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Lessons from Yellow Medicine County: Work and Custodial Service at the County Poor Farm, 1889–1935

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Poor farms, which spread to the Midwestern United States in the nineteenth century, were intended to provide work for their residents. Existing literature indicates that the need for work and the ability of residents to work was limited on Midwestern poor farms and that it decreased with time. In the historical case study of a rural Minnesota poor farm presented here, data support contentions of the literature. Between 1889 and 1935, the Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm expanded and modernized the house, while allowing an originally modern farming operation to stagnate. Residents who accounted for most of the occupancy were old, disabled immigrant males, and became more so with time. Thus, the Poor Farm adapted to the problems these residents presented, and moved from a work-providing operation to a custodial facility.

Introduction

Contemporary discussions of welfare issues have emphasized young single mothers. While the children of these mothers have been given verbal support in such discussions, there also seems to have been some agreement that the mothers receiving assistance should work, reviving an old idea. Before 1935, the poor were likely to be single, old, childless men, and indoor relief was often favored over outdoor relief. Though the demographics of and services to the poor were different, work as a cultural value prevailed then as now.

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In contemporary attempts to put mothers to work, employment as a value has been found to exceed employment as a possibility (Alter, 1996). In the present study, the data revealed a poor farm which set out to provide work and associated occupational rehabilitation. A small farming operation provided work for but a few people however, and it was allowed to stagnate while the house was developed into a center of living and care. Furthermore, the residents were revealed to be old, poor, foreign-born males, most of whom had worked but who no longer could. Thus, the work ideology failed both for want of work and for the availability of workers. Since the poor farm residents needed care, the living facilities were developed accordingly. Thus, the poor farm became a custodial care facility.

In this paper, a review of related literature is presented first. Then, an overview of the historical sources and inductive research methods is presented. Following the literature and methods, the data and analysis are presented.

Literature Review

In the U.S., indoor relief was established in the major eastern cities in the eighteenth century, but developed slowly through the next century (Trattner, 1994). The Yates Report, a study of poverty in New York State released in 1824, recommended indoor relief. New York enacted a poorhouse law the same year (Trattner, 1994; Katz, 1986). Indoor relief spread to the Midwest before the civil war, where it eventually became quite popular (Katz, 1986).

A preferred form of indoor relief in the Midwest was the poor farm, essentially a farm charged with the job of caring for, and perhaps rehabilitating the poor and infirm. In 1864, Minnesota passed a law which required counties to have poor farms or other substitutes. By 1880, southeastern Minnesota, the area surrounding Minneapolis-St. Paul, saw the establishment of several poor farms. However, poor farms did not reach other counties of Minnesota until very late nineteenth century. Thirty-four of 82 organized Minnesota counties had poor farms by 1900. The subject of this study, Yellow Medicine County in southwest Minnesota, established a Poor Farm in 1889 (McClure, 1968). Southwest Minnesota is part of the Great Plains.

Heady and Tweeten (1963) estimated that there was about one farm worker working an average of 32 hours per week per 65 acres on the Great Plains in 1910, a limited demand for labor on small farming operations. Poor farm residents were also incapable of work because they were old and disabled, and healthy workers might leave to find work elsewhere when they could (Katz, 1986). Nationally, the institutionalized poor were aging (Trattner, 1994). Mechanization of industry and agriculture had displaced the older worker, and by 1900, a Minnesota system of alternative institutions had siphoned off much of the younger population, and an aging, impoverished, disabled population remained (McClure, 1968).

The realities of work and aging came into a sharp focus during the Great Depression. One hundred and fifty miles to the north of Yellow Medicine County, the Cass County North Dakota board members voted to support the Townsend movement to deal with their burgeoning elderly poor farm population (Hoffbeck, 1992). Under the spur of federal legislation, Minnesota adopted an old age assistance program in 1935, and poor farms began to close. Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm officially closed in 1936 (McClure, 1968).

Research Methods and Data Sources

The research described here was based largely on the records of the Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm. For this research, the Poor Farm register was primary. This register and other records of the Poor Farm were preserved at the state historical society center at Southwest State University. Residents were listed yearly in the register, and several characteristics of each resident were recorded. Included were the gender, age, occupation, marital status, place of birth, a health rating, the presumed causes of pauperism, and the dates of admission and discharge or death.

From the register, it was possible to estimate the length of time residents spent at the Poor Farm. This was not a perfect procedure. Missing data on the short term residents led to estimates of about a year—that is they were recorded in one year but not the next. This might have inflated occupancy estimates for short term residents. Similar names, misspellings, and duplication of entries also created some difficulty counting residents.

