

Blue Earth County Poor Farm
A Brief History

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Piecing together a history of the Blue Earth County Poor Farm proved to be a daunting task. A visit today, to the residence that once was home to Blue Earth County's poor and aged, certainly would suggest the building's rich history. But as we found in our research, much of the story of this historic building was never recorded or has been lost. What records exist are as scant in information as they are in numbers. What does exist to tell us of the Poor Farm, are articles from the newspapers of the area including the Blue Earth County Enterprise, the Mankato Daily Review, the Mankato Free Press, and the Mankato Record. This account is in no way complete, in that the researchers were unable to find the mechanism by which people were consigned to the poor farm nor a thorough demographic look at the residents who lived there for almost 100 years. What we were able to find were accounting of grain and produce, accounts of reporters who went out to visit the farm. Utilizing the work of Ethel McClure who has explored the history of housing services for older Minnesotans exhaustively in articles and books, our hope is to put the Blue Earth County Poor Farm into the context of poor relief throughout Minnesota. Interweaving news accounts of the poor farm with information from McClure we will try to present some picture of this important building in the history of the county.

Before we begin, it is important to try to get a handle on the residents. Who were they? Why were they there? Ralph Woehle, lucky enough to have complete records of the population of the Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm, concluded that that county's residents were "mostly those with physical or mental health problems."¹ While there are no extant records that the researchers were able to uncover that allows

the statistical picture he offers of Yellow Medicine County's farm, the residents of Blue Earth County's Poor Farm are often subject to descriptions such as these through the years in newspaper accounts:

- “the aged, the imbecile and the weak” 1888²
- “Helpless and stone blind” 1911³
- “old people with dispositions soured by adversity,” 1895⁴
- only two of the 23 residents were able to help with the farm work.⁵ 1910
- “one of the inmates is blind and most of them are deaf.”⁶
- In 1911. 4 of 19 residents were blind and almost half were over 80 years old.⁷

Poverty may have been the issue, but it seems clear that most of the paupers were there as much as a result of age and disabilities as poverty in and of itself.

This brief overview of the poor farm will be followed by a more in depth look at the residents and the changes that occurred during the century it was in existence. The land was purchased in 1867. Initially the first superintendent, Hiram Yates in March of 1868 moved into a log home with the 3 men and 1 woman consigned to his care. The first year they relied partially on his hunting skills for their victuals.⁸ A brick home was completed in August of 1882 at a cost of \$5000.⁹ A couple was often in residence, the husband doing the farm work, the wife working with the residents. In 1893, a new barn was completed. There were between 15 and 33 people at the farm on average. The farm was a working farm, over its history it produced wheat, oats, soybeans, potatoes, corn, and pumpkins in addition to other crops. In 1904 renovations included steam heat, new sewerage system, and improved bathrooms. A 1911 article that primarily discusses

a report for improvements in the poor farm's ventilation system had this to say about the people housed there: "Helpless people who number 23, nearly all of whom are very old, five of them are practically blind, six in bed constantly, three have no physical control over themselves, four never go out of doors, four do not go out and try to do chores, but none are able to do manual labor." ¹⁰ Typical of the residents? We don't know, since no records were found, but it would be consistent with other reports of the many county poor farms.

The farm sustained a herd of cows and used the milk and butter with enough left over to sell. There were also hens, turkey, ducks and geese, as well as hogs. The house was described thoroughly in 1940:

Inside the roomy, three story home everything is kept spick and span. There are about 40 rooms in the building...On the first floor are the furnace room, wash room, the fruit and vegetable cellars, a spacious pantry, the kitchen, and a dining room used by the Weber family and two maids. The main dining room, containing three long tables capable of seating 40 persons, is on the second floor, as well as seven bedrooms, the smoking room, and two living rooms in which services were held. Fourteen bedrooms, toilets and bath and locker rooms occupy the third floor. The corridors are fitted out with linoleum. Most bedrooms are occupied by two and sometimes three persons

Social Security was legislated in 1935, making institutional residents ineligible for old age pensions. The name was changed name to Blue Earth County Home in 1943. In 1957, the county rented out the farm on one-year leases. In the end, 1964, the farm, now named "Oak Grove Rest Home" was sold to Mrs. Pearl Dodge.

