

Over the Hill to the Poor Farm: Rural History Almost Forgotten

Michael R. Daley
Texas A&M University – Central Texas

Peggy Pittman-Munke
Murray State University

Abstract. Poor farms were important rural institutions that cared for a wide range of poor and dependent people in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet today they are little remembered. This manuscript discusses these poor farms, their function, operation, who they served, and how they relate to modern day social welfare.

Keywords: poor farm, rural social welfare, social welfare history, rural social work

Over the hill to the poor-house--my chil'rn dear, good-by!
Many a night I've watched you when only God was nigh;
And God 'll judge between us; but I will al'ays pray
That you shall never suffer the half I do to-day. (Carleton, 1872)

This brief stanza from the poem *Over the Hill to the Poorhouse* by Will Carleton (1872) captures some of the dread and foreboding about becoming poor and the need for assistance that faced paupers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When, family, church, friends, and neighbors were not able to help with support, the locally maintained poor farm or poorhouse was a place of last resort for help. As the poem indicates, heading to the poorhouse, or for rural people the poor farm, indicated a feeling of despair and a deep sense of loss of self-worth. To earlier generations phrases like “You are driving us to the poorhouse!” were common and represented dire warnings to change your ways (Stow, 1974; Wagner, 2005). There appears to have been a general sense that not only those who were current poor were at risk, but that a sudden change in circumstances put almost anyone at risk for becoming indigent. Later generations would effectively capture this concept in the song lyrics “there but for fortune go you or I” (Ochs, 1973). The thought that a change in health or economic circumstances might potentially force a person to live in an institution for the poor appears to have been something that was viewed with trepidation and dread.

Although today poorhouses and poor farms for the indigent are remembered as quaint memories of our past, reminders like historical markers and curious names like the Poor Farm Road and Poor Farm Cemetery, offer subtle reminders of the social significance of these institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But today the rural poor farm or urban poorhouse is often something about which many people are unaware. Today our modern public assistance system with cash, food, medical, and housing assistance has diminished the memory of when the poor had to move into local institutions to get the help needed to survive.

Contemporary treatments of social welfare history usually include some discussion of the organizations variously called poorhouses, almshouses, or workhouses. These institutions were an important means of providing for the dependent and indigent member of society in the 19th and

20th centuries. Much of what has been written about these institutions for paupers is focused on shortcomings of the poorhouse system in providing care for their residents, in pursuing the original intent of providing humane care for the poor, or in even treating the residents of almshouses with minimal standards of decency (Axinn & Levin, 1997; Popple & Leighninger, 2011; Trattner, 1999; Wagner, 2005). Further complicating the understanding of poorhouses and poor farms as distinctive entities is the fact that poor farms were not limited to rural areas. Wagner (2005) indicates that some urban areas also devoted large numbers of acres to their poor farms, also referred as city farms, and referred to the residential structure where the poor residents lived as almshouses.

Yet almshouses and poorhouses appear to have been primarily urban organizations, whereas prior to 1920 a majority of the population of the United States lived in rural, not urban communities (Daley, 2015). What provision was made for the care of the rural poor? Social welfare literature that addresses this question is much more difficult to find. It was the locally funded poor farm that often filled that role of providing care and support for the rural indigent, and yet receives scant treatment in the history of social welfare. These poor farms were the creation of county governments-not cities, townships, or state, or federal government in the United States as means to provide relief for those in need. Although the financial responsibility and the costs of and responsibility for the indigent have been shifted in part to state and federal governments over the last century, responsibility for the poor still remains at the local level today for those who do not qualify for existing federal and state programs. With our present mind set of slashing public support for social welfare, we may be returning to 19th century practices.

This manuscript provides an overview of the poor farm as a local means for dealing with the indigent, discusses the important role that it played in rural social welfare history, and identifies the relevance that the poor farm experience has for modern social welfare services in rural communities. This discussion about poor farms is relevant today because we understand our urban social welfare roots of the profession much better than we do our rural ones (Daley, 2015), and the rural experience, then as now, was not often the same as the urban experience.

19th and Early 20th Century Support for the Rural Poor: The Poor Farm

Poor farms were the rural equivalent of the poorhouses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but we do not often hear or read much about them. It seems that poor farms were and are often subsumed into more general discussions of almshouses or poorhouses (Cottrell, 1989). This is not surprising since lumping poor farms under the umbrella of poorhouses was a common practice by writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and is continued today by many historians. Further confusing identification of poor farms is that the physical building in which the poor lived was often termed an almshouse. The result is that today we have much less information about the rural poor farm than we do their urban counterpart. Indeed the distinctions that developed over time between poorhouses, almshouses, poor farms and how they served the poor have not been well studied and we are presented with an incomplete history of these institutions (Wagner, 2005). Given the paucity of material, we appear to have only a fragmentary picture of the rural poor farm. For example, a simple search of one period source, the National Conference on Charities and Corrections, reveals that during the period 1874-1900 there were 1,089 references to almshouse (or poorhouse), yet only 32 to poor farm (National Conference on Social Welfare Proceedings, 2002).

That some combining of similar institutions was done is understandable since poor farms, poorhouses, almshouses, or workhouses all refer to essentially the same kind of locally based facility that provided housing, clothing, medical care and food for the poor. In addition, all institutions required paupers to live on premises under the close supervision of a superintendent as a form of indoor relief. Indoor relief as a form of assistance to the dependent represented an attempt to reform the way in which the poor were assisted in the U.S. (Trattner, 1999; Wagner 2005).

