

Finding



Overcrowding at Fergus Falls State Hospital, where patients slept in hallways, 1948.
INSET: Engla Schey, the intrepid, dedicated fighter for mental-hospital reform, 1940s.

Engla Schey

Catalyst for Mental Hospital Reform in Minnesota

Susan Bartlett Foote

After World War II, revelations about the deplorable conditions in the nation's mental institutions, including an exposé in *Life Magazine*, shocked the American conscience. Minnesota remained complacent, however; local press stories denied that problems existed for the 10,000 residents of the state's seven mental hospitals. The *Pioneer Press*, for example, declared: "Such conditions may exist in other parts of the country. But it should give the people of Minnesota great pride that there are no snake pits in Minnesota." Governor Luther W. Youngdahl mentioned the issue in his 1947 inaugural address but took no action and reportedly contemplated budget cuts. In 1948, however, he began his "Crusade for Forgotten Souls." Mental-hospital reform dominated his successful 1948 re-election campaign and the 1949 legislative session. It became his signature achievement and catapulted him to national leadership on the issue.¹

What happened to change Youngdahl's political agenda so dramatically? According to his biographer, "It all started with Engla Schey, an attendant in one of the [mental] hospitals, who had worked among and fought for patients for years."²

Who was Engla Schey, the person who started it all? Engla, which means angel in Norwegian, was not a public figure. Her name does not appear in the voluminous press coverage of mental-health reform efforts. She received no public recognition or accolades. Historical records provide only the barest outlines of her life, enough to intrigue but not explain. Fortunately, the descendants of Engla's siblings saved a cache of her writings—journals from 1946 to 1954, when she worked at Rochester and Hastings State Hospitals, personal reminiscences, and un-

published autobiographical stories.³ Her own words, put into historical context, bring Engla Schey to life. The child of immigrants, she was an intrepid, complex, unpolished, hard-working, compassionate woman whose life experiences led her to the cause of mental-hospital reform. This is the untold story of an ordinary citizen who made a difference.

Engla's childhood embodied the pioneer saga common to many of Minnesota's Euro-American families. Her father, Anders, was the thirteenth and last child of Norwegian farmers. Unable to care for him, his parents sent him to be raised by his childless Aunt Olina and Uncle Henrik.⁴ Anders came to America at age 18 in 1883, following two older brothers who had settled in northwestern Minnesota's Marshall County. He acquired 160 acres in Spruce Valley Township through the Homestead Act of 1862, and he began the arduous process of working the land.⁵

Anders soon sent for his sweetheart, Helene, in Norway. Helene spent the time between arriving in the U.S. and moving to Spruce Valley in domestic service, probably in the Twin Cities.⁶ She and Anders married in early 1895 and eventually had four children: Engla in November 1895, followed by Josie, Ole, and Helen. Anders also brought his aunt and uncle to America in 1891. Engla later noted: "In return for raising Dad, he sent for them after he became established on a farm in this country and they lived out their days with us."⁷

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Spruce Valley homestead, 1897: from left, Henrik, Olina ("Faste"), two-year-old Engla (in stripes), Anders, and Helene, holding baby Josie.

The community expanded rapidly as land opened up. Norwegians were the dominant group in the area, although there were also Swedes and, later, Finns. Newfolden, adjacent to Spruce Valley, was the center of town life.⁸ Young Engla's world revolved around home, farm, one-room school, church, and trips to town.

Three adults—her father, Olina, and her mother—shaped Engla's view of the world and her place within it. She had a close relationship with her father and adored Olina, whom she called "Faste," a Norwegian colloquialism for father's sister.⁹ Her relationship with her mother however, was a troubled one.

Helene and Anders had vastly different beliefs. For most immigrant Scandinavian settlers, the Lutheran church was the center of community life. As a local historian noted, "The church was essential as inspiration for the homesteaders as they struggled to eke out an existence." Helene embraced the pietistic and stern Lutheranism prevalent in the community. "Dancing, drinking, card playing and 'such works of the devil' were forbidden," said Engla. On the contrary, her father was considered a "free-

