

THE *Goodhue County Home*,
built in 1890 and
closed October 1, 1963



An Unlamented Era:

COUNTY POOR FARMS *in* Minnesota

ETHEL McCLURE

"A TIME comes in the history of all enlightened communities," wrote a local historian in the 1890s, "when some provision must be made for the aged and infirm poor, who have no means of support."¹ That time came early in Minnesota. Although there were few aged among the pioneers, as age

is reckoned today, there were many sick, infirm, and mentally incompetent persons. Some were penniless, finding it impossible to make a living in the new country; not a few lost their savings to the "demon rum."

From the earliest days the care of the sick and afflicted poor rested upon county and township governments. During the territorial period, when Minnesota's local governments continued to operate under the laws

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¹J. A. Kiester, *The History of Faribault County*, 265 (Minneapolis, 1896).

of Wisconsin by which they had been created, superintendence of the poor was a function of the boards of county commissioners. With statehood, however, an experiment was tried, and the commissioners were replaced by boards of supervisors comprised of the chairmen of the township boards.² Under this arrangement poor relief became the responsibility of each township, but the arrangement proved short-lived. The 1860 legislature abolished the unwieldy supervisor system and re-established boards of commissioners who represented districts rather than towns. Four years later a revised poor law explicitly named the county as the only unit for poor relief and required county boards to maintain poorhouses or make other suitable provision for their charges.³

At first the counties gave "outdoor relief"—assistance to an individual in his own or a boarding home. Poverty was generally considered a disgrace, and while government could not let its citizens die of starvation or exposure, neither was there any effort to make relief palatable or even respectable. The published board proceedings of those days are filled with references to allowances "for John Doe, a pauper," or "to Mrs. A_____ for the care of Mary Roe, an insane woman." Usually, however, they were not as explicit as an item in the *State Atlas* of Minneapolis for May 4, 1864, reporting an action of the Hennepin County commissioners: "It was determined to . . . allow Mr. S_____ of Minnetonka, \$3.00 per week to board and take care of Mr. M_____, of that town, who, made drunk by Minneapolis whisky, last winter, froze both feet off on his way home, and is made a County expense for life." Whether the commissioners were more irked by the "expense for life" or the "Minneapolis whisky" is not a matter of record.

As a county became more populous and expenses for relief mounted, its board invariably cast about for a cheaper method of caring for the poor. The answer appeared to be "indoor relief"—care within the walls of an almshouse or poorhouse, a central place

under the immediate control of the board. Sooner or later, after a courthouse and jail had been provided, almost every county board considered the propriety of buying a poor farm.

There were several reasons for thinking of the poorhouse in terms of a poor farm. A farm, it was argued, would provide food and other products essential for the maintenance of the inmates. Also, the latter might labor to some extent on a farm and thus contribute to their own support. It was a time, too, when people were land-hungry, and the idea of a farm as an investment weighed heavily with many boards. The fact that a county might have only a handful of paupers did not always deter it from buying, for it was felt that with increasing population, land would become more expensive.⁴

THE FIRST county to acquire a poor farm was Ramsey. From the beginning, the care of the poor in this county was tied in with the care of the sick. On December 30, 1854, the commissioners purchased a 282-acre tract of land with the idea of preparing a building "expressly for use of the sick," who were then cared for at St. Joseph's Hospital. A few years later the county bought a second farm near Pig's Eye Lake, and on March 4, 1859, the board of supervisors considered proposals from several contractors to build a ten-bed "Poor House and Hospital." The specifications called for a "frame building 36 by 40 feet, two stories and attic high, to be built in a plain manner." For the amount awarded—\$290 in county orders—it could hardly have been elaborate!⁵

² Minnesota, *Public Statutes*, 1849–58, p. 155; *General Laws*, 1858, p. 207. See also, William Anderson, *An Outline of County Government in Minnesota*, 24, 25, 69–71 (Minneapolis, 1927).

³ *General Laws*, 1860, p. 114; 1864, p. 49.

⁴ See, for example, Kiester, *Faribault County*, 266.

⁵ *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), March 23, 1855; February 11, 1859; *Weekly Minnesotian* (St. Paul), March 5, 1859. For circumstances under which the Pig's Eye farm was purchased, see the *Minnesotian*, August 14, 1858, and the *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), August 26, 1858.

Washington County was the second to acquire a poor farm. In 1858, despite the fact that the country was still in the grip of a depression, the county purchased 207 acres about five miles north of Stillwater. On June 10, 1859, the board of supervisors appointed its chairman "General Superintendent of the County Poor Farm" and agreed that "the bringing under cultivation more land on the Poor Farm, is an Object to be constantly pursued, with a view of making it self-sustaining." Apparently prompted by an emergency, the board on September 13, 1859, authorized the committee on poor "to enlarge the Barn and build a suitable Lock up for the Safe Keeping of a Crazy man on the Poor Farm." Through the early 1860s the number of inmates never exceeded three, but in 1868 a new level of operations was reached with the admission of twenty-eight persons, eight of whom were children.⁵