Other important documents for this research were the inventories and bills of sale, which recorded the property of the Poor Farm. Superintendents of the Poor Farm kept a "running inventory" in a small notebook. Regular inventories were also taken, and a sale bill for the 1935 auction of the Poor Farm equipment and furnishings provided a detailed view of the material artifacts. In addition to written records, the author visited the Poor Farm, now privately owned by a family with roots in the area. The woman, who along with her husband first occupied the Poor Farm after it closed, was interviewed. These visits were vital to the conclusions described here.

The use of historical records was necessarily inductive. As such this analysis was, no doubt, a mixture of facts and the author's predispositions. These predispositions were shaped by the author's early life on a subsistence farm in northern Minnesota. On that farm, poverty had kept technology at the 1900 level. So, the Poor Farm records described tools and machinery that had been intimately familiar to this writer.

County Population and Farm Labor

Southwest Minnesota was largely a treeless prairie when Europeans arrived in the nineteenth century. Wooded areas were found mostly along deep river valleys, like that of the Yellow Medicine River, on which the Poor Farm was located. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Swedish, German and Icelandic people immigrated to Yellow Medicine County. The largest group of immigrants, Norwegians, soon outnumbered the original Yankee settlers and the small band of Dakota Indians who lived in the County. The townships of the County were 50–75% Norwegian by 1905 (Holmquist, 1981).

Males outnumbered females in Yellow Medicine County throughout the period studied. The sex ratio was nearly even among the native born population, but there were four foreign born males for every three foreign born females in 1890 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1892, 1913, 1933, 1978, 1992). Since males tended to outlive females in those days, and because the immigrant cultural groups tended toward endogamy, it follows that some elderly foreign born males would not have married and

would eventually have been at risk of isolation from family and in need of assistance.

The farm labor needs in Yellow Medicine County were also suggested by the census. The census of 1890 indicated there was an average of 5.4 persons per family in Yellow Medicine County, and 80% of the families were farm families. Age data indicated that over half of the population in the County was under the age of 20, so one or two family members were probably too young to provide much help (United States Bureau of the Census, 1892; Heady & Tweeten, 1963). Half of the remaining family members would have been female, leaving about one or two male workers per farm. Work was not always neatly divided by gender; Norwegian women contributed substantially to outdoor work (Neth, 1994). Furthermore, hired hands were rare, making up 5–8% of the workers on the Great Plains in the 1850–1890 period (Heady & Tweeten, 1963). Thus, three farm hands at most would have been needed on a 200-acre farm. The 160-acre Poor Farm would not have needed much more than two able-bodied farm hands.

The Poor Farm Operation

The Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm buildings, a few of which still stand today, were at the north end of one of the Farm's two eighty acre plots, on the brink of a river bank. The barn, with a hay loft and a lean-to on one side, was of conventional size for the era. The two-story house was much larger than most farm houses of the time, however. Other outbuildings included a chicken coop, a granary, a summer kitchen and a storage building.

About 50 acres were fenced for pasture and a large garden plot adjoined the house. Cash crops included oats, barley, and millet. Corn and alfalfa fed the livestock, and potatoes were grown, probably for residents' consumption. Records from 1900 to 1935 show seven milk cows, two to four draft horses, 50–65 chickens and an assortment of calves, heifers, bulls, steers and pigs.

The Farm machinery was horse drawn throughout the Poor Farm's existence. The Poor Farm never owned a tractor, even in 1920 when mechanization was reaching other farms in the region. Horse drawn machinery included wagons and a bob sleigh for hauling, as well as machinery for tilling and harvesting.

The Poor Farm's technology certainly was labor intensive by today's standards. Hand tools, pitch forks, grain scoops, scythes,

axes and wheelbarrows were kept. So were milk pails for hand-milking, and cream was separated from the milk with a hand-cranked cream separator.

It appears that the Poor Farm was equipped with the most modern machinery when it opened, but that was a time of rapid advance in farm technology. The records indicated the Poor Farm did not keep pace with that advance, reporting the same kinds of equipment in 1935 as they did in 1889. Thus, the work requirement of two farm hands persisted throughout the existence of the Poor Farm. The Poor Farm averaged 10 residents, and the superintendent his wife and their children made a total of more than double the six of the typical family farm in the County, so the amount of farm labor needed from a resident may have been close to zero.

Living on the Poor Farm

Records indicate that the original house had thirteen rooms. The central rooms were large by the standards of the time. An all-season enclosed porch faced the west. The dining room was large, about 15' x 28'. The living and dining rooms were furnished with a dining table, and several kitchen and rocking chairs. The kitchen was about 16' x 16', and included a large hand-built, metal-covered work table and a large kitchen sink. A coal-burning kitchen range adjacent to a water tank provided for cooking and heated the water. Storage jars of various kinds implied food preparation and preservation. The cooking and canning of food on a coal burning range would have been sweltering in summer, and thus the summer kitchen was needed.