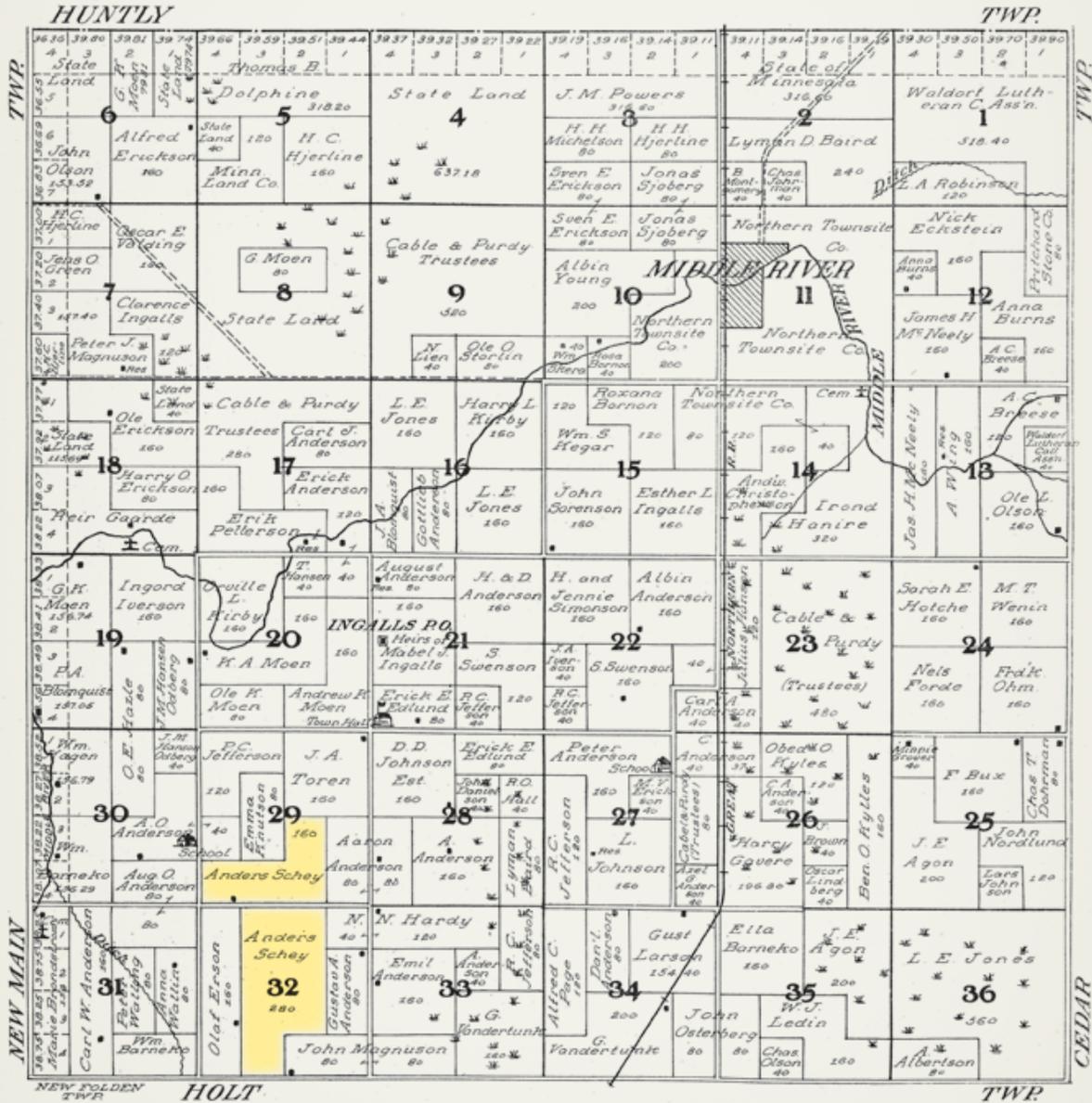
thinker" who questioned the tenets of the faith. Engla characterized their differences: "Mother said, 'you are just a sinful pitiful human. You cannot comprehend the mind of God.' But, Dad said, 'Always keep an enquiring mind.'"¹⁰

Her mother's sense of duty carried over to all aspects of family life: "Mother was a perfectionist and seemed to be forever working. We had to learn to crochet, tat, and do fancy work which didn't seem to make any sense to me. 'Don't let me ever catch you girls sitting around with idle hands,' mother used to say. Sometimes I would hide in the spruce grove or behind the willow grove when I felt the need of quiet to think things out."¹¹

Engla sought refuge in her father's world. She reported that her sister Josie once said: "It was a good thing that dad rescued you from housework and let you do the things you enjoyed doing on the farm." Engla responded: "Yes, Dad told me, 'I don't want any lazy kids around this place, if you can't help your mother, I'll hire someone to help her and you can run that self dumping hayrake and a mower as good as any man.'" In another story, Engla recalled how she was always underfoot wherever her father was, how

MAP OF
SPRUCE VALLEY
TOWNSHIP
Scale 1 1/4 inches to 1 mile

Township 157 North Range 43 West of the 5th P.M.



Schey family land; Engla's school is adjacent at the northwest. By 1909 when this Spruce Valley plat was made, Henrik and Olina had died and Anders had inherited their homestead (section 32), due south of his original 160 acres (section 29).

he helped her with her schoolwork and coached her for debates and spelling bees. She was “Daddy’s girl . . . a chip off the old block. Her Dad all over again.”¹²

Anders rejected many of the conventions of the religious community. He taught Engla not to fear those who were different. He was the only one in town to entertain Jewish peddlers, allowing them to sleep in the barn and feeding them eggs fried in butter, not bacon grease, while the family listened to their stories. Anders secretly provided a holiday bottle of whiskey to his aunt and uncle, despite his wife’s strict adherence to temperance.¹³

Engla absorbed his views and was not afraid to express them. On a return visit to her old schoolhouse with Josie, they reminisced

You started being a crusader quite early. You remember once without warning when you had finished your prescribed “I love America” speech, you said you were glad you were Norwegian. You would hate to think that your ancestors stole the land from the Indians or used Negroes as slaves. They clapped more for that than any other part of the program. . . . Wonder what the Yankee teacher thought, but after all that applause from the audience, what could she say?¹⁴

The most troubling aspect of the Schey family tension was Helene’s condemnation of Anders. Engla remembered her mother opening the oven door, pointing to the roaring fire, and saying that all who were not saved, including her father, would burn like that. As a child, Engla anguished constantly about her father’s soul.¹⁵

Great-aunt Olina was a source of comfort and joy. Engla wrote: “Faste was seldom too busy to stop anything she was doing to comfort or advise us when we ran to her with our childish problems.”¹⁶ Olina and Henrik were quietly pious, engaging in private devotions at their table.

When Engla was 12, Faste lay dying. “Many of the professing Christians were concerned because she had never publicly testified to being either saved or sanctified and . . . believed that . . . those who were not saved would burn in hell throughout everlasting eternity.” Engla continued, “The thought of Faste burning in hell forever and ever so unnerved me that I started to scream, ‘Faste is not dead. Faste is not dead.’ My father, who was labeled a freethinker by now took me into a bedroom and held me there until we saw the slays [sic] beginning to move out toward the graveyard. He let me know then that he did not believe in a literal hell and that comforted me.”¹⁷

In 1911, two years after the death of Faste, the Schey family faced a major crisis: the loss of their farm. Land was the dream of the immigrants. Land provided a home,

a livelihood, and standing in the community. After decades of effort to build a life on the land, Anders sold the farm and the family moved to Newfolden. He worked as a farm laborer on the land of others—a huge loss of status.¹⁸

What caused the collapse of Anders’ dream? Engla provided no clue. Was it too painful for her to recount? Was Anders financially overextended? Did his reputation as a freethinker in a disapproving community isolate and depress him?