Between 1858 and 1864 there was little, if any, further movement by counties toward acquiring poor farms. On January 7, 1864, the Goodhue County board, finding that the annual appropriations for poor relief had reached five thousand dollars, appointed a committee to select a suitable location for a county farm. A two-hundred-acre tract in Burnside Township, just north of Red Wing, was purchased, but the necessary buildings were not completed until 1867.⁷

The *State Atlas* of March 30, 1864, reported that the Hennepin County board had begun a series of advertisements for a piece of land "from one hundred and sixty to four hundred acres, situated not less than four nor more than eight miles from Minne-

apolis." The editor hailed the movement with pleasure as being the "most feasible, as well as the most economical way to maintain the unfortunate poor." He was especially pleased with the proposed location. "One thing is certain, the farm will not be in the immediate vicinity of Minneapolis. Thus the temporary rush of idle vagabonds during the winter months will in a measure be obviated. All inmates capable of working will be kept busily employed."

The idea of the county farm being a workhouse for persons able but refusing to work was not new. In fact, the term "workhouse" appeared in the 1864 poor law, section 3 of which empowered boards of county commissioners to "establish . . . a poor farm or work house or both, for the employment of such poor persons supported by such county."⁸

Certainly many counties expected that, having acquired a poor farm, their expenses for poor relief would practically cease. The *Mantorville Express* of May 31, 1867, in commenting on the decision of the Dodge County board to buy a farm, compared the possible future cost with present expenditures. "Last year the county disbursed to its poor, over thirteen hundred dollars. With the proper management of a poor farm, the county officers could do more for the needy, at less expense." And in Le Sueur County, when the board decided to open a farm it already owned, the *Le Sueur Courier* of January 22, 1868, approved: "The Board, we think, made a good move in resolving to inaugurate measures for the improvement of the county farm. It should be managed so that in a few years it will be able to support such poor as the county has on its hands in a comfortable condition and add very slightly to the general expense." Actually the term which appears in the board proceedings was not "comfortable," but "inhabitable," and the preparations for opening the home would not seem to assure many comforts: "Commissioner Hielscher was authorized to procure, for the use of the poor on the county farm, one table, two chairs, two

⁵ Edward D. Neill, *History of Washington County*, 334, 490 (Minneapolis, 1881); Washington County Board of Supervisors, "Proceedings," June 10, September 13, 1859, on file in the office of the county auditor, Stillwater; Register of inmates of the Washington County Poor House, 1867-1909, in the possession of the Pine Point Nursing Home, Stillwater.

⁷ *Goodhue County Republican* (Red Wing), January 15, 1864; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *A History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties*, 115 (Chicago, 1910).

⁸ *General Laws*, 1864, p. 50.

towels, one pail, one small looking glass, one broom, one dipper.”⁹

If the county farm was to be self-supporting, the land must be suitable for farming, but it was not always easy to determine the fertility of the soil in advance. As a result, there was considerable selling and trading of poor farms during the early years. Olmsted County had a disappointing experience. Although there had never been much pauperism there, the commissioners found it necessary, in 1868, to “provide a home for the indigent on their hands,” and bought a 240-acre farm in Marion Township. This proved to be “literally a poor farm,” and in 1874 the county traded it for another. Although the second was a “fine piece of land,” it was larger than needed and proved an incumbrance, keeping the county “land poor.”¹⁰

Blue Earth County, on the contrary, was fortunate. The 160-acre farm in Rapidan Township, which the board purchased on November 30, 1867, was at that time “located in the midst of a big forest and in one week nine or ten deer were killed in its vicinity. But after the woods were cleared no better farming land could be found anywhere.”¹¹

The location was generally less important than the kind of land; however, a few counties, like Carver, made an attempt to place the poor farm “in or near the center of the county.” After much search, this county found a partially timbered property which, according to the *Valley Herald* of Chaska, “would make an excellent place for the location of the county seat.” The newspaper added the suggestion, which no doubt fell on deaf ears, that the county officers might cut and haul wood, thereby saving the taxpayers some expense.¹² In Wabasha County the authorities at first tried to care for their poor on a large farm in a secluded location. Difficulties developed over supervision, however, and in 1873 the commissioners exchanged the property for a thirty-two-acre farm on the edge of Wabasha, about a mile from the courthouse.¹³

If a county had a poor farm the poor were expected to go there. Some counties made this a condition of relief. For instance, in the same meeting at which the St. Louis County commissioners accepted their new poorhouse from the contractor, they resolved “That on and after Saturday the 23d day of August, A.D. 1873, no provisions be allowed nor any help granted any parties in this County other than those residing at the Poor House . . . and that all those at present receiving help from the County be requested to appear at the Auditor’s Office on Saturday, August 23d, 1873, to be examined by the Board of County Commissioners and show cause why they should receive help from the County.”¹⁴

If there seems to have been a certain smugness on the part of some counties in allowing the poor, as one historian expressed it, to “share the bounty, a beneficent hand is pleased to bestow upon the county,” how did the poor themselves feel?¹⁵ There is no doubt that to many, “over the hill to the poorhouse” was the last ignominious stretch in an unhappy road. In Ramsey County, for example, when the question of a city-county hospital was being debated, the local board of health was informed that “a perfect horror was entertained at the thought of going to the poor house—in fact, starvation and death were considered preferable to removal to that establishment.”¹⁶

Many, of course, were resigned to it—they had little alternative—but occasionally there was rebellion in the ranks. Perhaps the most dramatic display of spirit occurred in Faribault County. At a sale of school lands in 1868, this county purchased a 320-acre tract in the township of Prescott but

⁹ *Le Sueur Courier*, January 22, March 25, 1868.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Leonard, *History of Olmsted County*, 101 (Chicago, 1910).

