

The Real Orphan Annie

VOLUME 01



My Life Story

Annie Bohanon

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Dedication

I am dedicating my book to the 6 mums:
Minnie, Sister Brendan, Sister Aiden, Sister Aloysius,
Margaret, and Monica, who supported and remained
in my life until it was time to leave the Nazareth House Orphanage.

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Chapter 1

Growing up in an Orphanage

I grew up in an orphanage in Northern Ireland during the 1940s. I hope my story will help many orphans who may have lost their way in life thinking, “Who am I? Why me? Why was I the one chosen by my mom and dad not to be raised with my other siblings?”

I was raised by nuns in an orphanage called Nazareth House. I don’t know why it was named that. Perhaps the Catholic parish at the time thought it was a good name. The Nazareth House is where my story begins.

I was born out of wedlock in 1943, to a woman who was married and raising six children. Her husband (my stepfather) was fighting in the war and was away for a long time. During that time in Ireland, many husbands were not home and their wives were lonely for love and affection. What I remember and read about in history books was that it was a time when many wives had given up on ever seeing their husbands again. I did not know exactly what had happened or why Mum put me in the orphanage rather than raising me herself until many years later.

When I first came to the orphanage, I was fifteen months old. I was almost sixteen years old when I first found out I had a mum.

I didn’t know much about my birth until I visited Ireland in September of 1996 with one of my best friends, Eileen, who lived in Chicago. She was visiting Kansas, where I was living at the time. She was applying for a job there. We chatted and became instant friends.

One day her curiosity got the better of her. You see, her parents were born in Ireland, so it was natural for her to ask me questions, since I was Irish, too.

I had never told anyone in America about my birth place as I was ashamed that I grew up in an orphanage. I made up a story about a make-believe Mum and Dad, brothers and sisters. I made up a perfect Irish family

life. That was the story I told everyone who asked. No one knew about the orphanage.

I didn't know what to say to Eileen when she asked about my background. I had only known her a short time. When I told her about my growing up in an orphanage, she was surprised. She became very curious and wanted to know more of my story. Eileen herself grew up in Chicago but she had many relatives living in Ireland, whom she and her family visited often.

Eileen popped into my life and started asking me questions since she knew all about Ireland herself. I'm not sure what happened. I always went with my gut instinct and felt she was the one I trusted and could tell the truth about my living in Derry, Northern Ireland. So I proceeded to tell her all about the orphanage where I was raised.

I told Eileen almost everything about my childhood. I left out certain things at first. When she heard my story, she interrupted me. "I can't believe your mum put you away for fifteen years. You know what, Annie, we are going to Ireland to meet your supposed family, who never visited you while you were in the orphanage."

Eileen became more curious and questioned me about the Nazareth House. I told her enough to satisfy her curiosity. I told her I was there until I was fifteen years old when my mum one day, out of the blue, visited the Nazareth House wanting to see me.

I talked with Eileen for a long time, telling her about my childhood. She continued to listen to the rest of my story and remarked, "I can't believe that your mum lived so close to where you were staying and never visited you."

Eileen immediately took charge (she is a take-charge kind of person) and I was delighted. I would never have made the trip to Ireland otherwise because I vowed the day I left I would never return feeling I did not have a family there. I told Eileen they used me like a maid and took whatever money I made. Eileen would nod and encourage me to tell her more of my story. "Annie," she would say, "I am listening to you."

I never knew the truth until my visit with Eileen in 1994.

Eileen told me, "Your supposed family live in Northern Ireland and mine are in the south. We will have a great time with my folks before we go to see yours."

I felt a load taken off me when I told Eileen how I appreciated everything she was doing for me. It was a great opportunity for me to visit Ireland with Eileen. She was an inspiration to me from the first time we met.

When I left Ireland at seventeen, I vowed never to go back again. So you see, when Eileen gave me the opportunity to once again go to Ireland, it was exciting. I started saving money to go with her.

When Eileen told her dad about her and me going to Ireland, he asked if he could join us in Belfast, which was not far from Derry where I had lived. He was planning a trip to Ireland so he decided to meet up with us in the North in Belfast before visiting his family in the South. He was happy about the trip and visiting the North of Ireland since he had never visited there before. He was curious to see for himself, so our plans were settled. Michael, Eileen's dad, would be meeting up with us in Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 2

Nazareth House

I grew up in an orphanage called the Nazareth House run by the Nazareth nuns. I lived there for fifteen years. The Nazareth House was well known. The nuns would go begging on the nearby streets, knocking on doors and asking for money to help support the house. I remember it was an enormous house with a tall front door with a large bell on one of the many glass windows above the door.

