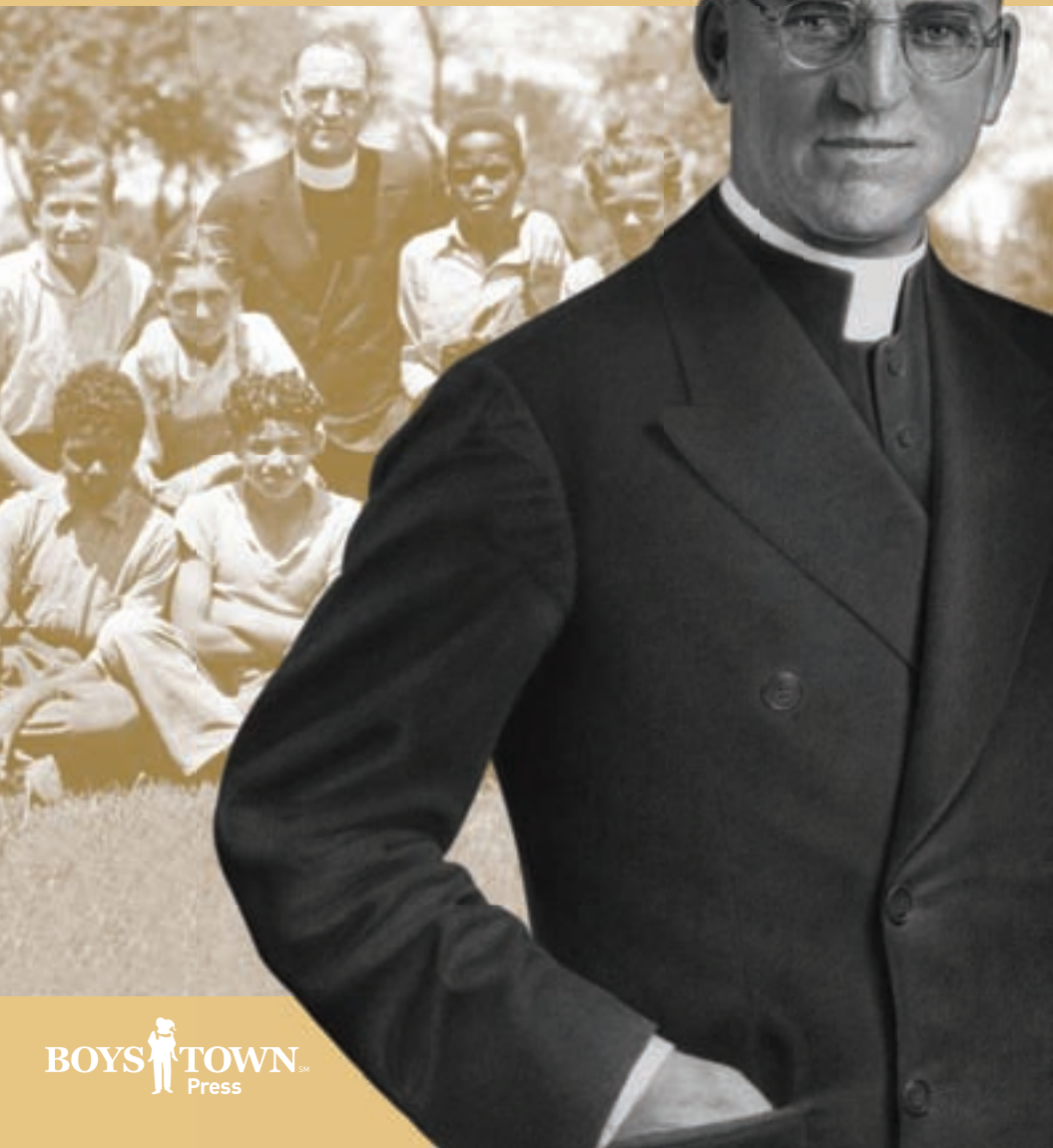


HUGH REILLY AND KEVIN WARNEKE

# FATHER FLANAGAN *of* BOYS TOWN *A Man of Vision*



## *Table of Contents*

PROLOGUE:	Their Only Hope	1
CHAPTER 1:	The Boy from Ballymoe	9
CHAPTER 2:	Preparing to Do God's Work	23
CHAPTER 3:	Inspired by a Boy Who Needed a Home	35
CHAPTER 4:	Finding a Home	45
CHAPTER 5:	Building a Village for Little Men	63
CHAPTER 6:	Putting Boys Town on the Map	79
CHAPTER 7:	Welcoming Hollywood	101
CHAPTER 8:	America's No. One War Dad	121
CHAPTER 9:	Helping the Children of Defeat	141
CHAPTER 10:	His Work Continues	161
AFTERWORD:	By Father Clifford Stevens	175
	Notes	179

## PROLOGUE

---

### *Their Only Hope*

JUST OUTSIDE OF MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI, Thomas Boykin slowed down to pick up two sailors who were hitchhiking by the side of the road. It was November 13, 1943, and Boykin, a former sheriff, was on his way home to his wife and children. He figured he could spare a little time to help two boys in uniform.