¹¹ Thomas Hughes, *A History of Blue Earth County*, 164 (Chicago, 1909).

¹² *Valley Herald* (Chaska), February 3, 1870.

¹³ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *A History of Wabasha County*, 45 (Winona, 1920).

¹⁴ *Duluth Minnesotian*, August 23, 1873.

¹⁵ Neill, *Washington County*, 334.

¹⁶ *St. Paul Press*, January 23, 1872.

did not open a poorhouse. The needy were lodged with friends and relatives throughout the county. In 1874, the board decided to concentrate its charges at one place, and on March 4, "the keeping of the County Poor was let to Ebenezer Raymond for the sum of \$2.00 per week each person, this being the lowest bid received." The board then notified the sixteen persons being supported by the county "to repair to Mr. Raymond's, where comfortable quarters had been prepared for them." Only three obeyed the order, the others managing in one way or another to find support for themselves elsewhere. Although the county authorities were thus pointedly snubbed, they cannot have been wholly displeased.¹⁷

BY 1873 at least twenty counties had established poorhouses or acquired poor farms.¹⁸ The depression of that year and the grasshopper plagues of 1873-77, which brought acute suffering to many parts of the state, effectively checked the acquisition of more poor farms and gave new emphasis to the question of county versus township responsibility for care of the poor. There were several arguments for shifting the tax burden to the towns. Many persons believed that there would be less tendency toward general extravagance with the administration closer to the people. Also, because the town officers would have a better knowledge of the applicants, they would match

the relief to the need, giving only such as was absolutely necessary. Finally, it was argued that the applicants themselves, especially "unworthy" persons, would be more reluctant to ask for help from local officials.¹⁹

For a county to go on the township plan a special law was needed. The first to seek this legislation was Freeborn. Its law, enacted in 1875, was considered "well drawn, but in this act, as in nearly all subsequent ones, the residence law is imperfect, since a pauper may have a residence in the county, but not in any town thereof."²⁰ The residence requirement was always a difficult problem, and many laws were subsequently amended to fix more accurately the areas of county or town responsibility. In their squabbles over jurisdiction, it would seem that the authorities sometimes overlooked the fact that it was not merely a tax burden, but a *human* burden, they were shuttling — sometimes quite literally — between county courthouse and town hall.

Between 1875 and 1889, when a general law was enacted which permitted counties to change from one system to the other at the option of its voters, twenty counties obtained special town plan laws. Two of these rejected the law at the polls; six counties had their laws subsequently repealed.²¹

Adoption of the town system did not prevent a county from operating a poorhouse; in the fifteen years of special legislation, nineteen counties acquired poor farms. However, it is of some significance that only two of these — Morrison and Brown — were town plan counties, and that three counties which already had poorhouses — Freeborn, Carver, and Le Sueur — promptly closed them on obtaining their special laws.²²

A third level of government stepped into the picture when the Minnesota legislature of 1883, in line with a national trend toward recognizing the responsibility of the state for its unfortunates, created a board of corrections and charities. It was to be primarily a fact-finding body, with the duty to "investigate the whole system of public charities and correctional institutions of the

¹⁷ Kiester, *Faribault County*, 265, 266, 375; *Blue Earth City Post*, March 21, 1874.

¹⁸ In addition to those mentioned, poor farms were purchased by the following counties: Winona (1866); Rice (1866); Nicollet (1867); Mower (1868); Fillmore (1868); Dakota (1867); Freeborn (1870); Chisago (1872).

¹⁹ Minnesota State Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1888, p. 187-190; Anderson, *County Government*, 69.

²⁰ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1888, p. 187.

²¹ *General Laws*, 1889, p. 279; Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1888, p. 187-190.

²² Morrison County obtained its law in 1881 and purchased a poor farm in 1887; Brown County obtained its law in 1885 and bought a farm in 1888.

state, [and] examine into the condition and management thereof.”²³

The new board was empowered to employ a full-time secretary. For this position, it selected the Reverend Hastings Hornell Hart, a thirty-two-year-old Congregational minister who had served for the preceding three years as pastor of a Worthington church. “For his position,” according to Minnesota’s historian, William W. Folwell, “Hart was fitted by natural endowment, character, and temperament.”²⁴ Certainly he attacked the problems awaiting him with enthusiasm and industry. A student and preacher, he was not content with merely amassing facts, but communicated his findings and philosophy with the zeal of an evangelist.

