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Ottawa County's Forgotten Dead Finally Memorialized at Poor Farm

by Eldon R. Kramer

"Show me your burial grounds and I'll show you a measure of the civility of a community."

-Benjamin Franklin

This quote, on a bronze plaque placed at the entrance to the newly-restored cemetery at the former Ottawa County Poor Farm in Eastmanville, is an appropriate recognition for a dedicated group of volunteers and the generosity of many individuals who made the project a success.

On July 10, 2010, the public is invited to attend a dedication ceremony for the Poor Farm Memorial Cemetery, located on Leonard Street, 1.4 miles west of 68th Avenue. It's the culmination of a project I first envisioned in a meeting I hosted in October 2002.

Earlier, after six years of research, I learned that my great-grandfather Isaac Kramer, who helped settle Holland in the late 1800s, was committed to the poor farm in 1895 and died there in 1899.

After rediscovering the forgotten cemetery during one of many trips to Western Michigan to do research for my family history book, I encouraged members of the surrounding communities to restore and preserve the cemetery. I was living in Arizona at the time and believed the project was best undertaken by local people.

In the years that followed, as the county began developing the Eastmanville Farm Park on the 229-acre poor farm site, I stayed in contact with county officials in an effort to demonstrate my continued interest in restoring the cemetery as a historical and educational venue. But it wasn't until June 2009 that I received an unexpected phone call from Jan Sluka of Spring Lake, who had assisted me with my

genealogical research. She told me that a member of the Friends of Ottawa County Parks, Marjorie Bethke Vivenen of Grand Haven, was interested in pursuing the cemetery project.

After weeks of e-mail and telephone communications with Marjie, it became abundantly clear that her small volunteer group was energetically moving

ahead with the project. My wife, Janet, and I decided to provide them with seed money to help them get started and to assist them in their fundraising effort. Additional funding followed from the Coopersville Community Foundation and the Grand Haven Area Community Foundation. In addition, the Drake Middlemist Foundation provided funds for a storyboard at the site. Smaller cash contributions and in-kind gifts have given an extra boost to the project.

Early Poor Farm research by Irene Reidsma of Holland and Henry and Loekie Boersma of Marne led to the



(continued on page 2)

From the Director



In this summer issue of the *Quarterly*, Holland native Eldon Kramer shares his story of the forgotten dead at the poor farm and his family's connection with that institution. He wrote an account of his families' settling in Western Michigan in his book, *The Trek: How the Isaac Kramer and Onne Peterson Families Overcame Hardships to Help Settle West Michigan's Hollandsche Kolonie* in 2005.

He now resides in Texas.

Also in this issue is a reprint of an article written by Dr. Deborah Sturtevant, originally published in the September/October 1992 *Michigan History* magazine. The article gives an in-depth history of the early origins of the poor farm.

If you are interested in learning more about the Ottawa County Poor Farm, please visit us at the Joint Archives of Holland to view the archival collection.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Poor Farm (continued from page 1)

development of a list of those who died at the farm and were buried there. There were 49 individuals on the initial list, but just four grave markers were found on the site, including those of Robert C. Dick of Olive Township, who died at age 92 in 1913; Gert Smoor of Zeeland Township, who died at the age of 75 in 1916; T. Wassenaar of Olive Township, who died at the age of 72 in 1916; and John Wolstron, who died at the age of 72 in 1917.



Headstone of Robert C. Dick, one of four on site

Robert Dick was born in 1823 in Maine. It is believed that he never married and was a mail carrier in 1900, who later became a farmer. Gert Smoor is possibly Geert Smoor, born in September 1843 in either Prussia or the

Netherlands. Never married, Smoor came to this country in 1880 and resided at the poor farm until he died in 1916. It is believed that Wassenaar, born in September 1843 in the Netherlands, never married. No definitive information could be found on Wolstron.

While the birthplaces of nearly a third of those buried there are unknown, another third were born in the Netherlands or



Ground penetrating radar equipped vehicle scans for burial locations; existing headstone in foreground

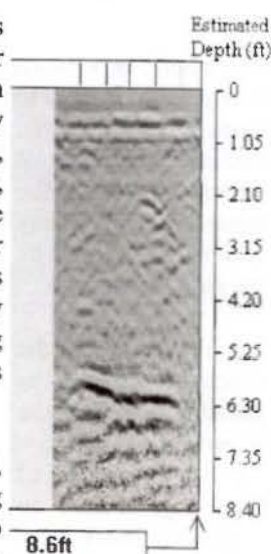
Germany. The remainder were either born in other European countries or America.

