

A Place Where Dreams Come True

Historical Mansion Has Been Home to Countless Children

By Kris Dudley - World Staff Writer

Toddlers dig in sandboxes while preschoolers run about playing ball and swinging in an area that once featured elegant gardens, fountains and goldfish ponds.

Where huge trees and lush green lawns once enhanced the house are asphalt parking lots for parents to pick up and leave their children for a day of play at Christian Day Care Center, 41st Street and Harvard Avenue.

Activity today in the former mansion is not unlike it was more than four decades ago when children slept, ate and played in the house. A big difference, however, is that 45 years ago children were waiting to be adopted instead of waiting for parents to pick them up at the close of the day.

The centrally located daycare center, operated by New Life Center Church, enjoys a rich history. It seems ironic that a beautiful estate, which at one time was located in the country, has since been the home of orphans, a fledgling church and eventually a day-care center.

The home, now flanked by New Life Center to the south and backed by a strip shopping center, was once surrounded by pasture and a two-lane dirt road; which now is 41st Street. One easily can see that the house was built with no expenses spared. The outside was designed with as much elegance as inside the house. The exterior of the mansion, which is stucco, features a tile roof and a large balcony. Exquisite gardens, beautiful towering trees and a large ornate fish pond once surrounded the home.

The inside features ornate fireplaces on every floor, rich wood finishings throughout the house, a staircase and countless windows. An unusual bathroom that still remains in the house includes a shower with seven shower heads.

According to records from the Tulsa County Clerk's office, the property was allotted to Ethel Hodge in 1903. Although the original builder of the estate is not known, it is assumed the mansion was built by Thomas A. Hunt, a

successful Tulsa businessman. Hunt eventually sold the mansion, which was bought and sold several times before being purchased by W. P. Marshall Jr. in 1944.

How the mansion eventually was purchased and became an orphanage is a fairy-tale story in itself.

It began with O.W. Webb – a man with a heart for children. He first founded a children’s home in Bristow (Bristow Children’s Home), where he was pastor of Bristow Gospel Tabernacle. Webb also was involved in a successful Bristow radio program, “Beams of Light,” which was heard daily over three stations in Tulsa, Oklahoma City and Arkansas.

Webb moved to Tulsa when the radio station stopped providing gasoline for his 80 mile round-trip journey to the station. Webb and his wife, Elise, moved to Tulsa, where he founded Beams of Light Tabernacle, 1704 S. Harvard Ave.

Ruth Darr, one of Webb’s four children, said the decision on where to relocate the orphanage was Webb’s idea. She said her father simply walked up to the mansion, knocked on the door and asked if he could purchase the property.

“They were shocked and said, ‘No.’ A year later they came to him and asked him if he wanted to buy it.”

In a monthly publication called “Beams of Light,” written by Webb, he describes how the Beams of Light Children’s Home was opened.

“Space does not permit us to tell you in detail the marvelous way that God provided so that we might have the present home which we occupy. It was purchased for the sum of \$68,000. Twenty thousand dollars was needed for the down payment of on the new home. We expected to sell the home in Bristow to raise part of the down payment, however through the kindness of friends, we went ahead and borrowed a sufficient amount to make the down payment and gain possession of the property.”

Webb wrote later in the article that the first four payments on the home amounted to \$ 1,033 per month, with the first payment due in a few days

after closing. A \$1,000 check and a \$50 check unexpectedly arrived in the mail and were enough to enable the Webbs to make the first payment.

“Nothing like this had ever happened before and it certainly showed the hand of God,” Webb wrote.

If orphans could not have a fairy-tale home life then this was one created.

According to Darr, her father and mother made sure the children lived in a Christian, family like home.

“Our home is strictly a Christian home and we do everything to keep it like a home rather than an institution. I do believe I can safely say there is no other home like it in the United States,” he wrote.