Although the county poorhouses were only a part of the board’s responsibility, Hart visited them early, met with county commissioners, studied contracts between boards and overseers, and set up a system of uniform reporting. The reports included statistics on the composition and movement of the poorhouse populations, as well as operating expenses and the costs of farms and improvements. Tables prepared from the information were included in the board’s published biennial reports. Prior to this time, no means had been available for making comparisons among counties.²⁵

WHEN the board started its work in the spring of 1883 there were twenty-three poorhouses, not including the one operated by Rock County, which had no inmates at the time the count was taken. Six counties had poor farms but no poorhouses; two used temporary buildings; and two others had contracts with families to board paupers. There was only one private benevolent home, the Home for the Friendless in St. Paul.²⁶

County poor farms were dumping grounds for all ages and conditions of people. Of the 625 persons received throughout the state during the year ending September 30, 1884, sixty were classified as “insane,

idiots, imbeciles, and epileptic.” Many were sick or disabled; some were women brought in for confinement care; and approximately eleven per cent of the inmates were children under fourteen years of age. The males outnumbered the females three to one. No doubt the majority of the men resembled those in the Itasca County poorhouse, who were described as “a hard lot with habits characteristic of their type. Occasionally, some would indulge in too many spirits and the sheriff would have to take them home. . . . The only time they were assured of a ride [into town] was election day, when the politicians would pick them up and take them home again after voting.”²⁷

In charge of this ill-assorted group were overseers employed under a multiplicity of financial arrangements. Usually the county settled for the person who agreed to board paupers at the cheapest rate or who would take the position at the lowest salary. A few were characterized as “vigilant and competent,” or “thorough and efficient.” In one county, Hart reported that the overseer was “a good one, and the county evidently intends to keep him, for at a salary of \$150 [a year] he will inevitably become a permanent inmate.” Some were plainly incompetent and indifferent. In one northern county Hart found the overseer and his wife both absent when he visited the home. As he left the place, however, he met the man, who “was intoxicated, swaying to and fro in his seat, urging his horse at a rapid rate up the stony hill. In the wagon was a coffin, containing the body of a woman destined

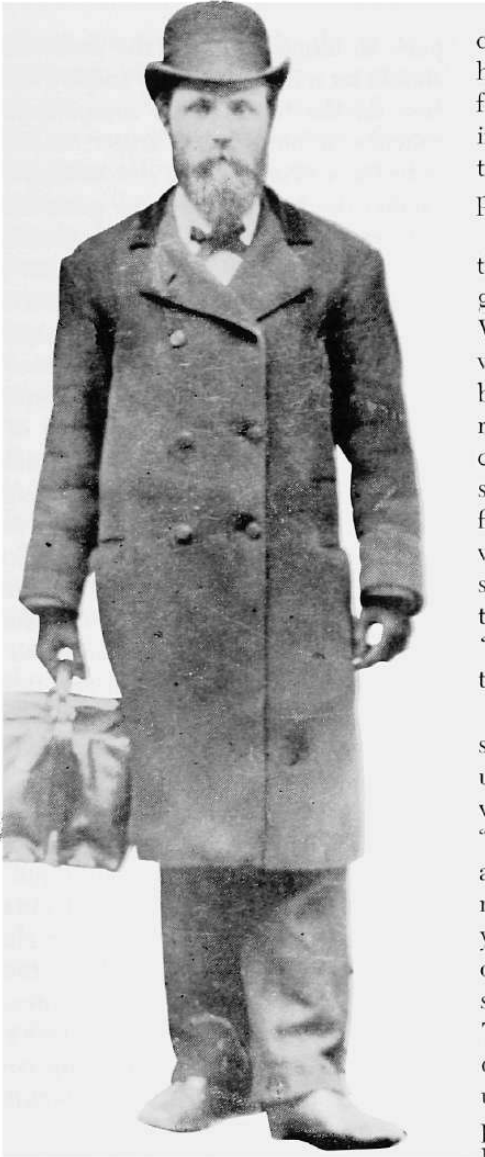
²³ *General Laws*, 1883, p. 171.

²⁴ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:412 (St. Paul, 1920).

²⁵ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 30.

²⁶ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 189–236. For information on the Home for the Friendless, see Ethel McClure, “The Protestant Home of St. Paul,” in *Minnesota History*, 38:74–85 (June, 1962).

²⁷ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 176; a mimeographed history of the Itasca County nursing home, by George Prescott and Ben Grussendorf, in the possession of the author.



THE Reverend Hastings H. Hart

to the county burying ground. The old song was literally exemplified: 'Rattle his bones over the stones, He's only a pauper that nobody owns.' In the main, however, Hart

²⁸ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 206, 224, 188. For the variety of contracts with overseers, see p. 178.

²⁹ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 231, 195.

³⁰ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 188, 199, 211.

