

The entire system was a headache to nearly everyone concerned. It was next to impossible for town supervisors to determine true master apprentice relationships.

Welfare wards were continuously being secretly moved across town lines to more generous precincts, a practice which could draw stiff penalties if the instigator was convicted.

The victims of misfortune were objects of scorn to the rest of society. Poor people were publicly listed as paupers, the insane were termed lunatics, and if one stuttered or couldn't talk, another term was used.

Pressures for reform soon surfaced. In 1853, the County Board of Supervisors appointed a committee to review the current pauper program. After study, the committee admitted that county administration was needed, but vigorously opposed such action because it would raise county taxes.



Photo Courtesy of Mike Livingston

But six years later, a resolution, presented by Moses Strong, was referred to a special committee which reported favorably. The resolution was adopted by the County Board. Briefly, it provided for the election of three supervisors who were to be known as Superintendents of the Poor. They were to determine the number and condition of paupers in Iowa County, and to make an estimate of the cost to care for them under the poor house and farm system. They were also directed to buy an improved farm, near the center of the county, of not more than 160 acres, a portion of which was to be timbered, at not more than \$25 per acre. The county was to assume care of the poor on June 1, 1860.

On February 22, 1860, the Superintendents purchased the farm of Peter Temby for

\$3,800 at 8½% interest, payment to be made in two installments in 1861 and 1862. The farm was comprised of 120 acres, which included the 40 acres where Bloomfield Manor is now located and 80 acres adjoining on the east — all in section 35, Town six. North, Range Two East. Forty acres of timber land in section 24 were also included.⁽³⁾

Peter Temby was retained as Overseer of the Poor for seven years. Rules of conduct adopted for the inmates were as follows:

No vulgar, profane or disrespectful language. Each person must do such work as the overseer finds them capable of doing. All lights out by 9 o'clock. Each female must keep her room clean and orderly. No person shall leave the farm without consent. For the first offense, the delinquent shall be punished. For the second, expelled for three months. Punishment shall consist of a bread and water diet.

The facilities suffered immediate growing pains. Soon after acquisition, an addition was built to Mr. Temby's large two story stone house and a separate building for the insane was constructed. In 1863, 30 x 45 foot barn was built for \$1,000, the quarters for the insane were enlarged in 1872 and in 1878, a new two story building was erected for that purpose.

Mr. Temby was followed by Thomas Thomas in 1867, who, in turn, was succeeded by M. F. Rewey in 1870, "a young man who voluntarily resigned after eleven years to open a new business in a new town with a new railroad and the same name as his own."⁽⁴⁾ Edward Perkins was then appointed Overseer. By this time the farm lodged and supported 38 inmates, of which seven were classed as insane.

It was during the administrations of Mr. Perkins and John Livingston, that the County Farm grew and eventually became one of the show places in Iowa County. Population increase dictated expansion and. 120 acres were added in 1884, at a cost of \$6,000.⁽⁵⁾ Then in 1892 another 100 acres were purchased for \$4,000,⁽⁶⁾ followed by 60 acres from the William Fine heirs in 1898 for \$1,800.⁽⁷⁾ This completed land acquisition until the 240 acres located north of the County Farm Road and between County Highways CH and Q were purchased during the 1930's. The present total acreage in 1984 is 640. The county has bought and sold several tracts of timber land.

Mr. Ed Perkins was a man of tremendous energy and great dedication to supervising the County Farm. Known as a good manager, one of the ways that he kept the budget low was by making efficient use of inmate labor. Some of the inmates could be trusted with teams of horses, and others could at least do hand work. Under Mr. Perkins' influence, a sense of pride of appearance was instilled at the farm. The well kept premises, yards, gardens and orchard were very attractive. The two story poor-house was built in 1901 and the rows of spruce trees along the highway and bordering the entrance drive were planted about that time. Traffic from the curious became so great that eventually visitors were barred on Sunday afternoons.

A pond was created southwest of the buildings to furnish ice to store for summer refrigeration. Skaters used to gather there for winter time fun. Perhaps the most talented performer to frequent the ice was Louis Ryall of Dodgeville. It was said that he could skate backward almost as well as forward, remarkable in those days.

Mr. John Livingston continued and expanded Mr. Perkins' programs when he became superintendent. He loved good livestock and built up fine herds of purebred Guernsey cattle and Poland China hogs.

When the magnificent dairy barn was built, the institution became the showplace of Iowa County. There was a large flock of laying hens and huge stacks of split stove wood were as large as small houses. The county farm system of caring for the poor and the insane was working very well. The huge quantities of milk, vegetables, fruit, eggs and meat consumed by the inmates were produced on the premises

Life at the County Farm was seldom dull. The inmates assured activity of some sort. Little Willie of grade school age arrived, a victim of neglect. The nice appearing lad touched the hearts of the nearby Hallam family, who decided to offer him a home, in spite of their already sizable family. Willie lasted overnight, as his loud talk and a vocabulary becoming an old time sailor proved his undoing. He was returned, bag and baggage, the next day.⁽⁸⁾ Willie wasn't the only boy from the County Farm to make an impact at the local school. Notations in a diary of a young lady teacher at Pine Grove in 1893 regarding one "Jimmy" are as follows:

"Jimmy was awfully mean in geography class and if he acts so again, I shall send word to Mr. Perkins."

"I am disgusted with Jimmy and I intend to see Mr. Perkins about him tomorrow."

"I called to see Mr. Perkins on my way home and told him about Jimmy. They have found a home for him."

Many other stories could be told about the ever popular Iowa County Farm Picnic and the hay wagon load of inmates, dressed in their finest, in attendance at the County Fair. There were occasional escapades involving runaway patients and local farm wives always dreaded possible visits from the insane when the menfolk weren't home.

Floors in areas housing the more dangerous insane were kept polished to a high and slippery finish. A great uncle of the author, who worked as a night attendant at the asylum about 1900, told of being threatened by large and violent patients at times, and of being taught to knock the attacker's feet out from under him on the smooth floor. Once down, the victim was more easily subdued.

The County Farm era spanned one of the most interesting periods in our community

history. The third such institution formed in the state, it furnished for many years a home for the poor and those who needed care. Only a small minority of the inmates at the asylum had minds hopelessly deteriorated. Others were seemingly normal, but were subject to unpredictable spells of one sort or other which kept them from leading a normal life. And a great many were happy, good-natured people with strong healthy bodies and the mind of a child. The farm in the open country, with its various tasks to perform was a splendid environment for these social misfits. To them, it was home and many were proud of their achievements and of their Overseer.

The County Farm system worked well as long as our society remained old fashioned and relatively simple. Bureaucratic meddling and the advent of power agricultural machinery beyond inmate ability to operate ultimately contributed to its economic demise. It remains a wholesome and refreshing memory.

Wayne Watkins

FOOTNOTES

- 1..Proceedings of Iowa County Board of Supervisors. State Historical 'Society, Madison, WI
- 2..The History of Wisconsin, Volume II, Richard Current, State Historical Society, c1976
- 3..Warranty Deeds, Iowa County Register of Deeds, Volume 6, page 9
- 4..Bloomfield and Number Five, (manuscript) Judge Hallam
- 5..Warranty Deeds. Iowa County Register of Deeds, Volume 42, page 79
- 6..Ibid, Volume 52, page 408
- ?..Ibid, Volume 60, page 183
- 8..Bloomfield and Number Five, (manuscript) Judge Hallam

The author acknowledges the courtesy of Hamilton and Mueller, Attorneys for the use of their legal library.