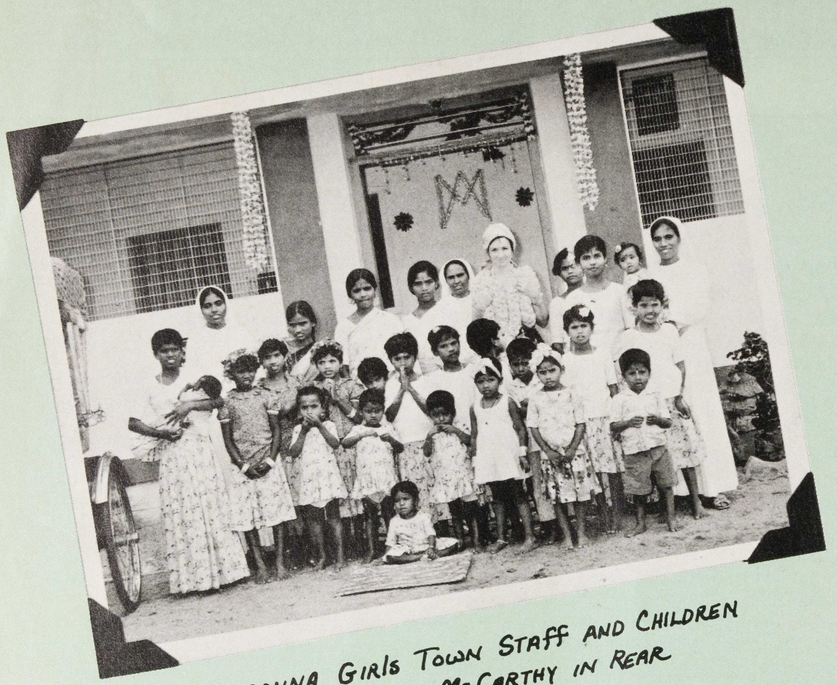

MADONNA GIRLS TOWN STAFF AND CHILDREN WITH MARY ANN McCARTHY IN REAR

Madonna Girls Town in India

by BARBARA KERR DAVIS

A tiny baby has been hurled against a fence and left to die in the weeds at the roadside. A four-year old girl and her five-year old sister can no longer be cared for by their widowed mother and are turned loose in the streets to make their own way as best they can. A fourteen-year old girl, just blossoming into young womanhood, has been shifted from poor relative to poor relative and may soon succumb to prostitution as a means of survival. All of these girls live in Southern India in the state of Tamil Nadu. Because girls are less valued than boys in the Indian culture, there are few places for these children to turn.

The plight of these, infants, children, and adolescents touched the heart of John and Elizabeth Keevers when a chaplain of an Indian boy's vocational training school wrote to them to enlist their prayers and help back in the early 60's. In 1981, as a result of the commitment made years earlier by the Keevers, an orphanage for girls, the Madonna Girls Town, was dedicated and immediately filled to capacity with twenty-five girls ranging in age from just a few weeks to about fifteen years old.

Father Savarimuthu, the chaplain at a school where boys from poor families could learn a trade, had read in a small religious newspaper about Elizabeth Keevers and her work in another project of love. At first he wrote to her asking help to raise an orphan boy named Joseph. The Keevers responded as generously as they were able. Then, in the course of regular correspondence, Father Savarimuthu told Elizabeth about the many needy Indian girls in the surrounding area. Her great concern led to a commitment of her own time, energy and love which gradually led others to make a similar commitment to the idea of purchasing land and then constructing and founding Madonna Girls Town.

Elizabeth Keevers, now a widow, still works hard organizing craft workshops and working with a group of interested people in the Sacramento, California area to raise money for Madonna Girls Town which is run by the Sisters of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception in Madurai. Father Savarimuthu, who sent pictures of the orphanage in its various stages of construction over the years, lived long enough to see its completion but died in 1982, just three weeks after the dedication of Madonna Girls Town.