³¹ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 202.

considered the overseers well-meaning and hard-working persons, and believed the defects of operation "due to inexperience and inattention, rather than to lack of disposition to care suitably and humanely for public wards."²⁸

These caretakers were hampered, too, by the lack of facilities and equipment, and the generally poor condition of the buildings. With but few exceptions the poorhouses were frame farmhouses, ill-adapted for use by more than one family. Many were in bad repair, hard to heat, and difficult to keep clean. The cracks in the floors of the second story of one home were so large that the floors could not be scrubbed because they were "so leaky." Halls were nonexistent; in some instances men and women had to go through the rooms of the opposite sex, and "slops" from the bedrooms were carried through the kitchen or dining room.²⁹

Most of the buildings were overcrowded, sitting rooms and even dining rooms being used as bedrooms, especially for the infirm who could not climb stairs. At one home, in "the women's sitting room, 16x16 feet, slept a man and his wife, a woman 84 years old not related to them, and an idiot girl 14 years old, mute and helpless." And at another home, in a "room 9x20 feet were a stove, two double beds and a single bed. There being no closets or storerooms, a quantity of old clothes and rubbish was under the beds. The single bed was occupied by an old bed-ridden man. One double bed was occupied by the old man's wife and idiot daughter, the other by two women not related to this family."³⁰

Several homes had strong rooms in the basement for refractory or mentally disturbed persons. In one instance, a "code of rules is prescribed by the county commissioners, for violation of which the overseer is authorized to confine inmates in a strong room, on bread and water."³¹

Hart's observations led him to several conclusions. First, children did not belong in poorhouses, and homes should be found for them elsewhere, "for children brought

up in poor houses seldom turn out well.”³² Most of the children were with their mothers, but some had been imported into Minnesota from New York for placement in private homes. A few were wards of the county commissioners who, in addition to their other duties, were responsible for binding out as apprentices minors who were dependent upon the county for support. If a home could not be found for such a child, he was usually sent to the poor farm. The state public school which opened at Owatonna in 1886 did much to correct this situation.³³

Hart also noted that a farm was not necessarily the best location for a poorhouse and that most farms were too large. “The overseer has enough to do in the supervision of a large poor house, without running a farm,” he said. In answer to the argument that farms afforded opportunity for paupers to share in the work, Hart stated flatly: “There are very few able-bodied paupers in the poor houses of Minnesota. The popular idea that pauper labor ought to be utilized would find little useful material to utilize.”³⁴

The practice of buying farms in advance of need was criticized as being uneconomical as well as unfair to the earlier settlers who must pay for something they could not use. The land did not always appreciate in value as anticipated, and the supposed saving from the low purchase price was more than offset by interest charges on the loan and the removal of the property from the tax rolls. In several instances, the board was successful in persuading a county to defer purchase of a farm or the opening of a poorhouse until there was a real need.³⁵

Hart also found much that was undesirable in the methods of hiring overseers and in the financial arrangements covering both home and farm operation. The county should exert closer control over the finances; farm proceeds should be turned into the county treasury, the bills audited, and payments made from the treasury. In small counties, Hart said, it might be more feasible to pay a fixed weekly sum for boarding pau-

pers. In larger counties, the commissioners should set a fair salary and employ the overseer on the basis of his competence. The practice of hiring an overseer on bids and only for a year's tenure did not assure obtaining the best man for the position.³⁶

Hart made a comparative summary of poorhouse expenses by the number of inmates in the institutions and came to the conclusion that counties of small population could not “afford to run poor houses.” As a solution to this problem, he supported the suggestion “made by a gentleman of wide experience . . . that counties having no poor houses make contracts with neighboring counties having poor houses, for the board and care of paupers.” A similar suggestion was put forward by the auditor of Yellow Medicine County, who wrote: “I think it would work well if four or six small adjoining counties purchased and run [*sic*] a poor farm or poor house in common.”³⁷ However, in 1899 when the legislature finally enacted a district poorhouse enabling law which permitted two or more counties having a combined population of not fewer than 25,000 inhabitants to build and operate joint facilities, none took advantage of it. The board of corrections and charities was not optimistic: “We believe this is a good law, but must frankly confess that there seems small prospect of its being used, because each of the co-operating counties cannot be the seat of the district building.”³⁸

ONE OF Hart's earliest and most important findings was the wide variation among the counties in their expenditures for poor re-

³² Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 181.

³³ *General Laws*, 1864, p. 56; Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1886, p. 186.

³⁴ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 181.

³⁵ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 182, 183.

³⁶ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 184.

³⁷ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 186, 187, 236.

³⁸ *General Laws*, 1899, p. 295; Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1900, p. 37.

lief. Some were generous to the point of extravagance, but in others, the amount allowed per inhabitant was so small as to suggest a complete lack of concern. Regarding the latter, Hart was uncompromisingly outspoken: "It is a disgrace to Fillmore County to herd her paupers together in the poor house like cattle in a stable, while the expenses of the poor house with an average of fourteen inmates, are but \$439.12 for a year. It is equally discreditable to Houston County to hire an overseer at \$150 a year and keep her paupers in a dangerous fire trap, partly unplastered, while the entire pauper expenses of the county are but 8.2 cents per inhabitant. It is incredible that \$22 is an adequate sum for Lincoln County to spend for a year's medical attendance, or that \$119.16 should cover all the needed indoor and outdoor relief of Wilkin County. And there must surely be an error in the report from Mower County indicating only one cent per inhabitant for all pauper expenses outside the poor house."³⁹

Although the immediate responsibility rested with the county commissioners, Hart refused to blame them wholly, pointing out that "The commissioners, coming into office, find established customs of dealing with paupers, which can be changed only with difficulty. Increased expenditure in economical counties is criticized as extravagance. Decrease in extravagant counties is denounced as oppression of the poor. The remedy lies in the increase of knowledge on this subject among the people."⁴⁰

Another area of particular concern to the board was the lack of any real planning for the future, and specifically the continued use of old buildings. The law of 1883 specified that "all plans for new jails and infr-

³⁹ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 169.