The next year, Engla graduated from eighth grade at age 16. She noted, “I was considered one of the bright ones. It was predicted that I would amount to something.”¹⁹ A family photograph taken about 1913 shows Engla, a clear-eyed, bespectacled young woman, standing behind her seated father, resting a protective hand on his chair. She stared straight out at the camera with a direct and serious gaze. The future lay ahead.

Her childhood experiences shaped her values. She rejected the version of Christianity that condemned her loved ones to eternal fire. She yearned for a world based in love, not retribution. Her father taught her tolerance and outrage against injustice. He encouraged her to question received wisdom, defy convention, and speak her mind. All of those traits help explain the future path she chose.

There was no high school in Newfolden in 1912. Bright young Engla was sent to Oak Grove Lutheran Ladies Seminary in Fargo, “a Christian high school for girls of Norwegian heritage living in rural areas.” In 1913 she entered Moorhead Normal School. Moorhead offered the opportunity to become a teacher in a Christian atmosphere of refinement and service. She spent two years there, though she was listed as a first-year student in the 1913–14 and 1914–15 school catalogs. These were likely challenging times, both socially and academically, for Engla.²⁰

After those two years, Engla chose another course. She left Moorhead and entered the Salvation Army Training College in Chicago on August 25, 1915. She was 19 years old. The Salvation Army was a highly visible and attractive organization for Scandinavians in Minnesota and one of the few acceptable employment options for young women at the time.²¹ The Christian-based organization offered social-welfare services addressing a wide range of needs along with its religious message. According to one of its historians

The help offered was typically immediate and practical; a day-work employment service . . . small sums to purchase kerosene, coal, or food; a warm cup of coffee,



Family portrait, taken in Thief River Falls, about 1913. Engla stands behind her father; her mother is seated at left.

soup, and a place to sleep. . . . Its services were delivered with energetic good will and, unlike some Christian organizations that insisted on distinguishing the deserving and the undeserving poor, were available to all.²²

Engla's early assignments (1915–1920) were primarily in small midwestern communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and South Dakota. Engla desired to work with the urban poor. From 1921 until 1929 she worked first at the St. Paul Rescue Home and then in settlement houses in the slums of Milwaukee and Chicago's South Side, practicing a nonjudgmental, action-oriented, loving Christianity among the poorest in America.²³

Meanwhile, all was not well for the Schey family in Newfolden. In the early 1920s, the younger children were leaving home, the region was experiencing severe agricultural distress, and Anders, now in his late fifties, was still doing farm labor among those who feared his non-conformist views. In October 1926 Anders made a fateful decision that would deeply affect him and his daughter. Without telling his family, he traveled alone to Fergus

Falls, about 160 miles south of Newfolden, and voluntarily admitted himself to the Fergus Falls State Hospital, a mental institution.²⁴

Anders stayed for nine months and was discharged in July 1927. A year later, Engla returned from Chicago to accompany her father back to Fergus Falls. He was voluntarily readmitted in July 1928 and remained there until his death in 1955.²⁵

Engla must have been devastated to lose her father in this way. Her life was devoted to helping people, but she was unable to help the father she adored. The next year she resigned from the Salvation Army.²⁶

Soon thereafter, Engla became a social worker with the St. Louis Provident Association in Missouri, an organization that administered relief and distributed WPA jobs during the Great Depression. According to her writings, she continued to fight for social justice for the impoverished and the dispossessed and exhibited intense compassion for the needy. She condemned the racism she saw that, for instance, gave lower welfare payments to black families than to white ones with similar needs. She also

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but she was unable to help the father she adored.*

absorbed the radical social-reform tactics of labor activists in St. Louis and learned to fight the powerful.²⁷

During this period, Engla visited her father at least once, as documented in a story written under a pen name and using the third person: “the daughter” and “the father.” The pain of the interchange between the two is searing and clearly personal. The father refused to reminisce with the daughter: “I don’t want to remember it. I want to forget the past. . . . All my life I have been so alone.” In despair, the daughter concluded, “It was obvious that he had made a new place and life for himself and he didn’t want anyone around to remind him of his old life. . . . He wanted to work out his own salvation among strangers.” Then, the daughter had an epiphany.

Quick as a flash it came to her what she must do—she would go forth and do all she could to improve conditions in mental hospitals as speedily as possible. That was the best way to help father. Her mind went back again to that quotation she used to answer the roll call with in grammar school:

Do something worth living for
Do something worth dying for
Do something to show there’s
A mind, heart and soul within you.

