

The
Tip
of the
Mitt
Journal



Tip of the Mitt Poorhouses

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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Cheboygan County Poor House 1897, photo from Cheboygan County Historical Society

The Tip of the Mitt Poorhouses

By Richard A. Wiles

The Michigan Territory was created out of the Northwest Territory in 1805 and one of its territorial legislature's first acts was to adopt "An Act for the Relief of the Poor." That act was amended in 1809 which further defined who was eligible for public assistance and set up a provision for the state's district court judges to appoint "overseers of the poor." These overseers were to help provide housing and medical care for the indigent. In 1817, the territorial legislature autho-

rized district courts to direct sheriffs to take over the care of the poor. The first poorhouse to be built in the Michigan Territory was in Wayne County (1828) and by 1830 every existing county at that time was directed to provide a poorhouse and medical assistance.

According to author Alan Naldrett's 2019 book "The Poorhouses and Poor Farms of Michigan," America's poor homes and farms were based on those of Great Britain which first originated in the mid-1500s.

"English Common Law came in part from the Bible. In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, Jesus says 'For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me ...'"

British law incorporated the above words into their "corporal works of mercy" which stated:

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Shelter the homeless
5. Comfort the sick
6. Bury the dead

British law concerning the poor created three separate categories: the Helpless Poor were widows, children, the elderly, and the sick; the Able-Bodied Poor could work and wanted to work but were unemployed; the Rogues and the Vagabonds were made up of beggars and criminals. To pay for help to the poor, the British government passed a property tax called the "poor rate" in 1572. By the early 1600s Great Britain had constructed workhouses



English Poorhouse, photos from Petoskey District Library

or poorhouses to offer accommodation and employment. It was hoped that these homes would be able to show a profit, however, over time that was proven unsustainable.

Referred to in America as a “Poorhouse,” “Almshouse,” “Workhouse,” or “Poor Farm,” the first poorhouse is thought to have been established at Jamestown, Virginia in 1622. The first documented poorhouse was the Boston Almshouse being used in 1660. Along with the establishment of a government-sponsored home for the poor, many denominations of churches also set up residences for the indigent of America. By 1830, all counties were required to have a poorhouse. In the Tip of the Mitt region, the first county to do so was Antrim County. They built one along Torch Lake in 1871.

By 1880, the state of Michigan, according to a Biennial Report of the Michigan State Board of Corrections and Charities, was housing close to 8,000 people in county homes — only one of which was in the Tip of



One of Cheboygan County’s early poorhouses in place by 1883, photo from www.gwood.us

the Mitt. The report stated that over 7,800 persons were being housed in county jails. The state, by 1880, had an asylum for the “insane” at Kalamazoo and Pontiac. By 1882, the county of Otsego had a poorhouse and farm in Livingston Township close to Elmira, Michigan. The Biennial Report of that year described it as “... a frame building, warmed by stoves, ventilated by windows. No provision for bathing.” Back in 1842, the state legislature had mandated

that each county in Michigan appoint three “Superintendents of the Poor.” Their job was to supervise relief for the poor of each county. The county’s Board of Supervisors would appoint each superintendent to a three-year, staggered term. Each county was then responsible financially for the care of its poor residents.

The 1869 Michigan law required annual reports concerning the county home to be filed with the Secretary

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of State. These were called abstracts. The residents of the county homes were referred to as “inmates.” The superintendents had the job of dispensing direct relief to those in need, operating the county home and/or running a county poor farm. These superintendents also hired the “poor masters” who ran the home or the farm. Many of these county superintendents also oversaw a County Poorhouse Cemetery where the “inmates” were buried if no relative claimed them. Most people today only know of poorhouses through Charles Dicken’s “Oliver Twist,” published in 1838. In the story, the orphan, Oliver Twist, is born in a London workhouse and the book describes its horror. Most of the information about the details of life in a Michigan county poorhouse has been destroyed by the superintendents. It was customary — they were just trying to protect the privacy of the indigent. A few state records and newspaper articles are all that is left of the Tip of the Mitt’s first county homes. Only a handful of photographs still exist.