Determining the locations of those buried there was foremost on my list of priorities

as plans began to take shape within the volunteer organization. I was enthused about a plan to fence in the cemetery, but I felt it was important to know the boundaries of the burial site. After reading about the work of a Pennsylvania-based geoarchaeologist, who used a ground radar penetration device to locate graves, I contacted him to determine if he knew of anyone doing this kind of work in Western Michigan. He suggested I try Work Smart, Inc. of Paw Paw.

Mike McGarry, of that firm, was intrigued by the story of the poor farm burials and agreed to perform a ground radar penetration survey there pro bono. On November 7, 2009, assisted by his wife, Denise, he drove back and forth across the site in his ground penetrating radar equipped vehicle, while volunteers marked each location. McGarry located 56 grave sites, including one mass burial with the remains of five persons.

Once the grave sites were located, a surveyor from Summit Surveying of Allendale was called upon to do a topographic survey that could be used to develop a landscape concept plan for the restoration of the cemetery.



Radar monitor photo shows burial at 6-ft. depth

As winter approached, restoration ceased with one exception—the placement of a 2.5-ton boulder donated and placed at the future cemetery entrance by Sticks and Stones of Conklin. The firm took advantage of the frozen ground to move it. A memorial bronze plaque bearing the names and year of death of those individuals buried there has since been affixed to it.

Volunteer committee member and genealogist Jan Sluka did extensive research on poor farm burials, checking and double-checking names and dates. Unfortunately, poor or incomplete recordkeeping made this work difficult, but the project committee is proud of her relentless pursuit of accuracy.

I am particularly pleased that the county approved my request that the name of my great-grandfather be prominent on the memorial plaque. It is believed that no other family is as heavily represented there, as we also learned that Isaac Kramer's sons, Abraham and George, also died there in 1917 and 1919, respectively. Above the list of names, the plaque reads: Poor Farm Memorial Cemetery, In Memory of Isaac Kramer and others buried here, Dedicated July 10, 2010. One of several storyboards at the site will feature the life of my great-grandfather.

Because there are no records of who is buried where, blank headstones have been placed on each unmarked grave to recognize those poor souls long forgotten. In addition, the construction of a period picket fence, the carving out of pathways, the planting of grass, shrubs and trees, and the placement of benches and storyboards took place during the past few months.

The Friends of Ottawa County Parks believe July's dedication will not only give overdue proper recognition to those buried there, but it also establishes a venue for citizens to visit and better understand a past culture that gave us the poor farm.



Poor farm in 1985 photo; cemetery is located in upper right

Holland Pioneer Isaac Kramer Represents Common Man Buried at Poor Farm

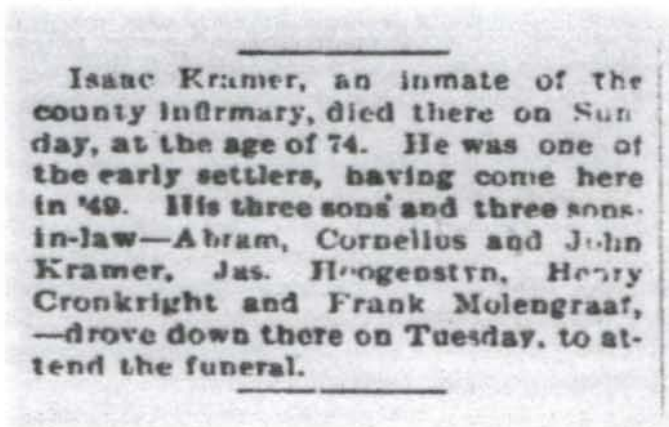
By Eldon R. Kramer

I believe my great-grandfather Isaac Kramer not only represents the stock embodied in settlers of the 1800s, but also typifies those individuals who resided at the Ottawa County Poor Farm in Eastmanville. For that reason, my family is delighted that he is singled out for recognition at the newly-restored cemetery there.

While doing my research, the Joint Archives and its director Geoffrey Reynolds were an invaluable source of information on early Holland and the poor farm. Bill and

Nella Kennedy located key documents on Isaac's origins in the Netherlands, and they also translated many documents I found there in 1999.

Information about my great-grandfather was scarce. A scrapbook of newspaper articles collected by my parents, many undated, proved valuable. I can only speculate how a copy of his obituary was included in the scrapbook, even though he died three years before my father was born.



