Father Flanagan's More Perfect Union: Pushing the Frontiers of Racial and Religious Inclusion at Boys Town

The U.S. government produced two films about Boys Town shortly after Father Flanagan's death on May 15, 1948. The first is silent color footage of President Truman's railway tour to the Pacific Coast, which included stops in Omaha and Boys Town on June 6, 1948. The film, made at the special request of the Naval Aide to the president, Admiral Robert Dennison, captured Boys Town in the wake of their shocking loss of their beloved Father Flanagan.[1] This window into his "City of Little Men" shows the president among the citizens of Boys Town. They are boys of many ages, talents, personalities, races, and, most assuredly, religions. It is a portrait of the world's most powerful figure in fellowship with his fellow American citizens and his fellow human beings.

[1] President Harry S. Truman Visits Indiana, Nebraska, Idaho, and Washington State, June 1948, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/55304HarryTrumanFootage.

Seven years later, in 1955, the U.S. Army newsreel *The Big Picture* produced a feature on Boys Town to highlight the 353rd MP Company, organized under the provisions of the Reserve Forces Act of 1955.[2] President Truman, in this more candid raw footage, was received by a Boys Town citizenry of all races, creeds, and colors. The *Big Picture* newsreel presents a "City of Little White Men" that its own residents would not recognize. In the whole of this newsreel there is only one boy who might read to viewers as being a person of color—if they happened to see this boy at all.

These contrasting depictions of Boys Town represent the distance between Father Flanagan's truly egalitarian America, where boys would not be limited, excluded, or injured by prejudice and an America whose white majority equated Americanness with white Protestantism. What might have looked like a radical social experiment was, in fact, a response to the dangers that prejudice posed to both the health of the boys and the health of American democracy. Rooted in his simple principle, "[L]ove of God and fellow man are the essentials of every good life,"[3] Father Flanagan ministered to the boys in his care, and to the nation he loved, through this powerful prayer:

"Let us take these innocent young minds which God has entrusted to our care and mold them into clean active minds filled with beauty and love—beauty of life and love of our neighbor and our fellow man. Let the strength of understanding and love crush this foul seed of prejudice. If we can but do this the future generation will be broadminded, not prejudiced, and the world will be a better, more beautiful, more peaceful place in which to live."[4]

[2] "Big Picture: Boys Town, USA," National Archives and Records Administration via Internet Archives, https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.2569615.
[3] "Father Flanagan's Page," *Father Flanagan's Boys Home Journal,* February 1, 1937, 2.
[4] Undated quote, Box B. 19.1: Directors, Father Flanagan, Writings, No Dates, Boys Town Hall of History Archives.

Stories of Father Flanagan's interreligious and interracial community building are familiar to many who know of his pathbreaking work in the care of neglected and abandoned boys and his extensive, selfless public service at Boys Town and beyond. When told together, these stories register the strength, humanity, and effectiveness with which Father Flanagan moved America's deep historical currents of division toward greater understanding, broadmindedness, and peace. The young citizens of Boys Town lived as brothers and as "one nation under God" ready to show the world around them how to do the same. Father Flanagan's approach to inclusion is timeless and it lives on in the many people whose lives he touched.

Race, Religion, and Community in America

The United States was a highly segregated society that was resistant to integration during the whole of Father Flanagan's life in America. Omaha, Nebraska was situated at the heart of a divided America. Even Father Flanagan's famous saying, "There is no such thing as a bad boy, only bad environment, bad modeling, and bad teaching…" posed a challenge to mainstream ideas about race. Reverend J.R. Perkins of the First Congregational Church in Council Bluffs had his own approach to "the boy problem" which he elaborated in a speech to the Omaha Rotarians titled "Before the Boy" in 1925. The former prison warden turned pastor represented the mainstream view that individual aptitudes, personality, and potential for achievement had a biological basis rooted in a eugenic conception of "race." Acknowledging and dismissing the power of "the environment factor" that Father Flanagan emphasized, Reverend Perkins asserted "the hereditary problem is the real problem that we have to face in dealing with the youth of today…. You cannot take a boy of low biological background and make him into a superman. Our problem is to see that better and better human material shall be the products of the future." The "better human material" were the graduates of Vassar, Harvard, and Yale—overwhelmingly wealthy white U.S.-born Protestants who, in recent years, had been having fewer children. Where Father Flanagan believed in the inherent value and potential of every boy regardless of his background, Reverend Perkins insisted that there were definitely bad boys and they were neither white nor Protestant. Father Flanagan envisioned an intercultural and interreligious America while Reverend Perkins stoked fear that America would be "overrun with a hybrid and polyglot people."[5]

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[5] "Calls Heredity Problem Greatest in World Today," *Omaha World Herald*, Thursday, February 26, 1925, 3.

Father Flanagan opened his Boys Home during World War I in what had been the German American Home. Germans and even German Americans were held in suspicion of being agents of the Kaiser. Anti-German feeling was so strong in Nebraska that the state prohibited instruction in the German language until the Supreme Court overturned the law in *Meyer v. Nebraska* in 1923. Admittedly, with just $90 and five boys in his care, Father Flanagan was in no position to turn down the offer of a space for a home, but situating his fledgling boys' home in proximity to German Americans signaled his unwillingness to be swayed by widespread prejudices.

The end of World War I brought a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska and several other states. In a study of contrasts, Boys Town was growing in size and diversity in 1921, the same year that the Klan opened its Omaha headquarters and recruited new members. Statewide ads called upon "reputable citizens" to apply for Klan membership. All that was required was a "yes" to the question, "do you believe in white supremacy?"[6] By 1923 the Klan had 45,000 new members with chapters in Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, Fremont, York, North Platte, Scottsbluff, and Hastings.[7] Newspaper accounts of cross burnings and Klan conventions became more and more frequent. On one night alone, April 24, 1924, crosses burned in Beatrice, Milford, Seward, Beaver Creek, Barneston, and Hebron. A few weeks later, on July 25, about ten thousand Nebraskans watched two hundred Klansman on parade in McCook, where they held a rally promoting white Americanism.[8] The Klan had especially great animosity toward African Americans, Jewish Americans, and Catholics—groups who were well-represented minorities at Boys Town.