Judith Landes’ 2018 article “Poorhouses in America” (*Torch Magazine*) discussed the positives and negatives of the county poorhouse system. She stated, “Those who lived in poorhouses were often given terrible labels: lazy, good-for-nothing, paupers, beggars, unworthy poor.” From the very beginning of their existence, the local citizenry (taxpayers) usually looked with disdain at the county homes. Once someone voluntarily entered, they became almost a



Antrim County’s second poorhouse 1889, photo from Antrim County Genealogical Society



Charlevoix County poorhouse/poor farm 1900, photo from Charlevoix Historical Society

non-person. Family members many times were too embarrassed to visit.

The idea of a poorhouse was based on the best solution in that period of time for handling poverty in America. Placing indigents on poor farms where they could work would make them become contributing members of society, however many of those who lived on such farms were unable to work. So, like the workhouses in Great Britain, the working poor farms were often not self-sustaining as planned. Many of the Tip of the Mitt poor farms contained gardens,

fruit orchards, livestock, horses, cows, pigs, chickens and sheep.

Those men able to work were outside and the women inmates worked in the kitchen. A person could only be admitted to a poorhouse via a written order of a county superintendent of the poor or a supervisor of a county if it appeared from an investigation that permanent relief was necessary.

While Antrim County was one the first Tip of the Mitt counties to institute a poorhouse, so was Alpena County in 1871. Prior to that, Charlevoix County Board of Supervi-



Alpena County poorhouse, photo from Petoskey District Library



Otsego County poorhouse, photo from Petoskey District Library

sors voted to use \$56 toward a poor fund in 1868. The county did not erect a poorhouse building until the year 1891. It was located on 80 acres of land near East Jordan, across from the hamlet of Ironton, Michigan. Based on the State of Michigan Biennial Report of the Corrections and Charities Board 1882-1883, only Alpena, Antrim, Cheboygan, Mackinac and Otsego had functioning poorhouses.

Every year, the Superintendents of the Poor in each county would choose a chairman and a secretary. These appointees were required to meet monthly to oversee the county poorhouse, or poor farm, to decide who might receive relief funds. "Direct aid" was referred to as "Outdoor Relief." Such direct aid would come in the form of a voucher to a local merchant or supplier of goods. Hospitals would receive payment from

the Board of Superintendents for any medical care given to those deemed indigent. In addition, it was common for the County Board of Supervisors to hire a county physician to visit the county poorhouse and those deemed indigent outside the poorhouse. Children involved under the age of 12 were usually sent to the Coldwater State Home and Training School in Coldwater, Michigan. That home was established by the state legislature in 1871.

The Cheboygan County Hospital was converted in October of 1886 into the county's poorhouse. The Biennial Report of the State of Michigan for 1886-1887 described the Cheboygan poorhouse as "... some three miles from Cheboygan, a one-story frame building used more as a hospital.

"All paupers of the county are supported, in whole or in part, outside (the home). The building is well arranged for the purpose; is fairly ventilated, has no bathtub, wash tubs being used for bathing purposes."

The same 1886-1887 Biennial Report said that Emmet County now had a poorhouse 12 miles from Petoskey.

"A two-story frame building, comparatively new; fairly well arranged, bathing facilities, sewage and proper ventilation.

That poorhouse was first suggested in June of 1882 when the Board of Supervisors appointed a committee to see what it might cost to purchase a farm for the poor. In January of 1883, the board's Committee on the Poor Farm authorized \$1,500 for the purchase of

