The Last House on the Block

The history of the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum

By Lisa Schmelz

Photos courtesy of the Walworth County Historical Society
But thanks to the efforts of local historians, who thought these outcasts deserved more in death than they ever got in life, we know a little bit about Carrie Manning. The 25-year-old arrived here on January 16, 1893, poor, ill, and pregnant. Less than a month later — on February 12 — she died. The only thing she took with her was her unnamed infant.

“The Almshouses were often the only place to go if a woman was with child out of wedlock,” says David Wagner, Ph.D., a professor of sociology and social work at the University of Southern Maine, author, and a national expert on poorhouses. “Their record with infants was very poor and there’s a lot of sad stories.”

Those sad stories aren’t isolated to unwed mothers. For people like Manning, who were unable to care for themselves, the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum was the last house on the block. Many who wound up here died here, and if their families didn’t claim their bodies, they were buried on the property in unmarked graves. Known as inmates, their greatest crime was poverty — often accompanied by mental illness or a physical or cognitive disability. Words used to describe them were far from politically correct: Lame, cripple, tramps, drunks, idiots, deaf and dumb, imbeciles, derelicts and in a family way were the labels of the day.

If you care to pay your respects to Manning and her baby, finding her won’t be easy. Just as they were relegated to the margins in life, so have they been in death. Their remains are in a small clearing in a cornfield, behind Lakeland School of Walworth County, on Elkhorn’s County Road NN. Head south on the unmarked service road east of the school’s parking lot until the pavement ends. Then, veer right. Around the bend,

The staff of the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum received frequent praise from the state of Wisconsin. In 1871, the State Board of Charities and Reform found it to be the “best in the state.”

We don’t know much about them, only that they were here. Beyond names, dates of birth and death, it’s hard to paint a picture of the men, women and children whose home was the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum. Tucked away on the outskirts of Elkhorn, where Aurora Lakeland Medical Center and a string of county buildings now stand, they were out of sight and out of mind.

**Timeline:**

1839 – Walworth County is formed.

1852 – Local officials purchase a farmhouse and 80 acres from Dudley Harriman for $1,500, and establish what will become the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum near land now occupying Aurora Lakeland Medical Center and several county buildings.

1853 – Earl M. Irish earns $350 annually as the poor farm’s first overseer. Livestock and crops sustain “inmates,” and bring in revenue to support the institution’s operating costs. Those capable of working contribute to farming. In its first six months, according to county reports, “18 paupers” were cared for, “three of whom were insane,” at a cost of $400. Crop earnings totaled $797.50. The “social experiment” proves it will “pay for itself.” According to the Milwaukee Sentinel, Mary Hutchinson is the “first insane person” cared for at Walworth County’s new institution.

1865 – Forty adjacent acres are purchased for $875 from Jesse Khodes.

1870 – The United States Census Report indicates there are 100 persons living at the Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum as “paupers, idiots, insane or drunks,” including a 14-year-old male, who is listed as an “idiot.”

1872 – Charles Dunlap, and his wife Berthania, sell their adjoining 40 acres to the county for $1,800; bringing the institution’s total acreage to 120 acres. By this time, most buildings have been destroyed by fire and rebuilt. Once again, the main dwelling house is taken by fire.

1873 – An imposing, three-story brick building is constructed at a cost of $9,885. It features separate quarters for men and women, a parlor, sewing room, kitchen and a residence for the superintendent’s family and staff.

1879 – A separate facility for the “insane” is built. Charles and Berthania Dunlap become superintendent and matron of the poor farm and asylum, moving in with their children.

1881 – 52 inmates reside at the poor farm and asylum, according to a report in the Walworth
you’ll see a large plaque, cascading with names. A shared tombstone for nearly 200 souls, it is here, on this soft patch of undulating earth, that society’s most forgotten members were laid to rest.

As much a stern admonishment as they were a crude safety net, poorhouses — or poor farms as they were also called — loomed large over the lives of our ancestors. When our grandparents remarked they didn’t want to wind up in places like this, they weren’t joking. Doris Reinke, president of the Walworth County Historical Society, says these institutions were feared and served as the earliest form of long-term care for the elderly.