The local paper reported that "Action to sell the facility follows a trend by the county to get out of poor farm services, and related headaches, and let them up to private enterprise." The property became a private residence in 1988 and is now the art gallery/studio/ home of Brian Frink, art professor at Minnesota State University-

Mankato. He is still in the process in transforming the space into gallery, living, and studio areas.

In 1864 a law was passed that made welfare the responsibility of the county in Minnesota. By 1880 there were more than 20 counties with poor farms. Thirty four of 82 organized Minnesota counties had poor farms by 1900. Ethel McClure wrote that the rationale of the poor farms, as opposed to poorhouses, was financial. “A farm, it was argued, would provide food and other products essential for the maintenance of the inmates, who might labor to some extent and thus contribute to their own support.”¹¹

This idea was largely not practical, as we have seen, because the residents were too superannuated, too physically or mentally fragile to work much.

The idea of a farm as an investment also appealed to many county welfare boards, for it was felt that with the growing population land would increase in value. George Pillsbury, early Minnesota Governor, in a speech said that “poverty is a disease, cured by hard work...and as little charity as possible.”¹² The poor farm was supposed to underline that idea that people would work, if possible, for their keep. Many of the articles about Blue Earth County’s Poor farm tout the thrifty nature of the poor farm as well as the quality of the care. The object of the exercise was to save money for citizens by grouping the paupers together, hire hard-working couples to run the farm and care for the residents as opposed to paying out for care in individual homes, which was the alternative. The farm perhaps had a dual purpose. Was the location to facilitate a working farm? Or to keep the paupers out of sight and out of mind? Of the roughly 50 articles about the Blue Earth County Poor Farm in my possession, 12 express the sentiment that the taxpayers are getting a good deal. Headlines that read “Cost \$1.44 per

week” were the main thrust of many articles about the Poor Farm from 1868 until its demise, although many others praised the farmer and his wife for their care of both the farm and the residents. .

McClure’s works discuss the “stigma of pauper on every old person who became an inmate.” The articles about Blue Earth’s Poor Farm echo that sentiment, with one representative article in the Blue Earth County Enterprise in 1911: “Naturally the inmates of such a home are not the sweetest dispositioned on earth. They are largely augmented from the ranks of those who have met with adversity or have been disappointed in life, thus making them pessimistic, sour and easily dissatisfied with life.”¹³ One account by Henry Beeler, Sunday School Missionary, puts the blame on the families: “What a haven of rest this is to the poor storm tossed heart of father or mother, who are denied the needed comfort of love by cruel or indifferent sons or daughters, or the one entirely friendless in this world.”¹⁴ One poignant statement is offered by a visitor in 1911: One old inmate said to Mankato ladies, “We are treated kindly here, and the visits of people from the outside are marked by us as spots of sunshine in our few remaining days.”¹⁵

McClure summarized the problems with the poor farms as including the :

“inadequacy of the structures themselves, ...generally crowded, unsanitary, and lacking in privacy or comfort. ... The most frequent criticism of the poor farm , however, was that it herded together all ages and conditions of people. Poor farms became human dumping grounds. Although dependent children, needy war veterans, mentally ill, deficient, blind, deaf and other handicapped persons were gradually siphoned off to specialized state institutions, the impoverished but respectable aged in poorhouses were thrown into close daily contact with vagrants, misfits, incompetents, and ‘members of the drinking class.’”¹⁶

In Blue Earth County’s case, however, it seems that the residents were mostly the superannuated who were past their working days of manual labor. Few of the newspaper accounts mention children, people addicted to alcohol, and while there are

mentions of the mentally ‘feeble,’ none mention residents with mental illness. With the elderly, however, there were issues of the quality of care, facilities to care for the bed-ridden, and easy egress in the event of emergencies.

