

Town Poor Farm made poverty and need local concerns

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY

In the early days the Town Farm, also called The Poor House or Almshouse, was an important institution. The idea behind the establishment of a Poor Farm was: If a man, woman or even a family with children could not maintain themselves because of indolence, hard luck or old age they would still have a home. If able to work on the farm or in the home they could do so. It could also be headquarters for outdoor service to those who had a home, but due to illness or laziness, could not obtain fuel, food or clothing for the family. The overseers of the Poor Farm would see that these necessities of life were furnished.

The movement was started in Boston as far back as 1733, but it was not until 1801 that the decision was made to build a Work House for the reception and employment of the idle and poor. Westford was also progressive and on April 5, 1824, voted to purchase the John Reid farm for the sum of \$2,500. Located on Town Farm Road, the building presently houses the Westford School Administrative Office.

The committee was authorized to receive proposals for a master and mistress to take charge of the workhouse. The master was to be a man of temperance, prudence and good moral character. He was enjoined to reward the faithful and industrious and to punish the idle and disobedient at his discretion by immediate confinement without food, other than bread and water. The Lord's Day was to be strictly observed and kept. The use of spirituous liquors and any partly-spirituous liquor was strictly forbidden, except when ordered by the physician, overseer or master. The first master was Joseph Hosmer and the second was Otis Heywood. Salary was \$250, increasing to \$500 in later years.

At no time was there a large number of people at the Poor Farm, usually 12 to 15. In 1844 the number of residents was larger than usual — 30 people at the Poor Farm, 24 on the outside (meaning those at home) and Westford citizens living in other towns. It was noted that one person in every 26 inhabitants of the town received aid from the Overseers of the Poor.

Selected portions from the Reports of the Overseers of the Poor gives an idea of the services rendered, as well as a colorful sampling of life at the Farm. Let's look at the report for the year ending Feb. 7, 1858.

Receipts

Received from the income of the farm as by H.W. Crocker's book: "For Milk, \$299.07; Calves, \$54.50; Poultry, \$4.50; Vinegar, \$3.35; Beans, \$2.20; Potatoes, \$20.39; Oil Meal, \$8.75; Seed

Corn, \$.20; Work done off farm, \$23; Oak Chips, \$5; Apples, \$30.40; Cranberries, \$4.50; Rye, \$1.50; Straw, \$12.67; Cider, \$1.43; Lard, \$.75; Wood, \$9.50; Dried Apple, \$.56."

For the year ending 1858, the payments made by Henry W. Crocker: "ox muzzles and wheelbarrow, \$3.75; medicine, \$7.82; baker's bill, \$5.90; potash, \$4.35; repairing harness, \$1.80; repairing wagon and sleigh, \$2.37; fresh fish, \$1.46; filing saws, \$.80; butchering, \$1.50; school tax, \$1.36; flour barrels, \$5.60. Also, bills paid by the Overseers: James M. Wright for digging grave for Mrs. Stevens, \$2; Ephraim Wright, for 5 coffins for the Paupers, \$17.75; George M. Child, 53 lbs. Butter, \$11.66; S. & S.D. Fletcher, for goods from the store, \$181.46 and again \$89.15; George A. Aldrich, for boarding Widow Rhoda Wright, \$17.50; House of Correction, for boarding Levi Prescott, \$4.56; J. B. Fletcher for Manure Fork, \$2; Mrs. A. Davis for grave clothes for Thomas Kemp, \$1.75; Ira Leland, for cow, \$44 and Dr. B. Osgood, for medical services at Poor House, \$35.79." Number of persons supported wholly or in part by Poor House at that time was 11. The actual expense of supporting the poor, exclusive of the interest on the farm, was about \$600 that year.

Tramps often stopped at the Poor House for a night's lodging, supper and breakfast, but were kept on the move; the town did not want to be responsible for them. By 1862 the number of tramps increased to 84; with 12 at the house and 17 helped outside. Those requiring hospital care were sent to Tewksbury State Hospital, to the Worcester Lunatic Asylum or on rare occasions to Massachusetts General Hospital. In 1869 the ages of those living at the Almshouse were 78, 61, 82, 61, 13, 21, 22, 10, 8, 9 and 7. This was unusual, as most years there were older people.

