and those run by the Salvation Army - which had institutions across the country. There were a few private homes, including the infamous Ideal Maternity Home in Nova Scotia, which functioned without a religious affiliation. Unwed mothers could also be placed in private homes to work as domestic servants until they were ready to give birth, which was referred to as living in a “wage home.” No matter where a woman went or was sent, the goal was to keep her hidden and the pregnancy a secret.

Admission to a maternity home was generally voluntary, but women could be sent by their families and the pressure to enter would have been difficult to refuse. When entering a maternity home, it was common for the staff to ask the women to choose a fake first name and keep their real names a secret, along with details of their lives before coming to the home. The use of assumed names protected the woman and



1951 - An unknown woman arriving at a maternity home run by the Salvation Army

her family from the stigma that was attached to her presence at the home, but it also effectively stripped the woman of her identity. As a result, many women felt alone during their stay; they were not allowed to talk about themselves, and were sometimes forbidden to talk to one another altogether, making the formation of friendships very difficult.

During their stay in the maternity home, women were given daily chores to help pay for some of the costs of their board and medical expenses leading up to delivery. In the Misericordia Homes, women were also required to stay for 6 months after the birth to

pay the home back for costs of confinement and delivery. The chores done in the homes were designed to teach the women domestic skills and an emphasis was placed on the reformatory effect of the work. This was particularly prevalent in homes run by religious organizations, which assumed that the women needed to be redeemed; the pregnancy was more than a mistake, it was a demonstration of the state of a woman's soul. The reaction of women to the rigid rules was varied, some believed they were lucky to be taken in, others became very angry and rebelled, and some withdrew completely.



Residents sitting on the lawn of the Ideal Maternity Home in East Chester, NS, circa 1940. Women could find comfort in the presence of others in their situation, but friendships could be difficult to form.

There was some comfort in the presence of other young women in the homes, for many it was a chance to be around others in the same situation without feeling the same prejudice that they would in the outside world. The feeling of relative safety was increased by the trend of going to a home located in a different city or even out of province to make sure no one in their home community would find out. Stories were told by family members to friends and neighbours that the woman had gone away on a “holiday” or “health retreat” to prevent suspicion. It was not uncommon for women to see someone they knew upon their admission to the home, but they could not discuss it because they were forbidden to talk about their lives before entering the home.

The average stay in a maternity home was 3 months before giving birth. There was little information available about delivery, leaving many women to fend for themselves during childbirth. Women were also faced with what would happen to their child after delivery, adoption was strongly encouraged and it was rare for a woman to keep her baby and, as a result, many women felt coerced into giving up their children. Most institutions treated adoption as the only option, even though it was officially the mother's decision. Women were sometimes misled about the process, and were often not given accurate information about where their children would be placed after being given up. In reality, children that were considered undesirable were usually never permanently placed with a family and ended up in institutions or foster homes, a fact that was kept from young mothers. Illegitimate children were stigmatized as well; even if a woman was allowed to keep the baby it would be labelled as a "bastard" and would be barred from taking the name, wealth, or social position of their father. After making the decision to give the baby up for adoption, the mother had to swear an oath that she would not try to find the child again. This ensured that the women were permanently separated from their alleged moral mistake and would be able to return to acceptable society. The shock, guilt, and shame that women felt in such circumstances was compounded by the heartbreak of having to give up their child.



Misericordia hospital in Montreal, 2009. The maternity home, established during the 19th century was only a part of the larger hospital complex.