Joseph Leemon was from Alabama and Murice Shimnick from Wisconsin. They were stationed at the Navy Air Station near Foley, Alabama. Boykin didn't know it, but the two nineteen-year-olds were AWOL and looking for someone to rob.

"We stayed in Mobile a while," Shimnick told police, according to newspaper accounts. "Then we came to Meridian where Joe had an aunt. We planned to rob someone and take his car, but we had no intention of killing a man. Boykin just happened to be the one we picked to rob."<sup>1</sup>

Shimnick and Leemon came from religious backgrounds; one was a Baptist, the other an evangelical. They had been high school honor students. They hadn't been in the service long, but the experience had changed them.

Shortly after Boykin picked them up, Shimnick slugged the former lawman with a blackjack and forced him to stop the car. Leemon drove the car off the road and the young men dragged Boykin into the woods. "He was yelling and we lost our heads and cut his throat," Shimnick said. "Then we got in the car and drove off. Remembering we had forgotten to take the money off him, we came back for it and then headed to Mobile."<sup>2</sup>

Leemon and Shimnick were apprehended some time later in LaGrange, Georgia, and brought back to Mississippi. After a quick trial in county court, they were convicted and sentenced to be executed by electric chair. The Mississippi State Supreme Court upheld the sentence.

Hundreds of miles away, in Boys Town, Nebraska, Father Edward J. Flanagan read about the boys' trial and conviction. Perhaps he thought of some of the boys he had rescued from prison and brought to Boys Town. Maybe he thought about the hundreds of Boys Town citizens who were fighting in Europe and the Pacific. He may have even thought about the three sailors from Boys Town who were killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Whatever his reason, on December 13, 1944, he sat down and wrote a letter to Gov. Thomas L. Bailey of Mississippi.

"I am interested in the cases of Murice Shimnick and Joseph Leemon, who are both members of the Lauderdale County Jail at Meridian, Mississippi, and convicted to die on the 29th of December this year," Flanagan wrote. "Both of these young men were excellent boys from Christian families when they joined the Navy.

"...Your honor, I am not one of these sob sister types that feel that a man should not die for a crime that he has committed in the full possession of his senses and perhaps with

## PROLOGUE

premeditation. I think the world is much better off by such men being taken out of it, for they have proven themselves to be unfit and unworthy members of society. I do think, however, your Honor, that these two boys who had excellent character as far as I can find out before entering the service of their country, are very young and the depravity to which they have sunk undoubtedly has been brought on by reason of their youth and the environment while engaged in the service of their country.

“Might you not use your clemency, your Honor, and give to these young men at least an opportunity to think over the crime that they have committed by giving them life in the penitentiary at hard labor rather than death in the electric chair. This would be such a consolation to their respective families who are decent Christian people and who are shocked because of what has happened. I would appreciate your giving this matter your serious consideration and, meanwhile, I shall pray hard that God will inspire you to give these unfortunate youths this chance to live and pray and meditate for the rest of their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Getting no response from the governor, Father Flanagan traveled to Mississippi the day after Christmas 1944. While there, he spoke at a state religious conference where he was challenged for his desire to see the two boys’ sentences commuted to life in prison. “One great big fellow, whom I challenged in his statement, got up and was going to do me bodily injury,” Flanagan later wrote to his friend, the Rev. John O’Brien. “Of course, I very coolly told him that such philosophy and such an attitude was not in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that as long as people manifested such an attitude we would have strife and contentions and murder.”<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to a Meridian, Mississippi, man, Father Flanagan laid out his reasons for interceding on the boys' behalf. He pointed out that the two youths had stellar records before entering the service and that something must have happened to change their behavior. "The training which they received and which was destined to make of them strong, iron men – a training to fit them for combat service with a dangerous enemy – this training did something to these two boys. I know that in ninety-nine percent of the cases in this training the result is as desired, but apparently in a small percent of cases it reacts to the detriment of the one receiving the training.