⁴⁰ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 169.

⁴¹ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1884, p. 31.

⁴² Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1888, p. 15; 1890, p. 78, 208, 212; 1892, p. 197; *Red Wing Argus*, October 10, 1889.

maries shall . . . be submitted to said board for suggestion and criticism." and this—broadly interpreted—proved to be one of its most effective sources of influence. As early as 1884 the board advised decidedly against "additions to old farm houses or badly constructed buildings," and in each subsequent report it repeated its criticism of the expensive makeshifts which frequently stood in the way of permanent improvements.⁴¹

New buildings were slow to materialize, however, and the board had little opportunity to participate in the planning of suitable structures until 1889, when the Goodhue County Home was destroyed by fire. Through the heroism of its overseer the inmates were rescued, but the building was a total loss, and at the request of the county commissioners, the board advised on plans for a new one. The resulting brick structure, opened about January 1, 1891, was for some years considered "the best poorhouse in the State."⁴²

Although thirty-one counties had opened poorhouses by 1893, there were still not enough to meet the needs of the burgeoning population of the 1880s and 1890s. In its report for 1894 the board pointed out that the state had practically no permanent buildings devoted to this use and was thus afforded "great opportunity to make a record on poorhouse buildings equal to our excellent record on the character of the county jail buildings." To stimulate interest and encourage county commissioners in building poorhouses designed for the purpose, the board had model plans prepared. Two sets were worked out, one for smaller institutions having a capacity of twenty-three inmates, and another for places accommodating fifty. The special requirements included were: "solidity of construction, complete separation of the sexes and separate apartments for the overseer. . . . clothes closets, well equipped bathrooms, plenty of water, warmth, light and ventilation," as well as "such a combination and arrangement of the parts . . . as will avoid a waste of time



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and labor in daily use.”⁴³ The model plan for the twenty-three-bed home was adopted by Becker County in 1900, and both designs were to serve, with some modifications, as the patterns for institutions constructed in the state over the next thirty years.

The members of the board of corrections and charities, however, were not to have the satisfaction of seeing these homes materialize under their jurisdiction. In a move to streamline state government, the legislature of 1901 abolished the board, along with a number of others, and turned its duties over to a new state board of control. This body, comprised of three salaried members, was at first preoccupied with the problems of state-operated institutions, for whose supervision it was directly responsible. Several years passed before a full-time staff member was employed to take up the function performed in earlier years by Hart, and to inspect all charitable and correctional institutions throughout Minnesota.⁴⁴

The man chosen for this post was Louis G. Foley, who served from January 1, 1908, until July 1, 1932, when he was promoted to membership on the board itself. Foley was

a genial, soft-spoken person, liked and respected by the persons in charge of institutions, and while he was hampered by the lack of any real regulatory power, he was able to accomplish much by persuasion, moral pressure, and practical advice.

FROM the turn of the century until the crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression, poorhouses in many respects remained “static.” The number of homes increased gradually from thirty-four in 1900 to forty-four in 1910, and remained at or near this peak for the next twenty years. Their administration was virtually unchanged. Overseers (now called superintendents) were still employed on the basis of the lowest bid submitted for “care and keep.” Tenures were brief, sometimes for a year or two only, and as Foley pointed out in his report for 1926, this offered “little encouragement for efficient administration.”⁴⁵

In the matter of new buildings there was steady progress. Winona and Chisago counties both opened new homes in 1904. On January 25, 1908, Brown County dedicated a twenty-thousand-dollar poorhouse, and in the following year Redwood County completed what the community’s historian described as “probably the most magnificent alms house in Minnesota.” Between 1914 and 1928 more than a dozen counties built new homes or substantial additions.⁴⁶

A number were constructed in response to prodding by the board of control, and it was sometimes difficult to explain to tax-

⁴³ Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial Report*, 1894, p. 41; 1900, p. 36, 40.

⁴⁴ *Laws*, 1901, p. 147; Minnesota State Board of Control, *Biennial Report*, 1908, p. 15. Hart resigned in 1898 to become superintendent of the Illinois Children’s Home and Aid Society and from there went on to a long and distinguished career in penology and social work.

⁴⁵ Board of Control, *Biennial Report*, 1926, p. 52.