Concerns were expressed in a report issued by Hastings Hornell Hart, a 32 year old Congregational minister appointed a secretary for the State Board of Corrections and Charities who toured all but 2 of the 24 county poor farms and found that while most aspects of the poor farms were acceptable, sanitation problems were problem, both water sources, amenities for bathing the inmates, and space. He found, in Blue Earth County, that “an infirm woman had her bed in the dining room.”¹⁷

Part of the reason, perhaps, Blue Earth County’s poor farm housed mostly the infirm elderly was Minnesota’s early entry into specialized care. According to McClure, “By 1900 Minnesota had a well-developed system of state institutions: five hospitals of asylums for the insane, a soldiers home; separate schools for the blind, the deaf, and the feeble-minded; a school for dependent children; the nucleus of a hospital for crippled children; and three correctional institutions. ...Nearly all the 917 persons cared for in Minnesota poorhouses during the year 1899 were there because of insanity, idiocy, sickness, loss of limbs, deformity or accident, blindness or old age. More than half were 60 years of age or over. At the end of the century county poorhouses were well on the way to becoming old peoples homes – or perhaps, more properly, infirmaries.”¹⁸

In 1900 a meeting was held of Minnesota’s superintendents of poorhouses. The State Conference of Charities and Correction was an opportunity taken by most speakers to disparage the residents of the poor farms, who were described as childlike, allergic to baths and work and worse. One sympathetic speaker, however, a Charles E Faulkner of

Minneapolis, pretended in his remarks to be an resident , and remarked on how bathing would be better in a clean shower and how as the baths should be discarded and used for the pigs, instead.. His were the only truly empathic remarks, the bulk apparently being of a disparaging nature about the residents they served. One of the suggestions put forth included inviting a local minister to say a rite when a resident died. It is not clear the degree to which residents of Blue Earth County's were treated with respect in their final rites, but it is clear that the norm at the time was that a resident of the poor farm was not given a funeral upon death, but unceremoniously carted off to a graveyard, in the case of Blue Earth County, to "a cemetery several miles north of Mankato, on the Saint Peter Road, in the care of the county undertaker."¹⁹

Most county operated poor houses were established prior 1910 and many counties did not continue incorporate the use of poor farms and houses even into the twentieth century. Facilities for the poor or aged that began operation after the turn of the century were often private and not-for-profit. Many of the new facilities were church-sponsored benevolent homes. Mankato itself had a few such homes in the Mankato Lutheran Home for the Aged and the Mother Francis Rest Home also. Residents in these types of homes often shared similar religious and ethnic heritage. A public facility, on the other hand, could not expect ethnic nor religious homogeneity. Even with the potential diversity in the public poor farm, there would certainly be a demand for religious services. A 1933 newspaper article suggests that both the Salvation Army and the "Adventists" conducted Sunday services at the farm. It was also mentioned that "Rev. Otto Brauer of Good Thunder has been conducting services twice a month on Wednesday evenings", although no denominations were mentioned.²⁰ This considered, there is no mention in any of the

articles as to whether these types of services were adequate in either the eyes of the residents or citizens of the county.

Although church services may have provided some stimulation for those interested in participating, this would have only occurred a handful of times a month. As older residents of poor houses physical condition deteriorated activities they could participate in would certainly have decreased. With limited activity for many residents, keeping minds occupied was important for a healthy atmosphere and the residents well being. McClure cites a 1928 study by the United States Department of Labor which discusses the “problem of idleness”. The study suggests that “Blank faces and vacantly staring eyes show the inert minds of the residents. This was especially evident in the homes in which no effort was made to arouse their interest.”²¹ There is evidence that the Blue Earth County Poor Farm provided some stimulation for its residents, although it is questionable to what extent. The 1933 article states that politics is a popular discussion topic and that there “is always a scramble for the Free Press when it gets here at noon.”²² The article also suggests that the poor house did not possess enough reading material to satisfy residents. The newspaper refers to a “scarcity of magazines and papers” and offers that “Contributions of old magazines and papers by individuals are appreciated”.²³

In the wake of the Great Depression many scholars, social workers and politicians were looking for alternatives to the existing welfare programs. As previously discussed, the poor farm was based on the idea that poor and needy would have a chance to contribute to their care by helping on the farm. By this time, this was becoming less and less the case as many residents were too old or disabled to provide much assistance. Ralph E. Woehle explained that Yellow Medicine County Farm for instance saw an

increase in its average resident age from 44 during the period of 1888-1894, to 69 from 1925-1935.²⁴ Woehle explained that while intentions were optimistic regarding the work of residents, few actually participated and the farm was “allowed to stagnate”.²⁵

