

The Williamson County Poor Farm

THE WILLIAMSON COUNTY POOR FARM

Public care of the poor in Illinois began in 1819. In that year, the General Assembly passed a law mandating public care and maintenance of those unable to support themselves and without family support. County overseers of the poor farmed out care of the destitute to private citizens. [Laws of Illinois 1819, p. 127]

In 1839, this system was reauthorized. County commissioners' courts were also authorized to establish county poorhouses, at their own discretion, to replace the farm-out system; to hire keepers of the poor, and to levy a property tax for poorhouse support. [Laws of Illinois 1839, p. 138] This poorhouse authorization was renewed in 1845 and 1861. [Illinois Revised Statutes 1845, p. 402; Laws of Illinois 1861, p. 181]

In 1917, counties were authorized to establish joint poorhouses and poor farms with other counties; and in 1919, the county poorhouses' names were changed to county homes. [Laws of Illinois 1917, p. 638; Laws of Illinois 1919, p. 698] The county home law was renewed in 1935 and 1945. [Laws of Illinois 1935, p. 1055; Laws of Illinois 1945, p. 1139] 1

OVER THE HILL

Transcribed from microfilm of the Marion Daily Republican Newspaper, 2 December 1925, are a series of four articles entitled, "Over the Hill," which offer a newspaper reporter's observations of conditions and the plight of the county's less fortunate living at the Williamson County Farm. The author of the following articles is unidentified, the Marion Daily Republican (Formerly Marion Leader), W.O. Paisley, Editor, Oldham Paisley, City Editor.

'OVER THE HILL'

Article One

Marion Daily Republican, Monday December 21, 1925, page 1

CHRISTMAS IS COMING BUT CHRISTMAS IS ONLY ANOTHER DULL, GRAY DAY TO THE OLD MAN WHO HAS SEEN 33 CHRISTMAS DAYS ON THE POOR FARM

NOTE - This is the first of a series of articles on the Williamson County Poor Farm. The second will appear Tuesday.

From a phonograph sitting in one corner of the little room lighted by the shadows of an open fireplace came the plaintive words of the old, old prison song. The wistful voice of the prisoner singing "I wish I had somebody to love me" and the words seem weirdly appropriate in that particular place, for from the window of the superintendent's living room one could see the other gray buildings that are homes to the inmates of the Williamson county farm.

That song of the prisoner which was sung a quarter of a century ago and which has experienced an encore even in this age of jazz, might be the pitiful whisperings of the heart of each of the 22 souls who at this holiday season look forward to Christmas as another day in the shadows of the fireplace, just as they have done year after year, some of them for as many as thirty years.

But in spite of the cheerless surroundings on a dull gray day like today these folk who spend their days "over the hill" are not altogether a despairing lot. They sit about their fireplaces and talk. Sometimes they play checkers and those who can see well enough, read now and then. When a representative of the Republican visited them the other day most of them were a sociable bunch of old fellows and willing to talk to anyone from outside. And some of them are well educated old men too, with an experience broadened by travel in foreign countries. As one of them explained it, they are just unfortunates who are 'down and out.'

And some of these old folks have nobody to love them. Others have 'somebody' but that somebody has forgotten about love and the golden rule. One old man has spent almost a quarter of a century on the county farm has three sons alive and well. Another has a brother in the mercantile business and worth thousands, but somebody twisted the doctrine of brotherly love and the old man sits by the fire with his coat and hat on the same as the others, as if their home were only a temporary stopping place and they expected to be leaving in a little while.

For some of them the stay is not long because they have already spent most of their allotted time in the world of greedy mortals and county farms. The oldest inmate of the institution is Mrs. Mary Yates, known as "Grandma" by Superintendent Joe Cummins and his family. She is 84 years old and has been at the farm since December 20, 1919.

Grandma's nearest living relative that she knows anything about is a son in law at Stiritz. She is the mother of six children, four of whom are dead. Two sons ran away from home many years ago when Mrs. Yates and her husband, now deceased lived in

Kentucky. The boys have not been heard from. Perhaps they are still alive. Perhaps they too are 'down and out' or perhaps they have settled down somewhere, reared families and prospered. Grandma doesn't know.

