

Poor Farm home to society's friendless and forlorn

"Be careful or you'll end up at the poor farm" was a popular admonition well in the mid-20th century.

From the early 1860s until the 1950s, the McLean County Poor Farm, located about five miles south of downtown Bloomington, was home to many misfortunate souls.

Those welcomed to the Farm, according to an early account, included the "infirm, the aged, the sick, the idiotic, the insane, and those who may be temporarily, through accident or misfortune, thrown upon the common charity."

In 1859-1860, the McLean County Board of Supervisors purchased 220 acres from John Grove Myers and established the county's first permanent poor farm. Additions were made in 1888 (80 acres) and 1904 (62 acres). The buildings, which eventually included a superintendent's house, residential quarters, washhouse, stables and various outbuildings, were situated on a 20-acre site just west of U.S. Route 51.

In December 1864, there were 32 "inmates" (as the residents were called into the 1940s) at the Farm. The "hopelessly insane and idiotic," numbering about a half dozen, were kept in unheated cells. "To our mind," The Pantagraph remarked, "it is sheer brutality and cruelty to keep these unfortunate persons in cold rooms when the thermometer is twenty degrees below zero, but we may be mistaken."

In June 1877, The Pantagraph described the pitiful state of many of Poor Farm's fifty some residents: Formerly "strong men and women from whom the light of reason has been taken away by its Giver . . . fragments of once prosperous and gleeful families, the wrecks of blasted hopes and ruined lives, young women at whose breasts suckle babes brought unto the world in shame, and young men whom dissipation and sinful practices have brought from the glory of manhood to the level of the most groveling beasts." The Mclean County Poor Farm, simply put, presented "one of the saddest sights that mortal eyes can view."

For all of its manifold miseries, the Poor Farm was reliably productive for much of its history. In the summer of 1897, for example, there were about 90 acres in corn, 45 in oats and 10 in millet. There were also 90 acres in pasture and a 10-acre truck garden. By 1924 the Poor Farm's orchard was one of the finest in the county, enabling Callie M. Jones, wife of Superintendent Arthur Jones, to can 700 quarts of peaches. There were also 300 chickens producing a daily average of 200 eggs. In the 1950s, if not earlier, a local sportsmen's club arranged for the Poor Farm to raise pheasants.

When livestock and grain prices were high, such as the First World War, the Poor Farm earned more money for the county than it cost to operate it. Residents performed work if they were willing and able, such as cleaning, tailoring, cooking, canning and field chores. Yet given the age

and physical and / or mental condition of many residents, paid staff handled the bulk of day-to-day work.

State inspector Anna Hinrichsen visited the Farm in October 1915, issuing a scathing report the following January. In it, she criticized the lack of support staff to care for the 91 residents, 16 of whom were women. “This institution,” Hinrichsen added, “employs the smallest amount of help in proportion to the population of any almshouse in Illinois.” The report noted the peeling exteriors and grimy interiors of the residential buildings. “More attention is given to the domestic animals than to inmates, and they are better housed,” was one typically blunt assessment.

Yet ten years later, The Pantagraph called the Poor Farm a “snug haven for human derelicts” and a “model public farm of the United States.”

Over the years the Poor Farm was home to profoundly troubled individuals. In 1894, there was the “Electric Man” William Woodard, a former Danvers resident known for his “lectures” on the electrical currents he believed permeated his body. And then there was “John the Baptist,” a resident whose name and personal history were a complete mystery. “He is a religious maniac, but will only talk when spoken to,” noted The Pantagraph. “He is a German but speaks fairly good English.” John the Baptist died in March 1900 having spent most of his final four decades under the care of the county.

“They would send all kinds of people out there, old people, drunks, people in trouble of some kind, even prostitutes,” remembered Geneva Smith, wife of Poor Farm foreman Elbert “Pete” Smith. “Sometimes we’d have whole families out there.” The Smiths, interviewed in 1980, worked under Superintendent George Kent, who ran the place from the late 1940s to the early 1950s.

In 1953-1954, the county converted the Poor Farm into the Maple Grove Nursing Home. Twenty years later the McLean County Nursing Home in Normal opened and the land comprising the old Poor Farm was put on the auction block. Russell O. Shirk, a founder of Beer Nuts Inc., purchased 320 of the 360 acres, including the collection of buildings. Today, the old Poor Farm site is private property and not open to the public.

The Poor Farm was also home to a pauper’s cemetery, or “potter’s field.” The first recorded burials date to spring 1860. The dead were buried in plain caskets in graves often dug by fellow residents. The headstones were plain concrete slabs upon which was inscribed not a name but a number.

County residents unable to pay for their burial were also laid to rest at the Poor Farm, as were transients and other assorted nameless, lost, neglected and forgotten souls. The last recorded burial occurred in September 1930 when cemetery became the final resting place for an unidentified newborn found dead at the city dump. The grave marker read “165.”

Today the cemetery sits south of the McLean County Animal Control Center, though it’s not accessible to the public. Mused a Pantagraph reporter in 1897: “Here are buried God’s poor—the

unfortunates who will be better off in the beyond, where the crooked ways are made straight and the wrongs of this world righted.”

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