“If you were aging, and you didn’t have anybody to help take care of you,” she says, “the only thing you could do was go to the poorhouse . . . and people of those generations did fear going to the poorhouse because they saw it happen.”

Based on the tradition of the Almshouses in Europe, what was conceived as a solution to extreme poverty and mental illness, soon gave birth to new nightmares, explains Mary Van Dyke, a lifelong Walworth County resident, social worker and instructor at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater.

“Even when the Almshouse or poorhouse movement took hold here, there were a

**County Independent; 27 men and 25 women.**

**1889** – The population on the poor farm and asylum stands at “about 135,” according to county records. Most are deemed insane.

**1896** – Mary Hutchison, 87, and reported to be the “first insane inmate,” dies on Sept. 16. After living here for nearly 40 years, she is buried out back in an unmarked grave.

**1917** – A county asylum with an infirmary is built, becoming the “forerunner to Lakeland Hospital.”

**1930** – The Department of Outdoor Relief, a precursor to modern public assistance programs, reorganizes. Programs like “Mother’s Pension,” “Old Age Assistance,” “Sailors and Soldiers Relief,” are now administered under the auspices of Outdoor Relief. Indoor Relief programs continue to operate for those in state and county institutions.

**1935** – The passage of the Social Security Act dramatically alters how assistance is provided to the elderly and disabled. The shift away from poorhouses and asylums begins.

**1938** – The poor farm and asylum becomes The Walworth County Home for the Aged, when the new County General Hospital is opened.

**1962** – Lakeland Nursing Home is built.

**1964** – Lakeland Nursing Home becomes a skilled nursing facility and the County General Hospital begins operating an acute 12-bed treatment unit for the mentally ill.

**1970s** – Closing of Insane Ward begins.

**2000** – The Walworth County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum Cemetery is dedicated.

**2006** – The asylum is demolished.

For people unable to care for themselves from the mid-1800s to the advent of Social Security and other assistance programs, poorhouses and asylums were their only option.
“These persons should not be forgotten. They had names and lives. Some had immigrated to the United States under the worst conditions and became laborers and servants. When they became lame and sick, they were no longer useful to (their) masters. The Poor House was their refuge; the Cemetery their final resting place,” Aug. 8, 2000, County Farm Cemetery Dedication program.

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lot of poor children and mentally unstable adults housed together because they didn’t know what to do with the people we now know to be mentally ill,” says Van Dyke. “At least at some point, in some sense, they realized that kids didn’t belong with mentally ill adults.”

Famous examples of the horror Van Dyke describes aren’t hard to find. After the death of their mother and abandonment of their father, Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher, spent four-and-a-half years in a poorhouse in Tewksbury, Mass., where conditions were beyond deplorable. Sullivan’s younger brother, Jimmie, died shortly after they were institutionalized.

“They just stuck them somewhere,” says Van Dyke of Americans, young and old, who found themselves in poorhouses and asylums from the mid-1800s until the advent of Social Security and other assistance programs. “They kept them alive, gave them a place to live, put clothes on their backs and made them workhorses not all that different from undocumented workers on large farms today.”

**THE BEST IN THE STATE**

For all its horrors as a system, the facility in Walworth County earned frequent praise from state bureaucrats. Whether they saw only a scripted best practice or an institution that truly did manage to avoid the ghastly conditions of nearby counterparts — where mentally ill wards were sometimes caged naked on beds of straw — is difficult to determine. Still, it appears the husband-wife superintendent teams running the local poor farm and asylum did so with care not always found in other municipalities.

Touring and inspecting facilities for the poorhouses and asylums was A.O. Wright, secretary of the Wisconsin State Board of
Charities and Reform. What he found in here, according to a Nov. 17, 1881, story in The Walworth County Independent, put the county in a class all its own: “You are welcome,” he told editor M.T. Park, “to say for the State Board of Charities and Reform that the Walworth County Poor House is the best in the state.”