Often the differing names of poor farm, poorhouse, or almshouse reflect variances in terminology based on locality and the time period, and these types of institutions for the relief of the poor were prevalent in the U.S. as a form of locally based social and economic support from the nineteenth century until the New Deal in the late 1930s (Ambrosino, Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, 2012; Axin & Levin, 1997; Barker, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2011; Trattner, 1999; Wagner, 2005). Even after the 1930s local facilities for the indoor relief of the poor persisted until after the second half of the twentieth century in several cases (Cottrell, 1989; Goolsby, 2011; Pasanen, 2013; Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008).

While a number of authors have discussed the historic and socio-political origins of the poorhouse, and the often deplorable conditions under which their residents lived, many of these poorhouses were the outgrowth of social welfare efforts in the cities that were originally intended to more effectively and humanely help the poor while moving them from a life of dependency (Cottrell, 1989). The reality, once poorhouses came into use, was that living conditions were often shockingly grim. Poor farms were sometimes no better places to live than poorhouses. But life as a resident of a rural poor farm, while not ideal, appears in some cases to have been more humane than many poorhouses (Cottrell, 1989). At least on a poor farm there was not the specter of crowding that often characterized the poorhouse, and because residents of the farm helped with the daily operations of the facility they may have retained more of a sense of personal dignity, community, and home (Cottrell, 1989; Wagner, 2005).

The result of infrequent writing about the poor farm is that this significant part of social welfare history about rural communities is not well understood. Lack of period writing on the subject and the difficulty in accessing historical records of poor farms certainly contributes to the dearth of literature and the current state of knowledge about these institutions. None of this is entirely surprising since poor farms tended to be localized entities based in counties with lower populations, and their officials may not have had the resources or motivation to participate in state or national forums, or to write extensively about their work. After all, those responsible for administering poor farms were simply public employees just going about performing their jobs.

Poor farms were the creation of local, usually county, governments as an expedient to deal with their responsibility for the poor. Most of the public officials connected with the administration of poor farms were civil servants and were usually not social workers. They may have felt little connection to the prominent social welfare forums of the day which produced reports about poor relief. As one period source, Homer Folks, speaking in reference to public administrators of charities aptly stated, "Only a few mayors, commissioners of charities, or other officials in similar positions in similar positions have been present at our meetings ..." (Folks, 1899, p. 106).

Additionally, poor farms may not have been considered an important part of local government, and perhaps, not a topic of general interest to be openly discussed. Thus, poor farm records, where they still exist, tend to be tucked away in local archives (Daley & Pittman-Munke, 2014). Finally, the historical record tends to lose the poor farm in the larger, undifferentiated discussion of almshouses. However, in the last fifteen years more information on poor farms has begun to emerge, often due to the work of genealogists and local historical societies.

The Rural Poor Farm

Poor farms were the institution used by rural counties to provide support and care for the rural poor and other groups dependent on the public for support. For much of the 19th and early 20th century primary responsibility was handled by the local county government. In some areas churches and private philanthropy assisted in this responsibility. But given the smaller population, low density of settlement, and the availability of surplus cash, rural communities tended to face challenges in providing for the poor that could best be addressed by county government. Local churches and private groups did help in meeting the needs of the poor, but to a lesser degree in rural areas. Josephine Brown (1933), an early advocate for rural social work, suggested that more development of private social welfare resources to augment those of the local governments was needed in smaller communities.

The institution called a poor farm consisted of housing for the poor and included enough acreage to develop a working farm with attendant agricultural buildings (Leiby, 1978; Miriam-Webster, n.d.; Wagner, 2005). This agricultural aspect was integral to the functioning of the poor farm as it provided ongoing activity to keep the residents productively employed, produced food for those who lived there, and occasionally generated some revenue to offset the costs of operation. Most commonly the term poor farm was given to rurally based poorhouses that were situated on these working farms, but the poor farm was also developed by city poorhouses that had an associated farm outside the city to produce agricultural resources for the poor (Wagner, 2005).

Poor farms appear to have developed from somewhat different motivations than their urban cousin, the almshouse (Wagner, 2005). Whereas rural counties looked to the poor farm as an economical way of meeting their responsibility to care for the poor and dependent, poorhouses, along with penitentiaries, schoolhouses, and asylums were attempts to rationalize society, make it economically productive, and build character in their inmates and attendees (Rothman, 1971). Thus, poorhouses were originally conceived as model institutions for the care of the indigent that would help move them from a life of dependency (Cottrell, 1989; Wagner, 2005). Indeed both the almshouse and the poor farm were both designed to board the poor and to move them from a life of dependency. However the agricultural work on the poor farm was seen as a utilitarian means for reducing the cost of operation, while keeping the poor from a life of idle dependency, rather than as a utopian ideal for a better society. In one period example, an inspector for the Massachusetts almshouses condemned the poor farm with “faint praise” for being a necessity in its care of the poor, insane, and petty criminals because it provided “practical employment and economical management” for its residents (Bardwell, 1917, p. 364).

Another difference between urban and rural care for the poor during this period is that larger cities, especially in the eastern part of the country, appear to have developed more diverse responses to care for the poor because private charities and Charity Organization Societies grew

to prominence at the end of the 19th century. Thus urban communities began to provide more supports for the poor and dependent outside the poorhouse. But rural counties appear to have stayed with county-provided services (Folks, 1899). Rural counties tended to use the poor farm as the primary resource for their dependent primarily because boarding out of the poor in private homes had not always been successful, but some counties continued to provide support for the poor who lived in the community (Cottrell, 1989).