Nebraska law did not prohibit Father Flanagan from creating an inter-religious, multiethnic community of boys who considered themselves brothers. But referring to the community as a "family" pushed against social and legal norms. Nebraska was one of thirty-eight states to impose miscegenation laws to prevent interracial marriage and what many understood as "race suicide" through the birth of biracial children. The first miscegenation law, passed in 1911,

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[6] "Organize the Ku Klux Klan: Nebraskans Solicited as Members in State Organization," *The Kearney Daily Hub*, July 1, 1921, 2.
[7] Michael W Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," *Nebraska History* 66 (1985): 234-256.
[8] Michael W Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," *Nebraska History* 66 (1985): 234-256.

prohibited marriage between white and Black people. The law was amended in 1929 to prohibit a white person from marrying anyone who had one Black, Chinese, or Japanese great-grandparent.[9] The law perpetuated the dangerous belief that white people, and American society, had to be protected from the "pollutants" of non-white people. It interfered with families, which Father Flanagan held up as the most important element of any society, and it perpetuated the dangerous falsehood of white supremacy—that white people were "better" and more deserving of the best of what America had to offer. The law affirmed the Klan's false claims that white Americans were under threat from their non-white neighbors and were justified in defending themselves through segregation, discrimination, and even acts of violence against members of American minority groups.

Father Flanagan spoke clearly and plainly against both racism and religious intolerance, knowing the potential for backlash from those who defended the status quo. He presciently foretold, "I … see danger for all in an ideology which discriminates against anyone politically or economically because he or she was born into the 'wrong' race, has skin of the 'wrong' color, or worships at the 'wrong' altar." What makes Father Flanagan remarkable in the history of American civil rights leadership is the extent to which he put his calls for liberty and justice for all into action. Father Flanagan's Boys Home and Boys Town itself were among the very first—and all but certainly *the* first—fully desegregated communities in the United States. This monumental feat has been eclipsed by Boys Town's equally great achievement in raising homeless and neglected boys to become exemplary U.S. citizens. To be sure, there were places in early and mid-twentieth century America, such as federal government housing installations, where people of different races and ethnicities lived in the same community, even in close proximity, but within racially segregated "sections" and social spaces. Jazz, blues, and other "Black music" was prohibited in jukeboxes on many government installations, as were interracial dances.[10] Nowhere outside of Boys Town did one find a community in the United States where respect for religious diversity and racial integration were not only allowed or encouraged but *expected* of every member of the Boys Town community.

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[9] James Browning, "Anti Miscegenation Laws in the United States," *Duke Bar Journal* 26:41 (1951), 28.
[10] Heather Fryer, *Perimeters of Democracy: Inverse Utopias and the Wartime Social Landscape in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 190-200.

Father Flanagan's American Values

THE USUAL IRISH WAY OF DOING THINGS.

Father Flanagan was an outsider when he emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland. In 1910, 14.8% of Nebraska residents were foreign-born whites, 4.6% of whom were Irish like Father Flanagan and his family.[11] Irish men and women formed a sizable share of the American working class, the laboring poor, and those struggling to emerge from poverty. Irish Americans of every class experienced discrimination and some limitations on their economic, political, and social mobility due to anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments. There was a saying in the 1910s, as Father Flanagan was getting his bearings in his adopted country, that there was "no Irish heaven in the U.S."[12]

The difficulties for Irish immigrants and Irish Americans were rooted in unfounded beliefs hat Irish people were not Nordic and, therefore, not "white." It was commonplace for the Irish to be depicted in popular media as ape-like figures that were intoxicated and armed and dangerous, or, as this famous political cartoon by Thomas Nast suggested, they were both. The message was that the Irish were not quite fully human, could harm white Americans, and were to be kept on the margins of mainstream society.[13] Such depictions were less common in the 1910s, when

[11] United States Bureau of the Census, "Reports by States with Statistics for Counties, Cities, and Other Civil Divisions: Nebraska-Wyoming, Alaska, Hawaii and Porto Rico," (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1911), 43-44.
[12] Kirby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 499-502; Jay Dolan, *The Irish Americans: a History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 133-34; 91-92.
[13] "The Usual Way of Doing Things, by Thomas Nast, 1871. Source: The Ohio State University.

Father Flanagan was establishing himself as a Catholic priest, a naturalized U.S. citizen, and a champion for neglected and abandoned boys, but they persisted in stereotypes of the Irish as drinkers, fighters, beggars, and followers of religious superstitions.

Most of America's Protestant majority viewed Catholicism with suspicion until at least the 1930s, though many had respect for individual Catholic priests as community leaders. Catholics were portrayed as followers of superstition based on a deliberate mischaracterization of sacraments and other religious practices as believing in "primitive magic." Serialized fiction and political cartoons represented Catholics as so religious as to be incapable of scientific thought or modern reasoning. Their tendency to have larger families was looked down upon in a nation moving from large families of farmers to smaller urban-industrial households, leading to labeling as "poor and backward"—much like America's non-white racial minorities. The most potent component of American anti-Catholicism, however, was the charge that American Catholics' first and only loyalty was to the Pope, which precluded any loyalty to the United States. Catholic schools and children's homes regularly came under fire as the tendrils of a great Papal mission to convert and bring America's youth into the Roman fold—and with it American wealth, power, and sovereignty. By this logic, all non-Catholic Americans were to fear their Catholic neighbors as conquerors soldiering for the Vatican. Father Flanagan was just one of a multitude of examples of prominent Catholics who disproved this dangerous myth, yet he and many American Catholics remained subject to it for many decades, even as late as 1960 when John F. Kennedy was held in suspicion for running for president.

Father Flanagan was aware of such stereotypes but let his experiences guide his thinking and actions, not public anxieties about race and religion. Reverend Francis P. Duffy, known for his remarkable service to the men of the Sixty-Ninth New York Regiment as their chaplain during World War I, was a steadfast mentor, spiritual advisor, and role model to young Edward Flanagan. As a devoted Catholic priest, Father Duffy provided guidance and comfort to Protestant and Jewish soldiers, along with his fellow Catholics with equal care for all. Father Duffy served as Father Flanagan's academic tutor when a long bout of illness slowed down his studies, and he credited this gifted priest with challenging him to sharpen his thinking and to make the best of the circumstances in which he found himself. Father Duffy imagined the

interreligious world differently from most other people and most other priests. Father Flanagan allowed himself the same expansiveness of the imagination to build brotherhood across lines of racial and religious division so that the people he encountered would feel wholly accepted and valued in their community as they were accepted and valued by God.[14]

Before Father Flanagan began his ministry, he worked as a clerk in the bookkeeping department of the Cudahy Packing Company in South Omaha. The packinghouses drew workers from all racial and ethnic groups, making it an uncommonly desegregated area. In addition to African Americans from the southern United States and established immigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, England, and Ireland, Germans, new waves of immigrants from Italy, Poland, Bohemia, Russia, Latin America, Japan, and Korea made South Omaha an increasingly diverse multicultural enclave.[15] It was in settings like South Omaha where young Edward Flanagan solidified and tested his core beliefs about what it really meant to be American. "We give meaning to Americanism" he would conclude, "by giving others the same consideration we demand for ourselves."[16] This statement sounds simple on its face but within the social and political realities in his lifetime this would prove difficult for many. Life at Boys Town had the potential to teach people the way to meaningful Americanism.

