

PRAIRIE PAUPERS:
NORTH DAKOTA POOR FARMS, 1879-1973

by

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PREFACE

The history of poor farms in North Dakota has not been fully recorded for several reasons. First, poorhouses have always been located in places on the edges of towns, always off the main thoroughfares. Situated away from public scrutiny, the almshouses have been little noted by contemporary observers. Poor farms are not a popular subject for study.

Second, most people want to concentrate on the happy side of life and the presence of poverty and distress makes almost everyone uncomfortable. In a land that glorifies success and money-making, failure and poverty provide only shame. The American Dream still survives but the defeat and despair found on poor farms make up an American nightmare.

Third, historians have difficulty with the subject because it falls between two disciplines. Part of the story involves sociology and social work, and the student of poorhouses has to enter another realm of literature and research. Because I have previously studied poor farms in the state of Vermont, I have gained some perspective on earlier forms of the institution.

The story is also very large. Involving Elizabethan poor laws, colonial times, frontier life, and the onset of the welfare state, the story of poorhouses is not consistent or tidy. With fifty states following slightly different methods of local poor relief, the history is complex.

Historians have different interests and many are not interested in this type of social history. To some historians falls the work of writing about businesses, wars, politics or government; others take on the tasks of writing about the darker, perhaps less popular types of history. Poorhouses are found under the shadow of the American Dream and the history of the institutions constitute an ugly aspect of our history.

I have undertaken this history for a number of reasons. First, the story of poorhouses in North Dakota needs to be told. Few North Dakotans know about poor farms; and although few care, documentation of the tale preserves the story of past forms of poor relief. The available studies of the subject have been written from a sociologist's viewpoint and have not sought to create a comprehensive history.

The second reason is that the topic is a challenge of a historian's endurance. The records are scattered across this large state. The researcher has to travel to the county court house to see the records. The old county commissioners' minutes are hand-written and, depending upon

the writer, may be difficult to decipher. Only rarely will a poorhouse be mentioned in the local newspapers, making the sources fairly scarce. The county poorhouse histories contained in this volume are sketchy at times because the records are incomplete. John M. Gillette, who studied poorhouses in 1913, wrote in his article "Poor Relief and Jails in North Dakota," that the poor relief records were "incomplete, fragmentary and unintelligible." I have attempted to make the subject a bit more understandable. If nothing else, I hope that the information is more available to those who might like to delve into it further. I enjoy regional history and I have had great enthusiasm for completing this project.

A third reason for doing this history involves my interest in the subject. When I was a little boy my family would drive past the Redwood County poor farm near Redwood Falls on our way to visit my uncle and aunt, and my parents told me a little about the poorhouse. The large, Spanish Mission-style building has always stuck in my mind. I wondered how people ended up in such a place. I understand now that most people wanted to avoid ending up in the poorhouse, but they were trapped in poverty, misfortune or illness.

Finally, there are so many good stories that need to be told in North Dakota. Anyone who studies history knows that there are a multitude of areas of historical interest and

far too many gaps in the written records of America and Americans. This paper seeks to fill one of those gaps, namely, that of chronicling the history of paupers and poor farms in the peopling of a fascinating Great Plains state.

The form of this research paper involves an overview of poor laws and poor relief in the United States and in North Dakota. The individual county poor farm histories are included so that residents of those counties may easily read the story of the poorhouse in their home county. The County Auditors in the respective counties have requested a copy of the county poor farm history for their permanent record. Some of the county poorhouse histories could be fleshed out considerably by a local historian, using the chapter in this paper as a starting point. Cass county, in particular, has merit for a longer work.