It was in this obituary that I learned that he was an inmate, as they were called, at the county infirmary and died there. But, we didn't learn of the existence of a cemetery there until 2002. While we had obtained a list of poor farm deaths, we thought interments were in Eastmanville or Lamont. A chance meeting with Art Lucas at the Polkton Township offices led us to Doris Modderman of Coopersville who, along with her husband, Tom, managed Ottawa County Community Haven. She graciously invited us into her home, where she talked about growing up at the poor farm. Using a large framed aerial photograph of the farm, she pointed to the location of the cemetery.

My wife, Janet, and our grandson Bryce, who accompanied us on this return to Michigan, immediately drove to the farm and trudged through knee-high grass and jumped a creek as we made our way to high spot near a tree line on the west border.

The hair on the back of my neck went up as we saw headstones, barely visible in the high grass. There were four of them, but not one with my great-grandfather's name or his sons Abraham and George, who also passed away at the farm.

Jan Sluka of Spring Lake, who was volunteering for the Grand Haven Genealogical Society at the Loutit District Library, told me that poor farm records were available at the office of the probate court. Even though I encountered numerous dead ends in my research, I had allowed myself to believe it was there that I would find a file on my great-grandfather that would tell me about his two and a half years at the farm.

What I did find was a microfilmed ledger. There, below the year 1895, was the name Kramer, Isaac, followed by the words “mentally incompetent” and a reference to File No. 2938, Film No. 89. The words jumped off the screen. I recall thinking: Well, at least he wasn’t insane as indicated of others listed.

| NAME AND CHARACTER OF ESTATE | | File No. | Film No. |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|----------|
| Kryma, Hendrik | 1894 Deceased | 2777 | 88 |
| Kramer, Isaac | 1895 Mentally Incompetent | 2938 | 89 |

File No. 2938 answered the question that haunted us ever since we read the obituary: Why was he an inmate at the poor farm? The file included a document filed by one of Isaac’s children, Lizzie Kramer Hoogenstein, petitioning the county to issue a citation that would declare him mentally incompetent and to appoint a guardian to manage his property.

In her July 3, 1895, petition, she stated that “Isaac Kramer by reason of extreme old age and by reason of the death of his wife, has become mentally incompetent wither to take care of himself or to transact any business or to take care of any of his property. He refused to leave the house and provide for himself in any way, either food or clothing, until it became necessary, about a week ago, to have him removed to the county poor house of Ottawa County, where he is now confined.”

Although he was 70 years old, it is believed that he became severely despondent over the May 23, 1895, death of his wife of 44 years, Antje.

Wiepke Diekema, long time supervisor of the Holland Charter Township, was appointed guardian. Isaac Marsilje and George E. Kollen were empowered by Judge of the Probate John V. B. Goodrich as disinterested parties to appraise my great-grandfather’s real and personal estate.



Isaac Kramer Home on Ninth Street, bottom center

His home was on the north side of Ninth Street near the corner of Pine Avenue and was sold after a notice of sale

was printed in the *Holland City News* and posted at the corners of Eighth Street and Market (now Central), Eighth Street and River and Ninth and River. The home sold for \$500.

On June 19, 1899, a final account of his estate was made known. It revealed a \$283.72 expense for his care at the poor farm, and \$64.50 to J. H. Nibbelink & Son undertakers for the 1895 burial of Antje. Though not included in this document, I learned later that Isaac’s burial cost was \$12.50.

In January 1917, Isaac’s first born, Abraham, died of apoplexy at the poor farm at age 60, and his other son, George, died there of pulmonary tuberculosis at age 61 in June 1919.

Little is known about Isaac except that he was an early Holland pioneer. We learned of his 1845 journey to America, alone at age 20, in Robert P. Swierenga’s record of Dutch immigrant manifests as Izaak deKramer. He devoted fifty years of his life to the settlement of Holland.

While early documents list his occupation as tailor, 1880 and 1894 forms list him as a laborer. He married the former Antje Dok in 1855, and together they raised seven children before the 1871 Great Fire of Holland destroyed their home, along with those of 200 other families. With obvious Dutch resilience, they rebuilt their home and brought two more children into the world, one of which was my grandfather John H. Kramer. John was a 38-year postal employee, the last ten years of which were as Holland’s Superintendent of Mails.

It is the humiliating end to the life of my great-grandfather, and the subsequent deaths of his sons there, that encouraged me to continue an effort to remember the poor souls of Eastmanville.