Prior to the poor farm, rural counties that carried responsibility for the poor used a practice of placing their poor with private families. Counties would either board the poor with private families or offer the poor to the public at a specified rate through a public bidding process such as an auction (History of 19th Century American Poorhouses, n.d; Trattner, 1999; Wagner, 2005). Individuals who submitted the lowest bid to provide room and board for the pauper would receive payment from the county and the right to use the poor person's labor for a year (History of 19th Century American Poorhouses, n.d; Wagner, 2005). There may also have been additional costs in seeing that an adequate level of care was provided for the dependent once placed with individual families. The costs associated with this placing out process and a possible shortage of families wanting to take the poor may have been primary motivators to the widespread implementation of the poor farm system, which was seen as simpler and cheaper (Cottrell, 1989).

With the primary concern being economical operation and expediency of dealing with the poor and dependent, poor farms did not always provide good care for the poor. Even contemporary authors describe some county poor farms as "dumping grounds" and the living conditions of some facilities as deplorable (Stonaker, 1903; Wysocki, 2008). Ultimately poor farms proved to be less economical to operate than contemplated, and may have been no more cost efficient than placing out of the poor or in providing direct assistance to them, but the poor farm system may have been a more practical way to do things.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, responsibility for poor and dependent populations rested at the local level (Axinn & Levin, 1997; Cottrell, 1989; Trattner, 1999; Wysocki, 2008). In order to carry out their obligation to their poor and dependent, rural counties often appointed a public official for that purpose (Cottrell, 1989; Wagner, 2005; Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008). Rural counties appointed superintendents to oversee the poor farm, and such appointments were often considered attractive because of the level of independence and the flexibility offered. Appointments as superintendents were typically time limited, but were often extended. Superintendents were salaried public employees and had responsibility for keeping written records on expenditures and operations of the farm. The position usually came with family housing, food, and extra money for farm expenses. It was the responsibility of the superintendent to provide the residents with clothing, medicine, and physician visits when needed. Superintendents were responsible for the overall operation of the farm and could hire extra labor when needed (Cottrell, 1989; Wagner, 2005). Over time, vigilance by both the county and the superintendent was necessary to keep the farm productive and the facilities in good order. County farms that at one time were considered good places could, in later years, deteriorate to the point that they were considered shameful unless care was taken to keep them up.

A key element of the institution was the farm which could be used to generate revenue, to feed residents, and to keep the poor employed at productive work. This agricultural element of the poor farms was considered so important that, when there were not enough able bodied residents to

do all of the work, outsiders were employed to cover responsibilities that could not otherwise be met. For example, children from local orphanages and even paid farm hands were used on poor farms (Wysocki, 2008). Petty criminals, whether housed on the farm or brought in from outside, were often valuable in performing the daily work needed to run the farm. Even the disabled, elderly, or infirm could be expected to contribute some work and thus avoid the vices of idleness and dependency that were thought to characterize one of the moral failings of the pauper.

While residents at the poor farm were indigent, there were a number of conditions that contributed to this, and over time the poor farm had to adapt to meet the needs of local communities. Thus, some poor farms had jails, housing for residents with mental or physical handicaps, and hospital or medical facilities (Goolsby, 2011; Meadow Brook, 2002; Pettem, 2011; Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008). In essence, the county poor farm was a catch-all facility for the indigent and dependent members of the community whose care ultimately became the responsibility of local government. Often the varying needs and conditions were not carefully considered by the county governments who established and funded the farms. One example was Bell County, Texas where a poor farm was established by 1900 and included 300 acres to serve as a detention facility for paupers and convicts (Gardner, 1995). Little distinction was made to differentiate the two groups, at least initially.

As all-purpose facilities, the types of accommodations and/or services that local poor farms had differed considerably from place to place. At minimum poor farms needed housing for residents, separate housing for a superintendent or caretaker, and facilities to support a working farm. Poor farms also housed the disabled; and if the disability was due to illness, such as consumption (tuberculosis), smallpox, ague (malaria), then pesthouses tended to be built to prevent the spread of disease (Cottrell, 1989; Pawtucket Memorial Library, 1976; Thigpen, 2001; Wysocki, 2008). If convicts or inmates were housed, locked facilities were usually needed. Secure facilities were often used for the mentally ill, “feeble minded and idiots” (developmentally disabled), and disciplinary problems such as unruly residents who lived on the farm (Ellwood, 1903; Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008). It appears that, given the limited means at their disposal, poor farms may have either used some form of restraint or opiates as a means of treatment for the mentally ill. Although poor farms frequently housed the mentally ill, from the beginning there appears to have been consensus in social welfare circles that this was far from a good idea. Bishop C. F Robertson (1884, p. 137) describes the poor farm care in Missouri as “a shame”, one of “squalor”, and “bestiality” in some counties. He laid the blame on cost conscious county governments who would not establish facilities for the mentally ill or even care about the conditions on the farm.

An example of a local poor farm, that of Anderson County, Texas, included buildings for residents and a caretaker, storage barns, a cotton gin, and a canning operation. It also had a jail facility for convict laborers who worked on the farm and on the county roads (Goolsby, 2011). Dallas County, Texas appears to have been a successful agricultural operation. It had 360 acres of land that according to a 1903 report, had sixty-five head of cattle, eight mules, farm implements and produced milk, butter, vegetables, and enough wheat to supply bread for the farm. The farm also produced 14,000 pounds of pork (Roots Web, 2004). This should have been more than enough to feed the 45 to 50 residents of the farm. It was not unusual for Texas poor farms to house inmates on the farms, and even to use them as a convenient site for public hangings (Cottrell, 1989). Dallas

and Grayson counties in Texas also built jails to house prisoners on their farms (Roots Web, 2004; Williams, 2015).

Medical care and housing for the ill was an important part of poor farm life, as those who became ill or the needy suffering from chronic health conditions were often sent to the county farm. Many counties had a county doctor who was paid to provide medical care to the poor, and who made regular visits to the poor farm (Cottrell, 1989; Roots Web, 2004). In Will County, Illinois the poor farm had housing for the ill and had regular visits or treatment from the county doctor for treatment (Wysocki, 2008). Facilities for health care were essential on the poor farm as many for the residents were both ill and medically indigent. In the case of Will County Illinois, separate housing facilities were constructed for the residents who had communicable diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis (Wysocki, 2008). That facility also served as a hospice for the poor as the terminally ill were sent to the farm by local hospitals. Antrim County, Michigan incorporated an infirmary into its poor farm in the 1930s as the emphasis shifted to providing medical care (Meadow Brook, 2002).

The People

For a rural county, the rural poor farm served as a catch all for addressing all the social welfare needs of dependent populations. In many cases the origin of or the type of dependency tended to make little difference. Simply stated, people who were dependents of the county went to the local poor farm. For example the Texas Constitution of 1869 stated:

Each county in the state shall provide ... a Manual Labor Poor House for taking care of managing, employing, and supplying the wants of its indigent and poor inhabitants, and ... all persons committing petty offenses in the county may be committed to such Manual Labor Poor House, for correction and employment. (Cottrell, 1989, pp. 170)

Thus little distinction was made between dependency and criminality. Short of committing an offense for which the sentence was going to the state penitentiary, criminals were a local responsibility and often served their time on the poor farm in rural areas. Offenses that could get someone sent to the poor farm were typically misdemeanors such as drunkenness or intemperance, debauchery, vagrancy, petty thievery, playing dice, and larceny (Ash, 2010; Garrett, 1898; Neidich, 2016; Stow, 1974; Tracy, 2015).

While the poor farm was a necessary mechanism for meeting counties' responsibility for care for its dependent population, local residents understood what it was and viewed the county farm with some trepidation. Parents tended to either shelter children from knowledge of the poor farm or to use the county farm as a sort of bogeyman to keep youngsters in line. Still the specter of the poor farm or almshouse was much on the minds of people in the 19th and 20th centuries. Will Carleton's (1872) *Over the Hill to the Poor House* was well known for generations. The poem inspired a song by the same name which was performed by traditional artists such as Flatt and Scruggs. It also inspired movies by the similar names in 1908, 1912, 1920, and 1931 (IMDb, n.d.). There was even a poorhouse literature as illustrated by the Horatio Alger (1899) novel *Jed the Poorhouse Boy*. While memories of most of this lore are not remembered today, it seems there

was, at the time, a general knowledge of poor farms and poorhouses. Poor farms were not viewed favorably, and moving to the county farm was a measure of last resort.

Going to the poor farm was no simple matter of just moving in. Residents who entered the county farm surrendered their rights as citizens, including losing the right to vote and often the ability to freely move from place to place (Cottrell, 1989). Going to the poor farm also meant surrendering all personal money or property. Residents of the poor farm were commonly called inmates, as were criminals, and the poor could be auctioned off to families in the community if necessary (Wagner, 2005). This loss of independence was demoralizing, especially in small communities where everyone would be aware of it. There may also have been a generalized concern that the living conditions would be harsh and inadequate. There are numerous examples of period reports of squalid conditions and neglect of the interests of inmates on poor farms and almshouses that would support this belief (Axinn & Levin, 1997; Ellwood, 1903; Johnson, 1901; Trattner, 1999; Williams, 2015). This may have been a general image of institutions that cared for the poor that was promoted to discourage dependency.

Many inmates of the county farm believed this was their last earthly stop. And, indeed for many, it was. That what remains of poor farms today is most often the cemetery is grim testament to that reality. Some inmates became long-term residents, but some did leave the poor farm from time to time. Criminals and some ill or unfortunate did get back on their feet. Seasonal or temporary residents such as rounders, bummers, tramps, and vagrants who used the farm as seasonal shelter also left (Brackett, 1893; Wagner, 2005). But this group was much despised and considered to be abusing the system. The aged, disabled, and the chronically ill still remain as occupants of the graves.

A central element of the county farm for the inmates was the work. It was physically demanding agricultural labor and no one was exempt unless he or she was found to be too infirm by the county doctor. Johnson (1889) described an example of a 95-year old woman who gladly peeled potatoes to contribute to the operation of the facility. Work was considered an important way to provide a means for reversing the moral failings that were believed to have led to dependency and to keep from encouraging idleness (Wagner, 2005). It also served the function of keeping the operation of the county farm efficient and self-supporting. There was a great concern in society that care of the dependent poor should not become too much of a drain on the public. Consequently period reports from poor farms often read like agricultural business reports, documenting the results of harvest, the number of livestock, meat production, farm implements and expenditures for operation (Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008). Since the poor farm produced much of its own food, its residents tended to be better fed than in an urban poorhouse (Cottrell, 1989). But the role of the superintendent was to keep the inmates working to help reduce the costs of operation.

One example of life on the poor farm is found in the descriptions the Will County Poor Farm in Illinois. The poor farm housed men, women and children from neighboring small towns that were either ill, orphaned, or in poverty. Paupers were given physical exams by the poor farm's doctor to see what work they could do. If able bodied, they could work in the fields or make soap for the farm. Often the elderly made blankets, knitted socks and sewed linens for the residents of the farm. Women cooked meals to serve the men first, and then they would eat with the children. Men and women were housed in separate wings of the residence. Two meals a day were served

during the winter and three meals a day in the summer. Breakfast was usually bread, butter, and coffee, and dinner was meat and potatoes (Wysocki, 2008).

County poor farms were ultimately local institutions and varied in who they housed as inmates and the types of facilities. While poor farms had a diverse group of residents, some poor farms did have an ability to separate some groups from others through the use of separate buildings built on the available acreage. Undoubtedly the most consistent groups housed by the poor farms throughout their history were the elderly, disabled, and chronically ill. Many poor farm records indicate that its residents were elderly or ill, necessitating some facilities for their care (Cottrell, 1989, Stonaker, 1903; Williams, 2015). These residents were there because they had few other resources, needed care, and their circumstances were unlikely to improve enough for them to leave. It was not unusual to have separate facilities for the ill to prevent contagion of debilitating diseases like consumption. Medical care was also provided for members of the community who otherwise could not afford medical care. Medical care for all was provided by the county doctor and nurses hired to provide for the indigent.

Many of the county farms housed the *insane* or *maniacs*, the period terms for mental illness. Epileptics were also housed in poor farms, as this was thought to be a form of mental illness (Byers, 1886; Powell, 1900). This was done by default and by necessity in the absence of access to the more specialized asylums run by larger communities or the states. Farms and poorhouses also housed the *feeble minded* (Byers, 1886; Ellwood, 1903; Williams, 2015; Wysocki, 2008). The latter were commonly classified as either *imbeciles* or *idiots*, indicating their limited intellectual capacity. To the extent that these inmates exhibited behavior that was difficult to control, the use of opiates, chains, and cells were available to help maintain order on the farm. The practice of whipping or horse whipping, although condemned as a helpful practice, was also used in some facilities to help control the insane (Ellwood, 1903; Peterson, 1902). Some of the feeble minded, if able bodied, could be an asset to the farm if they became productive in their agricultural duties (Johnson, 1889).

Housing criminals and vagrants, rounders, or tramps was a mixed thing. One the one hand these inmates tended to be more able bodied and could help to make the farm more productive, but they were often troublesome and victimized vulnerable inmates of the farm (Wagner, 2005; Wysocki, 2008). Prisoners worked off their sentences on the farm and were either housed there or brought in from the jails to work on the farm. Both to control difficult behavior and to prevent flight, locked facilities were constructed. But reports from Texas in the 1890s indicate that even the state prisons were full and convicts were being hired out to railroads and farms (Byers, 1894). Vagrants and tramps tended to take part-time or seasonal work, some of whom were migratory. They were often able bodied but sought out shelter when the work dried up or the weather was bad (Wagner, 2005). The periodic economic depressions or the normal ebb and flow of the agricultural and harvest cycle periodically put them out of work. The poor farm offered a place to sleep and to eat. This group was often despised because it was felt they could work and were abusing the system. There was also the concern that they, too, would victimize vulnerable residents of the farm (Wagner, 2005).

The insane were often residents of the poor farm, typically by default, as state asylums for the care of the mentally ill were often full or overcrowded. For example, a report from Texas in 1896 indicates that the insane were only admitted to one of the three state asylums when a vacancy

occurred, and Pennsylvania reported its six hospitals were augmented by county care and that more capacity was needed (Kennedy, 1896; Nutting, 1896). As a result many rural counties included the insane as inmates at their farms where there was little expertise or ability to deal with mental health care needs of the insane. Treatment could include locked facilities, restraint, sedation, and whippings. For example, Williams (2015) describes a boy at the Grayson County poor farm whose arms were strapped behind his back during the day. Wysocki (2008) identifies rooms for the insane as cells with metal bars, and Wright (1883) calls conditions for the insane on the county farms inhumane. Ill treatment of the insane was not the sole province of county farms as poor conditions for this population existed in jails, prisons, almshouses, and asylums. The county farms did the best they could under the constraints of resources, abilities of the superintendents, and support of the local government.

Children could also be found as inmates in county farms. Social reformer Homer Folks (1894) called for the removal of children from the almshouses because of the evil influences of the poorhouse, chiefly its other residents. While echoing the voices of others he refers to the almshouse as “the abomination of desolation” (p. 119), while pointing out that several states continued to have high rates of children in almshouses. Rural poor farms tended to house children for one of three reasons. The children could not be placed with local families, there was no local asylum or facility specifically for children, or they were there with members of their immediate families. The general practice was not to place children at the farms unless it was with their families. Children too were expected to work and could be valuable farm labor. Children from the local area asylums were also brought to the farm to work (Wysocki, 2008).