CHAPTER 17

MCHENRY COUNTY POOR FARM, VELVA

McHenry County, like a handful of other counties in North Dakota, reaped the benefits and hazards of the Second Dakota Boom. From 1900 to 1910, the population expanded rapidly from 5,253 to 17,627, an incredible increase of 235 percent. In the good times, the land could support that number of people. However, in times of drought or economic downturns, the once-hospitable county could not hold its population. The people of McHenry County had to adjust to the limits of the land, and the lessons were learned the hard way.¹

Poor relief in McHenry County consisted of provisions, rent and heating fuel for individuals and families from the founding of the county in 1884 until a poor farm was purchased in 1923. The names of the recipients of relief were published in the Minutes of the County Commissioners' Proceedings, which discouraged poor but proud individuals from seeking county help.²

The McHenry County Board of County Commissioners found extreme difficulty in helping needy county residents from 1920 to 1923. The agricultural recession which followed the First World War caused great hardships in the county. The

commissioners appointed a two person committee to investigate poor relief expenses and an option to purchase a poor farm. The committee reported that the "poor cases in this County" were "getting more numerous" and the financial condition of the county government prevented the commissioners from increasing relief expenditures. The county board accepted the report of the committee and resolved that the county would only pay for items that were "termed a necessity of life." A county commissioner had to personally authorize any clothing requests.³

Expenditures for the county poor had risen from \$13,179 in 1918-1919 to \$16,660 the following year and had skyrocketed to \$20,551 in 1920-1921. The county had gone \$6,109 into debt in order to make the relief payments. No reductions in aid were possible in 1922 due to continued economic hard times, so the county board decided to establish a poor farm as a money-saving measure.⁴

The motivation to save money spurred the county board to purchase and outfit a poor farm in the summer of 1923. However, the actual expenditures for poor relief greatly increased, largely due to the expenses of buying the farm. The county procured 480 acres of land from A.E. Walley for a total price of \$18,000. The property, located about six miles east of Velva, had dubious value as farmland. Some county residents considered the selling price to be "extremely high."⁵

The Walley property did possess a house, but it was considered so inadequate that the commissioners authorized the construction of a large addition to the residence. The addition, bid out at \$8,344 for the construction and \$3,358 for the plumbing and heating, made the dwelling a substantial structure. James Burriss of Minot won the bid for the general construction of the addition. Anderson Plumbing of Velva earned the contract for the plumbing and heating. Additional expenses for a "light plant" and a well on the property raised doubts about the economy of the plan. In 1924 a new machine shed and a new \$5,468 barn and silo soon graced the place. Indeed, welfare spending for the year of 1923-1924 came to the grand total of \$48,760, which more than doubled the figures from 1921. The county board members apparently hoped that the farm might become self-sufficient and therefore reduce poor relief payments in the long-term picture.⁶

Quarterly inspections of the poor farm by a Board of Visitors, instituted in 1926, regularly found the farm to be operated in an "admirable manner." August and Anna Sveund of Towner, hired as superintendent and matron, reportedly conducted the institution on a "business like basis." The Board of Visitors observed the relationship between the Sveunds and the residents and gave the supervisors a "fine" rating.⁷

Once the initial investments were complete, the expenses of the poor farm settled down to a reasonable level of \$5,000 per year. Yet, in 1928, the county reaped a harvest of public protest from citizens over the purchase of electrical power for the poor farm. The visiting committee, concerned over the strain placed upon Matron Anna Sveund in caring for inmates, had been constantly recommending the installation of various household electrical appliances at the poorhouse. The county board authorized the installation of an electrical high line to the farm. The cost of installing a line to the remote location totalled \$2,500. Farmers, most of whom could not afford to put in a high line to their own farms, grew irate over the prospect of the poor enjoying more conveniences than the farmers could procure through honest labor. The fact that the county had also purchased another forty acres for the poor farm for \$800 along with "silos and machinery" totalling \$1,306 produced an organized protest. The commissioners made a weak defense for the expenditures by noting that the farm had contributed \$517 to the county coffers from sale of produce and inmates had paid \$928 toward their own upkeep.⁸

The poor farm management struggled to gain a favorable attitude from the public. In 1930 the Sveunds encountered further difficulties regarding irregularities in their conduct of poor farm affairs. Mr. Sveund received direction to desist from lending tools to neighboring farmers and to

refrain from paying bills directly from cash sales of crops. The county commissioners finally required that the poor farm superintendent be legally bonded, a prerequisite for the job in all the other counties in North Dakota. To clear the air over the questionable practices, the minutes of the board contained a detailed listing of receipts and expenditures of the poor farm in 1930.⁹