Boys Town: Inclusion by Design

Boys Town was an intentionally integrated city—which Father Flanagan moved from Omaha to Overlook Farm outside of the city to extricate Boys Town from segregation and discrimination of all kinds. Father Flanagan rejected religious sectarianism in favor of religious freedom for every boy, but he did insist that every citizen of Boys Town practice a religion so that he would be fortified by and accountable to a power higher than his young human self. This deeply committed Catholic priest oversaw the construction of a Protestant church and a Jewish temple near the Catholic chapel so that every boy could meet this requirement.

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[14] Willets, "Father Flanagan of Boys Town," Chapter Two, 24-26, unpublished manuscript based on interviews with Father Edward J. Flanagan, Boys Town Hall of History.

[15] Omaha Directory Company, *Omaha City Directory, Including South Omaha, 1909* (Omaha: Omaha Directory Company, 1909), 383; Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey, "Reconnaissance Survey of Portions of South Omaha," Omaha, Mead and Hunt Inc., 2005, 5.

[16] "Father Flanagan Sayings," *Boys Town Times*, September 24, 1948, 1.

The result was a “City of Little Men” that was supervised, but self-governing. The mayor of Boys Town was elected from among the boys who resided there, as were an array of town officials invested with decision-making power, including legislators, judges, and law enforcement. Self-reliance, self-determination, self-esteem, and exemplary citizenship were the goals for every boy, regardless of religion or race. Every boy was part of the community’s mosaic; their differences made Boys Town an enriching and beautiful place to live. No boy would be expected to suppress their colors, hues, accents, personalities, heritages, beliefs, or traditions. No boy would be allowed to infringe on another boy’s right to be his full self. According to all available historical records, aside from moments of teasing, the citizens of Boys Town treated one another with care and respect. In the words of alumnus Harold Popp, life at Boys Town was about “Discipline. Not being prejudiced. Caring about one another, you know. We had a bond. Fight like hell with each other but when the chips are down, you wanted everybody to do well.”[17] It was American democracy, writ small, practiced by children who outshone many of the nation’s adults. Boys Town became a place of hope for a more just future and the boys were enthusiastic participants in this mission.

This enthusiasm predates Father Flanagan’s move to Overlook Farm. Father Flanagan’s Boys Home Peace Conference in 1928 was a clear reflection of the positive influence of racial integration and interreligious community. Modeled after the League of Nations, twenty-four Boys Home delegates represented the world’s races and nationalities in collectively determining the rights of homeless boys. In many cases, the delegates’ last names suggested they were representing the country of their ancestry. This brought to light the fact the Boys’ Home, like the United States, was a unified community formed of people from many backgrounds. In the case of the delegates, they included Greek, Croatian, Belgian, Canadian, Slovakian, Dutch, English, German, and Norwegian. One delegate, Virgil Nixon, represented African American perspectives and Robert Maxwell represented Native Americans. The delegates’ conclusions reflected Father Flanagan’s inclusive ethos. Homeless boys, they determined, are equally entitled to success and happiness as a boy raised by his parents. All homeless boys are “on a parity” and deserved a stable home and an equal opportunity to “make good in life” regardless of their race,

[17] Harold Popp interviewed by Tom Lynch, July 17, 1997, Box E, 13-3, 16, Boys Town Hall of History.

color, or creed. Their resolution included a statement of gratitude to Father Flanagan for opening the Boys Home to all "regardless of our religious beliefs, or the color of our skins, or the birthplace of our parents." These young, engaged citizens asked Father Flanagan to send their resolutions to the League of Nations in Geneva with their hopes that their deliberations would be as productive and harmonious as theirs.[18]

Father Flanagan himself identified as a proud Catholic American of Irish birth and made no secret of Boys Town's uncommon diversity. A Stanton, Nebraska paper reported in 1929 that two thousand boys had been cared for at Boys Town, representing thirty-three states, Canada, Mexico, and China. The boys represented thirty nationalities, and 65 percent practiced religions other than Catholicism.[19] Father Flanagan did not even tone down his integrationist mission in fundraising messages; an article highlighting the campaign to raise $400,000 for new buildings stated that the boys home was "open to boys of all races, religions and color [sic]."[20]

John Ferrald came to Boys Town from Texas, where racial segregation was strictly enforced. He found Father Flanagan's claims about inclusion to be completely true. He bunked next to a Black boy in the dormitory and the two became best friends. Ferrald, who went on to become mayor of Boys Town and eventually a priest himself, said "[Fr. Flanagan] didn't pay attention to the color of anybody."[21]

John Bauer, who also shared a dormitory with boys from many religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, found that also he did not pay much attention to "the color of anybody." Despite his early exposure to mainstream thinking about race and religion, John saw himself and the Black, Jewish, and other white boys at Boys Town as "a person, that's all you are." The bonds between boys at Boys Town made it hard to understand, even as an adult many decades later, why people "cannot get along" and how they believe that "somebody is a different race or a

[18] "Homeless Boys Hold Peace Parley," Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal, (December 1928): 14.
[19] "Overlook Farm Today," *Stanton Register*, April 4, 1929, 3.
[20] "Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Band to be a Feature of Frontier Days," *The Tribune-Sentinel,* July 24, 1930. 2.
[21] Fr. John L. Ferrald interviewed by Steve Szmrecsanyi, Box E 13.3, 21, Boys Town Hall of History.

different color, that there's something wrong with them." These kinds of divisions, he said are "what's wrong with our country."[22]