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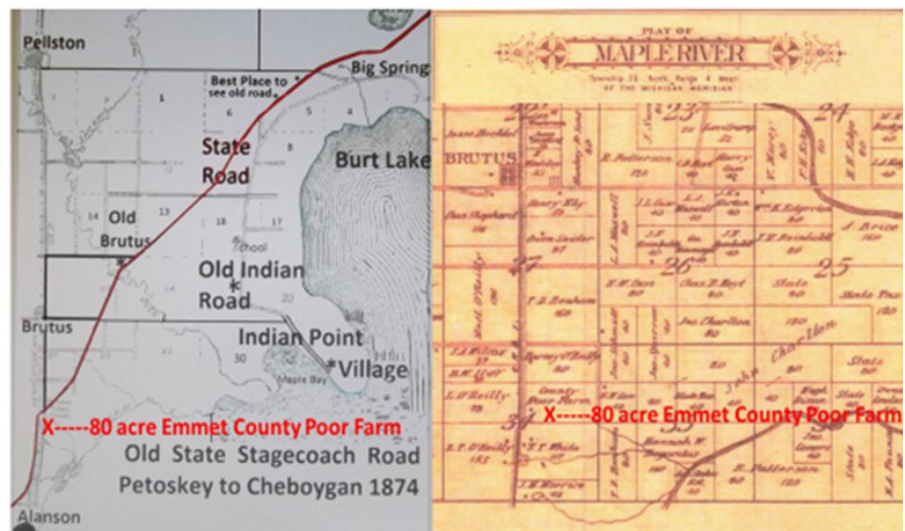


The site of the 80-acre poor farm in Brutus as it is seen today, photo from the author.

a farm property. Patrick McCarthy's 80-acre property in Brutus was bought in March of 1883 (\$750 + pay-off of \$300 mortgage).

In October of 1884, Dr. Carlos D. Hampton of Harbor Springs put a notice in the *Petoskey Record* asking for bids to build a structure on the poor farm property. Hampton had been appointed to the first Emmet County Board of Superintendents along with Petoskey's George Bump and Cross Village's Amos T. Burnett. For the first years of its existence, the Emmet County Superintendents of the Poor only issued vouchers for those deemed eligible of such assistance.

In 1888, the board had a barn constructed on the property and the Emmet County Poorhouse became the Emmet County Poor Farm. According to a February 2, 1886, report, only one boarder was an inmate at the Brutus poor farm at that time.



The site of the Emmet County poor farm in Brutus, map from Maurice Eby

The State of Michigan Biennial Report of Corrections and Charities stated that in 1905-1906 the Emmet County Poor Farm was described as being at Brutus "... a little station 13 miles from Petoskey, isolated and inconvenient to reach because of the infrequency of trains ... The keeper has the use of the farm and is paid for the board and care of the paupers."

The county superintendents hired a keeper, or matron, to carry out the day-to-day management of the property.

In addition to having no money, the conditions for admission into the Tip of the Mitt poorhouses included being homeless and without family or friends, being pregnant and unmarried, suffering from the death of a spouse, and being unable to work



Cheboygan County poor farm as of 1897, photo from Cheboygan County Historical Society

because of age, blindness, injury or lunacy. The Superintendents of the Poor in each county were also charged to investigate allegations of illegitimacy and whether a financial settlement was needed. Illegitimate children sometimes would be taken into the poorhouse before being sent to the Coldwater School. Poorhouse inmates were given the labels of either indigent, insane, idiotic, blind or mute. A 1908 Michigan Constitution revision changed the correct term to be used for a county poorhouse or farm to a “county infirmary.”



Site of Cheboygan County poor farm as it is seen today, photo from Cheboygan County Historical Society

Presque Isle County was the last one in the Tip of the Mitt to establish a poor home.

“On 17 October 1912, Otto and Minnie Wentzel signed an agreement with the Board of Superintendents of the poor of Presque Isle County to house and care for the elderly, sick and homeless, with operation to begin July 1, 1913. This agreement was for a period of (3) three years. They were to receive \$2.25 per week per client and \$1.50 per week for (10) ten persons laundry and 15 cents for each additional client’s laundry. Otto

and Minnie built 2 separate houses, one for the females and the other for males. The main house was used for family and personnel to cook and serve the food and do the laundry.