A close examination of the 1930 annual report showed that the farm's income from the sale of crops and animals could not even equal the typical expenses of seed, tilling and hired labor. The poorhouse brought in some funds from boarding the paupers of neighboring counties in the sum of \$1,273, but it, too, could not cover the expenses of caring for the inmates of the county farm. Observers could justify the purchase of rudimentary food, clothing and shelter for the poor, but some might begrudge spending \$116 to support the residents' tobacco habits. When poor farm buildings looked to be in better condition than those of the average farmer, public concerns about the thriftiness of the poor farm activities seemed deserved.¹⁰

The onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s intensified the matters of poor relief in McHenry County. Increased demands for county assistance forced the county board to examine requests for aid quite intensely. In 1931, the commissioners decreed that Mothers' Pensions or poor relief would not be given to "any person who owns or

operates an automobile." The county refused to buy "high priced articles of food" for aid recipients. The list of banned goods included "fresh fruits and canned goods, also tobacco, snuff and candy." The poor were to purchase staple goods such as rice, beans, bulk oatmeal, salt and pepper, baking soda or powder, potatoes and lard. Only invalids and children could buy milk. Any meat bought by the poor must cost less than ten cents per pound, and dried fruits could be purchased, but in limited quantities. County officials sought to conserve county relief funds due to the "present economical condition existing in McHenry County."¹¹

In 1932 conditions reached frightful proportions. The northern half of the county had "practically no crop at all," with some farmers reaping "no small grain what so ever." The southern part of the county stood "but very little better." Drought, combined with grasshoppers, had devastated the harvest. The county reduced spending and the poor farm operations faced funding cuts across the board. The salary of superintendent Sveund dropped from \$1,200 in 1930 to \$960 in 1933. The county cut the total poor farm funding from \$4,965 in 1930 to \$3,535 by 1933.¹²

The introduction of Old Age Assistance to the elderly poor and other New Deal programs partially alleviated the desolate plight of the McHenry County unfortunates. However, the county officials were conservative with relief dollars. An aged resident of the poor farm suffered

rejection of his 1934 application for Old Age Assistance because as an inmate of the county home, he was already receiving relief benefits. Increased pressures led to conflict between some residents, as well. The visiting board investigated troubles emanating from one inmate whose "vile language" and "malicious slander" fomented "discontent among the others." The visitors suggested that this "constant source of worry and trouble" be transferred to "some other institution."¹³

The Sveunds managed the poor farm until 1936, when August's health conditions mandated a return to their farm near Towner. During their tenure, the couple "usually had about 25 residents" under their supervision. The inmates helped with the farm work to whatever extent they were capable. Farm hands labored during the busy planting and harvesting seasons, along with occasional trustworthy county prisoners. Still, milking the large herd of dairy cows involved long hours of work for Sveund. Mrs. Sveund canned 200 to 220 quarts of garden produce from the big truck garden near the poorhouse. The cooking, cleaning and washing required hired women from the surrounding area.¹⁴

McHenry County reached its Depression-era depth of despair in 1937. Relief from federal, state and county funds totalled \$87,648 (compared to \$32,234 in 1933-1934). The burden to the county itself diminished, however, due to federal involvement. The expenses of the poor farm hovered

around the \$5,000 to \$6,000 level during the latter years of the 1930s helping to relieve suffering, but not contributing to the reforms of the New Deal. The county had managed to survive the hard times with the aid of the "old style" poor farm combined with new federal programs, but the cost in human suffering had been high. The population of McHenry County had reached a peak of 17,627 in 1910 and then fell to 15,544 in 1920; to 15,439 in 1930; and then to a 30-year low figure of 14,034. The Dust Bowl winds had taken away not only topsoil but also people.¹⁵