There were six separate sections in the Nazareth House, each with its own entrance and purpose. There was the nursery where the babies, from three months to four years old, lived and were cared for. It was beautifully decorated with colorful cribs. There was a small changing room and a loo for the ladies. The nursery was run by Sister Aloysius who oversaw the care of the babies and the women who worked there. Those women lived in the nursery and had their own quarters there, so that they were available all the time.

The woman who looked after me while I was in the nursery was Minnie. All the babies loved her. There were three other women who worked in the nursery with the help of the older orphan girls. When I was older, I worked in the nursery to learn to take care of babies. That was part of our school curriculum in fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. Needless to say, we didn't get much playtime when we had to work in the nursery.

If a girl was not adopted or not lucky to have a relative to take her home or not placed in someone's home to be a live-in caretaker or a maid, by the time she graduated and reached fifteen or sixteen years old, she worked in the Nazareth House. The Sisters tried their best to find us a place to work. If we stayed on at Nazareth House, we could work in the kitchen, preparing meals for all the residents and workers. That was what I did when I graduated.

I worked with Margaret and she taught me how to cook and bake. I was happy there and Margaret was like a mum to me. She would take me shopping on her days off and she took the time to teach me how to cook and prepare meals for the nuns, the ambulatory men and women residents, the bedridden, the school children, babies and the workers. All this kept us very busy in the kitchen.

We even earned a little money to buy ourselves new clothes and whatever personal items we needed, since, once we graduated, the nuns were no longer responsible for our care and upkeep. The men and women who worked at the Nazareth House slept in dormitories and shared the loos and bathrooms. We had an entertainment room with a large TV, a radio, and table games, as well as a dining area where we ate our meals.

There were men who took care of the gardens, growing beautiful flowers of all kinds. One flower garden was the nuns' sanctuary and they often went there when they wanted to be alone. The orphans could see that garden from the playground and my friends and I would sneak into it from a hole in the wall and we would run around among the beautiful flowers, trying not to be seen. If we were caught there, it would result in severe punishment by the nuns. We were forbidden to go into the nuns' garden, but my friends and I just wanted to be rebels and tried to get into the garden every time we could.

The farms had cows, pigs, chickens, hens, and one or two dogs - all cared for by outside men who came daily. Those day men also took care of the vegetable gardens.

The orphan girls who were about ready to graduate - fifth and sixth graders - had to help the men in the flower and vegetable gardens and with the animals. We gathered hen eggs daily and sometimes we got to milk the cows, clean the stalls, and feed the animals. Most of us enjoyed taking care of the animals and vegetable gardens, as it was part of our school curriculum. Our names were posted weekly on a board along with our chores for that week.

The men who had their own quarters were the ones who took care of the invalid and bedridden men and helped the men who were ambulatory. Those men had been raised in an all-boys orphanage about a mile away from the Nazareth House. It was called Termonbaca Orphanage and cared for orphan boys from infants through the sixth grade. After they graduated,

and if no parents came to take them home and no jobs were available outside, they were then employed by the Nazareth House. Their dormitory was similar to the women's dormitory.

All the men and women living in and working at the Nazareth House did so until they became too old and frail to work. Then they went to the ambulatory part of Nazareth House to live out the rest of their lives.

The girls who lived in Nazareth House after sixth and seventh grade had to work until they were able to leave on their own or were placed outside by the nuns to work as maids, shopworkers, or at some other work. Sadly, some of them stayed in Nazareth House and died there. They spent their lives caring for and helping wherever they were needed. They were assigned to specific quarters to work in by the nuns. The girls themselves had no choice in where they worked and most of them stayed in the same quarters all their lives. Once they were too old to work, they stayed at Nazareth House and were cared for. Those girls that were placed outside to work as maids or charwomen and were no longer the responsibility of the Nazareth nuns, weren't as lucky. They were not able to return to Nazareth House once they became too old to work.

Those that stayed at Nazareth House were given some pocket money by the nuns and they were allowed to go to the movies once a month on their day off. Kitchen workers didn't get days off however.