When the Boys Town Band performed for President Calvin Coolidge in August 1927, America caught a glimpse of how to make things "right with our country." Father Flanagan foregrounded Boys Town's racial diversity. When asked about the Home, Father Flanagan told the President that the home was "non-sectarian and cared for boys of all races, color, and religions" clearly and without qualification. Father Flanagan's musicians were intermixed during their performances by height and instrument, instead of being grouped by white and non-white.[23] As unusual as it was to see a racially integrated band—or to see racial integration in any part of American life in the 1920s—President Coolidge was so taken with Father Flanagan's boys that one year later, in August 1928, he met with the band once again while they were on tour in Wisconsin. President Coolidge remembered the eleven boys he met the previous summer and greeted all of them warmly, including drummer Willie Harris, who was Black. "Do you make the sticks fly as fast as you used to?" the President asked with admiration for Harris's musicianship. He stood next to nine-year-old Al Kerchival, who was new on the tour this year as a comedian, and whose performance was a hit with the most powerful man in the United States.[24] President Coolidge, like Father Flanagan, did not call for the Black performers to stand at the back of the photo or to be grouped apart from their white counterparts. Encouraged by Father Flanagan's unimpeachable moral force, President Coolidge participated in at least this moment of racial integration.

Father Flanagan's model of an inclusive America did not change the realities of race in the United States. But it did bring some remarkable results. The governors of nearly every Midwestern state—who rarely agreed on anything—endorsed the Boys Home as a premier program for the care of homeless boys. So too did Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish community leaders across the United States,[25] whose own missions for the care of children were

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[22] John Bauer interviewed by Tom Lynch, July 25, 1997, Boys Town Oral History Project, Box E. 13.3, 16, Boys Town Hall of History,

[23] "Father Flanagan's Boys' Band: Homeless Boys Serenade Nation's Chief Executive," F*ather Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal* v. 8 no 8 (September 1927): 8.

[24] "President Coolidge Meets Father Flanagan's Boys," *Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal* v. 9 no. 8 (September 1928): 3.

[25] "Father Flanagan's Boys Home Has Tenth Birthday," *Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal* v. 8 no. 11 (December 1927): 5.

overwhelmingly created by and for their co-religionists, with nonsectarianism usually out of the question.

Anti-Asian sentiment spiked in the early 1920s as Nebraska and other western states warned against the "yellow peril." Politicians and newspapers made unsupported claims that Asian immigrants were on a mission to take over the western U.S. for themselves, or for their ancestral nations of China or Japan. The Supreme Court ruled in 1921 and 1923 that people of Asian ancestry were ineligible to become naturalized U.S. citizens because they were neither "Black" nor "white." This meant that to many Americans, immigrants and U.S. born citizens were viewed as dangerous outsiders who were not deserving of the same rights as white Americans. The Nebraska Legislature passed alien land laws in 1921 that prevented non-U.S. citizens from owning land in the state. Although the wording of the law affected all immigrants, Asians were the only ones barred from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens, which had the effect of keeping Asian immigrants out of the state. Nebraska's marriage laws also prohibited unions between Caucasians and Chinese or Japanese spouses, reinforcing the idea that people of Asian ancestry were outsiders to civic and family life.

Boys Town welcomed its first citizen of Chinese ancestry, Tat Wong, amidst these heightened anti-Asian sentiments in 1921. His photo was featured on the front of the August edition of the *Boys Town Journal* and an article on page two announced the arrival of "Our Friend Tat Wong." Wong's father brought Tat to Boys Town, possibly due to the stresses of single parent. His mother was in China, possibly the consequence of tight restrictions on immigration from Asia. The article reported that Tat was teased a bit when he first met the other boys "but soon made friends...and he seems to be as contented and happy as any American boy who seeks refuge in a Home for Boys." Wong's father visited him regularly, and Wong expressed his wish to one day return to China, where he was born, and "where [people] will not tease or jeer him."[26] Father Flanagan stood against racial discrimination, but he did not allow anyone to pretend that it did not exist.

Father Flanagan did not proselytize for the Catholic faith and there was no religious litmus test to

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[26] "Our New Friend Tat Wong," *Father Flanagan's Boys Home Journal* v. 4 no. 7 (August 1921): 1-2.

be admitted to Boys Town: "we take all classes. We ask no questions whether a boy is white, black, or brown. We ask not if he is Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Mexican or Chinese. If a boy is in need, we take him in and endeavor to give him a good home and educate him." [27] Realizing that he was just one person, Father Flanagan sought leaders, teachers, and mentors for the boys from many different backgrounds and experiences. The boys would not only have a diverse group of friends, but they would also be in regular contact with community leaders from many backgrounds who could expand their imaginations as Father Duffy had expanded his.

Shortly after opening the Boys Home in 1917, Father Flanagan received a visit from Omaha musician Dan Desdunes, who offered to serve as band leader and music teacher. Desdunes's offer would seem impossible to refuse. The classically trained musician and former New Orleans music teacher took Omaha by storm when he assumed leadership of the Omaha Military Band, changed the name to the Dan Desdunes Band which, in 1918, was recognized as "Omaha's Official Band" by the Chamber of Commerce. Desdunes was beloved by the Omaha public and so well respected among musicians that he made Omaha a center for jazz music and culture. But Desdunes was a Black musician—and it was one thing for white families to be entertained by Desdunes and quite another for white families to put their children under his instruction.

Desdunes, like Father Flanagan, was not one to tolerate racial prejudice. He had challenged segregation by taking a seat in a white compartment of a train in 1892. Though his case never went to trial, it paved the way for the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.[28] His history as an inspiring music teacher and a bold desegregationist made Desdunes an ideal role model for the young Americans in Father Flanagan's care. Desdunes toured with the integrated Boys Town Band and Father Flanagan underscored that Desdunes would be leading the band in all of the advance press releases: "The show and songs were written by Dan Desdunes, well known colored musician and showman." [29] Under his direction, Boys Town musicians received first-rate instruction from a

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[27] "Religion, Color of Homeless Lads Disregarded at Boys Town,"

[28] Jesse J Otto, "Dan Desdunes: New Orleans Civil Rights Activist and 'The Father of Negro Musicians of Omaha,'" *Nebraska History* 92 (2011): 106-117.

[29] "Father Flanagan and Homeless Boys Coming," *Wisner News-Chronicle*, July 38, 1927, 3.

musical master and saw for themselves that there was a very wide gulf between stereotypes of African Americans as unintelligent and unsuited for leadership and real African American people with immense talents, wisdom, and capacity to teach those with the capacity to see race and racism for what they are and to move past them.