Nationally, the idea of the poor farm as a rehabilitating haven had drastically deteriorated. At a University of Chicago conference in 1930 the director of the forum Isaac M. Rubinow suggested that many institutional homes were “concentration camps for the aged” and that many who entered in old age felt they were “giving up, cashing in, capitulating.”²⁶

In contrast, the Blue Earth Poor Farm still appeared to be thought of in a positive light in local news accounts and continued to show signs of productivity. In 1937, as Yellow Medicine Poor Farm and others were shutting their doors, the Mankato Free Press described the county poor farm as having “the appearance of a country resort or a distinguished estate. ‘Over the hill to the poor house’ isn’t half as tragic as it sounds in Blue Earth county.”²⁷ Although one may suggest bias or question the reasoning for writing such an article, there is evidence of the poor farms success. The Free Press stated that the poor farm had more than doubled in size around the time the article was written.²⁸ As of 1936 the amount of goods produced by the farm far exceeded the amount consumed. The Free Press article suggested that “Produce valued conservatively” was worth \$6993, while only \$3,108.75 was consumed.²⁹ The farm’s produce included 3,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables, 50 dollars worth of home-made soap, 800 chickens, 28 geese, 11 guineas, 1,200 bushels of corn, 1,935 bushels of oats, 676 bushels of wheat, 58 pigs, 13 heifers, and five bull calves.³⁰ Although we have no

evidence as to what extent residents of the poor farm actually participated in the work of the farm it can be safely argued this level of production was a success.

In August of 1935 President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. With the passage of the Social Security Act, along with other New Deal initiatives, the federal government took an active step to care for the well being of its citizens and the welfare state was born. The S.S.A. provided a pension for those of old-age and a mandatory retirement plan for those currently working. Thus older people who could not support themselves financially, but could still care for themselves individually would have the opportunity to move out of the poor house. Moving people out of the poor house was an intention of the act. McClure points out that the government felt that “anyone receiving a pension would not choose to live in a poor house.”³¹ To further encourage people to move from the poor house the S.S.A. stipulated that one could not receive the pension while residing in a public institution such as the Blue Earth Poor Farm.

Although the S.S.A. was expected to have an immediate impact on the population of institutions for the poor and aged, early results showed this not to be the case. The Social Security Board in 1938 conceded that the act was “not followed by a marked reduction in the population of almshouses or in the number of almshouses”³² Minnesota proved to be an exception to this as sixteen counties discontinued the operation of poor farms and houses in the ten years following the passage of S.S.A. This group included Yellow Medicine’s poor farm.³³ Other counties considered leasing their public run facilities to the private sector so inmates could collect the pensions that otherwise would have been withheld. Residents of counties that continued to operate public poor houses,

such as Blue Earth, had a difficult debate as to whether they should seek independence from the public facility. Many residents were forced to decide if they could care for themselves. The situation as McClure states was often “jumping from the frying pan into the fire”.³⁴

The Blue Earth County Poor Farm was not immune to the changing times after the Social Security Act. In 1939 Commissioner C. F. Pohl proposed leasing the facility to a private party. Pohl argued that the poor farm would cost the county less money if turned over to a private manager. By going private, residents of the poor farm would get their pensions and then would pay it to the person leasing the property. Although the farm had been operating well, it still cost the county \$5,495 as of 1938.³⁵ In consideration of this idea the Blue Earth County Welfare Board conducted a survey of other county boards throughout the state to see how they had handled their institutions for the poor. The results showed that most counties had moved to private operation. Of the 74 board secretaries polled 39 reported their counties had ceased public operation of homes and farms, twenty stated their counties had never operated such facilities, eight felt their facility had been run satisfactorily by the county, while four suggested their poor house was a liability to the county, and the remaining three stated their facilities were run by townships rather than county.³⁶ The Mankato Free Press also reported that all of the counties which had leased their facilities to a private party incurred at least some savings with Dodge County reporting a \$5,000 gain.³⁷