⁴⁶ *Center City Press*, November 19, 1903, January 5, 1904; *Brown County Journal* (New Ulm), January 25, February 1, 1908; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Winona County*, 233 (Chicago, 1913); Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Redwood County*, 194 (Chicago, 1916); Board of Control, *Biennial report*, 1916, p. 290; 1918, p. 46; 1928, p. 56.

payers the need for a new home, especially in areas whose prosperity left something to be desired. An example was Pine County, where the voters defeated a bond issue designed to pay for a new poorhouse, which was to be "fireproof with soundproof inside partitions, steam heated and scientifically ventilated and with numerous bathrooms."⁴⁷ The commissioners nevertheless made a tax levy to pay for the new buildings. "They are substantial and almost palacial [*sic*]," apologized the *Hinckley Enterprise* of November 26, 1920, "but the old buildings were condemned by the state commission and buildings of this kind are the only kind that meet with approval." Persistent complaints about "such an expensive building for the poor" eventually brought about a grand jury investigation. This revealed only that "the board of control had ordered the erection of a new building which had to be built according to their specifications."⁴⁸

As in years past, the new poorhouse buildings were located on farms. They were large, solidly built rectangular structures with two or three stories, often set back from the road in a small grove of trees. A typical county home of that period could be spotted at a distance, but if there were any doubts as to its identity, these were dispelled on closer view by the appearance in the yard of a dozen or so old men clad in ill-fitting suits, the coats and pants of which never matched.

There was a marked sameness about the interiors, as might be expected in buildings evolved from the same floor plan. The "special requirements" of the old board of cor-

rections and charities were embodied in the design. Wide center halls made it unnecessary to go through one room to get to another, and modern plumbing obviated the necessity of "carrying slops through the kitchen." Separation of the sexes was usually accomplished by dividing the building into three sections: the men's and women's quarters at opposite ends, the overseer's apartment between them. The latter frequently occupied a disproportionate amount of space — especially as the number of inmates increased. Moreover, the front entrance belonged to the overseer, and a visitor who ventured to call at the front door might be informed that "these are private quarters," and directed to the "paupers' entrance" at the rear or side of the building. As it happened, there were few visitors other than those brought by duty; visiting the folks at the poor farm was usually reserved for the Christmas season when various groups put on their annual entertainments. Few people were really aware of the place in the country which by then had become chiefly an "old folks home."⁴⁹

Yet even in the 1920s, before the great depression had brought about a widespread change in public attitudes, there were persons on the national, state, and local scene who foresaw the development of what was termed a "class of aged persons, without means, who cannot through their own efforts earn sufficient to support themselves."⁵⁰ Many questioned whether the poorhouse was the best or even the most economical solution to the problem of their care. That it was not the latter was demonstrated in a nationwide survey made by the United States bureau of labor statistics in 1925. This disclosed that almshouses (especially the very small ones) represented an extremely expensive method of caring for the poor. Similar findings on the state level were reported by an interim commission appointed by the 1927 Minnesota legislature.⁵¹

This commission, which had been created "to investigate and examine into the general question of old age pensions, [and] the cost

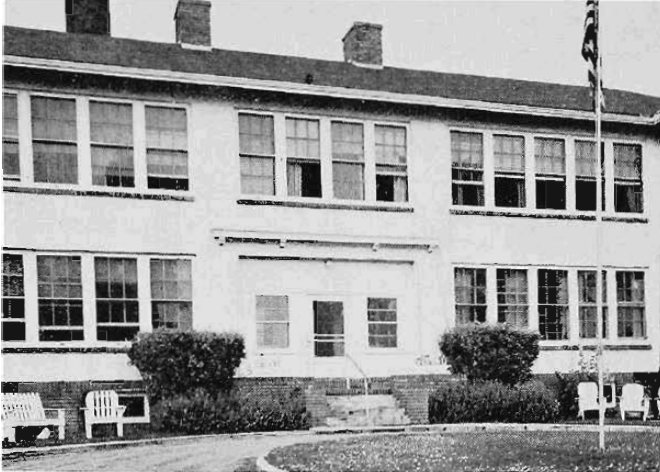
⁴⁷ *Hinckley Enterprise*, November 26, 1920.

⁴⁸ *Hinckley News*, November 16, 1921.

⁴⁹ In 1923 sixty-three per cent of the persons in Minnesota poorhouses were sixty-five years of age and over, according to the bureau of the census in its report on *Paupers in Almshouses, 1923* (Washington, 1925).

⁵⁰ *Report of the Interim Committee of the Minnesota Senate on Old Age Pensions*, 3 (n.p., 1929).

⁵¹ Estelle N. Stewart, *Cost of American Almshouses*, 42-44 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Bulletins* No. 386); *Report of the Senate Committee on Old Age Pensions*, 6.



SUNNYSIDE Rest Home at Lake Park

of poor relief under our present system” went on to take a broader look at the situation. Its report pointed out that the imperatives of an urban, industrial society were bringing about a “great increase of indigent old people, most of them of a higher type than their predecessors of a half century ago.” In addition to being costly, the poorhouse system deprived these people of independence, self-respect, a familiar environment, and any opportunity for self-betterment. “To a human being,” the report concluded, “who has borne the pleasant and unpleasant decrees of fortune during a lifetime and has contributed his best to society, it must be galling to feel that to all intents and purposes he is a number in an institution.” The commission recommended a limited old age pension plan and prepared a bill which the 1929 legislature enacted into law. The requirements were stringent, however, and the plan was put into effect by only a few counties.⁵²

THE PASSAGE in 1935 of the federal social security act, with its grants-in-aid for old age assistance programs, had a tremendous impact on the county poorhouses. Under the law as originally enacted, assistance could not be given to persons residing in public institutions. As a consequence, many of the aged moved out of the county home to be eligible for grants, or “pensions,” as they preferred to call them. Not all those over the age of sixty-five left the poor farms.

