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The Child Hatchery

In South Minneapolis, a last remnant of Dr. Martin Couney's freak show preemies

by Joseph Hart

One of modern medicine's strangest monuments disguises itself as an ordinary apartment building in south Minneapolis. It's a plain, two-story structure, built from soft brick painted white, and it stands on the corner of 31st Avenue and 31st Street at the edge of a drowsy, residential neighborhood, not far from the Mississippi River. From 1905 to 1912, the surrounding blocks were occupied by the Wonderland Amusement Park, a 20-acre pleasure ground featuring thrill rides, carnival games, and acrobatic performances. The building on 31st housed one of Wonderland's chief attractions: the Infant Incubator Institute. Here, for a small fee, curiosity seekers could peer through the glass of a half-dozen incubators, each containing a gently roasting human infant, no bigger than a game hen.

The babies were prematurely delivered--born months before their delivery dates. And the Institute (commonly known as the Incubator Flats) represented their best hope for survival. The treatment there was the most progressive available. And it was free of charge, paid for by the long lines of gawkers who jockeyed to see the featherweight babies with heads the size of oranges and feet smaller than bottle caps.

The incubators had a "bright and cheerful appearance," according to a 1906 account in the Minneapolis Journal. "Inside through glass doors, may be seen the baby resting on a fine wire hammock, clean and comfortable and tied around with either a pink or blue ribbon looking for all the world like a dainty bon bon."

A nursery adjoined the incubator room, and here the bon bons were fed fresh breast milk every two hours with spoons especially crafted to fit their nostrils, or with rubber tubes slid down their throats. Upstairs were apartments for the attending doctor and his staff, and for a requisite squadron of lactating nursemaids. Those infants who survived this regimen (which, surprisingly, were the majority) graduated in a matter of weeks or months from the incubator and were reunited with their parents.

The Infant Incubator Institute was one in a network of similar facilities, all owned and operated by Dr. Martin Couney, an unorthodox specialist considered by many to be the father of American neonatology. Born in Europe (France or Poland--the record is uncertain), Couney claimed to have trained in Paris with Pierre Constant Budin, a pioneer of incubator construction and use.

It was at Budin's request, according to Couney's account, that he first exhibited incubator babies, at the 1896 World Exposition in Berlin. Couney's "Kinderbrutanstalt," or child hatchery, sandwiched between the Congo Village and the Tyrolean Yodelers, operated on much the same principal as the facility in Minneapolis, and his wee, ailing patients captured the hearts of all Berlin. The Kinderbrutanstalt was an overnight success. Curious Berliners filed past by the hundreds during its open hours; newspaper reporters vied for Couney's time; nightclub singers even performed topical songs about the hatchery. Doctor Couney had found his calling.

From that day forward he devoted himself to the twin pursuits of amusing the public and saving babies. He soon immigrated to the United States, a natural headquarters for his curious blend of science and showmanship. Then, with the help of his assistant, Madame Louise Recht, and his faithful daughter Hildegarde, Dr. Couney rapidly built an empire of incubator sideshows in city after city. 1897: Earls Court, London. 1898: the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha. 1900: the Paris World Expo. 1901: the Pan

American Expo in Buffalo. 1903: Coney Island (Couney's headquarters for 40 years). 1905: Minneapolis. 1906: Portland. 1908: Mexico City. 1910: Rio de Janeiro. 1912: Chicago's White City. 1913: Denver. 1915: Panama Pacific International Expo in San Francisco.

Couney was, by all reports, a complex man. He had expensive tastes: a love of fine food, an appreciation for the best wines, and an ambition for elegance and high society. He was deeply divided over the conflicting roles of showman and doctor. He often bristled at his reputation as a carnival barker, and he deeply craved the approval of the medical establishment. "Nothing makes Dr. Couney angrier," wrote A. J. Liebling in a 1939 New Yorker profile, "than the imputation that he is merely a showman. He says 'Everything I do is strictly ethical.'"

Yet he courted the approval of his paying customers just as fiercely. He possessed a canny knack for the mechanics of show business. His barkers, shouting at the passersby, were of the highest quality (at one point they included a young Cary Grant). Madame Recht always wore an oversized diamond ring that she slipped onto the wrists of her wards, to the astonishment of onlookers. The nurses working under her supervision were required to wear bulky clothing to increase the viewers' sense of the babies' diminished size. Couney's enthusiasm for self-promotion extended to his own credentials. Recent scholarship (notably William A. Silverman, MD, in *Pediatrics*), disproves Couney's chief claim to legitimacy--that he began exhibiting babies at the behest of his teacher, the great Budin.