"I would assume you would say these boys were sick boys, mentally and spiritually. That is a safe assumption to make. They were suffering some defect – something lacking in their training that other fine boys absorb – and lacking this something, this certain vitamin, these boys would be classed among the sick mentally and spiritually."<sup>5</sup>

On December 27, Father Flanagan dined with the governor and spoke with him in private for several hours. At the end of their conference, Bailey told the press: "I am not in the position to make a statement until the morning. I have promised to confer with one more person before I announce my decision."<sup>6</sup>

Interviewed at his hotel after meeting with the governor, Father Flanagan said: "I came down here on my own initiative and at my own expense to bespeak a word on behalf of two youths who committed a terrible tragedy that is unexplainable. I don't think any psychiatrist in the world could give a reason for this tragedy because the boys themselves are ignorant of why they did it...I certainly would not want to be the one to convict and say they should die in the electric chair. I realize the

responsibility of the governor, and realize the many requests made on him to see that justice be done. But justice is a word often times abused.”<sup>7</sup>

The next day, the governor made it clear he would not commute the boys’ sentences. The execution would proceed. That night, Joseph Leemon wrote a brief note to Father Flanagan:

“Before you receive this no doubt but what I will be executed, but I want to thank you for your efforts towards saving my life. I deeply appreciate what you did. Father Flanagan, I am happy to say I have made my peace with my God. I have no fear of death.”<sup>8</sup>

The December 29 edition of the *Jackson Daily News* described the execution. “Not once during their last hours did the two youths lose their composure. During their trip from the Meridian jail where they were held to Waynesboro, they spent the time singing snatches of popular songs and laughing.”<sup>9</sup>

According to the paper, Leemon was the first to be escorted to the electric chair. He said, “I am ready to die. I am not afraid and I hope to meet everyone in heaven. Tell Mom to hold up and be brave.”

Shimnick was next and, according to the newspaper account, he asked a local evangelist, “How did Joe go?” He then told witnesses, “I feel God is on my side and that’s why I’m grinning.” The first shock failed to kill Shimnick. He was given a second shot of electricity, four minutes later, that finally killed him.

Father Flanagan returned home to a storm of protests against his efforts to get the boys’ death sentences commuted. Most letter writers told him the executions were none of his business and he should not interfere. He responded to one letter by stating, “Christ did not come to earth to punish the

wicked. He came to teach. He came to show his love for suffering and sinful humanity. He came to lift up the human race from its lethargy of sin and its suppressed state of slavery under Satan. Who are we that we should cast the first stone against a fallen man or a fallen woman?”<sup>10</sup>

A New York couple chastised him for trying to be a “giant” and taking on causes that weren’t his own. “I do not want to be a giant in anything,” he replied. “All I want to do is to try and carry out in my life the teachings that I have received at my mother’s knee and to put into practice those principles which my faith calls for.”<sup>11</sup>

Father Flanagan added that he assumed the writers believed in simple justice; two boys had killed a man and should be executed for it. He asked if they had thought about the possibility that the boys’ military training had somehow gone terribly wrong and influenced them to commit the murder. “These boys missed the principle and they utilized the training they received to kill a peaceful citizen. Who are you or I that should say that these boys are not mentally and spiritually sick? Who are we that should dare to say that they should be killed for their crime, instead of cured and rehabilitated back into society? I fear you are shouting with the crowd, ‘Crucify Him, Crucify Him!’”

Father Flanagan wrote to the parents of both boys expressing his condolences and his frustration that he could not save their lives. To the parents of Murice Shimmnick, he wrote:

“The strange thing I found in my meeting with people down there, and particularly the intelligent people, was that everyone wanted these boys to be electrocuted. I didn’t find one, outside of the Catholic Priests, who felt that life imprisonment should be given to them. I fear for that kind of revenge. It is destruc-

## PROLOGUE

tive. It is dangerous. It is the kind of thing that destroys security for the future – for peace. It is the kind of thing that begets miscarriage of justice, which makes for brutality and bestiality, revenge, punishment. In other words, Christ is not permitted to enter the picture, and these are people who are constantly talking about religion and Bible study and Bible class and Church. But, my friends, there is no religion in their hearts.

“I returned a broken man in spirit because of my failure, but I am happy that I tried. I would do it all over were it necessary.”<sup>12</sup>

For Father Flanagan, the choices were simple. Follow your principles. Do the right thing. Don't worry about taking an unpopular stance. It was a philosophy he had followed for decades and would follow for years to come. He would continue to fight social injustice, religious intolerance and racial prejudice.

This philosophy helped form his attitudes about rehabilitation and second chances. It was crystallized in his oft-repeated belief that, “There are no bad boys. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example, bad thinking.”