Henry Monsky was a visible partner in building and fundraising for Boys Town. Monsky was a leading Jewish philanthropist and community leader. He, like Father Flanagan, proudly embraced his heritage, evangelized for the principles of Americanism, faced the realities of discrimination head-on and supported the work of the Anti-Defamation League while forming community with others. [30] In a short speech at the annual B'nai B'rith dance in 1922, Monsky said, "A Jew must expect to encounter prejudice because he is in the minority. He must fight prejudice with truth." In the same speech, he denounced the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska and across the U.S.[31] Father Flanagan was open about his friendship with Monsky and about Monsky's support for Boys Town. The *Boys Town Home Journal* included a photo and note of congratulations to Monsky when he was named president of the Omaha Boy Scouts, referring to him as "Omaha attorney, and one of our real friends"—as well as the head of a rival Scout troop.[32] Monsky delivered the 1942 commencement address at the ceremony for Boys Town grade school and high school graduations.[33] Father Flanagan made no secret of the contributions of the Jewish community to the welfare of boys. Noting the relatively small number of Jewish boys in a speech in Dublin in 1946, Father Flanagan explained, "Jewish parents showed a great sense of moral responsibility toward their children's upbringing."[34]

Kiyoshi Patrick Okura

Patrick Okura, head of psychological services at Boys Town, was just the talented mental health professional Father Flanagan needed to lead Boys Town's counseling programs during World War II. Bringing Okura to Boys Town, however, presented risk to Father Flanagan's larger program. Okura and his wife, Lily, were Japanese Americans who had made their home in Los

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[30] Henry W. Levy, "Henry Monsky 1890-1947," *American Jewish Yearbook.*
[31] "B'nai B'rith Dance is Banner Jewish Event," *Omaha World-Herald,* May 31, 1922, 14.
[32] "Friend of Home Heads Boy Scouts," *Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal*, vol. 7 no.1 (February 1927): 15.
[33] "Henry Monsky Congratulates Boys Town Graduates," *The Jewish Press*, June 5, 1942.
[34] "Father Flanagan Honors American Jews in Speech," *The Jewish Press*, July 5, 1948.

Angeles prior to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Like nearly 120,000 other West Coast residents of Japanese descent, Okura was in an incarceration camp when Father Flanagan learned of his much-needed skills. Father Flanagan would eventually assist many Japanese Americans in leaving the camps and restarting their lives at Boys Town or elsewhere. In the end it was his advocacy for the Okuras that reflected the depth of Father Flanagan's commitment to racial justice.

In 1939, the Los Angeles Civil Service Commission hired Okura as a personnel technician, making Okura the first person of Japanese ancestry to hold an administrative position in Los Angeles city government. In his first two years of employment, Okura was a respected professional who earned two promotions and successfully hired more qualified Japanese Americans for city positions. He had good relationships with his co-workers, who affectionally referred to him as their Irish friend "O'Kura." That changed in February 1942, when journalist Drew Pearson reported that a Japanese American man, posing as an Irishman named "Patrick O'Kura," spearheaded the infiltration of the Los Angeles municipal power and water systems by hiring fifty qualified employees who, Pearson claimed, were really "saboteurs." Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron called twice for "the most dangerous Japanese in the city" to resign, but Okura refused. Instead, he was granted a leave of absence from the city so that he could be evacuated to the Santa Anita racetrack, where the Okuras would live in a lightly painted horse stall before being transported to a more desolate camp in the interior West.[35]

Bowron pressed the matter by testifying before the Dies Committee on Un-American Propaganda Activities in 1943 that Father Flanagan had influenced Okura's release to Boys Town, "a place where he is influencing the philosophy of the future citizens of this country, in an institution that cares for boys." Worse, Okura was near the "vital nerve center" of Omaha. The FBI found no truth to Bowron's charges, but some Nebraskans, upon reading the news of the hearings, wrote to Father Flanagan in protest. Father Flanagan returned each letter stating kindly, but firmly, "I don't think…that we should be a party to condemning people until they are proven guilty, and I am sure this is your attitude also."

[35] Okura's leave was originally for one year. Documentation in the Boys Town Hall of History suggests that Father Flanagan had to aid Okura in arranging for it to be extended (Okura 1981: 1-4; Hosokawa 1969).

Father Flanagan had no time to navigate bystanders' racial anxieties. The Welfare Department was down to three staff members to do all of the casework for all of the boys. Okura's key role in designing and delivering psychological services to the boys made him one of the public faces of Boys Town over his seventeen years in leadership. He recalled in 1959 that he sometimes received correspondence addressed to "Fr. O'Kura" or "Brother O'Kura" because he seemed so much a part of Father Flanagan's and, after 1948, Father Wegner's team.[36] Patrick Okura retained the position of staff psychologist for seventeen years. The Japanese Americans who came to Boys Town were not just housed in a corner of the campus. They became integral to the operation of the village, and they became teachers, mentors, and champions of the boys. Kazuo Ikebatsu and Patrick Okura both led Boy Scout troops at Boys Town and Jerry Hashii and Harry Kodama taught and mentored boys in the agriculture program. The federal government would find in the 1980s that the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans resulted from "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership."[37] In the midst of this, Father Flanagan showed his City of Little Men that racial prejudice was a dangerous illusion by giving them the opportunity of being supported and mentored by talented Japanese American men.

The value of this leadership was not just symbolic. Harold Popp went on to be a leader of young men as a high school football and basketball coach. Aside from discipline, "not being prejudiced" and "[caring] about one another" were the greatest influences from his time at Boys Town. When Popp became a coach one half to nearly all of his players were Black. Popp attributed his success in building relationships to "the background that [he] had at Boys Town where [he] could go in there and feel comfortable." He continued, "I was very successful in that area, because of Boys Town, because I had friends that were black here and I went over to an all black area. I didn't have any problems, because they could tell if you're prejudiced."[38] Popp's leadership, and that of his fellow Boys Town alums, created more spaces in the world where

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[36] "Mixture of East and West—With an Irish Flavor," *The Benson Sun,* March 19, 1959, 23.
[37] Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Washington D.C.: Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997), 459.
[38] Harold Popp interviewed by Tom Lynch, July 17, 1997, Box E, 13-3, 16, Boys Town Hall of History.

young people were treated as people and not as social categories or pegs on a social hierarchy. Boys Town alums were creating places of parity.