The proposal to lease the county poor farm met fierce opposition in W. C. Minks, Chairman of the County Board of Commissioners in 1939. Minks argued in a letter to the Mankato Free Press that the proclaimed deficit caused by the poor farm was

inaccurate. He cited “invisible credits due the farm”, such as the temporary housing of criminals in the poor house who would otherwise be kept in jail.³⁸ Minks also expressed doubts about moving the poor relief from local to federal control. He argued that federal controls of poor relief had been “continually increasing administrative costs”. He went on to say, “I firmly believe it will not be many years before it will again be turned back to the counties, townships and villages for we cannot continually live on borrowed money.”³⁹ Although Minks’ argument was reputable, it seems likely that a sense of pride in the work of the local boards and caregivers lay behind his public outcry. Minks expressed disdain at the selling off of parts of the farm, and was specifically angered by a plan that would “sacrifice the pure bred Guernsey herd which the county has spent twenty-five years in building up and place it on the action block.”⁴⁰ It is this sense of pride and desire for local control that might help to explain why the Blue Earth County Poor Farm was successful for as long as it was.

C. F. Pohl, who originally proposed leasing the farm, produced a rebuttal to Minks a few days later. While defending the figures that he had previously suggested, he also made the point that “one of the reasons given for instituting old age assistance – was the elimination of the county poor farm system”.⁴¹ On December 6th the matter was deferred to a later meeting after further dissenters expressed their views on privatization.⁴² Ultimately the farm was not leased to a private manager for a number of years.

The Blue Earth County Poor Farm continued operations as a publicly controlled facility until 1957, although as stated earlier it did receive a name change. Poor Farm was replaced with the more politically correct Country Home. Executive secretary

Herbert Wagen suggested the change was necessary, because the term poor farm had become “repugnant to many people.”⁴³ In 1957 the county leased the facilities, rented out the farm land, and changed the name to the Oak Grove rest home. In 1964 the county voted to seek bids for the home and sell it out right. The rest home’s operator Pearl Dodge purchased the building on the high bid of \$25,000.⁴⁴ The county kept the farm land, and has continued to rent the land out to area farmers.

The poor farm still today functions as a residence. But rather than providing a roof for the poor, aged, and physically and mentally disabled, the poor farm is home to a family and a home to art. What can we say about this building whose atmosphere must have been so different then from today? At some level the poor farm was held in high regard. Most all articles spoke favorably about the farm. The writers of the articles, perhaps, were writing ‘good news’ for the citizens glad to have their poor out of sight and out of mind. We don’t know. There is a discrepancy between studies done in Minnesota that articulate issues with hygiene, access to recreation, privacy, and autonomy for the residents and the glowing pictures always painted by the writers for Mankato newspapers. Even so there is little evidence to suggest that Blue Earth County’s poor farm truly reflected the abominable living conditions often associated with poor farms. It is also safe to say that the Blue Earth County poor farm lasted longer than most similar facilities in Minnesota. This could be the result of the quality of administration and caregivers in the county, which some of the articles suggest. It also may be the resistance of some, such as W. C. Minks, to relinquish local control of poor relief. The poor farm’s longevity may also have been simply the result of the city of Mankato providing the population to keep such a facility in operation. As with most things it is likely a

combination. Lastly, to draw any final conclusions of the county farm is a challenge. We would argue that for most of the poor farm's existence it served the county well. There may have been times when the farm was more profitable, but descriptions suggest that administration and the general community seemed pleased if not surprised with the farm's condition. What we can not make judgments about is whether the farm served its residents well. Certainly, having a roof or food may have been preferable to alternatives, but ultimately we do not know if people were satisfied with the care they received and the home provided at the poor farm.

¹ Woehle, Ralph. "Lessons from Yellow Medicine County: Work and Custodial Service at the County Poor Farm, 1889-1935.." Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare. 24(4): 14-28, December, 1997.

² ---"The Poor Farm for the Unfortunate." Review (Mankato, MN), December 10, 1888.

³ "Over the Hills to Poor Farm. Review Man Visits Place Where the Unfortunate of Blue Earth County are Kept." Everything about the Premises is Bright and Clean...Herd of Fine Dairy Cattle." Mankato Daily Review September 11, 1911, p. 6, column 3.