Ottawa County Community Haven: A Poor Farm Withstands the Test of Time

by Deborah Sturtevant

Leonard Road, a historic stagecoach trail, meanders along the Grand River past historic homes built on the bluff. Down the road past several quaint bed-and-breakfasts was the old homestead of Daniel Realy. In the mid-nineteenth century it was known as “Mid-Way House” because it was halfway between Grand Rapids and Grand Haven. Purchased in 1866, it became Ottawa County’s first “poor farm.” When it closed in 1998, it was known as “Community Haven,” and was the last remaining institution of its kind, with an operating farm, in Michigan.

As the nineteenth century unfolded, poverty was a way of life as more and more people worked for another person their entire adult lives. Everywhere the seasonality of work

menaced working-class security, and poorhouse populations swelled during the winter. Much unskilled labor took place outdoors—unloading ships, digging canals and building railways—and when lakes and canals froze in cold-climate states, this employment often ended until spring. Because the availability of work varied with demand, few people found steady work, and irregular employment often pushed families into poverty. Illness was another major cause of destitution. Work was dangerous and unhealthy; diets were inadequate; city conditions were dreadfully unsanitary; and medical care was poor.

Poverty also affected certain population groups, especially the elderly, children, and those with physical or mental disabilities. There was no social security insurance, and men and women did not retire, working until they were fired or were too old, too sick or too exhausted to continue. Elderly people either lived with their children or faced utter destitution. There was no public assistance program for dependent children; orphaned children were bound out and forced to work at early ages. The disabled were sometimes abandoned or placed in asylums with deplorable conditions.

By 1850, many institutions had been built to care for the mentally ill, to educate the blind and deaf, and to house prisoners. The almshouse in urban America and the poor farm in rural America were parts of this institutional policy of providing relief. Poor farms had clear goals—to check the expense of pauperism through inexpensive care, and to deter other people from applying for relief for fear of being institutionalized. Poor farms also attempted to rehabilitate and suppress intemperance—seen by many as the primary cause of pauperism—and inculcate the work habit as supported by the nineteenth century's strong work ethic. The perceived need for an Ottawa County poor farm was consistent with the times.

On 11 October 1865, the Ottawa County Superintendents of the Poor, Simon Haselton and E. J. Avery, recommended to the Ottawa County Board of Supervisors the purchase of a farm and building "suitable for the poor of the County." According to the superintendents, "the Town Poor as well as County Poor are poorly provided for, that they are growing up in ignorance and idleness and eventually the distinction between Town and County Poor must be abolished, and in our opinion, the quicker the better."

On 10 January 1866, the board of supervisors appointed a committee of three—G. Reed, B. Lillie and J. Blake—to visit and inspect various premises under consideration and to make a recommendation to the full board. The maximum sum of seven thousand dollars for property and furnishings was approved as the purchase price of a poor farm.

One month later, the board of supervisors considered purchasing property for a county poor farm. G. Reed, the poor farm committee chairman, recommended property owned by Martin Philleo, located near the village of Berlin

(present-day Marne), for seven thousand dollars. The motion was defeated because some members opposed the property's location. Another county board supervisor moved to amend the motion by inserting the "Realy Farm," whose purchase price was only six thousand dollars.

The 198 acres were originally purchased by Daniel Realy and Harry Miller from the government in 1837. Miller died in 1844 and was buried on the land. Philetus Hedges of Steele's Landing (present-day Lamont), built the Realy house in 1857, working on it for over two years. Every board used was hand-planed, every piece of siding and flooring, every door and window frame, the casing and even the sashes for the glass in the windows were handmade. Thanks to Hedge's loving attention, the Realy house was hailed as one of the best buildings in Ottawa County.

The American poor farm relief system was compelled to help its able-bodied residents support not only themselves but other disabled paupers through a successful farm operation. Whenever the farm was not self-supporting, the county billed townships based on the proportion of each township's residents in the poor farm.

Self-support was not easily attained. From the onset, the Ottawa superintendents of the poor requested additional funds from the board of supervisors. The amounts varied, depending on the poor farm census, the annual farm yield, and "acts of God."

As early as October 1869, the superintendent of the poor requested an appropriation of \$3,900 to purchase a furnace, bedding, live stock and supplies. The reported number of paupers admitted to the poorhouse that year stood at twenty-one, including one sane, four "insane" and four "foolish" adults, and three children. These were clearly not a homogenous group of able-bodied farm hands.