She had stumbled upon a cause to work for that was bigger than herself, her father and her entire family, and it made her happy.²⁸

Engla was soon to bring her crusading spirit to the asylums of Minnesota. She moved to Minneapolis in 1939 where she lived with her sister Helen and Helen’s husband, Oscar Ingve. She was hired as an Attendant I, the lowest level of employment at Anoka State Hospital. The 1940 census listed her among the “hired,” along with the “inmates,” as part of the “household” known as “Anoka State Hospital (Insane Asylum).” As an attendant, she worked 48 hours a week, with one day off, and lived in the building with the patients. She spent her days off taking courses at the University of Minnesota to improve her knowledge and in 1943 joined the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, a church committed to social activism.²⁹

When Engla arrived at Anoka, conditions in mental hospitals all over the country were bleak. The mentally ill had been a concern in Minnesota since the 1860s, when the state built its first hospital in St. Peter. Over the next several decades, the state constructed additional hospitals but could never keep pace with demand.³⁰

Early enthusiasm, both for the establishments designed to provide therapy and for committing state resources to them, gave way to prolonged neglect. Historian William D. Erickson, former medical director at the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center, wrote, “Two World Wars and a national depression drew money and attention away from the problems of institutionalized patients for half a century.” A 1939 U.S. Public Health Service report on Minnesota’s mental hospitals documented low budgets, lack of state oversight, dismal physician-patient ratios, inadequate staffing, and fire hazards, among other woes.³¹

The data, while shocking, does not tell the whole story. Engla’s journals reveal the human face of mental patients in Minnesota. Over the years, Engla worked as an attendant in three of the state’s seven hospitals: Anoka, Rochester, and Hastings.³² Her journals cover portions of the years 1946 through 1954. Written at first in pencil in composition books and later typed on a manual typewriter, they provide a wealth of information about life inside the mental institutions. The journals also chronicle Engla’s activism and her frustration with those who resisted change. Her compassionate nature, life experiences, and sense of justice jump from the pages.

The hospital population in those years included elderly senile people, misfits and nonconformists, those impoverished or “unbalanced during the Depression,” and advanced syphilitics—along with individuals we would call mentally ill today.³³ Engla had empathy for all patients, even the delusional and the violent ones. She offered kindness and conversation. She called them by name. And, in her journals, she gave them a voice. There are many life stories. Here are a few brief examples.

Lucille, unwed and pregnant, was committed by her mother. She gave birth on the ward; the baby was taken away and Lucille was restrained for months, then lobotomized: “They can’t do this to me. It’s my baby. I’m its

mother. I gave birth to it. They can't tear it from me like they can take a calf from a cow. All I needed was a fair chance."³⁴

Dr. L., whose dental practice collapsed during the Great Depression, came looking for respite. "Maybe all I needed was a rest. I'm not sure about the need of these shock treatments—It seems to make me forget. Do something to my memory. Maybe fishing on the North Shore would have been just as good as shock treatment."

Mrs. V., with advanced syphilis, had married at 17 and contracted the disease from her husband, who committed her. "He has another woman. He never comes to see me. He took me here and left me."³⁵

Mrs. C. was a "colored" lady on a ward with patients requiring little supervision. Clear-minded, well-informed, and intelligent, she was moved to the most "assaultive" ward (reserved for violent inmates) after being harassed by a white patient. "There was terrible noise and obscene language and two huge attendants walking around spouting threats, trying to maintain order. I found her crouched in a corner near the dining room shivering with fear and humiliation. . . . When I left she said, 'Come again, its [sic] just like somebody from heaven coming into hell to see me.'"

Engla bridled at the labor that patients were forced to perform, often of no therapeutic value and without pay.

Fergus Falls State Hospital, postcard, about 1914

She expressed frustration with low salaries for attendants, lack of opportunities for staff training, inadequate numbers of workers to perform the required duties, and the disdain of "the professionals" (doctors and nurses) toward attendants. An example:

We worked fast and mechanically again. Pushing patients around to the toilet, pulling off nightgowns, unlocking and locking their handcuffs, lacing camisoles and generally operating like cow hands on some ranch. We didn't talk to the patients except to give orders and they seldom talked to us. I don't think we were altogether to blame. It was the system. I don't know how else we could get the patients dressed in the time allowed.³⁶

She described the impact of the environment on a new worker in graphic terms: "I met a new attendant, Mrs. A. She was sick about overcrowded conditions, lack of adequate help and the sordid environment that patients had to live in. She had been unable to sleep, wept most of the night, and had been so emotionally upset about the whole business that she thought she would quit."

Engla did not stay idle in the face of what she saw. In her journal, she lamented the lack of interest in improvements and expressed her feelings: "The patient lingering in a living hell in a mental hospital, deprived of their life, liberty and pursuit of happiness reminds me of someone



Having given up on insiders, Engla identified liberal churches, organized labor, and writers as the keys to mobilizing the public.

who has fallen in a well and all around him people go about minding their own business and refusing to look into the well.”³⁷

No one with authority inside the system seemed willing to look down the well. Despite her low status, Engla approached them all. Attendants were the lowest caste. They had no job security or influence, and the worst among them often took out their frustration on patients. Nurses, Engla wrote, had all been “carefully taught to keep their place.” She fearlessly approached doctors, who were indifferent to her concerns. The superintendent at Anoka brushed her off, saying, “The life of a crusader is hard. . . . You should learn to swallow a few things. It takes time to do things. You have to learn to go slow.”

What of an inmate’s family and the public? From Engla’s point of view

Relatives of patients won’t show their interest because they are afraid someone might find out that there is mental illness in their family. The taxpayers who support these institutions leave it up to the politicians to run them. They never come in here to see how the mental patients are treated. They stay away from mental hospitals as if they were houses of prostitution. In fact it is more of a disgrace to have been in a mental hospital than an inmate in a house of ill fame.³⁸

She showed particular frustration with the politicians and their appointees in the Department of Public Institutions (DPI). She had met with the number-two official in the DPI, who was a dentist. In classic Engla style, she wrote

I told this dentist about the abuses that existed in the state institution I worked in at the time. The excessive use of morphine, sodium amytal and other drugs they were needlessly subjected too. I told him how patients were pushed around, insulted, talked down to, and tied down because of the untrained nurses and almost illit-

erate attendants that worked in that hospital. . . . I sat there petrified at his stupid remarks about how insane people have to be “drugged and tied down for their protection” . . . There was no sense in talking to a man so illiterate about mental illness anymore. I thanked him for listening to me and went out.³⁹