Boys arrived from all walks of life as equals. There was no arguing that boys of every race and creed were equal citizens of Boys Town. The Boys Town newspapers did not take up race or religious differences as a topic because there were no questions about the rights and privileges to be accorded each citizen. While the world outside of Boys Town negotiated segregation and inclusion, the citizens of Boys Town were expected to do nothing more—or less—than give others the same consideration they demanded for themselves.

Standing for Justice

Father Flanagan did not just promote religious and racial integration among the boys. He lived it publicly, through his words, his actions, and his praise for the people he worked with from all faiths and backgrounds. One such leader was Rabbi Frederick Cohn of Temple Israel whose leadership in the realms of social work, scouting, and charitable giving made him a natural ally to Father Flanagan, but it was Cohn's work to expose the dangerous illogic of racism and religious intolerance that truly united the two. Rabbi Cohn denounced the racial pseudoscience that held that the Nordic race was biologically superior to others as a falsehood that bred "war and race hatred."[39] He promoted interreligious harmony in public presentations about the commonalities across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and supported interfaith marriage–despite both being controversial outside and within the Jewish community.[40] One of the seven speakers celebrating Rabbi Cohn's twenty-five years of service in 1929, Father Flanagan described his Jewish counterpart as a "public spirited citizen" representing the best of America. Father Flanagan lauded the Jewish leader as "an inspiration to others to follow onward and upward

[39] "Cohn Deplores Theory of Race Superiority," *Omaha World Herald,* February 25, 1925, 3.
[40] "Rabbi Gives View on Intermarriage," *The Jewish Press,* November 10, 1927, 1.

toward a life of real social betterment and intellectual endeavor, thus to improve and place on a higher plane our citizenship of tomorrow."[41]

The admiration between the two anti-discrimination leaders was mutual. Rabbi Cohn attended the dedication of four new buildings at Boys Town in 1930. He, along with Bishop James F. Rummel, was one of the two clergy at the event and, with Henry Monsky representing the B'nai B'rith, was one of two Jews. Governor Arthur J. Weaver and Mayor Richard L. Metcalfe joined this celebration of Boys Town's success as a non-sectarian effort that did not take support from church, city, state, or community chest. Boys Town was created by and for people of all races and religions. Its success in caring for three thousand boys in a growing village valued at nearly $750,000 was proof that pluralism and diversity were a source of strength when segregationists were not using it to generate division and animosity.[42]

It would take more than four buildings at Boys Town to convince much of America to end segregation, which was deeply embedded in many of the communities where Boys Town athletes and artists traveled. Charlie Mitchell was on the Boys Town football team. When they traveled to Wheeling, West Virginia they encountered the pain of segregation. The Black players were barred from staying in the white hotel. Father Flanagan's request that the Black players be admitted to the hotel restaurant to share a meal with their team first went unheeded, but after much persistence the hotel manager agreed to allow the Black Boys Town team members to enter the restaurant if they dined in a corner where no one could see. When Charlie and his teammates came down for breakfast, Father Flanagan and the Black players were sitting in the middle of the dining room, visible to all who entered and passed by the restaurant."[43]

Oscar Flakes went on tour with the Boys Town variety show with Father Flanagan and six other boys. When they went to eat breakfast in Devil's Lake, South Dakota, Flakes, who is Black, was directed to eat in the kitchen because the hotel did not serve "colored people." Father Flanagan did not argue, but summoned all the boys to the kitchen where the group would eat together. The

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[41] "Banquet Marks 25 Years as Rabbi," *Father Flanagan's Boys' Home Journal* v. 9 no 3 (April 1929): 7.
[42] "Dignitaries Dedicate Four New Buildings and Honor Father Flanagan's Boys Home," *The Benson Times,* November 7, 1930, 5.
[43] Jim Mitchell interview (excerpt), Boys Town Oral History Project, 1987, Boys Town Hall of History.

hotel staff protested, insisting that Flakes eat in the kitchen and Father Flanagan and the white boys eat in the dining room. Although their food was already prepared, Father Flanagan walked out stating “if this boy can’t eat out here and we can’t eat in there, then we don’t eat here at all.” All seven boys followed. Later that night, after the boys’ performance, the owner of the restaurant made a $500 donation to Boys Town. Father Flanagan and the boys returned to the restaurant and all eight of them, including Oscar Flakes, ate together in the dining room for the remaining two days of their stay.[44]

When four Black players were denied lodging at a hotel in Washington, D.C. in 1945, Father Flanagan ensured that they would not be segregated in a “colored hotel.” Just as their white teammates were feeling sorry for these four players a long black limousine pulled up, opened the door for the exiled players, and took them to stay at an unknown location that was clearly luxurious.[45] Although the stretch limousine might have been a bit unusual, making adjustments to accommodate all of Boys Towns citizens without accommodating segregation made courage, flexibility, ingenuity, and commitment to principles part of what it meant to be an American citizen raised at Boys Town.

Father Flanagan’s strong stance against racial segregation was not a single incident and it was not a personal mission that ended when he died. Being part of the world-famous Boys Town Choir also involved resisting segregation when they went on tour. Norb Letter, who made travel arrangements for the Choir, described the system that the choir used to check into hotels. One of the adults would sign the register, pick up the keys, and take them to the kids who were waiting on the bus. From there, the kids went straight to their rooms—“no hanging around in the lobby or that sort of thing”—so that the hotel management would not take issue with the number of Black guests in their lodging.

Once, in Evansville, Indiana, Letter took the Choir through this usual protocol. He had informed the hotel that the Boys Town Choir was a multiracial group and that Black singers would be on the tour. The hotel manager confronted Letter as the boys were going into their hotel rooms,

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[44] Interview with Oscar Flakes, History of Boys Town Oral History Project, 1987, Boys Town Hall of History.
[45] Jim Mitchell interview (excerpt), Boys Town Oral History Project, 1987, Boys Town Hall of History.

saying that there were more than three Black choir members in the hotel. Letter recalled saying that he would not have told the hotel manager there would be only three because “I don’t know how many colored kids I got, I’ve never counted them so I don’t know how many I got. But I know I told you that I would have some—you remember that don’t you?”

The hotel insisted that the Black choir members move to another hotel. Letter agreed on the condition that he be given one hour to vacate the premises. “What do you want an hour for?” the hotel manager asked. “I want to call this army base right across the river in Kentucky and I’m going to ask them whether they can put us up for the evening. And then I want to call the Associated Press so they can take a picture of us as we all leave your hotel and go over to the Army camp.” Determined to avoid embarrassing national publicity the hotel manager allowed the entire Boys Town Choir to stay.[46] Letter avoided incidents like this in Texas by renting every room in a small motel so that the management would not worry about the presence of Black choir members upsetting white segregationist guests.[47]

The choir ate at government cafeterias in Washington D.C. in 1950 and 1952 because they were the only places where the full choir could eat together. The Boys Town Choir would not play for segregated audiences. Letter refused to perform at a venue in Richmond, Virginia where Black patrons were made to sit in the balcony. Five years later, when the venue changed its policy, the Boys Town Choir performed in Richmond. “We followed Father Flanagan’s principles,” Letter explained, “We couldn’t violate those principles on the road for the sake of a contract. No way!”

It sometimes took great pains to follow Father Flanagan’s principles, but their embeddedness in Boys Town made rejecting racism feel natural, even when it was not easy. “It’s all in his writing and his speeches, everything, the whole makeup of [Boys Town]” Letter recalled, “we were all treated alike at home here and I was honest with this fellow when I said, ‘I can’t tell you how many Black kids are in this choir because I never counted them.’ And I never did. I couldn’t tell you how many Spanish kids are in there. We just didn’t pay any attention to that sort of thing.”[48]

[46] Norb Letter, interview excerpt from documentary script, Box E 13-3, Boys Town Hall of History.
[47] Norb Letter, 1987, History of Boys Town Oral History Project, Box E.13.5, Boys Town Hall of History.
[48] Norb Letter, 1987, History of Boys Town Oral History Project, Box E.13.5, Boys Town Hall of History.

The football players, choir members, and all the citizens of Boys Town knew why they had to keep a low profile sometimes, eat at the center table by the window at others, and to sometimes refuse to travel to certain destinations. Racial equality was a way of life for the citizens of Boys Town from the first day they arrived on campus and remained a priority everywhere they went. Their resistance to racial discrimination was clearly stated, well-reasoned, and respected the law. It was also firm and unmoving, rooted in Father Flanagan's moral code, his principles of good citizenship, and his skilled engagement with the media to expose injustices and bring public opinion to bear on the issues. These actions took courage calculated against the very real threats of racial violence, including lynching, which was only categorized as a federal crime in the 2020s.

Boys Town influenced the course of American racial history but Father Flanagan and his boys did not always win against the long and powerful currents of discrimination. A football game in Miami, Florida was especially brutal for the players from Boys Town. Black athletes were not allowed to set foot on the field, which meant that the Boys Town quarterback was made to sit out the entire game. Jim Mitchell recalled that the quarterback resisted segregation by commandeering a water jug and sneaking it onto the field to give to the water boy. He could not have anticipated the depth of the animosity he received for his mere presence on the field. The crowd booed, jeered, and shouted at the boy with such ferocity that he left the field, and the Boys Town team did not play in the South for a long time.[49] Racial integration was not a utopian scheme to protect the boys from racial discrimination. It was preparation to treat racism as every American's problem and responsibility to confront. Father Flanagan equipped the citizens of Boys Town and the staff who would guide them long after his death to recognize and stand for the dignity, worth, and equality of all people.

World War II and Father Flanagan's Fight for Democracy at Home

Father Flanagan had been promoting racial equality for many decades by the time the United States entered World War II. He met the rise in global antisemitism by emphasizing the presence

[49] Jim Mitchell interview (excerpt), Boys Town Oral History Project, 1987, Boys Town Hall of History.

and importance of Boys Town's Jewish citizens during his public statements and continued to appear with Henry Monsky, Rabbi Cohn, and other Jewish leaders committed to child welfare and interfaith collaboration. According to the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, Father Flanagan successfully lobbied for a more central role for the Jewish character Dave Morris (a lightly fictionalized Henry Monsky) in the sequel to the 1938 feature film *Boys Town*.[50]

This addition might appear to be a minor detail but given public opinion at the time and the importance of public approval to the success of a high-budget Hollywood film, Father Flanagan's change was significant. Although polling data shows that most Americans in 1939 were not overtly antisemitic, they also did not see Jews as fully American—or as desirable immigrants. Only 39 percent agreed that Jews had the same standing as all other Americans and should be treated as fully American. Fully 53 percent agreed with the statement that "Jews are in some way distinct from other Americans but they make respected and useful citizens so long as they do not try to mingle socially where they are not wanted." Thirty-two percent believed that Jews had "somewhat different business methods" and should thus be prevented from "getting too much power in the business world." A small, but rather shocking 10 percent minority supported deporting all Jews from the U.S. to a new homeland in a humane manner, as quickly as possible. Sixty-nine percent opposed offering asylum to "a large number" of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. When asked whether the U.S. should take proactive measures to keep Jewish refugees out, 67.4 percent said yes. From a box office perspective, and a Boys Town fundraising one, cutting Dave from the sequel would have been the optimal choice. To Father Flanagan, it was unacceptable.

Even with the growing support of Father Flanagan's friends, associates, and the boys who respected and emulated his integrationist example, Boys Town remained a racially integrated village within a segregated, white-majority county. The 1940 Census shows that Douglas County (where Omaha is) was 85.3 percent "native-born white," 9.8 percent "foreign-born white" (like Father Flanagan), and 4.9 percent "Negro." Outside of these percentages were 191 people categorized as "other races" which included the forty members of the Japanese American

[50]"Personalia," *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, August 23, 1940, 6; Kurt Jensen, "There Was More to Boys Town Than Meets the Screen," *Catholic News Service*, September 23, 2017.

community whose numbers had dwindled from forty-five in 1930.[51] Although Father Flanagan's work with the boys was the pride of Nebraska, public admiration did not always extend to his efforts toward integration—particularly amidst the tensions of World War II.

