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A mission to remember: In Syracuse, commitment to an orphan - and his Medal of Honor



The House of Providence, in the era when it served as an orphanage for boys - long before its modern use as offices for Catholic Charities, in this region. (File art | Onondaga Historical Association)

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All Stories

The imposing old landmark on West Onondaga Street is used for offices by Catholic Charities. It has changed many times over the last 70 years, going back to when it sheltered 200 homeless boys, but Bill Broader - even now - could get around there in the dark.

He led the way along a hallway Thursday afternoon. He dipped down a staircase and swung into a corridor where the floors and woodwork hadn't changed since Broader (pronounced BRO-der) was a child. In this place, you almost felt the shadows of the little boys, most of them wearing cotton outfits of plain gray, until Broader, 79, came to an empty wall and waved one arm in sorrow:

"This is it!" he said. "This is where the medal was!" And then he reached high and shoved bare hands against white paint. It was here, in [the orphanage called the House of Providence](#), that the nuns hung an emblem, a talisman, for what these boys might become:

The Medal of Honor. [It was awarded to James McConnell](#), one of the orphans, for acts of bravery during the Spanish-American War. He was officially awarded the nation's highest honor after he "fought for hours lying between two dead comrades ... at Luzon, Philippine Islands, December 1899 ... notwithstanding his hat was pierced, his clothing plowed through by bullets, and his face cut and bruised by flying gravel."

McConnell would later serve as a member of the honor guard at President McKinley's burial. In 1918, he returned to combat in World War I. He was shot to death during an ambush in France. McConnell was honored, posthumously, with the Distinguished Service Cross.

His body was returned to Arlington National Cemetery. The Army Reserve Training Center in Salina would be named in his honor in 1957, but today few people in Syracuse remember who he was.

As for his Medal of Honor, it went to his "survivors" at the House of Providence.



Bill Broader, of Geddes, wanted to find the war medals that hung in House of Providence orphanage when he was a child. He didn't find them but got documentation to have them remade. He stands with them in the Geddes Town Hall. *Frank Ordonez | The Post-Standard*

Over the years, somewhere, that great tribute disappeared.

To Broader, on Memorial Day weekend, the lost medal says too much about his childhood. "Nobody knows where it went, " Broader said. "Nobody knows about him! The forgotten orphan, like all these forgotten orphans. No mother, no father. A lot of kids fought and died, from the House of Providence."

Broader, too, would grow into a war hero. He arrived at the House of Providence at the age of 5, during the 1920s, one of 10 brothers and sisters sent to homes and orphanages scattered along the East Coast.

His father died young. His mother, overwhelmed, put the kids in institutions. Broader never met her. He never tried to find her.

"There was only one way of life, the orphanage," he said. "How could you wonder about something that never even happened?"

His earliest memories are of the House of Providence.

"I'll tell you what life was like," he said. "Fighting. We were always fighting. Get up in the morning, and somebody wanted to fight. Over what? I'd have a green pencil, and you'd have a yellow one, and you'd want my green one, and we'd fight.

"That was the best education. The nuns were there to take care of you. Sure, they'd slap you around a little bit. But to me, it was the happiest place of all. You learned love and respect. You really loved and respected every person in that place. Looking back, I wouldn't have had anything else."

In 1942, from the orphanage, Broader went into the Army as a demolitions man. His own medals hang on his living room wall. In World War II and the Korean War, he earned five Purple Hearts.

He will show you the scars on his legs and his shoulders. You can see the bullet mark left on his forehead. Another of his wounds ended his dreams of becoming a father.

Broader returned to an empty Syracuse train station. "There was nobody there to meet me," he said.

He found an apartment, and he went to work at General Electric. Broader settled in Westvale. He and his wife, Anne, have been married for 43 years. He spends his retirement doing volunteer carpentry for churches and charities, creating wooden games of chance used at church festivals.

In his free time, he researches the stories of his fellow orphans who went to war.

The records show that about 600 orphans from the House of Providence fought in a sequence of wars over the last 103 years, beginning with the Spanish-American War. No one is sure exactly how many of them died in

combat, although the names of 13 orphans killed in World War II are among the many inscribed on a monument on Grand Avenue.

Broader has a dream of something grander, something more specific. He is an old man now, with no children of his own, and he fears the fleeting nature of local memory. His fellow orphans had no wealthy fathers to pull strings and protect them from combat. Most of them had no mothers sending letters to the front.

All they had was McConnell's medal, on a place that's now bare wall.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard.