

## **Martin County's Poor Farm**

What was Martin County's "Poor Farm?" While reviewing its history in newspaper accounts, it was especially interesting to see both the evolution of the facility as well as the colorful language reminiscent of the time used to describe the events and individuals associated with the "Poor Farm."

The April 7, 1914, Martin County Sentinel stated the following: "County To Have Home For Poor." The county commissioners of that era planned for a building to be erected about three miles north of Fairmont to accommodate the less fortunate. It would be a modern building for its time, consisting of a basement, a 30 square foot cistern, and a coal room. There would also be twelve rooms on the second floor. The first inhabitants of the facility, referred to as "inmates," moved in November 24, 1915.

As time passed, the cost of the "Poor Farm" became a concern for the citizens of the county due to the expenses associated with its operation. In 1926, the county paid the cost of tobacco for the inmates, which amounted to \$22.75 for a fourteen month period. A 1928 newspaper article stated that the facility cost the county \$4,776.00 the previous year. The breakdown of expenses shows that the "Poor Farm" costs were as follows: maintenance of the property was \$4,828; the keeper's salary was \$1,750.00; interest on the investment was \$2,000.00; therefore, the total expenses were \$8,578.00. Subtracting the \$3,802.00 income determined the county's cost to be \$4,776.00. The article further states that "the figures were without error because they were pronounced correct by county officials." Apparently the calculations of public officials were less likely to be scrutinized at that time in our history.

By 1937, the county decided to abolish the "Poor Farm." The farm, consisting of 116 acres, was rented and a tenant occupied the house. However, part of the house could still be used to house poor people from the city who asked the county for living quarters. Some reasons cited for its abolishment were that "old age pensions" and other kinds of "poor aid" would take care of the current inmates. Newspaper accounts stated that the twelve inmates of the farm were properly provided for by the commissioners. The six persons over 65 would be given pensions, several more had been placed "here and there" by the commissioners, and two of the

younger inmates were asked to “shift for themselves” by working on farms or finding jobs in the city.

The next phase in the continuing evolution of the “Poor Farm” was in 1938, when it was being considered as a girls’ school for the NYA, National Youth Administration. The current theory of the time was that it would provide an opportunity for training in household arts, health education, social and economic problems, recreation, and individual counseling for girls from eight counties in this part of the state. It was set to open on January 15, 1939, with the commissioners agreeing to accept rent of \$35.00 monthly. Selection of applicants was limited to girls eligible for NYA employment, in good health, able to profit from an educational program, able to adjust to group living, and who presented no unusual problems of mental or physical health. The enrollment was limited to thirty.

The school seemed to progress fairly successfully with the girls learning washing, sewing, ironing, mending, and repair work around the house. The girls were ready for temporary placement in homes and businesses by May 15<sup>th</sup> of 1939. Their work week would consist of a maximum of ten hours, and they were to be paid no less than twenty cents per hour.

In October of 1941, the NYA School that had been in operation for less than two years was closed. The reasons cited were that it must be sacrificed for government military defense measures and that it was not a profitable venture. The Martin County School had twenty-five girls, and it was said by officials of the time that 70 were needed to make it a profitable project.

The building then became empty and a posed concern for the citizens of the county. One suggestion at that time was that it might be a good site for evacuees in the event large cities on either coast were bombed during WWII. Eventually, in 1943, it would become chartered as a “Youth Hostel” and would operate from May through October.

In 1949, the “Poor Farm” became the St. Joseph’s Home for the Aged, a home devoted exclusively to the care of the elderly. When remodeling was completed, the facility held 28 persons. Mother Lucia was the manager of the home and she was assisted by four Catholic Sisters. A new addition was added in 1956. In 1971, after twenty-two years, the St. Joseph Home closed its doors. The “Poor Farm” was once again empty.

In 1973, the evolution of the “Poor Farm” completed its next stage and became the Chain of Lakes Halfway House. The first director was V. H. “Rocky” Baum and it served mainly residents of Martin, Jackson, and Faribault counties.

The final chapter in the ever changing landscape of the “Poor Farm” was in 2004, when the Chain of Lakes Halfway House went out of existence. The site of the original “Poor Farm” was in operation for nearly 100 years in a variety of capacities. It changed frequently over the course of time to meet the changing needs of the residents of Martin County and of the surrounding area.

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