It was challenging for a woman of compassion and action to confront relentless complacency. But by 1945 change was in the wind. Conscientious objectors (COs) who had served in mental hospitals during World War II began to speak out. Men of moral conviction, they were appalled by the conditions they had experienced. Determined to make a lasting difference, four COs organized the National Mental Health Foundation (NMHF) to reform America’s mental-hospital system.⁴⁰

As early as January 1945, they began traveling across the country to build support and staff. They worked with investigative reporters to expose hospital conditions and provided inside information for the influential *Life Magazine* article, “Bedlam 1946.” They published and widely distributed *The Psychiatric Aid*, an eight-to-twelve-page monthly magazine that ran stories and letters featuring mental patients and attendants.⁴¹

Engla jumped on the bandwagon. She became NMHF’s key link in Minnesota. In her journal, she noted, “Talking to a nurse who said, ‘I was in Philadelphia and I saw a chap from NMHF.’ He said, ‘We have someone from Minnesota’ and we both said in unison — ‘Engla Schey.’ I felt good and important.”⁴²

Her passion became “spreading the gospel of NMHF.” After 14 years in the Salvation Army, she knew how to spread a gospel! She sprang into her life as a crusader. Having given up on insiders, she identified liberal churches, organized labor, and writers, including Meridel Le Sueur, as the keys to mobilizing the public. She was in frequent contact with Harold Barton, a founder and the executive director of NMHF, who provided her with liter-

ature and other contacts. She called upon labor leaders, churches, community organizations, and the Veterans Administration. She even buttonholed strangers she met while hitchhiking from Rochester to the Twin Cities on her days off.⁴³

When she came to the Twin Cities, Engla continued to attend First Unitarian. The pastor, Raymond B. Bragg, participated in many social-action groups, including the Mayor's Council on Human Relations and the Children's Protective Society. Engla enlisted his interest in the NMHF.⁴⁴ By October 1946, when she was invited to participate in the annual statewide Minnesota Unitarian Conference, Bragg was aware of her experience and her passion for reform. Concerned by the national media reports, the group planned to consider an investigation into conditions in Minnesota's mental hospitals. When she received the invitation, she saw an opportunity to distribute NMHF literature. She managed to get the time off work and wrote to Harold Barton, "I can think of no better soil to sow the literature in than a Unitarian Conference." Her journal entry after the conference read

I've had a week. Holidays. I took it for the purpose of introducing NMHF at a Unitarian State conference. Dorothea Lynde Dix was a Unitarian. It was in line with their traditions I reasoned to concern themselves with conditions in mental hospitals. There were 102 delegates present. My own pastor, Raymond Bragg gave a splendid appeal for the cause. A resolution was passed to study conditions in mental hospitals and demand social action.⁴⁵

The Reverend Arthur N. Foote, the new young minister from Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul, was selected to lead the effort. In a later report to the Unitarian Conference, Foote acknowledged Engla's role, noting that the group's concerns were

reinforced by a state hospital attendant who appealed to the sense of responsibility of community leadership. She had had years of staff service in two different Minnesota mental hospitals and knew, first hand, the conditions that prevailed there. She was in attendance at the 1946 conference meetings. Riled by the frequency with which individuals to whom she appealed, even among Unitarians, tried to reassure her about conditions in Minnesota state hospitals which, they were sure, were not as bad as those in other states, she made some pretty frank disclosures.⁴⁶

Years later, in 1952, Engla remembered that day.



Cover of the 1946 conference program: "progressive transformation and ennoblement of individual and social life."

I still must shout from the hilltops as I did when my church announced in Conference, "We have gone to the highest authority. We have talked to the Superintendents." I stood up and volunteered, "You have not gone to the highest authority. These men are so far removed from the patients and low level personnel that they don't often know what is cooking. Take a dance band out and dance with the patients. Then you will get an idea about what needs to be done in mental hospitals." And that is precisely what they did.⁴⁷

Soon thereafter, Foote assembled an influential, talented, and dedicated group of Unitarians who set to work documenting conditions and planning strategy. In the fall of 1947, Foote persuaded Gov. Youngdahl to take up the cause, and the Unitarians became an influential force in the reform effort. Engla stayed in contact with Rev. Foote and Genevieve Steefel, a Unity Church parishioner who



Rev. Arthur Foote, about 1945. Foote led the Unitarians' reform effort.



Genevieve Steefel, vice-chair of the Unitarian Committee on Mental Hospitals, 1940s

served as vice-chair of the Unitarian Committee on Mental Hospitals. In letters to Steefel, Engla gave advice, contacts, and inside information, often implicitly expressing concern that, with no real hospital experience, the group could be led astray by politicians and professionals who protected their turf.⁴⁸

Engla knew that the reform baton had been passed to the Unitarians. She was a realist, though she dreamed of a different role.

I thought how wonderful it would be if some mental health agency would just pay me a living wage and expenses with all the literature I needed from NMHF and say to me, "Now go and spread the gospel of better mental health for one year as you see fit and don't worry about where the money is coming from. . . . But all this was only pipe dreams. No one was going to give me a salary to go out and work for mental health. I would have to exhaust my energy doing routine work on a mental hospital ward indefinitely for my own security—I just wasn't crazy enough yet to let the shore lines of my job go. I was glad that I was still that sane."⁴⁹

Staying with the grueling work at Rochester while the reform movement took hold, Engla watched—and pe-

riodically commented— from the sidelines. The mental-health legislation that passed in the 1949 session included new care and treatment goals, as well as increased financial support, staffing, training, and pay. It also required occupational therapy and social work services, research support, and a new position: Commissioner for Mental Health.⁵⁰ Additional improvements were offered in following legislative sessions.

