

PRAIRIE PAUPERS:  
NORTH DAKOTA POOR FARMS, 1879-1973

by

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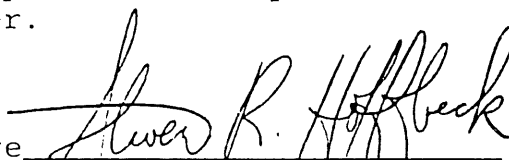
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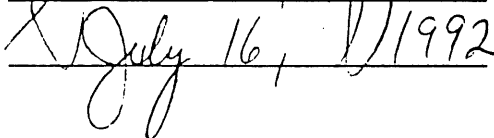
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## PREFACE

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 8

### TRAILL COUNTY POOR FARM, CALEDONIA

Trail County, fully organized in 1875, provided aid from its inception for individuals who had severe financial difficulties. The presence of the Grandin Bonanza Farm assured the success of the county, attracting numerous farmers and farm workers to the area. One of the earliest recipients of county poor relief worked on the Grandin Farm. The county allowed ten dollars to the local doctor for his attendance on the man, who could not pay the bill. The typical "indoor relief" consisted of buying provisions or paying medical bills for those unable to take care of themselves. The minutes of the County Commissioners' meetings in the early years did not always list the names of the needy people; instead the commissioners recorded aid given to a "sick pauper" or "pauper." At other times, the official record contained the names of the individuals in distress. County officials in the county seat at Caledonia supervised the administration of early poor relief.<sup>1</sup>

The completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad from Fargo to Grand Forks in 1882 allowed easier access to the county and stimulated an increase in population. Caledonia

faced a crisis, however, because the railroad passed west of its site. In hopes of establishing themselves as the center of county government, even though the future looked shaky, Caledonia's leaders acted decisively and organized a poor farm near Caledonia. Commissioners Peter Herbrandson and I. L. Rockne inspected potential properties in June 1883, choosing a site on the Red River about three miles northeast of the town. The selection of the Caledonia location made good political sense for Caledonia, notwithstanding the views of the rest of the county.<sup>2</sup>

The commissioners purchased nearly three hundred acres of land on 14 July 1883 for \$4,800. The property consisted of about two hundred acres of open farmland and seventy acres of woodlands along the river. By August plans were underway to outfit the farm with buildings, farm animals and machinery. The county board accepted plans and specifications for the poorhouse from E. R. Tischler and S. C. Lauterman, architects, from Fargo. J. Sercombe of neighboring Buxton received the contract for construction of the poor farm residence. By November, the two-story wood frame poorhouse stood completed. The first floor consisted of a kitchen and dining room, with rooms and an office provided for the superintendent. Ten small, separate bedrooms, 9' X 12', formed the second floor of the institution. The cost of the side-gabled structure totalled \$3,475. Fireplaces provided heat for the building, as is



evidenced by the six chimneys included in the building plans.<sup>3</sup>

The Hillsboro Banner boasted about the new and "splendid asylum for the poor." The property with its "large and commodious building" had cost less than \$10,000, and county leaders expected it to provide long-term savings. The commissioners believed that county poor relief would be reduced by "one-half" through "proper management" of the county poor farm. Accordingly, the county informed its residents that "no relief or support will be allowed permanent county charges . . . except at the Asylum."<sup>4</sup>

The county hired a superintendent, William Holmberg, in March 1884, at a monthly salary of \$35. T.J. Kelly soon replaced Holmberg in January 1885 with an increase in pay to fifty dollars per month. By 1888 the county board revamped the system. In order to save money, the superintendency would go to the person who offered the lowest bid for operating the farm. The superintendent had to care for the residents and farm the land with money that the county provided. With only one bidder, a savings was not assured. In 1889 the county advertised for a superintendent who would work under either a bid system or a monthly salary. The confusion over the best way to pay the caretaker revealed the doubts held by the county officials as to the real economy of operating a poor farm. The commissioners accepted Carl Aune's 1889 bid for the "renting and

superintendency of the Poor Farm," as "the most profitable for the county." The bidding system resulted in frequent changes in the office of superintendent which became undesirable. Accordingly, in 1892 the county reverted to the original practice of appointing a superintendent.<sup>5</sup>