But what did it take, in that era, to be best in state? Beyond the “palatable food,” and “clean rooms,” what was daily life like here for those dubbed “inmates?” According to state guidelines, providing work to the insane was one of the “best methods of treatment” available as it occupied their “fancied minds.” Paupers were also seen to be in dire need of structured work. For many, that work was done on what would ultimately become a 406-acre farm. Even those with significant mental illness or physical disabilities did laundry, sewed and performed other household chores. In the same 1881 story Wright proclaims Walworth County “the best in the state,” inmate Olive Stearns is described in near-comical terms. Like society then and now, Park shifts from empathy to blame in a heartbeat:

“The character of the institution is Mrs. Stearns, sixty-six years of age. She was brought to the home from Whitewater 21 years ago. After remaining a short time, she was sent to the hospital for the insane in Madison, but after a few years, she was returned as incurable, since which time she has presided, as she thinks, over the whole institution. She issues her orders with the confidence of a queen that they will be obeyed, and the language and invectives of a pirate. Tirelessly she toils in the laundry and as a chamber maid, mopping the rooms, and working on as a landlady of a grand hotel. Her ‘boarders’ pay her $1,000 a day. In her little room she takes her meals alone, accepting nothing from the common table, only such as comes from the Superintendent’s table. Occasionally, the little table is set for two, herself and ‘George,’ it is supposed a son, but he comes not and her life goes on day to day, nearing the goal where there is perfect rest. Mrs. Stearns was, years ago, a successful teacher in Richmond and Whitewater. Her maiden name is unknown. A few years of married life, a son born to her, deserted by her husband, crazed as she now is. The son, it is said, was a cripple, and no one knows what became of him. This is all that can be said of the wreck of a once beautiful, accomplished woman.
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A victim of a man’s desertion, a life, may be, uncomprehended by herself, she will pass away unknown by relatives or friends of early days. One cannot walk through these rooms without feelings of sorrow at the spectacle of human misery, mind and body, crippled, sufferers from loathsome diseases, idiots, the insane, most of whom are in this condition from gratifying their appetites and passions, and now their possessors are wrecks of the worst description. Others there are, who, from sickness and misfortunes occupy their present places. A lesson to all can be learned from these poor inmates.”

Even as a wreck of the worst description, it’s possible Stearns ventured outside the asylum. By the late 1880s, more than half of the insane inmates in Walworth County had “parole privileges” and could leave the grounds for short periods, in some cases unattended. With “open doors,” inmates here were likely not subject to frequent restraint or confinement. Separate sleeping quarters for men and women were always the norm, and by 1879 “a separate dwelling for the insane” was built.

What the best in state seems to have repeatedly failed at, however, was isolating those with highly communicable diseases. In numerous reports, attending physicians cited the need for a building for this class.
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Yet it wouldn’t be until 1917 — and many preventable deaths later — that an infirmary would be built.

A NEW DEAL

For nearly 300 years in America, the tradition of poorhouses and asylums was one of the most organized responses to poverty and mental illness. But make no mistake, they were never designed to be hospitable charities, explains Wagner, author of *The Poorhouse: America’s Forgotten Institution* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.).

“There’s this idea, at the same we’re constructing these massive spaces to house the poor, that people are poor because of their own failures, and if somehow they’re punished enough, they’ll get their act together,” he says. “And these ideas, as you can imagine, became very unpopular with the poor and middle class and there’s these kinds of rebellions in the later half of the (nineteenth) century.”

Those “rebellions” continued into the 20th century, with the Progressive Era, President Roosevelt’s New Deal, the passage of the Social Security Act, and later President Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” But as the poorhouses our grandparents feared faded into history, poverty did not.

Nationally, from 2000 to 2012, the percentage of people in poverty increased from 12.2 percent to 15.9 percent, according to U.S. Census reports. How to best help the 48.8 million people living at the bottom rung of society, not to mention those afflicted with grave mental illness, says Van Dyke, continues to baffle as much as it polarizes.

“We still haven’t figured it out,” says the 24-year social worker. “We still haven’t figured out what to do with people who are chronically poor, chronically mentally ill, and need help from the government.”

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Much of the archival material for this story came from the Doris M. Reinke Resource Center. We are especially indebted to Lloyd Jensen and Arlene Patek, who helped honor those buried at the County Farm Cemetery with the plaque erected on Aug. 8, 2000. The program for the cemetery’s dedication allowed Carrie Manning, even in death, to be more than a tragic footnote.