In her journals of the 1950s, after reforms were being implemented, Engla recorded the improvements in some conditions, such as the ban on physical restraints, allocation of more resources, better social and occupational activities for patients, and higher standards for staff. But she also documented the ongoing barriers to change: continuing cultural resistance and the rise in non-physical restraints like drugs, shock treatments, and lobotomies. She was prescient in recognizing the limits of the mental-hospital model, even with all the reforms. She dreamed of ways patients could transition back into the community—buying land and living together, independent, safe, and free.

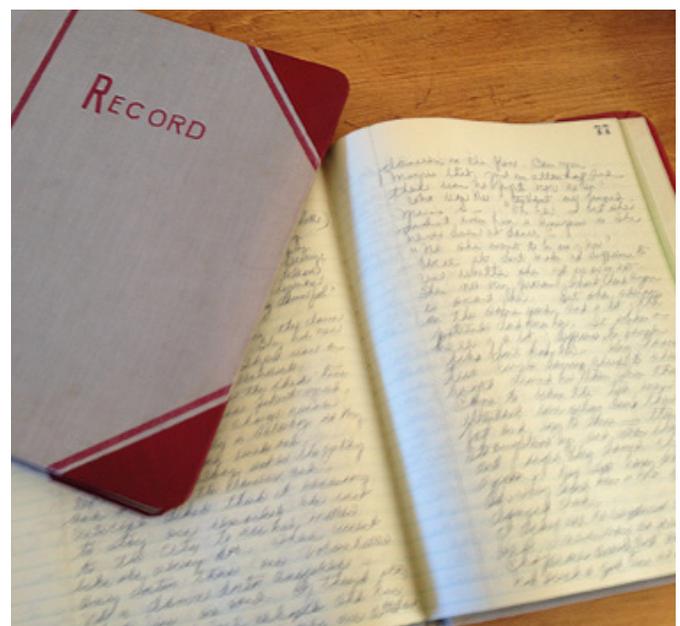
The important achievement of the "Crusade for Forgotten Souls" was to bring the issue of mental health out of the shadows. Citizens had been informed and politicians had been mobilized. The souls were no longer forgotten.



Staff and a few patients watch as Governor Luther Youngdahl burns straitjackets, Anoka State Hospital, October 31, 1949

Engla had her own personal challenges. She suffered from disabling migraine headaches. She had insomnia. She took a leave of absence from Rochester in 1947 because “I can’t use soap on my hands from to [sic] much and constant washing doing isolation,” and she admitted to Steefel that she had had bouts with depression. She worried about not having a home of her own or money for her old age. In appraising her life in a low moment, she wrote, “As I look back, it seems that my whole life has been more or less of a fight. Fights against my own inclinations. Keeping to a cause that I’m trapped with. Sometimes torn between what I want to do and what I have to do to save myself.”⁵¹

Yet her spirit also shines through. From her room in the staff quarters at Hastings State Hospital in 1952, she wrote, “It is so still and beautiful outside. The scenery is delightful. Green, yellow, crimson, flame. The great blending. Why should I speculate on how they came to be? It is enough for me to enjoy them. I like the motto we have



Engla's journals, 1946 and 1947

on our church bulletin. 'I cannot fathom the infinite. It is enough for me to love and serve humanity.'"⁵²

Engla moved to Minneapolis in 1960 and remained an active member at First Unitarian Society. She died in 1980 at age 84 in a St. Paul nursing home.⁵³

The road to reform in Minnesota's mental hospitals started with Engla Schey at the 1946 Unitarian Con-

ference. Now we know that when she spoke that day, her words sprang from everything she had experienced in her life up to that time—her father's lessons of tolerance and inquiry, a social mission of caring for others, tools to fight injustice, passion to "spread the gospel" of reform, and seeing a shadow of her beloved father in each patient. Personal history, hard work, and a lifetime of convictions led to the moment when she stood up and made a difference. □

Notes

1. Albert Q. Maisel, "Bedlam 1946: Most Mental Hospitals are a Shame and a Disgrace," *Life Magazine*, May 6, 1946, 102–18; Mary Jane Ward, *The Snake Pit* (New York: Random House, 1946); Lawrence Boardman, "No Snake Pits in Minnesota Asylums," *Pioneer Press Magazine*, Oct. 27, 1946, 12–13; Robert Esbjornson, *A Christian in Politics: Luther W. Youngdahl* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Co., 1955), 174.

2. Esbjornson, *Youngdahl*, 174.

3. Engla's writings were preserved by her sister Josie Hoppe and passed down for three generations. The family provided copies (cited below) to the author; the originals are in family possession.

4. A nephew of Engla's provided family information, based on a family tree and relatives he visited in Norway. The Scheys lived in Naustdal in the traditional district of Sunnifjord. Anders grew up in the nearby town of Lokebo. His future wife and his aunt and uncle took the surname of Lokebo when they emigrated. See John R. Tunheim, *A Scandinavian Saga: Pioneering in New Folden Township, Marshall County, Minnesota, 1882–1905* (self-published, 1984), 34.

5. Anders Schie, arrival date June 8, 1883, U.S. Customs Service, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York*, microfilm publication M237, roll 466, Record Group 36, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; Tunheim, *Scandinavian Saga*, 32. His two brothers, Henrik (Henry) and Thorval (Tom), were linked to him through articles in the *Warren Sheaf* (Marshall Co.) and census records.