The relative disorganization of the management of the county poor farm reflected the deep divisions in Traill County which arose from the county seat fight between Hillsboro and Caledonia. Supported by its location on the Great Northern Railroad, Hillsboro exercised its influence to have the county seat removed to its locale in 1890. Court battles consumed much time and energy, but, in the end, Hillsboro captured the prize of the county seat designation after the litigation reached the highest courts in the state by 1896. Caledonia kept the poor farm but had lost its great hope for any real prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

The accumulation of expenses in operating a farm forced the county to grope for economy. Money flowed out of the county coffers to build a granary, buy a cow, employ a hired man and a hired girl, pay for threshing, and purchase the food and clothing that the inmates needed. Such considerations were not apparent to residents of surrounding counties, however. The editor of the Grand Forks Herald praised the Traill county board for its foresight in operating a poor farm. Steele county commissioners negotiated with the Traill county officials in 1891 for

arrangements to send Steele county paupers to the poor farm in Caledonia. Traill County officials needed to find additional residents for the poor farm. The main problem for the poor farm came to be a lack of inmates, calling in question the need to support a superintendent and a large farm. Only two inmates resided on the farm in 1890.<sup>7</sup>

After building a new barn on the poor farm in 1897, the thriftiness of the institution came into serious question. The barn measured 20' by 44', with a solid stone foundation. After this expense, the county commissioners became engaged in a lengthy process of getting out of the poor farm business. In 1899 the board entertained offers to buy or lease the poor farm. Mrs. Antonia Heger offered \$5,000 in cash for the operation. The commissioners insisted on \$6,000 and the sale failed. The county leased the farm to Mr. Theodore Guttormson for a year. The arrangement proved unsatisfactory, and the practice of electing a superintendent resumed with the hiring of John Vennes of Caledonia in 1900. Vennes operated the farm until 1906 when the county again tried to sell the poor farm. The population at the farm had become too low to justify such a large-scale operation. Only two inmates were living in the poorhouse on 1 January 1905. The commissioners authorized a vote of the people to determine the fate of the poorhouse. County officials deemed the sale of the farm to be "advisable" and in the "best interest" of the county. Even

though the electorate voted to sell the farm by a vote of 856 for and 694 against the sale, the county continued to retain the farm. The county board ultimately determined that the purchase price for the farm would not correspond to the true value of the county's investments in the place.<sup>8</sup>

The appointment of Gust Herbrandson and his wife in about 1908 finally provided a measure of stability for the Traill County poor farm operation. The Herbrandsons supervised the county farm until 1927. The board was "highly pleased" with their management and declared that the farm stood in "first class shape."<sup>9</sup>

After the tenure of the Herbrandsons, Mr. and Mrs. Otinius Foss assumed the supervision of the poor farm. The Foss' were considered "well qualified" because they possessed "genial personalities" and had the "sense of farmers."<sup>10</sup>

By the time that Mr. and Mrs. Foss took over the operation of the poor farm in 1927, the original wooden poorhouse had stood for nearly 50 years. In 1929, however, the poorhouse fell prey to a disastrous fire that completely consumed the dwelling. The county board immediately met in special session to deal with the emergency. The commissioners hastily arranged to build a basement to house the poor farm residents in a temporary arrangement on the same site until better quarters could be built in the spring. Political considerations came into the picture as

the city leaders of Hillsboro questioned the rebuilding of the poorhouse in Caledonia. A committee of the Hillsboro Civic Club proposed that the poor farm be relocated nearer the county seat at Hillsboro in the center of the county. The county board dodged the issue by asserting that it was "powerless" to "legally relocate the farm."<sup>11</sup>

The five residents of the poor farm suffered during the winter of 1929-1930. The basement quarters proved to be excessively damp and caused "considerable sickness" in the cramped confines. The spring brought warmer weather and improved health, and the residents soon moved into a new large brick building. The two-story building, designed by the Fargo architects, Braseth and Houkom, provided considerably more room than had the old structure. The new residence house featured modern plumbing, heating and electrical wiring, providing improved living conditions for the residents. A visiting committee called the new building "a credit to Traill County," that met "all requirements for such institutions." The visitors believed that the new poorhouse measured up with "the best of its kind in the land."<sup>12</sup>