That the Poor Farm remained productive is shown by the Report of the Overseers of the Poor for the year ending Feb. 12, 1881.

Receipts

Income from the Farm as by H.D. Pierce's Books: "Received for milk, eggs, grease, soap, onions, turkeys, cider, cranberries, apples, cabbage, chickens, popcorn, pigs, horse, drawing stone, harslet, mowing machine, use of bull, cheese, keeping peddler, use of cart, one pair of spectacles, beef, pickles, keeping one man one night, boarding Mrs. Leland, calves, butter, potatoes, peas, one stove, ashes, work on roads, corn, beets, tomatoes, turnips, straw for beds, cow, pork, indigent soldiers, and sundries. The total of \$1,942.84."

"The Payments, in part: for grain, blacksmith's work, grinding corn, repairing pump, matches, one axe, repairing harness, bolts for sled, mending boots, mending stove, wheelwright work, one sled, etc. totaled \$2,852.65." Taking into consideration the expense for keeping 184 tramps, the gain on personal property, etc., the actual cost of supporting the poor inside the Almshouse in 1881 was \$25.24. The cost of sup-



Catherine O'Toole at her home in the southern part of town called "Texas." She spent her last days at the Town Poor Farm.

porting the poor outside of the Almshouse with such services as medicine, wood, for time spent in purchasing horses for the Almshouse, payment to the Lunatic Asylum and services as Overseer totaled \$733.16. Therefore, the actual cost of supporting the poor, exclusive of interest on the Farm was \$952.18. The number receiving two meals and lodging was 184. The number receiving aid outside the Almshouse was 20. The number receiving support in the Almshouse was 9.

After reading the appraisal of personal property at the Almshouse in Westford in the year 1881, in addition to the farm equipment and livestock, the everyday simple wares would today, if sold at auction, bring a small fortune. If you've been to an auction recently I'll bet you'll agree. Listed are such items as: apple parers - \$1.50; one butter worker, \$1; one churn, \$2.50; candle moulds, \$1.50; two cranberry rakes, \$3; one chopping knife and tray, \$.75; one cradle, \$1; five shawls, \$5; one Franklin stove, \$1; seven flat irons, \$2.50; shovel and tongs, \$1; boxes and spices, \$.75.

Improvement came to the Almshouse with the passing of the years. A new ell was added in 1898 at an approximate cost of \$2,000. The low cost was due, reportedly, to the work being turned over to Sam Balch the master, who completed the task in his leisure. Cells for prisoners of the town and a tramp room were installed in the basement of the ell. A wood shed and ill house was added the next year. Running water was brought into the Almshouse. The overseers reported that all the buildings were in good shape except for an inadequate heating apparatus. A furnace was added the next year, which was more efficient than stoves. In the 1901 inventory, a horse power and saw was listed, meaning that a treadmill was being used to saw up the cord wood to feed the furnace. A big improvement over the hand buck-saw.

Of general interest, a new

expense was listed in 1872 — Peter Naylor for services as a nurse in Small Pox Hospital, \$27, and Dr. Webster, medical aid at Small Pox Hospital, \$72. This was not a hospital as we think of it, but an isolated building where the small pox victims could be in quarantine.

After the State Act of 1910 which forbade the printing of any names of those receiving aid, the gradual cost increase of all Poor Farms, and the state's welfare takeover, a way of life came to an end. The Town Farm in Westford closed its doors to townspeople in 1960.

"It's an aspect of our society I'm sorry has left," said Ben Parker. "It had an unfortunate concept of welfare. By today's standards, it was far from it. We sold cows to the Town Farm. It was a pleasant place to visit. Nearly everyone had a project, whether it be tending a garden patch, chickens, or pigs. I recall one elderly lady who wouldn't allow anyone to milk her pet cow. Older people cling to company and pets when their children have left home. There is pride in being somewhat self-sufficient, with minimal expense to the community."

Ruth Johnson added, "It was a productive farm versus welfare. Downstairs were cells where the drunken people were locked up; upstairs, I remember Mrs. Ripley cooking mounds of pan-fried potatoes."

