

6-1-1990

The History of Sweetser-Children's Home

John M. Romanyshyn
University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Romanyshyn, John M.. "The History of Sweetser-Children's Home." *Maine History* 30, 1 (1990): 38-39.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol30/iss1/16>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

REVIEWS IN MAINE HISTORY

The History of Sweetser-Children's Home: A Century and a Half of Service to Maine Children. By William David Barry. (Portland, Me.: Anthoensen Press, 1988. Pp. xi + 288.)

David Barry's book has a somewhat misleading title. Specific reference to Sweetser-Children's Home does not begin until the last third of the text. By then however one has been wonderfully prepared to understand the development of this well known and highly regarded institution in the context of the social history of Maine. Special emphasis is given to Portland and surrounding communities, development of provisions for the poor in general, and particular public and private arrangements for the care of destitute children. Barry has not only chronicled the events that led four charitable child-care organizations to merge into what today is the Sweetser Home, he provides in the process a fascinating and meticulously detailed account of interrelated changes in the way people made a living, in family structure, in social stratification, and in perception of community responsibility from charitable works to professional services. All four institutions were organized to care for orphans and other children whose families were regarded as incapable of providing a suitable home environment. As times changed, as orphans diminished in number, as child welfare became both professionalized and increasingly a state responsibility, the traditional orphan asylums became obsolete. Under the leadership of Lynwood Brown, the first director of the Sweetser Home, a new facility was created for children whose emotional and behavioral problems required specialized treatment.

This is the bare outline of the story which Barry tells about the history of Sweetser. It is a bare outline indeed, devoid of the rich details which the author weaves into his account of the evolution of provisions for care of children. It is the development of orphan asylums which occupies much of Barry's attention, but he is always mindful of how the changing character of Maine communities influenced his subject: the onset of industrialization; the changing patterns of work; the influx of new

immigrants; and the rise of the middle class of merchants and entrepreneurs. It was the wives and daughters of the upper classes who formed the new group of community minded and benevolently motivated women with sufficient leisure to lend themselves to the performance of "good works." Largely through the voluntary efforts of such women, a wide range of charitable organizations, including orphan asylums, was created throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an intelligent and sensitive way, Barry places their efforts in the context of their times, their class, and their family and community affiliations, giving thoughtful attention to the unique personal qualities and talents of some remarkable women, such as Eliza A. Dickerson Burrington of Belfast, who founded the Children's Aid there, and later Margaret Payson who became noted as a pioneer in child welfare in Maine.

At the same time Barry is mindful of the limitations of private charity, and he sees, too, that doing good stemmed from mixed motives, not always prompted by exclusive regard for the well-being of the recipients of benevolent attention. He is too good a historian to assume simple cause and effect, and so he weaves his tale with ample regard for the complex thread of events that surrounded the eventual creation of Sweetser-Home. In the process of describing its history, William David Barry tells us much of great interest about the people of Maine and about events that shaped the development of this state.

John M. Romanyshyn
Professor Emeritus of Social Welfare
University of Southern Maine

Nobleboro, A History. By Robert E. Dunbar and George F. Dow. (Damariscotta, Me.: Lincoln County Publishing Company, 1988. Pp. 288. \$25.00.)

Residents of Lincoln County will welcome this town history, celebrating its bicentenary of incorporation. This is the first history ever published about this community and resulted