This elderly woman is a member of the Baptist Church in Johnston City and frequently Mr. and Mrs. Cummins will take her with them to attend her church. At the farm, Grandma lives in a home with Amanda Henderson who is twenty-six years old, the youngest inmate of the institution and partially demented.

The oldest person on the farm, from the standpoint of the number of years spent in the institution is Uncle Philmore Rippey, 78, who has been there since June of 1893. Uncle Phil as he is called has no known relatives and he is partially blind.

Willis Wicks is the second oldest man among the inmates. He is 76 years old. He has one son living in Marion and two other sons in West Frankfort. He was once a well-to-do land holder, but his sons and bad management played havoc with his wealth. But Uncle Willis is not the sort that crabs at the world, even if it has used him roughly. When asked about the treatment received at the county farm he said "Well we get as good as we deserve; if we deserved better, we'd get it I reckon." Although he admitted there was room for improvement in the house which he occupies a room with three other men.

Probably the most widely traveled man on the farm is Thomas Mathews, one time farmer and miner. He used to live in Christopher where he reared a family and sent his children through high school. Before that when a young man he had traveled in England, Australia and South America. Now he has one daughter whom he thinks lives in California. His wife and a son are living too, he thinks, but he doesn't know where they are.

These old folks have various hobbies for their entertainment and profit. In the summer several of them are able to help Mr. Cummins with the farm work, for 65 acres of the farm are under cultivation. In the winter they pick their own ways of passing the time, and of the hobbies chosen by these men the most unusual is that of Joe Atess, an Englishman who makes picture frames, snap shot racks and all sorts of similar articles from bended willows which he finishes up with bronze paint and sells in the towns over the county. Joe is fifty-four years old and both his legs are artificial. He came to the farm on July 20, 1918 after his legs had been frozen and then amputated in the winter of 1917-1918. He was born in Durham England.

Grandma Yates is an expert at making quilt tops and rag carpets. She now has about fifteen quilt tops on hand. She is permitted to keep the little money she earns from her labor in this way.

'OVER THE HILL'

Article Two

Marion Daily Republican, Tuesday December 22, 1925, page 1

"WHY CAN'T WE HAVE A HOME AS GOOD AS THAT FURNISHED FOR
THE CRIMINALS?"
ASK THE OLD FOLKS OUT ON THE COUNTY FARM

"If we were bootleggers or criminals convicted of the worst crimes in the category of crime we would be living in a \$100,000 home with warm rooms, and electric lights. But as it is, we're just men who are down and out and we have to live in a place like this."

That's what an elderly man told a Republican reporter the other afternoon as he sat in one of the dark little rooms of the county almshouse, and there was just a little tone of bitterness. But that was the sentiment echoed by the majority of the inmates at the institution, "We are fed well and treated well, but if we are as good as your criminals, give us as good a home as they have; if we are not as good, let us live here." That was the plea of Williamson county's dependents.

All of the men at the county farm live in one house and the two women inmates live in another. Both houses are frame and built in the size and fashion of a small family cottage. A third dwelling is a brick structure occupied by Superintendent Joe Cummins and his family. But tho of brick this structure is anything but imposing. The brick came from the old Williamson jail which burned many years ago, an event which Mr. Cummins remembers taking place when he was but a youngster. Even the superintendent's home at this institution comes second-handed from the home of criminals. But that's right perhaps, for as Mr. Cummins pointed out the weakened places in the old brick walls one might doubt if the walls would keep criminals in if they lived there.