Traill County followed the rest of the nation into the throes of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The new and larger poorhouse, built at a cost of \$25,000, came at a time when the county faced increased demands for the relief of poverty within its boundaries. "Quite a few more" inmates

were added in the summer of 1930.<sup>13</sup> The only real change in public welfare in the county since the institution of the poor farm in 1883 came with the advent of Mothers' Pensions in 1915. The Taxpayers' Association in Traill County, responding to the strain of the hard times, pressured the county board in 1932 to reduce the salaries of all county employees by 20 percent, provide a full public listing of all Mothers' Aid recipients, and forego the employment of a school nurse for county schools. The commissioners tightened the proverbial belt that year but soon found that county poor relief expenditures increased phenomenally. The 1934 tax levy for relief stood at \$16,600 but rose to \$20,000 a year later. The poor farm provided relief for a small proportion of the population and the tax levy for the farm increased from \$4,400 to \$4,650 from 1934 to 1935. (This compares to levies for operation of the poor farm of \$1,375 in 1929 and \$2,245 in 1930.) The severe drought in 1936 brought economic conditions in the county to such a "low level" that the county board felt that it "could not cope with the situation" which would develop during the winter and spring of 1936-1937. Fortunately for the county, the New Deal programs gave needed funds and work for residents of Traill county. The county petitioned for the establishment of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, utilized Civil Works Administration, Rural Rehabilitation Resettlement, and Works Progress Administration projects,

and worked with state and federal officials to combat the effects of the depression. The poor farm budget fell to \$4,040 in 1938 but stabilized at that level. The Old Age Assistance program (1935) under the Social Security Administration eased the strain on the poor farm establishment.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1940s the poor farm continued its function of caring for the indigent elderly upon the recommendation of the county commissioners. However, the institution became known as the "County Farm." As the elderly came to have improved options for nursing-home care and access to homes, the population of the Traill County Home dropped during the decade. Accordingly, in 1952 the county entered into an agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, based in Arthur, N.D., for the lease of the county farm. The commissioners canceled the lease with the Society in 1954 as they attempted to sell the property. After a buyer backed out of an agreement, in 1955 Clarence Blake of Caledonia leased the premises and operated a private "home for the aged." Gerald Kimbrell soon took over the operation from Blake and continued the institution until business dwindled to only a couple of mentally handicapped individuals. The county sold the property to Kimbrell in 1958.<sup>15</sup>

The poor farm residence, built in 1930, still stands on the site. The granary remains, but the large barn built in

1920 burned to the ground. The poor farm cemetery, located just north of the main building, is marked by a bed of weeds. Eleven gravestones, dating from 1933 to 1942, are present in the cemetery. The earlier wooden grave markers have long since deteriorated.<sup>16</sup>

Traill County, with a stable population (about 12,000 from 1900 through 1940) based on agriculture, provided care for its relatively small pauper population through the poor farm system and by the other traditional forms of poor relief. When the poorhouse burned in 1929, the county decided to continue the poor farm operation with little debate. After the new institution was built, the county continued the poor farm in order to justify the expense of the rebuilding effort. To discontinue the operation of a new building made no sense to the stalwart commissioners of Traill County, until the passing of time brought the rebuilding decision of 1929 into a serious time of questioning in the 1950s. Political expediency had brought the institution into existence and political inertia kept it in operation.



## ENDNOTES

1. John H. Long, ed., Historical Atlas and Chronology of County Boundaries, 1788-1980 (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), vol. 5, 256. Traill County Commissioners' Minutes, Volume A, 8 July 1879, 86. 5 October 1880, 141; 5 October 1881, 186; 5 April 1880, 122; 9 January 1880, 113; record variants of pauper identification. The County Commissioners' Minutes will be hereafter cited as C.C.

2. Gerhard D. Olson, County Auditor, "Poor Farm History," in "Poor Farm Papers, Caledonia Township," in a folder in Traill County Auditor's Office, page 1.