6. Helene's immigration date is not known. The 1895 state and 1900 federal census did not record immigration dates for wives. U.S., Census, 1910, Population, Spruce Valley Twp., [enumeration] [district] 100, sheet A, lists her arrival in 1893; U.S., Census, 1930, Newfolden Village, e.d. 45-37, sheet B, says 1887. All census data, here and below, viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

On Scandinavian women in domestic service, see Joy K. Lintelman, *I Go to America: Swedish American Women and the Life of Mina Anderson* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009), 92–134. Engla wrote, "Mother had worked in a well-to-do American home and . . .

had 'learned Yankee ways'"; "Faste," 5, unpublished story.

7. Minnesota, Census, 1895, Schedule 1, Marshall Co., Spruce Valley Twp., shows Henrik and Olina Lokebo residing with Anders and Henrik's immigration date. Schey, "Faste," 1.

8. The population of Marshall Co. grew from 992 in 1880 to 15,698 in 1900 and peaked at 19,443 in 1920; U.S., Census, 1890, *Population*, pt. 1, 200 (1880); for 1900 and 1920, see www.census.gov/population/cencounts/mn190090.txt. Tunheim, *Scandinavian Saga*, provides rare details on the lives of settlers in the area when the Scheys lived there. See also Loiell Dyrud et al., comp., *Excel Township 1884–1984: The Story of the First Hundred Years* (Warren, MN: Sheaf Print, 1984) for a nearby township, and *Spruce Valley Township: Centennial 1888–1988* (Warren, MN: Sheaf Print, 1988).

9. Schey, "Faste," 1.

10. Tunheim, *Saga*, 135–36; Schey, "They Say Don't Go Back," 6, 8, unpublished. The story is untitled. The beginning of its first line is used here for reference purposes.

11. Schey, "Don't Go Back," 11.

12. Schey, "Don't Go Back," 11; Engla Schey, "No One Cares for Doggie," 4, unpublished. Engla tried to publish some of her stories. This one has her name and address in Rochester on the cover page, although the author is Sylvia Stevenson. The work is clearly autobiographical and is in Engla's papers among her other memoirs.

13. Engla Schey, *Journal*, Sept. 1946–Nov. 1946, 13; Schey, "Faste," 2–3. The author transcribed the journal's fragile first 128 pages, written in pencil, noting original pagination.

14. Schey, "Don't Go Back," 4.

15. Schey, *Journal*, 1953, 40.

16. Schey, "Faste," 2.

17. Schey, "Faste," 5, 11.

18. Engla Schey, "The Auction," unpublished.

19. *Warren Sheaf*, Aug. 8, 1912, 1; Schey, "Don't Go Back," 8.

20. Now called Oak Grove Lutheran School, its archives preserve Engla's grades for 1912–13 including catechism (92), Old Testament (97), rhetoric (82), civics and American history (81), sewing (78), and arithmetic (50); telephone call

by author to Oak Grove Lutheran School office, Mar. 19, 2015.

Korella Selzler, Moorhead State University Archives, email to author, Mar. 25, 2014; a fire in 1930 destroyed all student records, including Engla's "attendance . . . grades, majors, etc." See *Bulletin of the State Normal School, Moorhead, 1915*, 70. The catalog had a decidedly elite tone. The women's dormitories were "Christian homes where every effort may be put forth to maintain the amenities of life, which prevail in homes of refinement and good cheer," and the Young Women's Christian Association encouraged work "such as friendly visiting at institutions . . . sewing . . . teaching English to foreigners, and services along other lines to people whose lives are different from their own"; *Bulletin . . . 1915*, 11, 13. See also, Clarence A. Glasrud, *The Moorhead Normal School* (Moorhead: Moorhead State University, 1987).

21. Susan Mitchem, archivist, Salvation Army National Archives, Alexandria, VA, email to the author, Oct. 16, 2013 (rank, locations, and dates of service); Lintelman, *I Go to America*, 134. See also, Anne Gillespie Lewis, *Swedes in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004), 40–41; David Markle, "Dania Hall: At the Center of the Scandinavian Community," in *Swedes in the Twin Cities: Immigrant Life and Minnesota's Urban Frontier*, ed. Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 177.

22. Edward H. McKinley, *Marching to Glory: The History of the Salvation Army in the United States, 1880–1922*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 115.

23. From 1915–20 Engla served in Houghton, MI, Red Wing, MN, Green Bay, Appleton, and Janesville, WI, and Mitchell, SD; Mitchem email. She is listed in the 1922 *St. Paul City Directory* as a captain, residing at the Como Ave. address of the Salvation Army Women's Home and Hospital.

24. On economic woes in the 1920s, see Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 480–81. Anders Schey, index card regarding admission, Oct. 30, 1926, Patient Records, Fergus Falls State Hospital, Minnesota State

Archives, Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS). There was no information on diagnosis.

25. Voluntary Application of State Hospital in the matter of Andrew Schey, July 7, 1928, Patient Records, Fergus Falls Hospital.; Minnesota Death Certificate 1955-MN-011915. The hospital's Commitment Papers note "depression with urge to commit suicide"; Report of the Board of Examiners, In the Matter of the Alleged Insanity of Andrew Schey, Probate Court, State of Minnesota—Warrant of Commitment and Superintendent's Receipt, Jan. 22, 1931. Commitment made an individual a ward of the state, relieved family of financial obligations, and allowed a spouse to sell property and perform other transactions without consent.

26. Mitchem email.

27. For a history, see www.ProvidentStL.org; Engla Schey, "Communist Load," unpublished. U.S. Census, 1940, Population, Anoka State Hospital, e.d. 2-4, sheet 7B, confirms St. Louis as Engla's residence in 1935.