The men sleep on army cots and on an average there are four cots in a room. The rooms are heated by open fireplaces. Some improvements have been made since Mr. Cummins became superintendent of the farm. There are now electric lights in the room although at present the lighting plant has broken down so that the rooms are lighted only by the glow from the fireplaces, which until two years ago was, all the light afforded at any time. Since then a water system has been installed, providing bath and toilet, these things may be regarded as bare necessities. There is nothing about the place to hint as comfort for these old people who are unfortunate. All but three of the folks living on the county farm are over fifty years of age. Their names and respective ages are as follows:

Joe Artess, 54
Aaron Henderson, 60
Philmore Rippey, 78
Willis Wicks, 76
James Morrow, 66
Charlie Sanson, 49

Thomas Mathews, 72
Steve McDonald, 69
Lee Carter, 48
Green B. Story, 63
Edward Murphy, 73
Charlie Landauskey, 68
James Childers, 53
David Day, 74
James Paine, 62
James Dailey, 67
John Hughland, 74
John Morgan, 58
Soloman Grace, 69
Thomas Barwick, 73
Amanda Henderson, 26
Mary Yates, 84
Thomas Hall , 58
W.J. Powers, 62
James Conner, 67
John Franklin Royster, 68

Seven states besides Canada and six foreign countries have native representatives living on the farm.

'OVER THE HILL'

Article Three

Marion Daily Republican, Wednesday December 23, 1925, page 1

THERE WILL BE A CHRISTMAS DINNER FOR THE OLD FOLKS AT THE OLD FOLKS AT THE COUNTY FARM AND ALL WHO WILL MAY HELP BRIGHTEN THE PLACE

Not all will be dreary on the little farm just "over the hill" on Christmas Day for Joe Cummins, keeper of the Williamson county farm, has already begun preparations for a Christmas dinner for the county's dependents and he expects to receive the assistance of the various clubs of the county, especially the clubs in Marion.

Due to the preparations of Mr. and Mrs. Cummins and others the old folks at the farm will have on their table Christmas day, plenty of chicken, roast meats, cranberry sauce, vegetables, pie, cake, fruit salad, milk, eggs and butter.

A number of things in the Christmas dinner are products of the farm itself, cultivated by Mr. Cummins and his family with some help from the inmates who are able to assist. Chickens are raised in goodly numbers and they provide the eggs. The vegetables are raised on the farm, and dairy cows are kept to furnish the milk and butter. Providing all of these things and plenty of them, costs considerable effort on the part of the superintendent who speaks for himself, his family and the folks under his care, collectively as "we". He needed another cow he said, so he traded a buggy, which belonged to him for a cow so that all of the old folks would have plenty of milk and butter. Although the inmates eat in their respective homes the women in one building

and the men in another, all of their food is the same and is cooked the same as that on the table of the superintendent's family. And the rations are issued with the advice from Mr. Cummins, "If you don't have enough ask for more." Every effort is put forth to make up in personal treatment what the inmates lack in the way of a comfortable home to live in.

This score of old folks have long ago lived through the happy experiences that are a child's in anticipation of the coming of Santa Claus. Some of them in childhood knew him as Kris Kringle or Old Saint Nicholas in their native lands. All of them have passed through that period of life, which is enriched by the privilege of playing the Christmas saint to the youngsters. At this holiday season it is not far fetched to suppose that they look back to those days when they were out in the world experiencing the joy of giving and receiving, and then turn toward those of us who are more fortunate and wonder if any of us will think of them on Christmas day.

'OVER THE HILL'

Article Four

Marion Daily Republican, Thursday, December 24, 1925, page 1

WHY NOT BUILD A COMFORTABLE HOME FOR OLD FOLKS AND TAKE CARE OF ALL COUNTY DEPENDENTS WITHOUT ANY COST

"Now I'm not looking for any more members of the royal family, understand, but we can take care of the county's pauper cheaper and better here than in any place in the county - if we have the room."

That was the reply, which Superintendent J.H. Cummins of the Williamson county poor farm made to a newspaperman who visited the farm and asked him if it were not possible for the county to care for all of its many dependents cheaper and better in a new and properly equipped home.

While the month of November may or may not be a typical month so far as expenses of the county's poor farm are concerned, the report of the county supervisors shows that in November the county spent \$620.97 for the salary of the Superintendent, the food clothing and medical attention for the inmates of the county farm, and in the same month the county granted \$961.82 in pauper claims for persons not living on the county farm.