3. Purchase of the land recorded in Warranty Deed, 14 July 1883, John Mickelson to Traill County; and Warranty Deed, 14 July 1883, John Morgan to Traill County, in "Poor Farm Papers," Traill County, Auditor's Office. The land consists of Lots 6, 7, 8, 9, and the SE 1/4 of SW 1/4 of Section 2, Township 146, Range 49 W. (153.7 acres); and the North 1/2 of the SW 1/4 of Section 2, Township 146 N. of Range 49 W. (120 acres). C.C., vol. B, for 4 August 1883, 37; 10 August 1883, 39; 11 September 1883, 46; describe the plans, architects and builder. Information about the poor house is from "Specifications of Poor House, Traill County, D.T.," drawn by E.R. Tischler, Architect, Fargo, in "Poor Farm Papers, Caledonia Township." Also Olson, "Poor Farm History," 1, 2.

4. The Hillsboro newspaper is quoted in "County Almshouses," Grand Forks Herald, 13 December 1883, 2. C.C., vol. B, 20 November 1883, 63.

5. Holmberg in C.C., vol. B, 19 March 1884, 87. Kelly in vol. B, 17 March 1885, 133. First bids for rental in vol. B, 12 November 1887, 349; 6 January 1888, 361; vol. B, 8 February 1888, 366. Bid or rental in vol. B, 12 January 1889, 423; Aune bid and profitability in vol. B, 6 February 1889, 426; bid approved in vol. C, 3 February 1891, 109; appointment resumed in vol. C, 6 January 1892, 166.

6. County seat fight mentioned in Traill County Historical Society and the Red River Valley Historical Society, Yesteryears in Traill: Traill County, North Dakota (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1976), vol. 1, 10, ; and in Illustrated Historical Atlas of Traill and Steele Counties, N.D. (Mayville, ND: J.J. Kelly & Company, 1892), 11.

7. Expenses listed in C.C., vol. B, 7 October 1884, 108; 21 October 1884, 110; 21 May 1885, 143; 3 June 1887, 319. G.F. Herald, 13 December 1883, 2. Steele county in C.C., vol. C, 8 June 1891, 125. Population at the poor farm is found in Frederick H. Wines, Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on Crime, Pauperism and Benevolence in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890, part II: General Tables (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1895), 685.

8. C.C., vol. D, 14 February 1899, 15; 6 April 1899, 24; Vennes in 1 March 1900, 71; vote in 10 July 1906, 395. Population of the poorhouse in Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, Paupers In Almshouses, 1904 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1906, 82. The barn was built by contractor M.O. Rudrud of Hillsboro, N.D., according to "Bid," in "Poor Farm Papers, Caledonia Township," Traill County Auditor's Office.

9. Appointment of Herbrandson noted in C.C., vol. D, 10 October 1908, 527; report on couple in 9 April 1909, 557.

10. C.C., vol. F, 6 August 1930, 545.

11. C.C., vol. F, 9 September 1929, 500; and 25 September 1929, 501.

12. C.C., vol. F, 6 August 1930, 545;

13. Olson, "Poor Farm History," 4.

14. C.C., vol. G, 20 July 1932, 34, tells of taxpayer concerns; CWA programs in 9 December 1933, 118. 1929 and 1930 tax levies in vol. F, 16 July 1929, 489; and 22 July 1930, 542. Later budgets in vol. G, 24 July 1934, 163; 24 July 1935, 219; 21 July 1936, 277; and 22 July 1938, 409. CCC in vol. G, 11 June 1937, 330; Resettlement in 8 July 1938, 401; WPA in 22 July 1938, 410.

15. "Contract," 21 March 1952 between County and Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society in "Poor Farm Papers, Caledonia Township," Traill County Auditor's Office; "Notice," of sale of poor farm at public auction 12 May 1954; "Contract," between Clarence Blake and County, 1 February 1955; "Contract," between Gerald and Ruby Kimbrell and County, 1 July 1958, for sale of poor farm property.

16. Telephone interview by Steven Hoffbeck with Millard Stigen, Caledonia, N.D., October 19, 1991. Gravestone records are from "Cemetery Records," vol. 5, Traill County (Fargo: Fargo Genealogy Society, n.d.), 30.