⁴ Brown, J.E. "County Poor Farm." Mankato Daily Review June 28, 1895, p. 2, column 2,

⁵ ----- "Poor Farm Real Spick and Span; a Fine Place." Mankato Free Press September 17, 1910, p. 4, column 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ -----, "Around the County: An Enterprise Reporter Travels Over the Hills to the Poor Farm." Blue Earth County Enterprise, November 6, 1911, p 1, column 1.

⁸ ----- "The Poor Farm." Mankato Weekly Record May 30, 1868, p 3, column 1.

⁹ Hughes, Thomas. A History of Blue Earth County and Biographies of its Leading Citizens. Chicago: Middle West Publishing Company, 1909.

¹⁰ ----- "As to Improvements at the Poor Farm" Mankato Daily Review December 12, 1910.

¹¹ McClure, Ethel. More than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged Minnesota Historical Press, St Paul, 1968.

¹² O'Keefe, Michael. "Social Services: Minnesota as Innovator." Daedalus 129(3): 247-267, 2000 .

¹³ -----, "Around the County: An Enterprise Reporter Travels Over the Hills to the Poor Farm." Blue Earth County Enterprise, November 6, 1911, p 1, column 1.

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- ¹⁴ Henry Beeler, "At the Poor Farm: A Compulsory and Yet Most Delightful Visit at the Blue Earth County Institution." Mankato Daily Free Press December 2, 1898, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ ----"Speak in Praise of Our County Poor Farm." Mankato Daily Review May 23, 1911, p. 4, column 2.
- ¹⁶ McClure, Ethel. More than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged Minnesota Historical Press, St Paul, 1968, p. 233.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 80.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 90
- ¹⁹ ----- "County Poor Farm." Mankato Daily Review June 28, 1895, p. 2, column 2.
- ²⁰ "Peace Reigns at County Home" Mankato Free Press October 16, 1933, p.7 col. 2.
- ²¹ McClure, Ethel. More than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged Minnesota Historical Press, St Paul, 1968, p. 145
- ²² "Peace Reigns at County Home" Mankato Free Press October 16, 1933, p. 7 col. 2
- ²³ Ibid. P7 col.2
- ²⁴ Woehle, Ralph. "Lessons from Yellow Medicine County: Work and Custodial Service at the County Poor Farm, 1889-1935.." Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare. 24(4): 14-28, December, 1997.
- ²⁵ Ibid
- ²⁶ ²⁶ McClure, Ethel. More than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged Minnesota Historical Press, St Paul, 1968, p. 151 and 153
- ²⁷ "County Poor Farm More Like a Fashionable Estate" Mankato Free Press April 20, 1937 p. 11
- ²⁸ Ibid p. 11
- ²⁹ Ibid. p. 11
- ³⁰ Ibid. p. 11
- ³¹ ³¹ McClure, Ethel. More than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged Minnesota Historical Press, St Paul, 1968, p.164
- ³² Ibid p. 164.
- ³³ Ibid P.245-246.
- ³⁴ Ibid p. 165.
- ³⁵ "County May Lease Farm" Mankato Free Press August 9, 1939 p. 5 col. 2
- ³⁶ "Survey Made of Poor Farms" Mankato Free Press November 23, 1939, p. 11 col. 1.
- ³⁷ Ibid. p. 11
- ³⁸ "Minks Tells Opposition to Change at Poor Farm" Mankato Free Press November 30, 1939 p. 11 col.2
- ³⁹ ibid p. 11
- ⁴⁰ ibid p. 11
- ⁴¹ "Pohl Replies to Minks on Poor Farm Question" Mankato Free Press December 5, 1939 p. 11 col. 2
- ⁴² "Action on Poor Farm Deferred" Mankato Free Press December 7, 1939 p. 13 col. 2
- ⁴³ "County Farm Renamed; Now County Home" Mankato Free Press November 27, 1943 p.9 col. 3
- ⁴⁴ "Lessee Awarded County Property" Mankato Free Press November 10, 1964 p 9