With the disparate types of inmates, their ranges of intellect, physical abilities, and skills it is not surprising that some residents took advantage of others. Period authors were aware of this and also knew that a catch all institution such as a poor farm could not humanely meet the needs of everyone. Over time calls were made for separate institutions for the mentally ill, feeble minded, deaf and blind, ill, and veterans. Many of these specialized institutions did come to be. But state, charitable, and local funding was never quite adequate to meet the need and these institutions were often full. Thus, people who could benefit from these specialized services were pushed to local poor farms and often remained there. So the poor farm persisted into the 20th century. The number of residents continued to swell or decrease with economic conditions, disease, or other social factors until, ironically, one of the worst economic disasters of the 20th century erupted in the 1930’s.

The Decline of the Poor Farm and its Modern Descendants

It is ironic, given the purpose of the poor farm the changing social and economic conditions borne of the Great Depression of the 1930s eventually led to the decline of the poor farm through greater national and state level involvement in social welfare (Cottrell, 1989). The passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 created a system of cash payments to support many of the dependent poor who had formerly relied on poor farms. Thus in many cases local relief efforts were supplanted by those of the state and federal government (Wagner, 2005). The cash benefits of Social Security were not immediately effective; but by 1940, the eligible elderly, surviving children and spouses could receive cash payments (Martin & Weaver, 2005). The act also established state administered means-tested old age assistance, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, and Unemployment Insurance programs that provided further support to low

income individuals and families that helped reduce the dependence on the local poor farms. But in its early years, Social Security was limited in the percentage of workers covered (Wagner, 2005). Further, the use of Social Security funds to support persons living in municipal charitable institutions such as poor farms and poorhouses was not permitted.

Social Security benefits to the disabled were added, and retirement and survivor benefits were expanded to cover more workers in the 1950s (Martin & Weaver, 2005), further reducing the need for county farms for the poor. State administered welfare programs for the disabled were also added during this period. Despite the increased economic coverage for more people and the increased attention to making benefits more adequate the local poor house remained in operation in many locations past the middle of the 20th century. Although the numbers of residents housed by poor farms declined, some individuals, such as the elderly, disabled, and unemployed, did not qualify for benefits, or their benefit levels were too low to permit independent living (Wagner, 2005). But the dye had been cast and economic support programs that were generated by the Social Security Act allowed more of the poor to remain in the community and eventually made the poor farm and poorhouse obsolete (Wagner, 2005).

As financial assistance programs increased coverage and benefits for the poor the numbers of residents of poor farms decreased and the residents tended to be elderly and infirm to the point that the farms grew more expensive to operate. The farms were less viable to offset costs, and the residents required more care. Many of the residents were medically indigent, but had insufficient funds to pay for treatment, and that certainly increased the cost. The advent of the Medicare and Medicaid programs through Social Security in 1965 (Martin & Weaver, 2005) offered medical coverage that spelled the end of the local county poor farms. County governments were glad to get rid of the expense as new generations of the poor and near poor relied on state and federal assistance and were able care for themselves in their own homes or outside the poor farm. But residents continued to live on county poor farms until the late 1970s (Wagner, 2005)

So as we in the 21st century look back on the experience of the poor farm and that model of indoor relief for small communities, have we really progressed that far from the local institution that served the poor for over one century? The decline in the value of social welfare benefits that began in the 1970s and subsequent assaults on such programs through tougher eligibility standards, reduced funding, periodic recessions, and economic instability have, at times, made not only the poor but even the middle class subject to reliance on social welfare (NPR Staff, 2012; Wagner, 2005). But the decrease in affordable housing in recent years has increased the likelihood that people will be poor and rely on social welfare programs (Desmond, 2016). Rural communities are particularly hard hit in terms of affordable housing and the poor condition of homes, and funding for improving rural housing has declined (National Rural Housing Coalition, 2014). Rural health care also receives a larger share of its funding from public sources, and decreased funding is affecting the availability of health care (Doescher, Skillman & Rosenblatt, 2009; Respaut, 2014; White, 2015).

The result for many rural residents is that they are forced to move to seek shelter, live in sub-standard housing, or become homeless. Medical care must be sought in distant locations or becomes the responsibility of local governments that are ill equipped to fund it. Both of these are conditions that the poor farm was set up to address. The rural elderly who are unable to maintain themselves in their own homes are subject to shortages of assisted living facilities or lack of

financial ability to afford assisted living (Hawes, Phillips, Holan, Sherman, & Hutchinson, 2005). Again, this was formerly a function of poor farms. Given the current pressures to maintain health care efficiency, vulnerable rural populations may see conditions grow worse for health care and assisted living facilities because rural providers do not have the numbers of residents that help create such efficiencies.

The deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals, the shortage of affordable housing, and the difficulty in getting benefits from public cash programs have created a concern over homelessness in the cities. Homelessness is a problem in rural communities that parallels that of the larger cities. Yet rural homelessness is more difficult to identify because of the problems inherent in getting counts, and the homeless in small communities have fewer resources to help (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Yet, federal and state funds to serve the homeless and to provide more affordable housing continue to be directed at the more visible urban housing. Curiously the use of farms for prisoners has continued to the present, although in recent years such operations have been scaled down with the decline in profitability of smaller agricultural operations (Winters, 2013).