28. Schey, "No One Cares for Doggie," 3, 6, 9, 11.

29. Engla Schey to Dr. Alexander Dumas, Minnesota Mental Hygiene Society, Dec. 7, 1948, 1, Correspondence, Mental Health Unit, Division of Public Institutions (DPI), Public Welfare Dept., MNHS (hereinafter, Correspondence, DPI), also describing her coursework; U.S., Census, 1940, Population, Anoka, e.d. 2-4, sheet 7B. During her years at Anoka, Engla's correspondence used her sister's South Minneapolis address as her permanent location. She remained an active member of First Unitarian throughout her life; First Unitarian Society, Minneapolis, archives.

30. William D. Erickson, "Something Must Be Done for Them: Establishing Minnesota's First Hospital for the Insane," *Minnesota History* 53 (Summer 1992): 42–55. See also Erickson's longer work, *This Great Charity: Minnesota's First Mental Hospital at St. Peter, Minn., 1866–1991*, <https://archive.org/details/ThisGreatCharity>.

The seven hospitals and opening dates are: St. Peter (1867), Rochester (1879), Fergus Falls (1890), Anoka (1900), Hastings (1901), Willmar (1912), and Moose Lake (1935); U.S. Public Health Service, "A Survey of the State Hospitals of Minnesota: Section I" (Washington, D.C., 1939). See also, Michael Resman, *Asylums, Treatment Centers, and Genetic Jails: A History of Minnesota's State Hospitals* (St. Cloud: North Star Press, 2013).

31. Erickson, "First Hospital for the Insane," 55; U.S. Public Health Service, "Survey."

32. Because employment records at state hospitals are incomplete, her precise dates of employment are unknown. She worked at Anoka from 1939 to the fall of 1945 and moved to Rochester at the end of 1945; Engla Schey to Dr. Royal Gray, Medical Director, Aug. 28, 1945, Correspondence, DPI. She transferred from Rochester to Hastings State Hospital on Aug. 24, 1949; Report from Magnus C. Petersen, Medical Superintendent, Rochester State Hospital to Mr. Carl Jackson, Director, DPI, for the Month of August, 1949, 1, Correspondence, DPI. Engla's journals place her at Hastings until the mid-1950s. First Unitar-

ian archives list her as an "out of town" member until 1960, so she could have remained at Hastings until then.

33. Patients were generally assigned to wards first by gender (separating men and women) and then by behavior. "Self-government" wards housed those needing little supervision, including "seniles" and bed patients, while violent patients lived on "assaultive wards" and those with contagious diseases on isolation wards. The names and groupings varied from hospital to hospital. See Gerald N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 66–74.

34. Here and below, Schey, Journal, 1947, 44, 49–51.

35. Here and below, Schey, Journal, 1946, 25, 67–69.

36. Here and below, Schey, Journal, 1946, 137, 60–61.

37. Here and below, Schey, Journal, 1946, 131, 23, 11.

38. Schey, Journal, 1946, 32.

39. Schey, Journal, 1946, 29–30. The official, Dr. George Orr, died in September 1945 (Minnesota Death Certificate 1945-MN-026077), so the meeting took place earlier. Public institutions, including mental hospitals, schools for the deaf, blind, and mentally deficient, prisons, and training schools, were under a Board of Control until 1939 when its authority was transferred to the new Division of Public Institutions in the Dept. of Social Security; *General Laws, 1939*, Chap. 431. A position, commissioner of mental health and hospitals, was established in the DPI in 1949; *Minnesota Statutes, 1949*, Chap. 512. In the 1950s, the DPI and the Division of Social Welfare were consolidated in the new Department of Social Welfare.

40. The COs worked in Civilian Public Service, a nonmilitary corps. Steven J. Taylor, *Acts of Conscience: World War II, Mental Institutions and Religious Objectors* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 289–90.

41. Taylor, *Acts of Conscience*, 136, 282.

42. Schey, Journal, 1946, 18.

43. Schey, Journal, 1946, 11, 97. Engla met several times with Minnesota author Meridel Le Sueur, in hopes of improving her writing and getting stories published. There is no record of any accepted publications. Le Sueur advised her to write every day. We owe the journals to that advice.

44. Jim Grebe, "Raymond Bragg," *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, www.uudb.org/articles/raymondbragg.html. On Bragg's support for NMHF, see Re: Engla Schey, memorandum to Royal C. Gray, MD, Medical Director, from his Secretary FA, Sept. 24, 1946, Correspondence, DPI.

45. Schey, Journal, 1946, 7, 94.

46. Rev. Arthur Foote, chairman, "Preliminary Report of the Minnesota Unitarian Conference Committee on Mental Hospitals, 1946–1949, unpublished document in author's possession.

47. Schey, Journal, 1952, 40.

48. Engla Schey to Genevieve Steefel, eight letters, Jan. 6, 1947–June 11, 1949, Genevieve Fal-lon Steefel Papers, MNHS.

49. Schey, Journal, 1946, 58.

50. *Minnesota Statutes, 1949*, Chap. 512.

51. Schey to Steefel, Mar. 20, 1947, Steefel papers: "I haven't been locked up in a mental hospital yet. I got depressed, instead of manic . . . and simply went to bed." Schey, Journal, 1952, 9–13.

52. Schey, Journal, 1952, 27. "We cannot fathom the Infinite—it is enough for us to love and serve humanity," attributed to English free-thinker and Unitarian George William Foote, is often quoted in Unitarian writings; www.philosophedia.org/index.php?title=G_W_Foote&oldid=35366.

53. First Unitarian Society, archives; Minnesota Death Certificate 1980-MN-002413.

The photo on p. 248 (inset) is courtesy Roxanne Butzer; p. 250 and 253, John Schey; p. 258 (right), Sarah Steefel; and p. 259 (bottom), the author. All other images are in MNHS collections, including p. 257, in Unity Church Records, and 259 (top), a *St. Paul Dispatch/Pioneer Press* photo reproduced in newspapers nationwide and in Esbjornson's biography of Youngdahl.



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