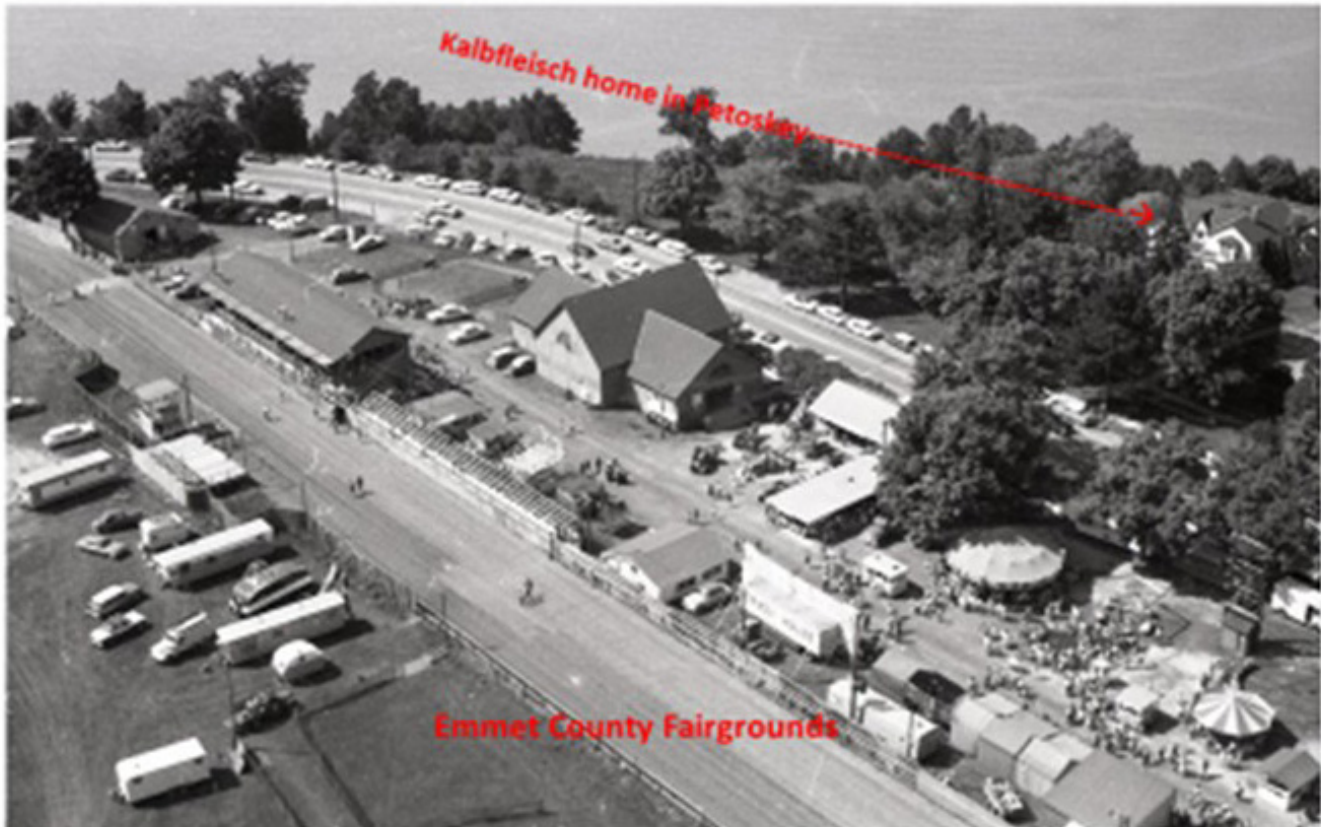
In June of 1919, the Emmet County Board of Supervisors sold the 80-acre poor farm in Brutus to Norman Bickford of Alanson for \$3,000. A few months before that sale, they had bought the Albert Kalbfleisch home along the bluffs west of Petoskey and across from the Emmet County fairgrounds. The home was remodeled and became the Emmet County Infir-

mary, the county’s second poorhouse. By the year 1920, the state of Michigan now had 81 county poorhouses (out of 83 counties).

