



Brown County Journal

March 15, 2013

Events:

Brown County Historical
Society meeting
April 1

Brown County Genealogical
Society meeting
April 9

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Paupers and the Brown County Poor Farm

A poor farm was a temporary residence for county residents that had fallen on hard times or had become too feeble or too old to support themselves and had no family that would take them in. Poor farms were for the most part county or town-run residences where paupers were supported at public expense. They were common in the United States beginning in the middle of the 19th century and declined in use after the Social Security Act took effect in 1935.

Poor farms had their beginnings in the U.S. tradition of county government. They were created as a method of providing a less expensive, to the taxpayers, alternative to what we now call "welfare" - but what was called "outdoor relief" in those days. People requested help from the community Overseer of the Poor, an elected town official.

Often able-bodied residents were required to work on the farm to help support themselves. Most poor houses were located on working farms that produced at least some of the produce, grain, and livestock they consumed. Residents were expected to provide labor to the extent that their health would allow, both in the fields and in providing housekeeping and care for other residents. Rules were strict and accommodations were minimal.

By 1875, after the regulation of poorhouses in most states became the responsibility of the State Board of Charities, laws were passed prohibiting children from residing in poorhouses. Laws also laid down regulations for removing mentally ill patients and others with special needs to more appropriate facilities.

(from Poor Farm History at Wikipedia.com)

The Era Before Poor Houses

Prior to the establishment of poorhouses the problem of what to do with paupers in a community was dealt with in other ways. Outdoor relief could be applied for by someone that was in need. Counties would either elect or appoint an Overseer of the Poor. Most counties would have a budgeted amount that the Overseer could use. Within a budget of tax money, he might provide them with food, fuel, clothing, or even permission to get medical treatment to be paid out of tax funds. In some instances such as in Brown County even indigent people's burial expenses were covered.

Another method that was used was to farm individuals out to families that could use help on the farm, a business, etc. People who could not support themselves (and their families) were put up for bid at public auction. In an unusual type of auction, the pauper was sold to the lowest bidder. This was the person who would agree to provide room and board for the lowest price. The person who



got the contract got the use of the labor of the pauper for free in return for feeding, clothing, housing and providing health care for the pauper and his/her family. This was actually a form of indentured servitude. The welfare of the paupers depended almost entirely upon the kindness and fairness of the bidder.

Another method for handling paupers was for the count to contract with someone in the community to care for paupers. In this situation the care of a group of paupers was delegated to someone who would contract to provide care at the lowest price. This system allowed the opportunity for somewhat better

supervision as indicated in the terms of the contract -- which might specify what minimum standard of care must be provided and that community officers would do inspections.

In some cases (before state laws began to require the establishment of County Poorhouses) local communities had already discovered that a place to house paupers helped reduce the cost of poor relief. These small town poorhouses were the prototypes for the later state-required county poorhouses. Those earlier poorhouses often instituted the use of an adjacent farm on which the paupers could work to raise their own food, thus making the houses more self-sufficient (relying less on local tax funds). That is how the term “poor farm” came into being.

(from “Poor House History” at www.poorhousehistory.com)



Pauper Children

A system that was instituted in Brown County especially for children was to have an adult care for the child as well as educate them and train them in a craft or means of self-support. The child was to be Apprenticed to a business owner, a farmer, or a craftsman, etc. Children were not meant to be residents of the Poor Farm especially in the event of the death of their parents.

Between the years 1860 to 1871 Circuit court records detail the apprenticeship of thirteen children. Over half resulted from the deaths of one or both parents. Alonzo Calvin, William Fry, John W. and Perry Hanna, James and John Lawson, America, Eliza Alice, and Laura Little, and Walter Mathis

