



Mother and Baby homes

Unit 3

Activity 4

A mother's day: Extracts from the recollections of Julia Carter

The women had to have an admission ticket from the doctor to get in. ...once they were there they would have to wait a year [in the home] to look after their baby.

One girl escaped, went out, but she was brought back again that night by the Guards.

The gates were never locked as there were always bread vans and milk carts coming in. The people who called with deliveries were all nice. The bread van would often give the girls a cake for themselves.

...’twas a cold barracks of a place, they were perished, no heat, no warmth, no comfort. You’d see the women all around the old stove warming themselves before they went to bed. It wasn’t homely at all, no hot water jar [bottle].

We got up about 6 am.

The mothers would bring their child that slept with them down to the Nursery. The babies would sleep with the mothers from about nine or ten days old.

Mass was at 8 am. Breakfast was after Mass. A good eye was kept on those who were receiving communion. They would be shunted out of the dormitories to go to Mass.

There was a chaplain who was the secretary to the Archbishop of Tuam and he said Mass in the home every morning with priests from the Tuam parish coming in every week to hear confessions, give a lecture and baptise children as there was a baptismal font in the home. The mothers visited the Blessed Sacrament every day with the rosary also recited daily.

Breakfast consisted of porridge, milk, tea and bread – trays of bread. Then down to feed the babies.

Mothers were barged into breastfeeding. If the babies weren’t breastfed, bottles would have to be made up and sterilised. She [Mother Superior] would nearly starve the infant to make the mother breastfeed. The doctor had to certify that the mother could not breastfeed before bottles were given.

Then the mothers went to the laundry to wash the babies’ nappies. Each mother had to account for her own nappy. Each mother had a little cubby hole for her own laundry. There was a big cold bath outside the laundry to take the baby’s ‘bowels’ off the nappy (pre-wash), and then it was washed in the laundry.

The Co Council put in great washing machines...and a wringer and a big thing for hot water in later years. In the earlier years there were only washboards and sinks.

Some women's jobs was to dress the children in the morning and bring them downstairs.

In the morning they would take the 'mackintoshes' [plastic sheets] off the beds, clean and dry them by hanging them on the old iron stairs. Then at 5 pm they would put them back on the beds.

They'd each go to their jobs after that ... go out [on] the land digging, or the kitchen, scullery, dining room, children's dormitory, wash and polish and clean, monotonous work.

The nuns in the home did not condemn the women as sinners, no no.

If the girls came in young they were not allowed to finish their schooling.

The mothers spoke only to each other about the fathers of their children. They'd hate to face [their own] home. The lads that were friendly with them outside would ignore them now. Many a girl shed tears – a terrible depressing place.

An odd fella would come in and take the girl out and marry her. I remember one case where the parents and the priest and the fella came in and he said he would marry the girl, he went down on his knees, but he would not take the child as it was not his.

They had a very hard life, there was no consolation, no advice, no love there for them. They just got through, counting the days and weeks until they were free to go.

There were sad times, it wasn't always sad, but it was a sad old place. You see it was always before them [the mothers] knowing that they had to part with the child, like Our Lady waiting for the Crucifixion.

They couldn't see any future in that child, just the year they were there. I remember a lady had a most beautiful child, and when she came back (very few of the mothers did) she was devastated to see that the child had deteriorated with loneliness.

None of the mothers would kick up, because if they did, then they knew they would be put into the Magdalene [Laundry], they'd be punished.

The parents would come back to the home to bring the woman out after her term of a year was up, whether it was to put them on the train or not, and the nuns would get a job for anyone else who had no-one to meet them.

Sometimes people from Tuam would come looking for a servant girl.