So in late 1982, Elizabeth Keever's daughter, Mary Ann McCarthy, traveled to India and visited both the Madonna Girls Town and the now grown orphan boy, "Joe," and his family. Representing her mother and many other contributors, Mary Ann was treated as an honored guest from the moment she arrived at the rain-soaked airport in Madurai. During her three day visit to the nearby village of Nilokottai, she lived with the Sisters near the orphanage and was able to observe the children, the staff, the physical facility and other buildings. Following is an interview with Mary Ann concerning her experience in India:

How did you get to Madonna Girls Town?

I flew to Madurai, a town of about 100,000 people located in the state of Tamil Nadu in the southern portion of India, where two Sisters of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception drove me to the village of Nilokottai, about 37 miles to the northeast. From there we drove a few more miles to Madonna Girls Town.

It must have been a very different experience for you coming from the United States?

It was exhilarating! I was so impressed with the warmth and gentleness of the Indian people. When I arrived very early in the morning in Madurai I was greeted with five foot long leis of pink roses by Joseph and his three children and by two of the Sisters, Sister Mary Agnes and Sister Salette. From that time until my last morning, I felt surrounded by love.

Where do the girls from Madonna Girls Town come from?

While I was there I had the opportunity to examine the books. Some children are orphans, others had been abandoned or had come from families who were simply too destitute to care for them. Three of the girls, for example, came from a family in which the father was blind and unable to earn enough to care for them.

Who actually runs Madonna Girls Town?

The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception are responsible for the girls. They provide a warm, secure environment for their twenty-five charges. Their love showed in the faces and in the behavior of these girls. They were happy, well-behaved, responsive and warm. One time I opened a package of bright balloons which I had brought with me. They accepted the gift with much gratitude and then ran off to have fun like children anywhere. They were a joy to experience.

How many nuns care for the girls?

Madonna Girls Town is near a complex which includes the convent, a chapel, a general care hospital and a leprosorium. The fifteen nuns who reside in the convent work in the leprosorium and hospital, and they also serve as evangelists in the small villages in the area. There are over 700 sisters in the order in South India. At present the staff at Madonna Girls Town consists of three Sisters, the handyman/rickshaw driver, and two girls from the village.

Sister Mary Salette, our main correspondent for information from Madonna Girls Town, made her final vows in December of 1982. She has had courses in child development and institutional management.

Sister Mary Agnes (a niece of Father Savarimuthu who first conceived the idea of Madonna Girls Town) spent several years in Detroit, Michigan earning her M.D. degree.

Are the facilities adequate at Madonna Girls Town?

I was pleased with what I saw, but already the building needs some repair and additions. The dormitory for the girls is a room about forty feet by twenty feet. It can comfortably house twenty but is presently holding twenty-five girls. Some time ago, a group called the Joy Sowers in Belgium, donated funds to build a nursery at Madonna Girls Town. The foundation was laid for that addition, but when it was determined that other additions were more important at that time, a toilet facility, a kitchen, and a room to keep rabbits and chickens was built instead. There is also a group in West Germany that is willing to give financial aid, but only when the orphanage is able to serve a hundred children. Right now Madonna Girls Town is already over capacity with twenty-five children, and there are no immediate prospects for adding to the facilities.

Most inadequate, I felt, is the water situation. It is the key to the survival of the Girls Town. The original plans called for facilities for 400 girls. The California groups paid for twenty acres of farming land and 13 acres of land for buildings. They paid to have a well dug and the Sisters added money later to have it deepened. But that well is now totally useless. A new well will cost about $6,000. It is hoped that Madonna Girls Town can eventually be self sufficient in its food supply. Meanwhile, the girls must go to the convent for daily bathing, and all water for cooking. No food is being grown because the much needed rain missed the area in 1982.

After the most pressing needs — a new well and roof repairs — are met, we hope to finish the nursery and be able to house another forty children.

What kind of religious and academic education do the girls receive?

There were eight older girls at Madonna Girls Town who went by rickshaw to the village of Nilokattai each day to Catholic School. They left at about 8:15 in the morning and returned by 4:30 in the afternoon. The educational curriculum is strictly prescribed by the Indian government from first through the highest standard which is actually the first year of

MARY ANN McCARTHY HOLDING A SIX WEEK OLD BABY