There was a garden where we grew our vegetables. There were cows for milk, pigs for meat, hens for eggs, and chickens for eating on special occasions such as Christmas.

By the time I was thirteen, I had to do chores such as cleaning stalls, gathering eggs, and churning milk for butter. The farm was at the back of the convent and the animals had their own place and caretakers. This is how the nuns were able to get the help needed for everyone who lived in the Nazareth House.

In the kitchen, I worked with Margaret who was like a mum to me. My real mum never visited me until I was fifteen years old. Then she came to visit, expecting to take me home with her. I asked Sister Aiden, the head nun in charge of the orphanage, if I could stay at Nazareth House until I was sure I wanted to go with her. Sister Aiden agreed to have Mum visit me on visiting days, and in the meantime, I left the children's quarters and worked

in the kitchen. This made me sad and I cried, “Oh, Sister, do I have to go? Can’t I stay here until we know if Mum will visit me? She may not.”

Sister agreed to let me stay until I graduated at sixteen. Mum did visit regularly but I still was not keen on leaving Nazareth House, so when the time came for me to leave the school, Margaret took me to work in the kitchen with her. Margaret taught me about cooking and baking while Mum visited me regularly hoping I would go with her.

One day Margaret asked me to deliver a tray to the bedridden women, since the girl who usually delivered meals to them was sick. I had to walk down long corridors past the nuns’ quarters, up three flights of stairs to the top where I was greeted by Monica. Monica was another person who cared for me and helped me. She was tall, with a medium build, and curly black hair turning gray. “Boy,” I thought to myself, “She must have been here a long time.”

She took me into where the meals were prepared. The food was mushy, soft food since most of the women there were unable to feed themselves and their food was made easy for them to chew and swallow. I helped Monica and we chatted and she asked me how I liked working in the kitchen. I told her I liked it but I felt I needed a change. When I saw the women in the beds I was drawn to helping them. I asked Monica what exactly she and the other girls did. She told me all about how they bathe, dress, and feed the women. If they could get out of bed they helped them into a chair. I was in awe about how she seemed to enjoy taking care of the women.

I asked her if she thought Sister Leonard, who was in charge, would let me work there once in a while.

“I don’t see why not. Let me check and I will get back with you,” she said.

I was so excited and said, “Good-bye. Don’t forget.”

“No. I won’t, Ann.”

So, off I went back to the kitchen feeling very different about what I was doing. I wanted to do more, but I was not sure why I was feeling this way. Maybe it was when in school we had to write an essay on what we wanted to do when we grew up. We were in the sixth grade then and I remember writing that I wanted to be a nurse like Florence Nightingale. Her story was one of the books we had to read which I enjoyed. So when I

visited Monica, I felt that was it. I could bathe, feed, and help the women in bed. Right there and then in the kitchen I made up my mind and prayed, "Oh, God in heaven, if you want me out of this kitchen, let me work with the bedridden women who need my help." I knew God was going to help me. I just had to be patient while waiting for the answer from Sister Leonard to tell me if she would let me work with her and Monica.

The orphans growing up in the Nazareth House were not told anything about their background, so I didn't have any information about why, who, when, or what happened to me. We talked among ourselves, trying to understand who brought us here, why we were brought here, what happened that caused us to be brought to live at the orphanage. I always wondered where I came from. I was made to believe I was an orphan and that I had no family, so I came to accept that.

Church was at five p.m. every day. The children in fifth through seventh grade attended. Father John would say and pray the Rosary with the church members and us children. For thirty minutes every day, us children had a place in the church, in the balcony, and three of the Sisters were present with us to make sure we behaved ourselves.

After church we went to the dining room to eat supper, which was leftovers from lunch. Most evenings it was bread pudding, which I enjoyed, hot cocoa, an apple, and an orange. Our breakfasts usually consisted of Corn Flakes. On Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday, we had porridge with salt and milk, a half banana and tea, which was one of my favorites. On Fridays we had a boiled egg, buttered toast, a cut-up apple, an orange, and tea. Our big meal was lunch (dinner) between noon and 1 p.m. On Mondays and Thursdays dinner was vegetable soup, a slice of buttered soda bread, Jell-O custard, and milk. On Tuesdays we had a bowl of beef vegetable stew with milk, and an apple. On Wednesdays we had fried liver with onions, boiled potatoes, root vegetables, Jell-O custard, and milk.

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