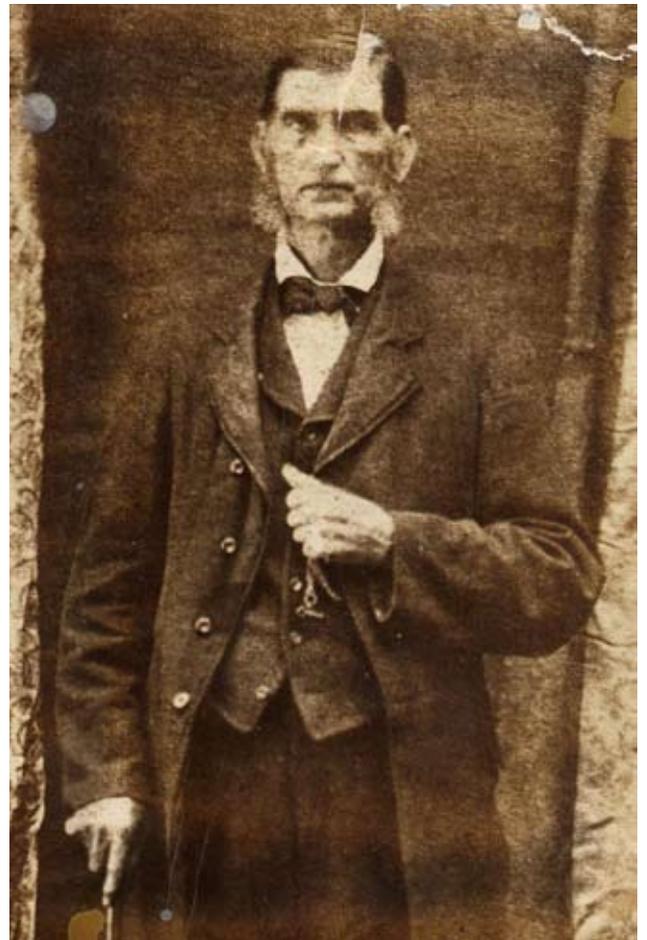
entered the system as a result of the death of a parent. In some instances the mother survived, but could no longer support the child. The child was turned over to the County government for help. The child was then apprenticed until the age of maturity usually about age 18. Other children mentioned as apprenticed were John Campbell, Albert Gourley, and William Pool with no details given for their circumstances.

Our Poor Farm's Early History

The first record of a pauper claim in Brown County was made in 1837 by Ambrose Cobb who was allowed \$6.97 for caring for a poor person from November 2, 1836 to March 6, 1837. After this time claims were allowed on audit from the Overseer of the Poor, under whose direction the townships care for their poor and helpless. Most of the earliest claims were settled in the townships and were not cared for by the County Board until much later. One pauper, Jane Sconce, was cared for by the county for more than 20 years. She was regularly farmed out annually to the lowest bidder. From 1847 to 1880 pauper claims averaged about \$550 per year.

In 1859 the County Board took steps to purchase a poor farm, but after viewing several locations and find out the final cost was more than they cared to pay at this time the project was abandoned. Then in 1869 the County Board purchased 244 acres of land adjoining Nashville on the east side from Thomas M. Adams. The cost was \$5000 which was paid in two equal installments. Then William Waltman was contracted to construct a frame poor house to be 30 x 60 feet in dimension for \$1474. It was a two-story frame house with a basement. It was completed in 1870 at a final cost of \$1600.

The first Superintendant of the Poor Farm was James Taggart. He received the use of the farm and \$3085 for caring for the poor for a period of three years. In 1872 Caleb Ferguson became Superintendent and he was paid \$675 per year plus the use of the farm. He was succeeded in 1877 by Benjamin R. Kelley for \$277.50 per year plus the use of the farm. Thomas J. Taggart became Superintendent in 1879 and then Ambrose Fraker in 1883. The number of poor farm residents



Thomas M. Adams

ranged from eight to fifteen people.

(from Weston A. Goodspeed's book, "County of Brown, Indiana - Historical and Biographical" 1884)

In 1896 when Clark Campbell resigned as Superintendant there were twenty-three acres of corn, a patch of potatoes, hay in the barn, and a large garden with turnips, cabbage, and beans growing. The County Board or Commissioners financed other groceries and necessities from stores in Nashville, as well as repairs on the buildings and farm equipment maintenance. Brown County residents regularly gave food, supplies, and helped out on the poor farm when the residents could not.

Poor Farm in the 1900s

From Commissioner's records are found the details of daily operations of the Brown County Poor Farm. Quarterly Reports were prepared by the Superintendent to be presented to the County Commissioners. A sample of one quarter's operations follow from November 30, 1900 prepared by Superintendent John F. Bond for the Brown County Poor Asylum.

Andrew Bishop admitted to Asylum on September 19, 1900.

Milton Pruitt bought pigs from the Asylum - Sept. 4.

Lee Barnhill bought cattle from the Asylum - Sept. 6.

Forest Guthrie bought pasture - Sept. 10.