Originally, the records indicate eight beds and bedrooms. The bedrooms were small, probably largely occupied by the bed, and double pillows suggest that they were double beds. This might have been occasionally necessary during the early years of the Poor Farm, before a major addition around 1900. Ten beds were indicated in 1900, and 13 in 1903. Growth in the number of beds continued until 1914, when 17 rooms 18 beds were listed. In the 1916 inventory, 15 residents were listed by room, each with a single room. In 1921, 14 rooms with beds were listed, and two were indicated as empty. An additional "boys room," perhaps was occupied by the children of the superintendent since children were not found among the residents by that date.

As indicated below, many residents were sick or disabled, and must have spent some of their waking time in bed. The steel-frame beds had pillows of tick or straw, and blankets or quilts. Some rooms had lamps and water pails, and all had wash basins and stands, and chamber pots. Others had a dresser, but some had just rungs or hooks for storing clothes. Each room had a window, and some rooms had a chair or rocker.

In the later years, a running water system and a bathroom were added. The water of this part of Minnesota is notoriously "hard," and this probably added to the difficulty of cleaning. "Soft" rainwater collected and stored in barrels or cisterns, may have eased cleaning at the Poor Farm. In the early years, water for clothes washing or bathing was apparently heated in copper boilers on stove tops, and a zinc tub was available for bathing. Washboards were used for hand-rubbing clothing, and hand-cranked clothes wringers were first used, but a clothes washing machine appeared on the latest inventories. Clothes were probably dried on lines outside in the summer, and inside in winter, perhaps in the large furnace-heated basement after the steam furnace replaced the coal burning heaters in 1906. After drying, clothes were probably dampened again and ironed with flat irons, or in the later years at least, with the Farm's electric irons.

While kerosene and candles were included in the early years, the house was lighted by the self-contained electrical power plant in the later years. Though this system required regular attention to charge batteries with a gasoline engine, it did provide power for household irons, toasters, and radios.

Clearly, by the standards of the day, the Poor Farm was a place where many people could live. The emphasis on household, both in the size of the house and on labor saving devices which eased household tasks, changed with time. This contrasts with the farm operation, which had stagnated at 1900 modernity.

Poor Farm Residents

The Poor Farm residents were different from the people in the surrounding community, and from one another. Most of the analysis presented here compares residents to each other, but the poverty, gender and nativity of the residents are compared to the County population.

Poor Farm and County Residents Compared

There is little doubt the Poor Farm residents were virtually all poor and propertyless. Only about 15 of the 145 residents were said to have property or money, while the rest were said to have none. Across those 15, the following property was noted: Seven houses and seven city lots (some lots specified were apparently vacant lots); five with "some money," of an unspecified amount; a total of 240 acres of land; and, livestock consisting of a cow, a team of horses, and 68 chickens. The residents of the larger County averaged more than 12 times as much land per person, and 274 times the cattle. Poor Farm residents owned none of the various other kinds of farm property, farm machinery for example, that the farmers of the County had (United States Bureau of the Census, 1913).

Table 1 demonstrates that the vulnerability of foreign born males increased over time. Though the sex ratio remained stable in the County population as a whole during the period under study, men were over represented at the Poor Farm. In the County population, the proportion of foreign born persons decreased over time, and was a small proportion by 1930. At the Poor Farm, however, the proportion of foreign born was far greater than would have been expected by chance and remained at a high level.

Comparing the Poor Farm Residents by Time of Occupancy

Assuming the records are inclusive of all residents, 145 people spent time on the Poor Farm. The total occupancy of the Poor Farm was calculated by adding up the years of occupancy for all residents. Total occupancy was about 450 years. This was an average occupancy of about 10 residents at any given time, and a mean stay of about three years.

The time of residents' occupancy varies widely. Five days was the shortest stay, and 32 years the longest. The median time was 12 months, skewed to the short stay side of the mean. Most of the residents, 81 or 56% of the residents, stayed 12 months or less. The remaining portions of the residents were naturally divided between four and five years, with no stays between four and five years, and 32 people on either side of this division. The three resulting groups displayed differing qualities on the recorded variables, as Table 2 indicates.

