

**LIFE ON STATE'S 'POOR FARMS'**  
**By SEAN BAKER The Minnesota Star Tribune**  
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A century ago, before the federal government provided social services, most of Minnesota's counties ran poor farms to house their most impoverished inhabitants. Some residents who were young and healthy enough worked on the farms.

Today, the poor farm era is largely forgotten. But for generations, these institutions — some well-run, others filthy and without enough beds— served as a last refuge for America's destitute.

When they closed, most of them left behind little more than rubble — and the stories of those who lived and labored there.

Tim Sletten was walking down the Cannon Valley Trail in Red Wing when he stumbled across a sign marking the site of the Goodhue County Poor Farm. The acres are now home to a Red Wing Shoe Co. plant.

Sletten reached out to Curious Minnesota, the Strib's reader-powered reporting project, to learn more about the role poor farms played in Minnesota's history. "I have lived here for over 40 years and never knew about the poor farm," Sletten said. "And I am sure I am not alone."

In Minnesota, 63 of the state's 87 counties once operated poor farms between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. The Goodhue County Poor Farm operated from 1864 to 1963 .

Like most of Minnesota's poor farms, it was established under an 1864 law that required counties with sizable poor and aging populations to provide basic care and shelter.

While England ran "poorhouses" as early as the 17th century, the poor farm was a distinctly American offshoot. The idea was that poor people could use the farm to become self reliant, while the counties that managed them would save money.

A wide range of people shared life on U.S. poor farms, said Megan Birk, author of "The Fundamental Institution: Poverty, Social Welfare, and Agriculture in American Poor Farms." "You may have elderly people who have no other outlet, and so this is where they end up," said Birk. "But you do have a lot of in and out. People who are sick and have an acute emergency. A house has burned down, a husband has gone to prison ... emergencies that drive people to kind of immediate distress."

The one common thread, however, was that few residents were in any condition to work on a farm in the way early proponents of the facilities had imagined.

Because residents tended to be elderly, frail or disabled, counties often brought in paid workers , Birk said. Farm residents who could do manual labor often did household tasks or light farm work, such as milking cows or caring for chickens.

In Minnesota's Goodhue County, the 200-acre poor farm housed more than 1,500 people — many of them orphaned children, immigrants and the elderly — through the decades.

"This was a time when in many parts of the state there might have been a county jail, but there was no orphanage," said Jesse McClelland, a researcher at Metropolitan State University who has studied the history of poor farms in Minnesota. "There was no women's shelter or homeless shelters."

In 1925, a federal investigator named Harry C. Evans delivered a blistering indictment of America's poor farms. In a report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, Evans described grim conditions marked by filth and neglect, where the poor, elderly and mentally ill were crowded together in the name of efficiency.

"A more depressing pamphlet was never written," the New York Times wrote about the report at the time.

What had once been promoted as a model of self-sufficient charity, Evans found, had instead become a symbol of the country's failure to care for its vulnerable. His conclusion was unequivocal: poor farms, he wrote, were "the worst mismanaged public business in the United States" and should be abolished altogether.

"There are many farms that are maintained and conducted in as decent a manner as is possible," Evans noted. "But decency is rarely possible under the system."

Evans cited 10 farms in Minnesota (Goodhue County's was not one of them) for problems like insufficient food, "nauseating odors" and being "unclean and unsanitary."

"While conditions are extremely bad in places, generally conditions are above the average," he wrote about Minnesota's farms.

Things changed in 1935, when Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act — effectively shifting the burden of caring for poor people away from counties to the federal government. The act was part of his New Deal with the American public.

"Suddenly, for the first time in U.S. history, social or human welfare is something of interest to the federal government," McClelland said. "And then all these little tiny local solutions to extreme poverty start to close. "

One of the few remaining traces of Minnesota's poor farm era still rises above the landscape in Maplewood — a towering red barn that now anchors the Ramsey County Fairgrounds. Built in 1918, the barn once housed more than 100 cows whose milk sustained the residents of the county's poor farm.

The Ramsey County Poor Farm moved to Maplewood from a location that's very familiar to many Minnesotans today: the Minnesota State Fairgrounds.

Newspaper accounts about the Ramsey County Poor Farm evoke a life governed by a strict routine. Residents were expected to rise at 5:30 a.m. and turn in by 8 p.m. Profanity and liquor were banned — except by a doctor's order — and bed linens were to be changed weekly.

And the question of who was allowed to live there was left entirely to county officials.

"If it is not a case of absolute destitution, without friends to furnish sustenance or ability to earn a living, the applicant is rejected," one bulletin read. By today's standards, that kind of local discretion and subjective decision making can seem outdated, Birk noted.

But "sometimes that personalization helped people more," she said. "County officials might decide the best thing wasn't to send someone to the poor farm but to pay their rent, or to cover a doctor's bills for a month so they could die at home."

"It was a much different way to think about relief," she said.