Misericordia Home in Montreal

The Misericordia Home located in Montreal was established by an order of nuns during the mid-nineteenth century as a place where women could go to hide their pregnancies. It was a particularly prominent home in Quebec, and about 20% of illegitimate births in the province during the 1930s took place in the Misericordia hospital in Montreal. Once women entered, they were not allowed to use their real names and were referred to as “penitents” until their departure. Most of the residents were Roman Catholic between the ages of 18 and 22, and nearly half were domestic servants. Admission to the home was voluntary, but once admitted women were not allowed to leave freely and were subjected to strict discipline and rigid rules. All boarders were considered minors regardless of age, and were generally considered weak, ignorant, wicked, or simple-minded. The homes were designed to encourage repentance and penance, but often left women feeling angry or guilty or both. As in other homes, it was assumed that the baby would be given up for adoption after the birth, and less than 15%

of women left with their baby. Michèle Karch-Ackerman's grandmother was one of these few, as she was allowed to return home and keep her baby. After the baby was born, women were required to stay and work there for 6 months to pay off their debt, even if the child died, which was fairly common - almost 40% of children born in the Montreal home died within a year. It was a difficult atmosphere for women, but they had few other options in a society that viewed pregnancy outside marriage as shameful and deviant.



The Ideal Maternity Home, East Chester, NS, 1943. The home began in a small cottage but expanded into the large building seen here.

The Ideal Maternity Home – East Chester NS

The now infamous Ideal Maternity Home was established in 1928 by William and Lila Young in East Chester, Nova Scotia, to fulfil a need for places that protected unwed mothers from the accusing eyes of their friends and neighbours. The home was unique in the way that women who were married could also stay and give birth there; it was an alternative for women who lived in rural Nova Scotia and would otherwise have to travel to far away hospitals to give birth. For unwed mothers, the guarantee of secrecy and privacy attracted them to the home; these women were assured that they would be protected from gossip. Like in other homes, unmarried women who went to the Ideal Maternity Home went to be hidden away, give birth, and then put the baby up for

adoption. The Home demanded payment for services upon arrival to ensure privacy, and those who could not afford it were able to work off their debt as part of the Home's staff – often for more than a year after the baby was born.

Women who entered the Ideal Maternity Home were expected to sign away their rights to their children, and were held responsible for adoption fees or funeral expenses if the child died while still in the home. The Ideal Maternity Home was not affiliated with any religious organization, unlike most other maternity homes, instead it was a very profitable business for the Youngs. Controversy surrounded the Home and evidence suggests that children who were unlikely to be adopted were neglected and usually died as a result. Moreover, many young women died under suspicious circumstances while in the care of the Youngs as well. An investigation began in the 1930s into the deaths at the home, leading to criminal charges against the Youngs and the closure of the home in 1945. To ensure secrecy and privacy, the birth and death records of infants were not accurately kept – making it very difficult to determine how many infants may have died of neglect. There are also stories of women whose babies may have been sold without their consent; they were later told that the baby had died and they would be responsible for funeral costs. The Ideal Maternity Home, although less religiously punitive in nature, left women with similar feelings of loss and guilt. Many women who gave their children up for adoption through the home tried to find their babies later in life, a difficult search due to the lack of accurate birth and death records.

Looking Back

Women who entered maternity homes during the beginning and middle of the 20th century each faced a unique situation and their experiences were extremely varied. The

only universal feature seems to be that their experience stayed with them and affected them for the rest of their lives, particularly in the cases where women were discouraged from talking about it. The difference in society's attitude towards unwed mothers now is very different from what they were fifty years ago, and it is no longer assumed that a pregnant unmarried woman needs to be redeemed in some way or should be sent away and hidden to prevent the humiliation of her or her family. Maternity homes do still exist in Canada and the United States, but the aim today is to support pregnant young women instead of to hide them. Most modern maternity homes include parenting classes and adoption is not treated as the only option for young mothers. This is not to say that there is no stigma surrounding unwed motherhood, especially in the case of teenage mothers, but the prejudice is less and the needs of the mother and child are more of a focus.

Additional Resources:

Cahill, Bette L. *Butterbox Babies: Baby Sales, Baby Death: New Revelations 15 Years Later*. Halifax, Fernwood Publishers: 2006.

Lévesque, Andrée, "Deviant Anonymous: Single Mothers at the Hôpital de la Miséricorde in Montreal, 1929-1939" *Historical Papers / Communications Historiques*, vol. 19, n° 1, 1984, p. 168-184.

Petrie, Anne. *Gone to an Aunt's: Remembering Canada's Homes for Unwed Mothers*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998.