The region’s poorhouses and farms continued in existence through the 1920s and into the 1930s when the Great Depression struck the country and the world. The massive unemployment numbers and subsequent growth in the number of indigent persons triggered the federal government to act.

At the end of 1929, the unemployment rate in the United States was

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at 3.2%. By March of 1933, the rate of those without work was up to 24.9% and began to go down from that year on until 1941 when it stood at 9.9%. By 1942 it was at 4.2% and by 1945 it was 1.9%. To compare, the unemployment rate in April of 2022 was 3.6%.)

By the time of the President Roosevelt “New Deal” administration in the 1930s, most Americans had developed an ideology of a “deserving poor” and an “undeserving poor.” Plus, an overall negative stigma surrounded those who needed poor relief. Then, the Great Depression hit, and it created long lines of people standing to get some type of help, day after

day. Roosevelt, after taking office as the 32nd President of the United States, said “If I fail, I shall be the last one.”

His administration went to war against the national rate of poverty. The Federal Emergency Relief Act passed by Congress made the individual states create their own Emergency Relief Administrations with local county offices and agents. All federal money allocated to the states for poverty relief bypassed Michigan’s Superintendents of the Poor and were now administered by the Tip of the Mitt’s county federal-state relief agents. Thus, in 1939, the Michigan legislature passed a

reform bill eliminating all county Superintendents of the Poor and set up a statewide Department of Social Welfare (September 30, 1939).

Prior to the 1939 Michigan law to reform the state’s welfare system, the *Lansing State Journal* on March 12, 1936, carried the headline “Cite Counties Abusing the Poor.”

The article read:

“... The state welfare department revealed Thursday the county infirmaries it considers unfit for occupancy and made recommendations for the safety of inmates and others ... The report termed the infirmary in Presque Isle

to be a firetrap ... Overcrowded conditions were found at the Otsego Infirmary ... The report stated that drinking water at the Emmet County Infirmary could be obtained in the bathroom ... The counties that received commendations for the care given their charges, or having poor houses satisfactory to the department included ... Charlevoix ... Alpena ...”

The state report concluded with the recommendation that the state health department conduct investigations of some of the state’s 50 (out of 82) infirmaries with the view of ordering them closed. This was due to the State Welfare Department Commission only having advisory powers over the county infirmaries.

In 1939, each county in Michigan began to set up a Social Welfare Commission made up of two members appointed by the Board of Supervisors and one commissioner appointed by the state welfare commission. Thus, the Emmet County Department of Social Welfare was set up and Ruth Chamberlin was named its first administrator. Members of the commission had to meet civil service standards and their services for the county included the issuing of Social Security Administration checks (created in 1934), administering direct relief checks (food stamps), overseeing hospitalization needs, unemployment compensation, and old age assistance.

The Emmet County Board of Supervisors and the Emmet County Department of Social Welfare decided to sell the Emmet County Infirmary building across from the Emmet County fairgrounds to Petoskey residents Lyle and Joyce Gerren. The purchase price was \$8,000. Lyle was listed in the 1940 federal census as being a tree surgeon and wife Joyce had been the cook at the facility for 10 years. The couple bought the home and renamed it the Sunset View Boarding Home. It was in operation until 1958 when the state of Michigan decided to decrease funding for the home. All of its 45 patients (11 of them female) were then transferred to the Traverse City State Hospital.

According to an article on the closing in the *Petoskey News-Review* on May 29, 1958, “The final patients included World War I veterans, alcoholics, victims of disasters, or family tragedies and some described as ‘people whose minds never grew up.’”

The Sunset View Boarding Home property was then sold to Ernie and Cora Manthei in December of 1959 and later became the Pine Bluff Condominiums.

The poorhouse/poor farm/county infirmary models slowly transformed into the public old-age home. By 1955, it was estimated that the United States had 9,000 nursing homes in operation. Various names are used to describe

these such as care facilities, old-age homes, rest homes, retirement homes, or assisted living homes have all been used as time has passed. Ruth Turk opened Emmet County’s first nursing home in 1937 on Mitchell Street in Petoskey. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master’s degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

SOURCES:

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