

# Five Children at the Birdbath

A family poem by Dennis Gray inspired by the rediscovered story of five siblings placed in St. Joseph's Orphanage in Cincinnati during the collapse of the carriage industry in early twentieth-century America.

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getting to know family

great American history of the 20th century  
Ford modernizes the auto industry  
with the first assembly line  
everyone knows that or used to  
but it was the catalyst that left  
five siblings in an orphanage in Cincinnati  
one industry slowly died away  
and the craftsmen who worked there  
were hard pressed to find work  
because handmade carriages  
were slowly being erased from existence

my grandfather was one of those craftsmen  
growing up we didn't know the whole story  
grandpa stayed in Cincinnati looking for work  
grandma went to Chicago  
to go to nursing school  
and two sisters and three brothers  
went to St Joseph's Orphanage  
just five of over 100,000 kids in 19 orphanages  
in Hamilton County in the early 1900s  
more than half of which were not orphans

I never met my Uncle Bob  
by the time I was born he was well established  
in the US Marines living in California  
raising a house full of kids of his own  
but there was this one image  
that always haunted me as a child  
and even more today  
it was a picture of the five of them  
at the orphanage surrounding a birdbath  
Genevieve my mom and Margaret standing  
the three boys Robert, Joseph and Paul  
sitting inside from left to right  
Robert like me the youngest  
their faces tell the story

within a year Joe would die from pneumonia  
Mom escaped at sixteen after almost 9 years  
with a false age on a marriage license  
in another state and go on to have 13 children  
I understand why there was always room  
for anyone who needed a bed to sleep in  
or even just a spot at the table  
the others spent longer times at the orphanage  
with Robert being the last to leave  
at age 20 when he joined the marines  
he would spend his entire working life there  
through World War II even ending up  
in occupied Japan where in 1954  
he helped establish an orphanage  
by now he was a Master Sergeant  
he never made it back to Cincinnati in my lifetime  
but thanks to Ancestry one of his family

came searching for us  
and we are slowly putting a family history  
back together again

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*Prepared for KeepGoingKeepLoving.com — “One Family Through the Story of America”*