

# "A Commonwealth Founded on Love"

## Interpersonal Spaces at Floyd Starr's School for Boys and Girls

Elizabeth Goodenough, Ph.D. *Where Do the Children Play?* (Sponsor)  
 Amy Reimann (Director of Archives and Alumni Affairs at Starr Commonwealth)  
 Gabrielle Valentic (Presenter)

### ABSTRACT

In 1913 Floyd Starr founded Starr Commonwealth in Albion, Michigan for homeless, neglected, and delinquent boys. Unlike contemporary reformatory institutions (called "deform" schools by Starr, as they "did boys more harm than good"), Starr Commonwealth was established with the faith that "there is no such thing as a bad boy." This belief translated into employing staff and bringing exceptional individuals to the school whose presence made the students feel safe and worthy. For example, Starr hired conscientious objectors, men who were deemed deficient in manhood during World War II, to perform reformatory action at the school. This trust created a space of open connection, reinforcing Floyd's belief in the nonexistence of a 'bad boy' to the students under his care. By introducing the boys to famous people such as Helen Keller, Dorothy Maynor, Rabindranath Tagore, and George Washington Carver, Starr aimed to expose students to examples of human excellence and to elevate their sense of self-worth. Starr's insistence upon a housemother for every cottage and his own presence as "Uncle Floyd" also generated a familial feeling in the school that was lacking in the boys' lives.

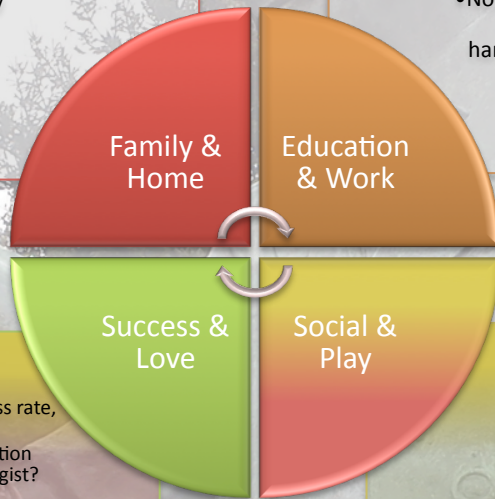
My research explores how these three spheres of relationship opened interpersonal spaces at the school that encouraged boys to feel secure in the world. I read *Faith Made Visible* by Dr. Keith J. Fennimore, the history of Starr Commonwealth published by the school in 1988, a collection of Floyd Starr's primary correspondences at the Bentley Historical Library, James G. Leaf's doctoral thesis, "The History of the Internal Organization of the State Reform School for Boys at Westborough, Massachusetts 1846-1874", testimonies of alumni/ae, and other materials to be provided by Amy Reimann, Director of Archives at Starr Commonwealth. I also conducted a visit of the school itself to better understand the atmosphere Floyd created in Albion. I expect to find a direct correlation between the understanding, love and respect with which Floyd, the staff, and guests treated the boys and the school's astounding success. This information will help develop an exhibition on the history of Starr Commonwealth for its 100th anniversary in 2013. I interact with one other student studying the significance of architecture and landscaping at the school; our team will showcase the achievement of Starr Commonwealth and the success of Floyd Starr's methods in creating a safe space for the unsafe.

• Group therapy

• Note on conscientious objectors and the hard work boys were required to do in chores etc.

• Current success rate, quote from alumnus, mention head psychologist?

• field trips to sanatorium, sports (mention the famous, art/music (bruekner-auction), playground, open campus



### DISTINGUISHED VISITORS



Rabindranath Tagore

"It was a real joy to me to see the creative work you are doing for your boys, for you are showing what I myself have always so strongly believed, that every boy responds to sympathy and trust by developing the best qualities that are in him."



Helen Keller

"You boys are potential Jeffersons and Lincolns, and what resources are being put into your hands for preserving democracy! As you will find out, culture is not only schooling, it is a chisel to shape character, and here you are molding the substance of which I hope you will carry into mature years."



Ruth Bryan Robt.

"A member of the 71<sup>st</sup> and 72<sup>nd</sup> Congresses, Chairman of the Board of Federal Prison for Women, and alternate U.S. representative to the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the UN, she was known to Starr Boys as "Aunt Ruth."



President Jimmy Carter

"Your place in history deserves the praise for its long and successful history providing leadership, encouragement and guidance to young men and for motivating them to realize their potential as individuals."

### CONCLUSION

The accounts, histories, testimonies, and lives that have come forth from Starr Commonwealth all point to one key factor in the success of the school: open love and respectful treatment. Floyd was brought up by a family that taught him the value and power of both love and understanding, and the outside influences in his life, such as Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, shaped these convictions. Floyd, in turn, provided the same love and understanding to "his boys" from the many provisions he made for their excellence. He provided family-like living with housemothers and himself as "Uncle Floyd" to fill the void many boys had in place of family and reintroduced their self-worth made absent by either abuse or neglect. He reinforced this self-worth by teaching the boys skills and culture they could employ usefully and gainfully in their lives; the schedule of chores, workshops (such as carpentry, musicology, and artistry), and educational opportunities he set for the boys are prime examples of this. Last but not least, he completed his provision of "an environment full of love and activity" with famous visitors, team sports, a large nature filled campus, and play, a vital nutrient to the growth of imagination and creativity for all children. With this foundation, Floyd taught them trust, diligence, responsibility, and gave them a chance to make something of their lives. This is the source of the outstanding success rate of the Starr Commonwealth, even to this day.



### NOTABLE ALUMNUS

**Dr. Wiley Brownlee**  
 - Starr Commonwealth Student 1942-1944  
 - Earned his B.A. in Education at the University of Michigan, and obtained his M.A. & Ph.D. from Michigan State University  
 - Taught students at military bases around the world for the Department of Defense  
 - Returned to Michigan to work with the Department of Education as Deputy Superintendent of the Ann Arbor Public Schools

### OBJECTIVES

- To discover and explore direct correlations between interpersonal spaces and the success of rehabilitation at Starr Commonwealth
- To compile a bank of information on the history of the school to be used in a published paper documenting the school's success
- To present research for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Starr Commonwealth

### TIMELINE

1589 1853 1902 1903 1913

**Marshall Horace Starr and Mary Root** begin their family on a farm. Parents "overflowing with love" to Floyd Starr, introduced him to the concept of adoption through the many visitors they

**National Leadership of the Temperance Union** leads to adoption by **Dr. John Harvey Kellogg**. Dr. Kellogg, who turned out to be the man who visited his family and talked about adoption, shaped the desires Floyd had to adopt his own boys. Floyd worked at his Sanatorium in

**The Starr Commonwealth is founded**. Starr moves into the Albion campus with his wife, child, and the first boys to be adopted. Together, they renovated the 'Old

Family plays an integral role. **Grandma and Grandpa Starr**, Floyd's parents move onto campus. Mary is one of the first 'housemothers', and Marshall teaches the boys to farm

**National Leadership of the Temperance Union** also leads to work with **Bernard MacFadden**. Floyd is employed by the famed physical culturist, who established the Healthatorium in Chicago, and he adopts many lifestyle philosophies

**Principal Ralph Garwin** introduces Floyd to a special course in Psychology. In this High School class, Floyd was introduced to "**Railroad Jack**" which was here that Floyd first said his famous motto, "There is no such thing as a bad boy."

**Dr. Comfort Starr** (Tutor in Harvard College from 1648 to 1650), and Fellow in the latter year, ancestor of Floyd