In that total of \$961.82 are included some expenses such as hospital bills which could not be included in the regular expenses of the county farm if all the persons who were helped had been living there. However had the 44 people aided by the county been inmates of the county institution, calculating with the per capital expense for November as a basis, the total cost to the county \$888. And that \$888 would have fed and clothed and provided heat for the dependents while the pauper claims issued only some other means of caring for their wants.

Following is a list taken from the supervisor's record of persons whose expenses were contributed to by county pauper funds in October or November or both:

Blairsville township - John Murphy, Mrs. Daisy Brown, Mrs. Ollie Yates, Mrs. Imboden, Bill Robinson.

Cartersville township - Nothing paid out.

Grassy township - Mike and Mary Hiller.

Herrin township - Mollie Larkin, J.H. Walker, G.B. Hazle, J.T. Darnell,

Jno. Byers, Anna Stacey, Lucille Gumcoski, Mrs. Wayne Doughty,

Mrs. Pearl Muncey, Malina Hoover, Alice Smith, W.E. Shea.

West Marion - Mrs. ____ Boles[3], Mrs. J.M. Crabtree, Mrs. Corder, Mark Shelby,

Frankie Jones, James Stewart, Edna Swinney, Dora Jolly, James McLain, Mable

Rainey, Mrs. Sam Roberts, Mary Jones, Mattie Singleton, Sarah Sharp, Bob

Clendinin,

Hez Arnold, Jack Burton.

Southern township - Nothing paid out.
Lake Creek - John Fletcher, Dinos Carhart.
East Marion - Lucy Anderson, Madania Cook, J.H. Peerson.
Creal Springs - C.C. Kelley for Nathan Kent, Mevina Rushing.
Corinth - James Harrison, Eagle Allen, Raymond Roberts.
Crab Orchard - Nothing paid out.
Stone Fort - Nothing paid out.

Of course there would be a disadvantage in requiring all dependent claimants to live on the county farm. With the present housing facilities such a move would be little less than criminal. But Superintendent Cummins maintains that if he had the proper home for the poor, the county farm would be a better place for the dependents now living with or assisted by friends or begrudging distant relatives.

The superintendent pointed out that by buying in larger quantities, the larger the number of inmates is, the less would be the cost per capita for the operation of the county farm. The inmates would, as Mr. Cummins expressed it, be living with folk with whom they had something in common and the remainder of their days not be spent in struggling for something to eat or in begging for the things that should be freely given.

Viewed in that light, would it not be a humane as well as an economical policy to build for Williamson county's poor a home fit to live in?

ENDNOTES

1 Care of the Poor in Illinois, Woodford County Almshouse Registers, 1868 - 1957, Compiled by the Illinois Regional Archive Depository, Illinois State University.

[This is an electronic publication.]

Web site address: <<http://www.sos.state.il.us/depts/archives/wood.html#poor>>

2 Microfilm, Marion Daily Republican, Illinois, From: Oct. 1, 1925, Thru: Apr. 23, 1926,

Microfilm Roll Number, A-6017, Illinois State Historical Library, Newspaper Microfilm Section, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701 - 1507.

[3] AGED WOMAN WAS BURNED TO DEATH

Marion Daily Republican

Thursday January, 15, 1925, page 6

Mrs. Mahala Boles who resided at the Williamson County Farm, died on Wednesday after being seriously burned while living at the farm. Mrs. Boles was passing the fireplace about eight o'clock Wednesday morning and her dress caught on fire.

Before the flames could be extinguished they had enveloped her body and she had inhaled some of the flames.

Medical attention was immediately obtained but she passed away latter due to the fatal injuries received by the flames.

The deceased was born June 11, 1854 on the J.T. Hill farm near Marion and at the time of her death was 71 years of age. She was united in marriage to Solomon Boles who passed away 7 years ago.

Mrs. Boles leaves 3 brothers and 3 sisters to mourn her departure, namely; W.R. Hill and S.R. Hill both of Marion and F.M. Hill who resides 5 miles from Marion; Mrs. J.H. Moak of Danville, Mrs. Martha Owens of Centralia and Mrs. Pete McAnally of Marion.

Funeral services were conducted at 2 o'clock Thursday afternoon at the county farm by Rev. L.H. Knight and interment occurred at the farm.