Table 1

A Comparison of Yellow Medicine County Population and Poor Farm Population by Gender and Nativity, 1888–1935

Year	County Populations		Farm Populations ^a	
	Percent, number male	Percent, number foreign born	Percent, number male	Percent, number foreign born
1890	53% (5,264)	39% (3,858)	39% (12)	77% (24)
1900	54% (7,853)	30% (4,403)	69% (38)	64% (37)
1910	53% (8,116)	23% (3,579)	65% (22)	66% (23)
1920	53% (8,698)	17% (2,808)	75% (18)	83% (19)
1930	53% (8,740)	12% (2,064)	93% (26)	77% (20)

^aThe years for the Poor Farm data refer to the midpoint of the ten year period surrounding the census date, for example 1886 to 1895 for 1890.

Short-staying residents. As can be seen in Table 2, the residents who stayed a year or less accounted for just 37 years of the occupancy of the Poor Farm. Thus, about 8% of the total occupancy was accounted for by this group. This short-staying category was younger, and more likely to be American born. Similarly, they were in better health and were less likely to die than other residents. Those with occupations were less likely than others to be laborers or domestics. They had few recorded causes of pauperism beyond the financial problems which brought them to the Poor Farm.

A case by case examination suggested that the short-staying majority were not without problems. Thirteen of the 81 in this category were elderly. Most of these elderly people also had physical or mental health problems, or were disabled. Four of the 13 elderly ended their short stay in death. The two elderly people without health problems were 73 and 80 years old. Eighteen of the short-stayers were dependent children, less than 12 years of age, two of whom died at the Poor Farm. Three pregnant women, all widowed or single and in their forties, spent seven to eleven months at the Poor Farm. Two women in their 20's,

Table 2

A Comparison of Length of Occupancy with Other Characteristics of Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm Residents

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Length of Occupancy</i>		
	<i>One year or less</i>	<i>One year, one month to four years</i>	<i>Five or more years</i>
Number of people	81	32	32
Years of occupancy	37	78	339
Percent (number) foreign born	49% (40)	81% (26)	84% (27)
Percent (number) widowed, single or divorced	59% (48)	78% (25)	94% (30)
Percent (number) laborer or domestic	47% (38)	53% (17)	72% (23)
Percent (number) who are dependent children	22% (18)	9% (3)	0% (0)
Percent (number) in good health	36% (29)	19% (6)	25% (8)
Percent (number) with multiple causes of pauperism	17% (14)	63% (20)	84% (27)
Percent (number) deaths	10% (8)	38% (12)	47% (15)
Median years of age at mid-stay	32	70	70.5

one with a baby, were left without support when their husbands abandoned them. Among the middle-aged short-stayers, there were two deaths. An additional 29 residents entered the Poor Farm injured or ill, and were discharged after a few months, one to a hospital. One middle-aged short-stayer had lost his legs. Three short-stayers had mental problems, recorded as "idiote," [sic] "feeble minded," and insanity. One short-staying resident was a drinker.

The remaining short-stayers, about 11 people, appear to have been without significant problems and did not stay long. Just 1% of the total occupancy, so far as short stayers are concerned, was by residents who may have been functioning at a high level.

Residents with medium-length stays. The medium-stayers were even less functional than the short-stayers. Seven of the 32 medium-stayers were ages 65–74, three of these elderly residents were said to be “feeble minded,” and three others were in poor health. Health data was missing on the one remaining 72-year-old. Twelve additional elderly residents were 75 and over, very old by the standards of the day. There were nine deaths among residents over 65. Two medium-stayers were children less than two. Of the middle-aged people in this group, four were said to be feeble minded or, “idiotes” [sic]. One feeble minded person was also said to be crippled; another was blind. All of the remaining people among the medium-stayers had health problems. Three of them died at the poor farm, and four sick residents apparently got well and left. Clearly, the medium-staying group was more debilitated than the short-stayers, and it would be difficult to say that any individual in this category was in a high state of functioning during their Poor Farm stay.

Long-staying residents. Among the 32 people in the long-staying group, there were 20 people older than 65, ten of whom were more than 75. In the 65–74 group there were five with physical disabilities, and one was also blind. Three of the disabled ended their stay in death. Four in this age group were said to be physically feeble. Only one 70-year-old had no recorded health problems. In the 75 and over group, there were two obviously disabled people. All others except one had some recorded health and age related problems.

The middle-aged long-stayers included a variety of disabled and sick. There was one blind resident, and two men had deformed legs, apparently from broken legs which had not healed properly. Six of these long-stayers had multiple problems including apparent mental problems. One of these six was an alcoholic, and two had health problems. One, a woman, was said to be “extravagant,” and “too fat.” However, she ended her six-year stay in death, suggesting her problems were serious whatever their nature. There were four additional deaths among the middle-aged long stayers. Obviously, those who stayed long at the Poor Farm were aged, losing function, and near death.

