

## MINNESOTA HISTORY

# She crusaded to fix state hospitals

CURT BROWN



With winter descending on their northwestern Minnesota farm, Norwegian immigrants

Anders and Helene Schey became parents in November 1895. They named the first of their four children Engla — Norwegian for angel.

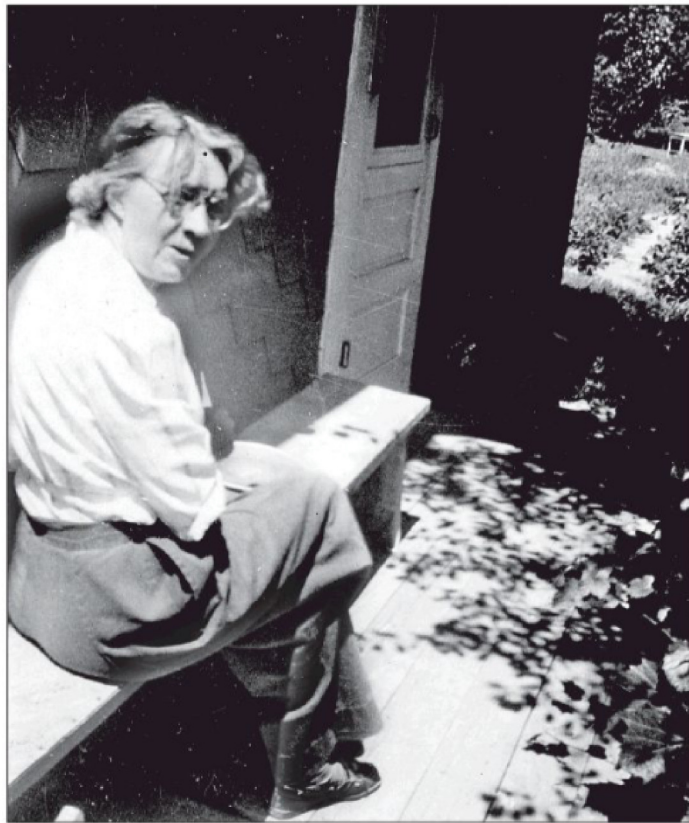
And Engla Schey grew into a little angel, all 5-foot-2 and 103 pounds of her. In her early 30s, she experienced a life-altering epiphany while visiting her father at the castle-like, overcrowded Fergus Falls State Hospital. Suffering from depression, Anders checked himself into the institution in the 1920s and died there nearly 30 years later.

"Quick as a flash," Schey later wrote, she decided to do all she could do "to improve conditions in mental hospitals. ... That was the best way to help father." So she quit her job as a social worker, aiding the poor, and launched a 20-year career as a frontline attendant in three state hospitals — determined to make life better for 10,000 Minnesotans locked in seven state institutions in the 1940s.

"She started out wanting to care for patients, discovered the horrendous conditions in the hospitals and the cynical bureaucracy that ran them, and began a one-woman crusade to inform the public about the conditions ... in an era when the stigma was extreme," said Susan Bartlett Foote, a retired public health professor and author of the 2018 book, "The Crusade for Forgotten Souls."

Schey emerges as the book's heroine and became Foote's focus in a 2015 Minnesota History magazine article (available at [tinyurl.com/EnglaSchey](http://tinyurl.com/EnglaSchey)).

As a low-ranking attendant at state hospitals in Anoka, Rochester and Hast-



ROXANNE BUTZER • University of Minnesota Press

**ENGLA SCHEY** 1895-1980

Engla Schey devoted her life to reforming state hospitals as an attendant in the 1940s. Her father had entered Fergus Falls State Hospital, setting the course for her work.

ings from the late 1930s into the '60s, Schey was "an ordinary citizen who made a difference," Foote said. "Her name does not appear in the voluminous press coverage of mental-health reform efforts. She received no public recognition or accolades."