Though we are now over eighty years past the enactment of the Social Security Act, we may not have progressed that much since the poor farm and in some respects may have even regressed. The elderly and infirm still find themselves in institutions variously called nursing homes or assisted living facilities (Wagner, 2005), as the frail elderly generally qualify for nursing home care under Medical Assistance in most states. Elders who are able to live on their own qualify for public housing when available, and some of these units are set up for people with mobility disabilities. Thus, public housing in many rural areas houses seniors who formerly would have been residents of the poor farm. However, since seniors no longer have separate public housing units exclusively for them, there is often grave dissatisfaction with other neighbors in public housing who have mental health issues, substances abusers, or perceived issues with children's behavior. This is much the same as what was reported for the old county poor farms. Yet affordable rental options for rural housing continue to be limited by government budget cuts (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2012).

Comparisons of current living conditions of those institutions with those of the past are extremely difficult, but what we do know is that rural residents have more difficulty close to home than they did in the past. One might say that the modern homeless shelter, many of which are located in urban areas, force the rural poor to relocate away from support systems, or live in substandard living conditions. These shelters have come to serve a catch all function that is a modern equivalent of old poorhouse or poor farm. If that is the case, then the poor farm may have been better. At least a poor farm could give extended housing to the poor when needed and not temporary or partial day refuge to the homeless that is common in today's shelters. In any event, rural communities have fewer places to provide shelter than they did during the era of the poor farm.

Essentially today, we face the same social problems in rural America that we did when poor farms dealt with the dependent in the local area. Yet today the very support that enabled us to move away from the poorhouse and for the poor to retain some independence are under attack from those who want to cut taxes, especially in the name of reducing dependency through cuts to the welfare state. As these trends continue responsibility for the poor will shift back to local

governments where there may be little ability to respond. Many rural communities have been hard hit with declining tax bases due to changes in agriculture and the outsourcing of jobs. In many respects some of the solutions being proposed are not new, but merely modern extensions of a debate that has been going on for over a century and a half. We can learn from the poor farm experience, and it may help to shape the dialogue over what happens to the rural poor for the future.

What is the use of heapin' on me a pauper's shame?
 Am I lazy or crazy? Am I blind or lame?
 True, I am not so supple, nor yet so awful stout:
 But charity ain't no favor, if one can live without. (Carleton, 1872).

References

- Alger, H. (1899) *Jed the poorhouse boy*. Retrieved from <http://www.poorhousestory.com/JEDbookreview.htm>
- Ambrosino, R., Ambrosino, R., Heffernan, J., & Shuttlesworth, G. (2012). *Social work and social welfare: An introduction* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Ash, S. W. (2010). *Look back: A history of 'poor farm'*. Retrieved from the *Star Tribune* website at <http://www.startribune.com/look-back-a-history-of-poor-farm/101392494/>
- Axinn, J., & Levin, H. (1997). *Social welfare: A history of the American response to need* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Longman Publishers.
- Bardwell, F. (1917). Standards of almshouse administration. *Proceedings of the national conference on social work* (pp. 357-364). Chicago, IL: National Conference on Social Work.
- Barker, R. L. (2014). *The social work dictionary* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Brackett, J. R. (1893). Reports from the states: Maryland. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the conference of charities and correction* (pp. 331-339). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.
- Brown, J. C. (1933). *The rural community and social casework*. New York, NY: Family Welfare Association of America.
- Byers, A. G. (1886). Poorhouses and jails. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp. 31-37). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.
- Byers, J. P. (1894). Report from the states. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the National conference of charities and correction* (p. 255). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.
- Carleton, W. (1872). *Over the hill to the poorhouse*. Retrieved from <http://www.hillsdalecounty.info/history0053.asp>
- Cottrell, D. M. (1989). The county poor farm system in Texas. *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 93(2), 169-190.
-

- Daley, M. R. (2015). *Rural social work in the 21st century*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.
- Daley, M. R., & Pittman Munke, P. (2014, October). *Rural social services delivery: Implications of past history for current services*. Presented at the 60th Annual Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, Tampa, FL.
- Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.
- Doescher, M. P., Skillman, S. M., & Rosenblatt, R. A. (2009). The crisis in rural primary care. *Rural Health Research Center Policy Brief*. Retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/uwrhrc/uploads/Rural_Primary_Care_PB_2009.pdf
- Ellwood, C. A. (1903). Almshouse abuses and their correction. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.). *National conference of charities and correction* (pp. 386-391). Atlanta, GA: Press of Fred J. Heer.
- Folks, H. (1894). The removal of children from almshouse. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp.119-132). Boston, MA: Geo. Ellis.
- Folks, H. (1899). Report of the committee on municipal and county charities. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp.106-107). Boston, MA: Geo. Ellis.
- Garrett, P. C. (1898). Necessity for radical prison reform In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp. 31-32).. Boston, MA: Geo. Ellis.
- Gardner, J. C. (1995). *Record of the inmates of the county home 1913-1969*. Huntsville, TX: J.C. Garner.
- Goolsby, D. (2011). *The Anderson county poor farm*. Retrieved from *TexasEscapes.com* at <http://www.texasescapes.com/DanaGoolsby/Anderson-County-Poor-Farm.htm>
- Hawes, C., Phillips, C. D., Holan, S., Sherman, M., & Hutchinson, L. L. (2005). Assisted living in rural America: Results from a national survey. *Journal of Rural Health, 21*(2), 131-139.
- History of 19th century American poorhouses* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.poorhousestory.com/history.htm>
- IMDb. (n.d.). *Over the hill to the poorhouse*. Retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/find?q=over%20the%20hill%20to%20the%20poor%20house&s=t&ref_=fn_al_tt_mr
- Johnson, W. A. (1889). Minutes and discussions: Discussion on poorhouses and almshouses. In I. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp. 249-250). City, ST: Publisher?
- Johnson, W. L. (1901). Poor-farms and pauperism in Kansas. In I. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of*
-