By 1941 the poor farm became known as the "County Home." In that year, the county advertised for a new superintendent and matron for the institution. Despite the more modern-sounding name, the main qualification for the applicants remained "experience in farm management." The work required a "married couple" who were familiar with "all phases of farm and dairy work." "Considerate and proper care of aged inmates" continued to be a secondary consideration of the county commissioners.¹⁶

Operation of the county poor farm ended abruptly in 1946. A fire burned the wooden poor farm dwelling on the Fourth of July. None of the residents suffered serious injury from the blaze, and all of them were taken to private homes and institutions. Rather than rebuild the residence building at a great cost, the county commissioners decided

to "discontinue the asylum for the poor" in McHenry County.¹⁷

The accumulated property of the poor farm, amounting to 834.31 acres, was sold in 1955 to Frederick Wolhowe of Verendrye for \$15,200. The original 480 acres had cost \$18,000 in 1923. The county remained responsible for the maintenance of the poor farm cemetery on the property.¹⁸

McHenry County, a predominantly-rural county with scattered small towns, utilized the poor-farm approach to poor relief when its population grew too great for the productive capacity of the land. The leaders in county government appeared to be influenced by the actions of its neighboring county to the west, Ward County, which established a poor farm by 1909. Even though Ward County had the relatively-large city of Minot within its boundaries, the two counties relied on the poor farm for some measure of aid during the Depression, but then both counties discontinued operation of the poorhouses by 1946. Poor farms did not satisfy the needs of county government in the north central portion of North Dakota.

ENDNOTES

1. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, Abstract of the Census With Supplement for North Dakota (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1913), 44.

2. First meeting at Villard in County Commissioners Minutes, Volume 1, McHenry County, 15 October 1884, 1. Names listed in C.C., vol. 1, 11 November 1892, 184; and 8 July 1895, 275. Poor farm established in vol. 5, 22 June 1923, 267.

3. C.C., vol. 5, 7 December 1921, 209.

4. C.C., vol. 5, 21 July 1919; 3 August 1920, 157; 2 August 1921, 200; 2 August 1922, 235.

5. C.C., vol. 5, 22 June 1923, 267. "County Old Folks Home," The Commoner [Towner, N.D.], 11 December 1984, 1.

6. C.C., vol. 5, 18 August 1923, 278; 20 October 1923, 287; 21 April 1924, 305; 1 July 1924, 310; expenses in 8 July 1924, 312; also "County Old Folks Home," The Commoner, 11 December 1984, 1.

7. C.C., vol. 5, 5 January 1926, 366; 7 April 1926, 373.

8. C.C., vol. 5, 12 July 1927, 426; 4 October 1927, 438; 16 March 1928, 451; 7 July 1928, 458; protest in 1 August 1928, 463.

9. C.C., vol. 6, 4 April 1930, 49; and 3 July 1930, 57.

10. C.C., vol. 6, 3 July 1930, 57. In the house report, incoming funds totalled \$1,471.85, with expenditures of \$5,283.99. The farm showed income of \$2,280 and expenditures of \$2,616.70 in 1929-1930. Further research in specific county courthouses is required to uncover the names of the counties that sent paupers to McHenry County.

11. C.C., vol. 6, 9 April, 1931, 91; 6 August 1931, 111.

12. C.C., vol. 6, 8 September 1932, 156; 8 July 1930, 59; 10 July 1933, 196 B.

13. C.C., vol. 6, 5 June 1934, 249; 8 April 1932, 135.

14. "County Old Folks Home," The Commoner, 11 December 1984, 1, contains the recollections of John Sveund, son of August and Anna Sveund.

15.C.C., vol. 6, 13 July 1937, 470; 9 July 1934, 266.
Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census, Abstract, 44;
Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States:
1940, Population (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1942), vol. I, 794.

16.C.C., vol. 7, 7 March 1941, 91.

17.C.C., vol. 7, 10 July 1947, 381; and The Commoner,
11 December 1984, 2.

18.Deed Record, McHenry County, Volume 140, #193980, 14
February 1955, 318. Deed Record, McHenry County, Volume 74,
#126998, 30 June 1923, 532.