And yet, Dr. Couney was no quack. He handled more premature babies than any other physician in the country, and his rates of survival were enviable, even by today's standards. His contemporary, Julius H. Hess, the country's leading expert on premature birth, offered warm and respectful praise for Couney and even loaned his own staff to the Chicago exhibit. Many parents were happy to deliver their premature babies into his care. Their options were often limited; only a few hospitals then treated premature infants. And unlike hospitals, Couney's establishments were free; gate receipts covered all expenses.

Couney's skill shows most in contrast to his rivals. Many promoters, in envy of his long lines and fabulous publicity, opened competing incubator exhibits. Without Couney's experienced touch, however, the tiny preemies died at alarming rates. When businessmen opened a competing exhibit in St. Louis, for example, fully half of the babies on display perished in the first three months of the venture.

Couney's career climaxed in 1939, when he spent lavishly to outfit a magnificent headquarters on the grounds of the New York World's Fair: a pink confection of a building with a well-appointed suite for himself, another for the inimitable Madame Recht, and one for Hildegarde, as well. He bought extravagant dinners for visiting physicians and showered his infant wards with prizes and publicity. His expenses set him back some $125 a day. By the time the fair ended, Couney was broke.

At the same time, business at Coney Island evaporated, along with interest in incubator babies generally. Simple boredom, perhaps, with yesterday's sensation. Or it may be that world events had satiated the public's interest in human tragedy. Couney quit in 1944 when New York City opened its first premature infant station in a hospital setting. Six years later, he died in poverty.

Minneapolis's Wonderland Amusement Park was a short-lived affair. In 1912, faced with mounting debts occasioned by two wet summers and diminished attendance, the park's backers pulled out. After just seven years, the thrill rides and amusements were all torn down: The Old Mill boat ride with its underground caverns; the scream-inducing Scenic Railway roller coaster, its scrims painted with Oriental landscapes, mountain ravines, and fiery caves; the House of Nonsense; the mythic city, crystal maze, and faerie

theater--all were dismantled and sold off for scrap. The acreage was subdivided into lots and sold to developers. Only the empty Infant Incubator Institute was spared and converted to a rental property.

Not long ago I paid a visit to these apartments, hoping to find some trace of its unusual history. I discovered that the building, once the provenance of new life, had recently endured the opposite extremity with the death of the man who had been caretaker, longest occupant, and resident historian since the early 1960s. His mantle has passed to Betty Kersting, who moved into her apartment on the first floor in July of 1967.

A single woman of settled habits, Kersting is disinclined to move, although she's given some thought to the senior high-rise down the street. For nearly 40 years she's worked in a hospital: as a cafeteria worker, and then as an escort for patients needing x-rays. Perhaps because of this profession, she is a garrulous and plainspoken extrovert. When I arrived she relinquished her easy chair and flipped off a cowboy movie to walk me through her apartment while relating stories about the difficulties of removing its wallpaper, the joys of its backyard, the foibles of its coniferous arbor (savaged one winter for a Christmas tree), about her family, and her job. When the phone rang, she excused herself to answer. "Maybe that's my sister calling," she explained, "It's my birthday today." But the phone call was a wrong number.

Her apartment's simple decoration reflects the idiosyncratic tastes of a hard-working, single woman getting on in years. A twin bed, neatly made. Photographs of siblings and their children. Arranged on a table were quite a number of inexpensive stuffed animals. I was disappointed, however, that there were no signs of the old Incubator Institute, excepting a few initials scratched, perhaps by sweethearts, into the building's soft bricks. Kersting has saved a picture postcard dated November 1909 that depicts the front gates of the Wonderland all lit up against the nighttime sky. The postcard is creased and worn, and she keeps it in a little plastic sleeve. The note on the postcard is from a woman named Helga who writes that she purchased some theater tickets, and looked forward to the show. ("Haven't seen anybody today," Helga has written on the front of the card.)

Talking to Kersting brought to my mind the customers who provided the bulk of Couney's business. He called them "repeaters." Typically they were childless women who formed an attachment to one baby in particular and then came once or twice a week to check on its health. One woman visited Couney's exhibit on Coney Island once a week for 36 seasons, transferring her affections from one baby to the next, as each graduated. "Repeaters attend more assiduously," Liebling writes, "than most of the patients' parents."

I got to thinking about repeaters, while Betty Kersting continued her side of the conversation, and I tried to imagine the particular set of losses and desires they brought to the incubators, and I wondered what had happened to them when Wonderland closed down. I thought about the premature babies who had survived and grown, and about those who had perished in the machines, and I wondered aloud if Kersting's apartment might be haunted. She said, no, no. She'd never seen any ghosts in the building. Myself, I wasn't so sure.

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