Darr and Nadine Corbett, of Beams of Light Tabernacle Church, both said the church was unusual for its time. “There was a lack of good, quality Christian care for children at that time,” Corbett said. “There weren’t that many orphanages at that time.”

Approximately 50 children of all ages lived in the home at one time. Both orphans and those children whose parents were either separated or unable to provide financial care for their children were part of the big family.

Some of the children’s circumstances were worse than others. Webb wrote the following about one group of children who were taken into the home.

“The children were literally filthy. The father had died in Arkansas and the mother moved to Oklahoma. She had no way of providing for them They were twin girls 6 years of age. They had rickets so badly, we had to bind their knees so they could play with the other children. When they sat at the table, instead of using spoons, they put their mouths to the plate and raked the food in with their hands. The reason is that they had no knives and forks at home.”

Due to the large number of children living in the home, only girls lived in the mansion and approximately 17 -20 boys lived upstairs in the Webb parsonage nearby, Darr recalled. For Darr, who was 4 years old at the time, living with her siblings and the large family atmosphere. She often played and ate with the children and later attended school and church with them.

Eisenhower Elementary School opened at that time and the enrollment consisted mainly of the Webb children and the orphans, Darr said.

“He wanted it to be like a family and not like an institution,” Darr said. “I told everyone I was one of 54 kids.”

As in other family homes, each orphan was provided toys, a bike and roller skates, Darr said. Webb even wanted all the children to have a vacation like all other families. So, every summer everyone would load up for a vacation to Spring Creek for a week of fun at a cabin. Every Fourth of July, Webb entertained the orphans with his own fireworks display.

When Darr was younger, she grew accustomed to picking up orphaned babies at the hospital. “I thought if you wanted a baby, you could go the hospital and pick one up that you wanted. I would wait in the car while they picked up the baby and we would go and deliver it.”

With a strict Christian environment that began with prayers on your knees every morning, Webb wanted nothing but the best for those who were adopted, writing in his publication that the first and most important requirement for adoption of children was placement in a Christian home.

“Under no circumstance will we place a child in a home unless both the mother and father are Christians and are living for the Lord,” he wrote. “Folks desiring a child do not have to be wealthy but have to have sufficient means to give a child a comfortable home and an education.

“Many of our greatest problem children in this day come out of wealthy homes. Many of our greatest Christian leaders, businessmen and statesmen come out of the very poorest homes. Oftentimes wealth is a greater curse than it is a blessing because people do not use it properly.”

Times were not always happy at the orphanage. Financial problems hit the home from time to time. Although the home was funded through private and church donations, as well as money Webb received from his radio broadcast, there was no organization backing the orphanage financially.

“I remember the time I was told to set the table and there was no food,” Darr said. “We were told to pray and it would be supplied. Then we heard a knock at the door and there was someone with food.”

Darr said that it was not the first or last time that happened. When a child was adopted, it provided mixed emotions for the Darrs. "When daddy would find a home for them, they would be so happy but I would be so sad. They were my friends."

It was in the early 1950s that Webb had thoughts of closing the orphanage. "He felt an urgency to find homes for all the children and didn't take any more in," Darr said. "He cried his eyes out when he had to close it. We all cried our eyes out," Corbett said.

Mounting financial obligations and the load of running an orphanage and pastoring a church were reasons cited for closing the orphanage.

One year later in 1953, at the age of 45, Webb was killed in a car wreck. "It's almost like he knew," Darr said. Webb, always known for his endless work and generosity, had been working nonstop on a Thanksgiving convention that was to begin at Beams of Light Tabernacle that day. A woman in Bristow had called Webb and asked for prayer at her home. On Webb's return to Tulsa, he fell asleep at the wheel of his car. He was killed instantly. Elise Webb died in 1994 at the age of 90.

Although the founders and many of those who worked tirelessly at the orphanage are now deceased and the orphans scattered near and far, there are still those who hold memories of the mansion. And, there are still children playing in the yard.

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