

Ellen Murphy Gelches

I never knew my grandmother. She died when I was nine months old. But I heard so many stories about her from my mother, my grandmother's only child. The story that stood out over all the others was her time at Chester Springs at the Orphan School there. She felt it was the best time of her childhood.

Kathryn Kern Weimer was born in Shamokin, PA, on July 18, 1873, to Lloyd Kern, a veteran of the Civil War, and his wife, Laretta. When Kathryn was only six years old her mother died of complications in pregnancy. She and her siblings were farmed out to Lloyd's sisters where they provided childcare and household work while Lloyd moved on to a new family. I don't know how this group of abandoned children found their way to the Orphan School. However, my grandmother loved it there. She remembered the pieces the students learned in elocution class and taught them to her daughter. The two would have lively dramatic recitations doing such works as "Why is the forum crowded? What means this stir in Rome?"

My grandmother was an accomplished seamstress, and her needlework pieces are still beautiful all these years later. She had to have learned those skills at the Orphan School. After leaving Chester Springs she became a nurse - again probably because of the Orphan School. She and my grandfather, Ephraim James Weimer, a superintendent of the mines for the Reading Coal and Iron Company, returned for reunions, and after his death, my mother, Laretta Weimer Murphy, would take my grandmother to Chester Springs for Mother's Day. She continued that tradition with me. I was brought up to believe that Chester Springs was a magical place - so much so that I ended up living there. What a legacy the Orphan School gave my family.

After my grandmother's death in Minersville, PA, in 1949, people of the town would tell my mother that my grandmother was such a lady. The Orphan School had a big impact.