- the national conference of charities and correction* (pp. 125-130). Boston, MA: George H. Ellis.
- Kennedy, W. L. (1896). Reports from the states – Texas. In I.C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (p. 92). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.
- Leiby, J. (1978). *A history of social welfare and social work in the United States*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Martin, P. P., & Weaver, D. A. (2005). Social security: A program and policy history. *Social Security Bulletin*, 66(1). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v66n1/v66n1p1.html>
- Meadow Brook. (2002). *Our history*. Retrieved from <http://www.meadowbrookmcf.com/About%20Us/history.htm>
- Miriam-Webster (n.d.). *Poor farm*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poor%20farm>
- National Coalition for the Homeless. (2009). *Rural homelessness*. Retrieved from <http://nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/rural.html>
- National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2012). *Housing challenges in rural communities persist, on the rise*. Retrieved from <http://nlihc.org/article/housing-challenges-rural-communities-persistent-rise>
- National Rural Housing Coalition. (2014). *Rural America's rental housing*. Retrieved from http://ruralhousingcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/NRHC-Rural-America-Rental-Housing-Crisis_FINAL.compressed.pdf
- NPR Staff. (2012). *Poverty in America: Defining the new poor*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/22/151166529/poverty-in-america-defining-the-new-poor>
- National Conference on Social Welfare Proceedings 1874-1982*. (2002). Retrieved from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/n/ncosw/>
- Neidich, J. (2016). *Venango county poor farm*. Retrieved from <http://www.venango.pa-roots.com/countypoorfarm.html>
- Nutting, J. H. (1896). Reports from the states – Pennsylvania. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (p. 89). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.
- Ochs, P. (1973). *There but for fortune*. Retrieved from Metrolyrics Website at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/there-but-for-fortune-lyrics-phil-ochs.html>
- Pasanen, M. (2013). *Long ago, Vt. took care of indigent on local poor farms*. Retrieved from USA Today website at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/15/vt-poor->
-

farms-indigent/2817427/

Pawtucket Memorial Library. (1976). *Pawtucket poor farm (Providence County)*. Retrieved from http://www.poorhousestory.com/poorhouses_in_rhode_island.htm

Peterson, F. (1902). The essentials of an adequate system of care for the insane. In Isabel C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference of charities and correction* (pp. 166- 174). Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis.

Pettem, S. (2011). *County hospital and poor farm helped the needy*. Retrieved from *Daily Camera* at http://www.dailycamera.com/ci_17856732

Popple, P. R., & Leighninger, L. (2011). *Social work and social welfare, and American society* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Powell, F. M. (1900). The feeble minded and epileptic: Report of the standing committee. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *Proceedings of the national conference on charities and corrections* (pp. 70-82). Boston, MA: George H. Ellis.

Respaut, R. (2014). *Rural hospitals pressured to close as healthcare system changes*. Retrieved from *Yahoo News* website at <https://www.yahoo.com/news/rural-hospitals-pressured-close-healthcare-system-changes-110702292.html?ref=gs>

Robertson, C. F. (1884). Report for Missouri. In A. O Wright (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual National Conference on Charities and Correction 1883* (p.137). Madison, WI: Midland Publishing Co.

Roots Web. (2004). *Dallas County poor farm/convalescent home*. Retrieved from *Rootsweb* website at <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~jwheat/poorfarm.html>

Rothman, D. (1971). *The discovery of the asylum*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

Stonaker, C. L. (1903). County and municipal institutions: Report of the committee. In I. C. Barrows (Ed.), *National conference of charities and correction* (pp. 373-379). Atlanta, GA: Press of Fred J. Heer.

Stow, J. H. (1974). *Cass county poor farm*. Retrieved from *Frontier Times* website at http://www.poorhousestory.com/TX_Cass_newspaper1.htm

Thigpen, S. M. (2001). *Wythe County poorhouse farm*. Retrieved from *The Mountain Laurel* website at <http://mtnlaurel.com/history/791-wythe-county-poorhouse-farm.html>

Tracy, L. J. (2015). *The Onodoga Hill poorhouse story*. Retrieved from <http://www.onondagatownhist.org/phstory.htm>

Trattner, W. I. (1999). *From poor law to welfare state* (6th ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Wagner, D. (2005). *The poorhouse*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

White, G. B. (2015). *Rural America's silent housing crisis*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/rural-americas-silent-housing-crisis/384885/>

Williams, D. (2015). *The poor farm of Grayson County, Texas*. San Bernardino, CA: Dusty Williams.

Winters, R. (2013). *Evaluating the effectiveness of prison farms*. Retrieved from Corrections.com website at <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/33907-evaluating-the-effectiveness-of-prison-farm-programs>

Wright, A. O. (1883). Discussion on the prevention of insanity (continued). In A. O. Wright (Ed.), *Proceedings of the ninth annual national conference of charities and corrections* (pp. 84-86). Madison, WI: Midland Publishing.

Wysocki, G. (2008). *Digging up the dirt: The mysteries and history of the Will County poor farm and potter's fields*. Bloomington, IN: iUversebooks.