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Ireland: 800 babies found in septic tank near home for unwed mothers

By Mark Ellis

ASSIST News (03.06.2014) / <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2014/s14060008.htm> - A grim septic tank next to a former home for unwed mothers run by Catholic nuns from 1925 to 1961 was found this week to contain the skeletons of nearly 800 infants and children.

The Home – once a refuge for so-called “fallen women” — was run by the Bon Secours nuns in Tuam, according to IrishCentral. The mothers paid penance for their “shame” with indentured labor at a workhouse on the seven-acre site.

Apparently, when many of the mothers left the home their children did not leave with them.

The 800 infants and children were secretly buried without any identifying markers until The Home was closed in 1961.

Catherine Corless, an Irish historian and genealogist in the area, remembers the children from the home. “They were always segregated to the side of regular classrooms,” she told IrishCentral. “By doing this the nuns telegraphed the message that they were different and that we should keep away from them.”

The Home was bordered by a forbidding, eight-foot high wall, according to IrishCentral. Many local residents say that they knew little about The Home or of the pregnant young women who seemed to come and go in silence throughout the years.

It may be revealing that in the few surviving black and white photographs taken at The Home none of the children were smiling. Their frowns and blank stares may suggest the conditions they endured.

A local health board inspection report in 1944 recorded 271 children and 61 single mothers in residence, a total of 333 in a building that had a capacity for 243, according to IrishCentral.

The report described the children as “emaciated,” “pot-bellied,” “fragile” with “flesh hanging loosely on limbs.” The report described 31 children in the “sun room and balcony” were “poor, emaciated and not thriving.” The effects of long term neglect and malnutrition were observed repeatedly.

One report claimed that 300 children died between 1943 and 1946, a mind-boggling two deaths a week in The Home.

The investigation by Corless revealed the names and fates of up to 796 forgotten infants and children who died there, due to her discovery of their death records when researching The Home’s history.

"First I contacted the Bon Secours sisters at their headquarters in Cork and they replied they no longer had files or information about The Home because they had left Tuam in 1961 and had handed all their records over to the Western Health Board," Corless told Irish Central.

Unfazed, Corless turned to the registry office in Galway. "A week later she got back to me and said do you really want all of these deaths? I said I do. She told me I would be charged for each record. Then she asked me did I realize the enormity of the numbers of deaths there?"

The registrar came back with a list of 796 children. "I could not believe it. I was dumbfounded and deeply upset," says Corless. "There and then I said this isn't right. There's nothing on the ground there to mark the grave, there's nothing to say it's a massive children's graveyard. It's laid abandoned like that since it was closed in 1961."

The certificates Corless received record each child's age, name, date – and in some cases – cause of death. "I have the full list and it's going up on a plaque for the site, which we're fundraising for at the moment. We want it to be bronze so that it weathers better. We want to do it in honor of the children who were left there forgotten for all those years. It's a scandal."

Corless charges that the truth was hidden because people undervalued illegitimate children. Incredibly, the children of The Home were referred to as "inmates" by the press at that time. It was believed by some that the harsh conditions of The Home were a form of corrective penance.

The state, the church and their families all failed these women, Corless says.