Mike McGrayel bought service of a bull - Nov. 22.

M. T. Poling sold household furnishings to the Asylum for quarter.

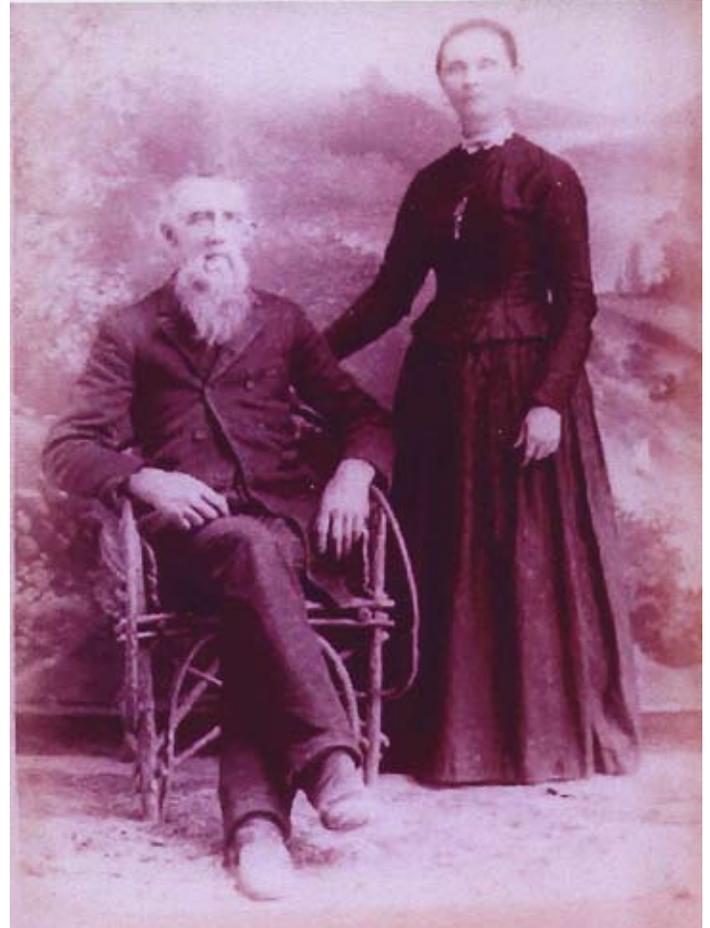
James L. Tilton sold groceries to the Asylum for quarter.

Frank P. Taggart sold dairy supplies to the Asylum for quarter.

Sadie Calvin sold hardware to the Asylum for quarter.

Clark Campbell sold molasses to Asylum.

Jacob Beach sold peaches to the Asylum - Sept. 18.



Thomas J. Taggart & wife

Samuel Walker sold apples to the Asylum - Sept. 18.

Notes: population 15, income at \$148, expenses at \$186.

In later years the reports contained more detailed information of the poor farm residents. Following are details for a few of the individual residents.

Benoni S. Roberts admitted May 11, 1904, age 78, poor physical condition

W. L. Bishop admitted Aug. 9, 1904, age 39, has palsy

Annie Wilcox discharged on July 1, 1904, sent to feeble-minded home

Hannah Hanson discharged on May 22, 1908, went to stay with son

Thomas E. Erton discharged on Mar. 6, 1909, went to his own support

Richard Ogle admitted on Dec. 5, 1910, age 44, can do light work

The county home remained useful for 93 years. With the resident population declining after the advent of Welfare and the Social Security system the County Commissioners decided to close the home on April 1, 1963. Two men and three women were living in the home at that time. Carl Hobbs, Superintendent at that time, took the men into his own home for \$120 a month. Relatives of two of the women took them in. The third woman was placed in a home by the welfare department. On Sept. 7, 1965 the Brown County School Corporation bought the old Poor House with 15 1/2 acres. It is used this day as the Administration building for the School system.

The modern day poorhouse population was even more narrowly defined during the twentieth century when social welfare legislation as well as Unemployment benefits and Social Security began to provide a rudimentary safety net for people who would previously have been pauperized by such circumstances. Poor houses as the prototype became such institutions such as nursing homes, mental homes, and retirement villages.

The house is now listed with the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. It is ranked 'N' as above average in its importance. The only other ranking above this is an 'O' which means it is historically or architecturally significant.



unknown Poor Farm resident 1929