Table 2 clearly indicates the strong tendency at the Poor Farm to operate as a home for poor, disabled and aged laborers. More than 70% of the long-staying category were former laborers or domestics, compared to about half of the other residents. The long-staying residents accounted for nearly 75% of the total occupancy, and thus best implied the function of the Poor Farm, namely to care for the poor, disabled and aged laborers, often until they died.

Change Over Time

There was some change of the Poor Farm function with time. Table 3 shows how age changed in the Poor Farm population. At first, the Poor Farm had large numbers of younger residents. After 1904, a smaller number of much older residents stayed for longer periods of time. Table 4 indicates how Poor Farm staff viewed the change in the resident population. Age was given as a "cause of pauperism" in larger proportions of the cases in the later periods. Also more frequently mentioned were various forms of physical disability and being, "feeble minded." The frequency of these perceived characteristics dropped off in the 1925–1935 period, but Table 3 indicates that real age was highest during these years. Perhaps those recording "causes of pauperism" had begun

Table 3

Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm Age, Occupancy and Change over Time, 1888–1935

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number Residents</i>	<i>Mean Months Occupancy/ Resident</i>	<i>Mean Resident Age</i>
1888–1894	38	20	44
1895–1904	47	21	41
1905–1914	38	36	59
1915–1925	24	39	67
1925–1935	27	34	69

Note: Occupancy is defined within the time period, and total occupancy/resident may be larger, because some residents had occupancy in multiple periods.

Table 4

Changing Percent (Numbers) of Selected "Causes of Pauperism," at the Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm over Time, 1888-1935

<i>Period</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Physical Disability</i>	<i>Feeble Mindedness</i>
1888-1894	29% (11)	8% (3)	3% (1)
1895-1904	21% (10)	11% (5)	11% (5)
1905-1914	53% (20)	21% (8)	18% (18)
1915-1925	50% (12)	29% (7)	33% (8)
1925-1935	41% (11)	18% (5)	22% (6)

Note: There is some duplication of "causes" because some residents had occupancy in multiple periods.

to take age, and mental and physical disability, for granted. Or, perhaps the Great Depression had rendered most elderly people unemployable, and that the elderly people at the Poor Farm were now somewhat healthier despite their age.

Conclusion

The primary conclusion of this paper is that the Yellow Medicine County Poor Farm was confronted with realities related to day-to-day needs of the Poor Farm residents, and when County officials responded to those needs, the Poor Farm became a custodial institution. Needs were far more prevalent among elderly and disabled male former laborers than others. Combined with the fact that the Poor Farm operation did not require their work, this suggests that residents did little farm work. Young people, including women and children, did come to the Poor Farm but they seldom stayed long.

The realities of the Poor Farm and the ideology of indoor relief were contradictory. The ideology maintained that the problems of the poor were related to their unwillingness or inability to work. Teach them to work, the ideology said, and the problem would be solved. Most Poor Farm residents having been laborers knew how to work, but illness and disability, as well as age, had reduced their ability to work. Moreover, agriculture was being

mechanized and the demand for labor was falling, and the Great Depression extinguished demand.

Still, the Poor Farm may have set out to rehabilitate the unproductive worker. When the younger residents quickly departed, the superintendents may have counted their successes. However, counting successes by counting cases does not tell us what went on at the Poor Farm most of the time, which is better revealed by accounting for occupancy. Occupancy at the Poor Farm is accounted for by residents who had little ability to work.

A case in point was provided by one of the Poor Farm's rare alcoholics. In and out of the Poor Farm for a period of 25 years, this resident was "rehabilitated" from the time he was hired to undertake a paint job for the Poor Farm and was hence recorded as occupation "painter." Still, the alcoholic painter frequented the Poor Farm. After one long absence, he was reported dead, but a superintendent later recorded that he had nonetheless returned! Perhaps this resident, separated from anyone who cared that he worked, lived or died, found the Poor Farm a place where he could be sober, have a work status, and avoid exaggerated reports of death.

However, most Poor Farm residents were confronted with the inevitability of their own decline and death. Officials responded as they could, and perhaps as they thought they should. As the years went by, the County commissioners and Poor Farm superintendents adapted by neglecting the unrealistic agricultural operation, and modernizing and expanding the necessary house. Similarly, Alter's (1996) findings that work participation of clients is largely unchanged by contemporary efforts suggests that ideology continues to be insufficient to the task of rehabilitation. While the demographics and environment of contemporary welfare reform differ from those of the poor farm movement, the lesson from Yellow Medicine County is that the heavy ideological basis of that reform will also have to be adapted to existing social conditions and human needs.

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