But nearly 40 years after her death in 1980 at age 84, Schey's letters and journals echo her outrage and activism. After World War II, Life magazine shocked Americans with coverage of inhumane conditions in the

nation's mental institutions. The St. Paul Pioneer Press assured readers that things were better here, insisting "there are no snake pits in Minnesota."

In a 1946 letter to the Minneapolis Star and Journal, Schey urged readers not to be "so gullible as to swallow the propaganda ... that there are no 'snake pits' in Minnesota."

In another letter to the editor two years later, she insisted that "an awakened, enlightened public does not have to sit around and twid-

dle its thumbs." She implored "kind, intelligent, progressive men and women with missionary zeal for humanity" to do what she had done and become attendants.

Schey never married, but her siblings' descendants saved journals she wrote from 1946 to '54 while working at Rochester and Hastings State Hospitals.

"The patient lingering in a living hell in a mental hospital," Schey wrote in 1946, "deprived of their life, liberty and pursuit of happiness

## UPCOMING AUTHOR EVENTS

Susan Bartlett Foote wrote the 2018 book "The Crusade for Forgotten Souls: Reforming Minnesota's Mental Institutions, 1946-1954" (University of Minnesota Press). She has these upcoming events:

- Zephyr Theater, 601 N. Main St., Stillwater, Sunday, Sept. 15, 2 p.m. Suggested donation: \$10
- Owatonna Public Library, 105 N. Elm St., Tuesday, Sept. 17, 6:30 p.m., free
- Subtext Books, 6 W. Fifth St., St. Paul, Thursday, Sept. 19, 7 p.m., free
- Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, University of St. Thomas, McNeely Hall, Room 100, St. Paul campus, Summit and Cleveland avenues, Friday, Sept. 27, 9 a.m., \$25 (registration deadline Sept. 23 at [tinyurl.com/FooteTalk](http://tinyurl.com/FooteTalk))

reminds me of someone who has fallen in a well and all around him people go about minding their own business and refusing to look into the well."

Gov. Luther Youngdahl, who burned straitjackets in 1949 while spearheading state hospital reform, said in his biography: "It all started with Engla Schey, an attendant in one of the hospitals, who had worked among and fought for patients for years."

Schey began her angelic work at 19, moving to Chicago to enroll in the Salvation Army's training college. For the next 14 years, she provided social-welfare service — first in small towns in the Upper Midwest, then tending to the urban poor as a social worker in the slums of St. Paul, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Louis.

Everything changed when her father entered Fergus Falls State Hospital in the late 1920s. He was among 1,600 patients in an institution built for 1,000 people. Some slept in overcrowded hallways, suffering from senility, delusion, advanced syphilis or just being misfits.

In her journals, Schey wrote about the individuals she scrambled to serve and the excessive use of morphine, sodium amytal and other unneeded drugs and shock therapies.

Lucille, she wrote, was unwed and pregnant when

her mother committed her. After she gave birth on the ward, her baby was taken away while she was restrained and lobotomized.

There was a dentist who lost it all during the Depression, his memory erased with shock treatments. Mrs. V contracted syphilis from her husband, who committed her, replaced her with another woman and never visited.

Schey wrote about finding Mrs. C, a black woman, "crouched in a corner near the dining room shivering with fear and humiliation" after racial harassment.

"When I left she said, 'Come again, it's just like somebody from heaven coming into hell to see me.'"

Like an angel, doing the best she could.

"We worked fast ... pushing patients around to the toilet, pulling off nightgowns, unlocking and locking their handcuffs, lacing camisoles," she wrote, using the euphemism for straitjackets and saying they worked like "cow hands on some ranch."

"I don't think we were altogether to blame. It was the system."

Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at [mnhistory@startribune.com](mailto:mnhistory@startribune.com). His latest book looks at 1918 Minnesota, when flu, war and fires converged: [strib.mn/MN1918](http://strib.mn/MN1918).