"Much of interest have I derived from Mr. True Bean, whose little life drama ended somewhat pitifully at the Town Farm — a contretemps of which he always had a horror, and often swore should never occur," penned Mr. Goode. "The last time I saw my friend, Mr. Bean, he was sitting in a hammock under a maple tree across the road from the Town Farm. He was wholly unreconciled, though he admitted that he was kindly treated. I went away to New York a little later. I received a letter during the winter couched as follows — a highly characteristic message:

"Dear Friend: Have you got an old

pipe you are not using and some tobacco?"

Your friend in hell:

True Bean

"My sympathies were touched. I promptly wrote to Dick Wright at the Wright & Fletcher Store in Westford Center to take Mr. Bean the best plug tobacco. It was done."

"A personal story might be told," said Allister MacDougall. "Soon after Mr. Bean went to the Poor Farm in 1901, my cousin who had lived next door to this great gentleman, and I, both of us about 10 years of age, decided to visit him. One day we drove over, had a good visit, then he pulled his old fiddle out from under the bed and entertained us with old-time songs. We enjoyed the visit and I am sure he did, but I still remember how barren his room seemed as compared to his cozy cottage on Depot Street." [14 Depot St.]

Mr. Bean was a lexicon of information concerning early events in Westford. He loved to roam the woods, fish and study wildlife. The town paid his funeral expenses of \$27.90 when he died in 1905.

Vagabonds

After the Civil War the country was broke. The number of tramps stopping for lodging and one or two meals at the Poor Farm in Westford indicates the pressure of hard times and unemployment. For example, in 1874 there were 906; in 1875 — 622; 1876 — 674; 1878 — 921; 1879 — 839; 1903 — 464; 1904 — 537, gradually fading out with 15 in 1915. The town kept them on the move. In fact, as early as 1692 a law enacted by the Massachusetts General Court required officials of the towns to warn all strangers to leave. Persons allowed to remain three months were considered "reputed inhabitants" and the town was obligated to care for the "sick and poor" individuals in town. Perhaps in every age there has been a fragment of society disenfranchised with the status quo, that seeks to strike out on its own. The classic illustration of the vagabond with his soot-stained face, tattered clothes, worldly possessions tucked into a handkerchief and

slung over his shoulders, may be just a prototype of today's bluejeaned "free spirit" with his knapsack on his back.

It has been said that many tramps walked the railroad tracks — perhaps that is why so many of them happened upon Westford's Poor Farm. Individual families oftentimes cared for these travelers. Ruth Hall remembers them coming to their Parkerville farm and doing odd jobs in exchange for a meal and a night's sleep. "It was a long time since some of them had been introduced to soap and water," added Frank Jarvis. "Sometimes they would ask for a meal; sometimes they would work for a meal." When, as a boy, Austin Fletcher lived down at the Westford Depot, it was his morning task to feed the horses and cattle. One day when he went to pick up the pitch fork to get some hay, a man jumped up from the mow. "Mind if I sleep here?" he inquired. Austin didn't know who was more startled, but in order to literally save his hide, I guess the tramp realized he'd better speak out quickly. On another occasion, Austin spoke of a man on crutches down at the Depot. "When the conductor yelled 'All Aboard,' the man threw his crutches on the truss rods and crawled on and rode underneath the train. Westford Depot telegraphed to the West Chelmsford station. They took him off. The man had already lost one leg on the railroad."

"There must have been a mark or symbol communicated among tramps that the food at our house was plentiful and good," related Elizabeth Carver McKay who then lived next door to the Roudenbush School. "Great numbers knocked at our back door. Mother left orders that they were to be fed, but not allowed in. They would thank me over and over again."

With the coming of World War II their numbers dwindled. The open door has been closed to vagrants.

Editor's note — The late Allister MacDougall supplied background material for this article.

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WANTED!

A MAN AND HIS WIFE,

To take charge of the

ALMS HOUSE IN WESTFORD,

From the first day of April next.

Proposals will be received until the 20th day of March next, by the subscribers.

NATHAN S. HAMBLIN, } Overseers
OREN COOLIDGE, } of the Poor
SAMUEL FLETCHER, 2d, } Westford.
Journal and Courier Press, Lowell.

Westford, Feb. 21, 1857.

Town Farm Poster.

COURTESY OF JUNE W. KENNEDY

A help wanted ad for the Westford Town Poor House.