Some remained because there was no other place for them, or because after weighing the advantages and disadvantages, they decided their best course was to stay.⁵³

“They debate the question endlessly,” said the superintendent of one home. On the one hand was the security of bed, board, and an ordered life; on the other hand was “independence” — coupled, however, with fear of the unknown. Could their little pensions purchase as much as they now had? And, indeed, for many it was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Certainly, the new law had not taken into consideration the fact that many persons in poorhouses were physically, mentally, and temperamentally unfit to fend for themselves. They needed more care than they could get in the boarding homes available to them, and in many “rest homes” opened by unscrupulous persons, the newly created “pensioners” undoubtedly were exploited.

County boards met this situation in several ways. Between 1933 and 1950, fifteen county homes were closed. Nineteen were leased for private operation, making it possible for the residents to receive grants.⁵⁴ Even though a home was turned over to a lessee, however, the county usually maintained some control of admissions and matters of operation. In the beginning the new plan promised much. The aged received their grants and were able to pay for care in a “private” institution. Even the name “poor farm” was eliminated; the home became

⁵² *Report of the Senate Committee on Old Age Pensions*, 1, 4; *Laws*, 1929, p. 42–48. George Nordlin, the committee’s able and dedicated chairman, attended the First National Conference on Old Age Security, held in New York City, April 10, 1928, and secured data from leading public welfare workers of other states. On October 9, 1928, the committee held a public hearing at which the views of Minnesota social workers and other concerned citizens were aired.

⁵³ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 49:620.

⁵⁴ For a list of homes closed or leased during this period, see Ethel McClure, *Homes for Aged and Chronically Ill Persons in Minnesota*, 89–91, a mimeographed study issued by the division of hospital services of the Minnesota department of health (Minneapolis, 1959).

the "Murphy Boarding Home," or "Evergreen," "Fairview," or "Hill Top" rest home.

Before long, however, problems became apparent. There were disagreements over repairs, inventories, and especially the rates the county would allow for persons who needed more than simple board and room. With the continued increase of aged persons, the number of sick and infirm also increased. There were usually not enough beds in the community, and the county of necessity referred many of its most difficult cases to the leased homes. The operators of these were hardly in a position to refuse, even though in most instances they did not have staff or facilities for nursing cases.

In spite of efforts by both public and private agencies to stimulate new construction and improve the quality of care in existing homes through licensing, educational programs, and increased rates, the number of satisfactory facilities lagged far behind the need. It was apparent to many observers that private sponsorship could not keep up with the demand for more beds. One solution was to bring the county back into the picture, but with a facility radically different from the old poor farm. The 1950 amendment to the social security act and certain changes in Minnesota laws helped solve the problems of operation and of financing care. But the question of buildings remained.

One obvious source was the more substantial of the existing county homes; these were enlarged and remodeled and some of those

which had been leased were returned to the county for operation. Even more promising possibilities were offered by those county tuberculosis sanatoriums which improved methods of treatment had made unnecessary. Already owned by one or several counties, these buildings were fire-resistant or substantial enough to warrant the installation of sprinkler systems. As former hospitals, they were not associated in the public mind with poor farms and therefore were readily accepted by both patients and public. The first sanatorium to be converted was Sand Beach at Lake Park, owned jointly by Clay and Becker counties. In July, 1951, this was opened as Sunnyside Rest Home, the first such facility to be set up under the new county nursing home law. Between 1951 and 1957 eight others were converted.⁵⁵

There has been little new construction, one notable exception being in Traverse County, where a modern forty-bed facility built at a cost of \$365,000 was opened in January, 1959. Koochiching, Hubbard, Chisago, Crow Wing, and Red Lake counties also have new buildings, or have added new wings. Others operate nursing homes in remodeled structures. Six counties lease their former poor farms to private individuals who operate them as boarding homes or simply as farms. Minnesota's last poorhouse not converted to nursing care was closed October 1, 1963. It was the Goodhue County Home, a model for the rest of the state when it was built almost seventy-five years ago.⁵⁶

During the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, county poorhouses were a major form of relief for the state's needy and infirm. But in the hundred years since the first county board went out to "examine a farm" for its paupers, there has been much "increase of knowledge among the people." New types of sponsorship, new forms of care, and a changed philosophy have almost, if not quite, removed the old county poor farm — bleak and forbidding — from the Minnesota landscape. No one will lament its passing.

⁵⁵ *Lake Park Journal*, June 28, July 12, 1951. Legislation enabling counties to co-operate in building district tuberculosis sanatoriums was enacted in 1919, and state aid for construction was provided under a 1913 law. (See *Laws*, 1913, p. 731; 1919, p. 338.) Although counties had shown little interest in building district poorhouses, they constructed fourteen jointly-used tuberculosis sanatoriums between 1914 and 1928.

⁵⁶ *Wheaton Gazette*, January 9, 30, 1959; Philip M. McGonagle, Director, Goodhue County Welfare Department, to the author, October 22, 1963.

THE PICTURE of the Goodhue County Home on page 365 is used through the courtesy of the *Daily Republican Eagle* of Red Wing. Others are from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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