The Empire of Japan took the American public by surprise when it bombed the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The surprise turned to anger and fear, which revived old stereotypes of Asians as treacherous and predatory. Acting on racial anxieties, and not on evidence of actual or intended wrongdoing, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the removal of nearly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry—77,000 of whom were U.S. citizens—from their homes on the West Coast into incarceration camps. Although there was no national security benefit, the government could claim that it had the "Japanese threat" under control. Public opinion polling by the Office of Facts and Figures in the Office for Emergency Management found that 46 percent of respondents considered the Germans the most dangerous "alien group" only 35 percent considered the Japanese the most dangerous. Yet there was "virtual consensus" that Roosevelt made the right decision to incarcerate the Japanese. Although the public was somewhat wary about incarcerating U.S. citizens of Japanese descent fully 59 percent were in favor.[52]

Father Flanagan was not part of this "virtual consensus." Within a few months of the mass incarceration, Father Flanagan was in contact with Father Hugh Lavery of the Maryknoll Fathers, whose Los Angeles parish was mostly imprisoned at Manzanar Relocation Center. Among them were Japanese orphans at the Manzanar Children's Village. The two priests worked together to persuade the War Relocation Authority to release a few Japanese Americans, including Patrick and Lily Okura, to live and work at Boys Town while the war was in progress. Boys Town was a small and secure place where Japanese Americans could live in freedom while replacing the Boys Town staff who had been drafted into the armed forces. After many rounds of bureaucratic wrangling, Japanese Americans from the camps began arriving at Boys Town, where they were greeted with tremendous warmth—especially the children, who received a bag of candy from Father Flanagan. Toshio Takahashi felt at home the minute he met Father

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[51] United States Bureau of the Census 1940a: 609; 1940b: 648.
[52] Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Washington D.C.: Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997), 112-113.

Flanagan: "[he] came up and greeted me, he hugged me, he was very, very loving." The plan to bring "a few" Japanese Americans to Boys Town expanded to ten by the end of 1943 and numbered forty-three by the end of the war. Nearly three hundred more Japanese Americans passed through Boys Town for short periods between 1943 and 1945. Father Flanagan helped them in any way he could, from writing letters of recommendation for military service to connecting them with jobs and housing through his many contacts across the U.S.[53] Many years later, in a newspaper interview, Patrick Okura said of the opportunity to come to Boys Town, "Father Flanagan rescued us." [54]

The prospect of members of the so-called "enemy race" settling in Nebraska—and at Boys Town, no less—drew harsh criticism from the Omaha community. While it was not in Father Flanagan's nature to escalate a conflict, he did put it to a stop by admonishing, "We must not permit ourselves to be smeared with the same moral filth we are criticizing in our enemies."[55] Father Flanagan's conviction that the Japanese Americans had been treated unjustly extended beyond the war and the eventual release of all who were incarcerated. This Irish Catholic child welfare expert joined the growing postwar Japanese American community in Omaha to form networks of support with local civil rights and social welfare organizations.

In October 1947, Father Flanagan joined the national president of the Japanese American Citizens League, Mike Masaoka, as a speaker at the installation ceremony of the League's newly established Omaha chapter. Masaoka appointed Patrick Okura the Omaha JACL's first president, Kazuo Ikebasu first Vice President, and Lily Okura Corresponding Secretary. In his remarks, Father Flanagan shared his experiences of his recent tour of orphanages in Japan as part of his role as advisor to General MacArthur and President Truman on the needs of Japanese children, and especially orphans, in the aftermath of the war. True to his humanitarianism, Father Flanagan projected that Japan could one day be a great friend to the United States. In the meantime, Japanese Americans and their immigrant parents faced discrimination at home that

[53] "A Rescue Mission on the Home Front Japanese Internees at Boys Town During World War II," n.d., Boys Town Hall of History.
[54] Phil Gurney, "Mixture of East and West: With an Irish Flavor," *The Benson Sun,* March 19, 1959, 22.
[55] Dwight Griswold to Forrest Lear, June 17, 1942, Dwight Palmer Griswold Papers, RG 1 SG 32 F217, Series 1: 1942 Correspondence, Nebraska State Archives, Lincoln, Nebraska.

the Japanese American Citizens League was preparing to address. Masaoka visited Father Flanagan at Boys Town the day after the ceremony to tell him about the JACL's new Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) which would focus on overturning discriminatory laws and policies. Father Flanagan committed to doing "everything possible" to support both the ADC and the JACL.[56] Boys Town was perhaps a natural location to start rebuilding ties of trust with Americans who had been so grievously excluded during the war.

Toward a More Perfect Union

Father Flanagan passed away just seven months after pledging his support for the Japanese American Citizens League. His death came as a shock to many and a great loss to all whose lives had been changed by his care for them, his belief in them, and his readiness to insist upon the recognition of their dignity and worth as human beings—and not as racial, religious, ethnic, or any other stereotype. As an Irish Catholic priest known worldwide for his moral character, and with plenty of white Catholic boys in need of care, Father Flanagan could easily have made racial equality and interreligious harmony somebody else's concern. Yet he never turned away from discrimination or intolerance and confronted it with a determination and moral force that shook the hardened foundations of inequality just hard enough to crack them a bit wherever he went. The young people at Boys Town who experienced Father Flanagan's realization of his religious and civic values learned that an integrated America was not a distant dream but a natural way to live.

Though critical of Father Flanagan's failure to proselytize and for coddling the boys, columnist Cass G. Barnes credited him for being "the liaison officer to sustain fellowship relation between all Christian denominations, Catholic and non-Catholics, Jews, and those outside the church fold" and "a missionary to a troubled world he is breaking down all barriers between church denominations, sects, nationalities, and colors."[57] Fr. Flanagan did not just talk about inclusion: he enacted it, he defended it, and he expected it of supporters of Boys Town, the boys in his care, and all of his fellow U.S. citizens.

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[56] "Father Flanagan, Mike Masaoka Speak at Omaha Installation Banquet," *Utah Nippo*, October 13, 1947.

[57] Cass G. Barnes, "Things to Talk About," *Madison Star-Mail,* March 13, 1940, 2.

Knowing the centrality of racial diversity and religious pluralism to Father Flanagan's mission for Boys Town makes the contrast between the footage from President Truman's visit to Boys Town and the Army newsreel all the more stark. Patriotism at Boys Town had long included military service. Father Flanagan had, after all, been America's Number One War Dad because so many from his City of Little Men served with honor and distinction during World War II. Many made the ultimate sacrifice, which inspired new generations of their young brothers to enlist during the Cold War. The 353rd MP Company would surely have recruits from Boys Town but not for an America that looks like the all-white village in the Army's newsreel. The Boys Town they lived in, and the America they loved, was the one Harry Truman came to visit, and which is memorialized in this all-but-forgotten piece of film. In big ways and small ways, with words, actions, deeds, and habits of friendship, the men of Boys Town continue Father Flanagan's work toward fulfilling the American promise of working together to form the more perfect union that eluded the Founding Fathers but had been at the heart of their dream for this exceptional nation.