A leather-bound journal from the original poor farm was discovered by Larry Hilldore, former director of social services. It contains the original "Record of Paupers," kept by H. S. Taft, the first poor farm "keeper" or manager who recorded notes on each pauper from 1866 to 1874. The type of information varied, but commonly a narrative about the reason for "coming to grief."

The poor farm's first pauper was committed on 2 March 1866. A woman named Elizabeth was admitted on 24 October 1868, because she "was not content to live with her ma, so she ran away with one Mr. C. Now Mr. C. was poor; and Elizabeth got sick and love would not keep the wolf out and they came to grief, or at least Elizabeth came to the poor house." According to the keeper's notes, Kate and her three children were admitted on 13 January 1869. She "was not considered very virtuous so the fathers of Grand Haven ordered her shanty pulled down." Kate stayed at the poor farm until April 10, then went to Coopersville and "spent the summer."

As the number of paupers increased during the institution's first twenty years, it became clear the Realy house no longer provided adequate space. With voter approval in 1866, a new brick building was built for about nine thousand dollars. The farm's name was changed to the County Infirmary. Around New Year's Day 1887, the new structure was ready for occupancy. Made of brick and stone, it was "so solid in appearance that only a vigorous quaking of the earth could cause a weakening in any part."

Every year the county board of supervisors visited the farm as part of its annual report. Although an elaborate undertaking, the supervisor's traditional visit continued for years. The *Holland Sentinel* reported in July 1950 that the supervisors were "proud of the county farm. Once a year, the group finishes business early at one session and makes a trip to Eastmanville. They inspect the farms, walk through clean buildings, talk with the residents and sample some food when coffee time comes around."

A 1950 *Sentinel* article offered a tribute to keeper Lewis H. Peck, who had been hired by the poor farm in 1909 and was retiring after forty-one years of service. According to the *Detroit News*, of all the poor farms in Michigan, Ottawa County's was considered among the best during Peck's tenure. His commitment to the poor was a major contribution to the institution's longevity. Peck lived on the farm with the poor through natural disasters, the economic depression of the 1930s and both world wars.

In 1920, the farm was damaged by a Palm Sunday tornado, which ripped off a large section of the main building's roof, demolished one of the chimneys, and damaged the roof of the silo connected to the large barn. Despite the wreckage and the rains following the tornado, the inmates were comfortably cared for and no one was injured. During the hours of greatest need, neighbors volunteered their services to the poor farm.

Neighborhood involvement, evident throughout the farm's history, was an important component of the farm's success. Neighbors visited and talked with residents, and performed other services. The farm held an annual harvest festival for the community; children rode on the hay wagon, while their parents shopped at the crafts fair.

Local churches also supported the farm. Sunday services were held at the farm; during the summer these exercises were conducted by young peoples' societies and Bible classes throughout the county. Churches also provided farm residents with reading materials, radios and other gifts. In later years, local church members transported residents to nearby religious services.

When they were unable to visit, relatives sent packages and mail. A January 1925 letter tucked into the keeper's purchase records read:

My Dear Uncle:

Received your letter last week and was glad to hear from you and that you were well. I am so glad you are where you can be comfortable this cold winter and do not have to be exposed. We sure have had a cold time this winter and it will be a long time yet before spring.

I keep quite well most of the time and have my boarder who has not gone south this year. She has not been very well much of the time. Her birthday is tomorrow, she will be 82 years old, I can see she is not as well as she has been this winter.

We have lost three by death with winter on our street. Mrs. W. you must remember her, died two weeks ago today, she had cancer of the stomach and was a great sufferer but was only down in bed a little over three weeks. A cousin is there, he has proven himself quite wonderful, we were afraid he would loose his mind again but he did not. Ralph was buried this last week, so they go one by one. Our turn will come too maybe soon but if we are ready it will be alright.

*With Love,
Ella*

In 1927, Peck made an unusual request of the county. Because many of the poor farm residents were fearful of being buried in the farm cemetery, he asked the county to purchase a plot in the nearby Lamont Cemetery as an alternative burial site. The county approved Peck's request on 13 May 1927.

Though sensitive to his residents' needs, Peck maintained high standards. In 1921, he issued a rule banning the use of tobacco, a departure from the standard practice for such facilities. The *Detroit News* reported on 6 February 1927:

Don't smoke; eat peppermints. That's the rule in the Ottawa County infirmary, enforced to the best of his ability by Lewis H. Peck, Superintendent. He confiscates every pipe and package of tobacco he finds. For persistent offenders there is a cell in the basement.

