

Telephone Interview with Miss Ruby Simon

on July 27, 1983

Ruby Simon and her older brother, Mortimer, entered the Home from Galveston, in 1910 when Miss Simon was seven years old. They had spent the year before with their aunt and grandmother. The father had deserted, and they never heard from him after that. Her older sister, Gladys, was 15 and too old to enter the Home, so she stayed with their mother, who was able to find work as a seamstress in Marshall, Texas. However, after Miss Simon had been in the Home for a year, her mother found work here at Gus Mayer and moved to New Orleans to be near her children.

Miss Simon recalled being placed in the Isolation Ward in the Infirmary when she and Mortimer first came. They were both very sad at leaving their family and very frightened of the new experience, especially being placed in the Ward. Her brother broke away and ran out the front door, running she knew not where. Miss Simon ran after him, and the grown-ups caught up with him and brought him back. Actually, they remained in the Infirmary only a few days instead of the two weeks most children stayed, because Mr. Teller wrote to her mother that they were so clean and well-behaved. Miss Simon recalled that usually when children first came, their heads were shaved to make sure that they did not have head lice.

Boys and girls were still separated when Miss Simon lived in the Home, the girls living on the side of the building facing on Jefferson and the boys on the Leontine side. There was a big courtyard with a fence down the middle. Parents were allowed to visit on alternate Sundays. On Friday nights they always had a little service dinner, with a home baked bread, and she recalled that they cut the bread up in small pieces so each child could have a piece. The Home had its own chapel, which she called the Temple, on the ground floor, where services were held each Saturday morning and where the children were confirmed when they reached thirteen years. She still has the silver thimble which one of the women interested in the Home always gave the girls at their confirmations.

Miss Simon recalled with pleasure Mr. Teller, who was the superintendent when she came. He was very kind and really liked the children. She recalled that when his little girl was born, he brought her down for the children to see when she was less than a week old. She also recalled one occasion when he was away for a while, and the children went out to the levee to gather sacks of shells, which they used to make a path in the courtyard, and how pleased Mr. Teller was with them when he saw it.

Miss Simon was very firm in her dislike of Mr. Vollmer, the superintendent who succeeded Mr. Teller, describing him as very mean and harsh to the children. She recalled that one of her chores as a younger child was to pick up the leaves in the courtyard. She remembered the sycamore tree, which was always shedding leaves and remembers how cold her hands used to get outside picking up those leaves. As she grew older the chores

she recalled were making her own bed every morning and keeping her room clean. Older girls also helped to set the table and to bring the food in from the kitchen to serve the children, though there was staff to prepare the food. While she did not get into trouble, she recalls seeing Mr. Vollmer hit children who were in trouble. One recollection she had was when she and another girl, Mildred Moskowitz, were sewing in the sewing room and did not respond to a bell immediately. Mr. Vollmer came in and when Mildred arose kicked her very hard on her bottom. Miss Simon said that he aimed a kick at her, also, but missed. Another punishment was to sit on the lockers.

In the basement of the Home there were lockers where each child could keep his own private possessions. She remembered that she used to keep her skates there, some books and her crochet hooks and threads. If one were punished, he would have to sit on the locker until excused. Mr. Vollmer also would punish children by not permitting them to see their parents on the alternate Sunday visiting days. Her own mother would not put up with that, and when she came if Mortimer was being punished, as he often was, she would insist that he come outside with her.

While Miss Simon described her brother as the mischievous one and herself as the quiet one, she does recall one prank that she and another girl regularly did. In the storeroom on the ground floor there were barrels of supplies. She remembers that at night she and her friend would sneak into the storeroom, where her friend would swipe an apple and she would swipe a tomato, and then they would crouch on the gallery and eat their stolen fruit. (It is possible, of course, that this actually happened once and that Miss Simon at 81 now recalls it as a recurrent pattern.) She also recalls that once when the children were up in the attic for some reason, they discovered some pictures of Mr. Vollmer which showed that he was bald, but he always wore a toupee. This she connected to another recollection. Children lined up each morning for inspection, i.e. to make sure that their finger nails were clean and their hair brushed, etc. Once Mr. Vollmer thought that Mildred was not clean enough, and he went to pull her dress up and spank her "right there on the line" where boys could observe. According to Miss Simon, Mildred "fought him off" and threatened to pull off his wig if he touched her.

Miss Simon also recalled that Mrs. Vollmer always stayed upstairs in her own apartment and neither she nor her daughter Sophia had anything to do with the children, unlike the Tellers.

There were very pleasurable recollections of a young man named Rosenblum, who worked as a counselor while at Tulane. He would read good books to the children and would make up plays which they would put on in Anniversary Hall, which was on the third floor. Miss Simon still recalls a song she had to sing in one of the plays. It was called, "I'll wrap you in a bundle and take you home with me."

Another pleasant recollection was of the Succah which they had in the courtyard each year at Succoth time. The children were each able to decorate their own tables, and all meals were served out there at Succoth time.

Miss Simon was there for a short while after Mr. Vollmer left. She is convinced that he was caught in some kind of chicanery, and that the Board fired him and told him that he would be arrested if he ever came to town again. (This was apparently the story that was going around amongst the children.) She knows that children were very fond of Mr. Ginsburg, who came later, but she did not approve of him because he walked around the Home without a shirt, clad only in shorts, which she considered "disgusting." (By that time Miss Simon was an adult visitor.)

She thought she had had a very good education, and remembered all her teachers at Newman as being pleasant and competent. It was then a vocational school, and she recalled classes in sewing, cooking and pottery making. At school she was very good friends with Jean Avegno, and they were called the Gold Dust twins, because they were both blond and always together.

Miss Simon's brother left the Home about two years before she did, and then she left to join her mother. She missed her friends at the Home and used to come to visit them for the first few years after she left.

Miss Simon never married, nor did her older sister Gladys. Both lived with their mother until first Gladys and then their mother died. Her brother died when he was 48 years old. He did marry, but he used to spend every Saturday with their mother. Miss Simon says that she and her brother were also very close, which she attributes to their having been placed together.

Miss Simon is now retired and lives alone at 224 S. Solomon St., Apt. 1.