Mr. Peck admits that his rule, which has been in force for six years hasn't absolutely stopped smoking. Every once in a while he finds one of his charges, 70 years old or more, smoking out behind one of the barns or in the belfry, a five-story climb.

I used to have much trouble smoking. Many times I have taken pipes away from the men. They were smoking in bed. If a fire should break out in the dormitory I dare say few of the men would be able to get out.

The no-smoking policy upset some people who read the article, and a letter writing campaign ensued, drawing wide support from both the church and the community. One critic charged:

I can not shake this out of my mind until I ask you and the members of your Board to please have a heart. Try to put yourself in these poor mens places. Old forgotten by all the loved ones they ever had and the only friend they have is there pipe. They have smoked perhaps for 50 years or more and only God the Almighty can take away that desire to smoke.

The controversy came to a head at a joint meeting of the superintendents of the poor, the keeper and county supervisors on 25 February 1927. The supervisors supported Peck's ban of tobacco at the farm. Supervisor Bolt declared:

I wrote to the churches. It seems to me that churches should have other functions then encourage the appetites of man. The men have enough appetite today. The Ottawa County Infirmary has a reputation for being one of the best if not the best kept institution in the state and conditions there are as near flawless as can be. A recent inspection is said to bear on this statement.

Not long after Peck's victory with the smoking crisis, the barn burned to the ground after being struck by lightning. The county board of supervisors agreed to rebuild it; the barn still stands today. Throughout the years other building projects have taken place, including a 1928 addition to the women's infirmary.

On 3 January 1929, Peck reported to the county board of supervisors that the inmates were sleeping in corridors and hallways. The Depression swelled the poor farm population to eighty-two inmates. Because up to one third of the population in America was now considered poor, a different poor relief system was needed.

In 1935 the federal government passed the Social Security Act. Michigan implemented the law on 1 December 1939, and under the authority of Act 280, P.A. 939, county welfare relief commissions were abolished and the administration of general public relief was put under the control of the new Ottawa County Board of Social Welfare. The board of supervisors decided that the meeting of the Social Welfare Board would be held at Holland's city hall; local townships and cities would be fiscally responsible for fifty percent of the cost of caring for the poor from respective areas. James Van Wesseem was elected chairman of the Social Welfare Board, James S. Van Vollenburgh, director and secretary, and Gerrit Zaagman, vice chairman.

This comprehensive public welfare system antiquated the poor farm relief system—by 1938 there were still seventy-

nine county infirmaries, some with operating farms in Michigan.

Ottawa County built a new infirmary in 1978 and changed the name to Community Haven. Each resident had a meaningful job that was considered part of his/her "therapy." Dairy cattle, sheep, pigs, rabbits, parakeets, peacocks, other livestock and most of their feed were raised on the farm. Residents threshed hay, milked cows, fed livestock and did chores. They also trained leader dogs for the blind on the farm and practiced with them in downtown shops. Resident-made bread, jam, wooden toys and quilts were sold in the Haven's store.

Bibliographic Note:

Sources used in preparing this manuscript include: *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (1986), by Michael Katz, "Ottawa County Community Haven/Farm Strategic Plan" (1990), the "Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Ottawa County" and the *Coopersville Observer*.

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Deborah Sturtevant is a Professor of Sociology and Social Work at Hope College. She has a doctoral degree in the social sciences from Michigan State University.

To this article, she adds:

We raised our children in Coopersville/Lamont and went to the annual fall farm festival to see the animals, shop at the crafts fair, and visit with the residents. In the early 1980s, I was appointed to the Community Mental Health Board and my husband Dennis was appointed to the Department of Social Services Board, and both of the county boards had some oversight of the residents and the property of Community Haven. Throughout the 1980s, social policy shifted away from large institutional care to adult foster care group homes, and the remaining poor farms in Michigan closed.

By 1998, the Department of Social Services Board decided to turn Community Haven over to Hope Network to operate. I was appointed the first chairperson of the Advisory Board for Community Haven under the auspices of Hope Network. The infirmary building had fallen into disrepair and needed major work on the septic systems. Hope Network decided that Community Haven needed to be closed and the remaining residents be placed in adult foster care homes or nursing homes.

The historic residential buildings were demolished, while the barn and cemetery restorations still mark the historic site that is now a county park.



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Ottawa County Poor Farm in Eastmanville, n.d.