

# Go Straight to the Poor Farm – in 1880

By Connie Lenzen

As Oregon developed as a state, systems to take care of people who were unable to provide for themselves were established. The county courts had the authority and power “to provide for the maintenance and employment of the county or transient paupers, in the manner provided by law.”<sup>1</sup> Counties paid a daily stipend to individuals who were willing to take in the poor and infirm. Poor farms, as a place to send indigents, were built in the larger counties.

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## Paupers in the 1880 census

The 1880 census included seven supplemental schedules for the “Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes.” The schedules, sometimes called the “DDD,” included

1. Insane Inhabitants,
2. Idiots,
3. Deaf-Mutes,
4. Blind,
5. Homeless Children,
6. Inhabitants in Prison, and
7. Pauper and Indigent Inhabitants in Institutions, Poor-Houses, or Asylums, or Boarded at Public Expense in Private Houses.

The enumerator was instructed to ask the following questions:

- How Supported?
- At cost of city or town?
- At cost of county?
- At cost of State?
- At cost of institution?
- Is this person able-bodied?
- Is he (or she) habitually intemperate?
- Is he (or she) epileptic?
- Has he (or she) ever been convicted of crime?
- If disabled, state form of disability
- Was this person born in this institution?
- Date of admission

What other members of the family of this person are in this establishment?  
Is this person also blind?  
Is he or she deaf and dumb?  
Is he or she insane?  
Is he or she idiotic?

There were 80 people enumerated as “Paupers and Indigent Inhabitants” on the 1880 Oregon schedule; 67 were males, and 13 were females. Multnomah County had the largest population with 23. Other counties with their numbers were: Baker, 6; Benton, 1; Clackamas, 6; Coos, 3; Douglas, 5; Jackson 6, Josephine, 3; Lane, 2; Linn, 4; Marion, 5; Union, 6; Wasco, 3; Washington 4, and Yamhill 3. Ages were not given on the DDD schedule, and the people were located on the 1880 population schedule in order to gather that statistic. The ages ranged from three months to 91-years old. The average age was 48.5.

The schedule indicated that five counties had institutions for the poor. There was the Baker County Poor House, the Coos County Poor House, the Douglas County Poor House, the Jackson County Hospital, the Linn County Workhouse, the Marion County Workhouse, the Multnomah County Poor Farm, and the Wasco County Poor Home and Hospital.

In the counties where there was no public facility, paupers and infirm were boarded in families, or they lived independently and received public assistance.

## **Oregon Poor Farms in 1880**

### ***Baker County***

Six people were enumerated at the Baker County Poor House; a 27-year old widow with her four children, and a 45-year-old male pauper.

### ***Coos County***

Three men lived at the Coos County Workhouse in Coquille. A 67-year-old widower was suffering from dropsy, a 36-year-old single man had necrosis of the hip and was crippled, and a 56-year-old logger had been out of work for twelve months and was afflicted with rheumatism.

### ***Douglas County Poor House***

Two people were noted as residing at the Douglas County Poor House but they were living in separate households with families, and three others were enumerated separately. This suggests that there really was no Poor House, and the county was paying families for their maintenance. The disabilities were dropsy, drunkenness, injury, blindness, and old age.

### ***Jackson County Hospital***

Five men resided at the Jackson County Hospital in Jacksonville. Their disabilities, paralysis, old age, leg amputation, blindness, and inflammatory disease of the joints, would have prevented them being able to support themselves.

### ***Linn County Workhouse***

The Linn County Workhouse was in Albany. Four people, including two orphan infants, were listed as living there. However, when the people were located on the population census, they were found to be living in two separate households in Albany and one household in Brownsville. This may be another case where the county paid to have people boarded at county expense.

### ***Marion County Workhouse***

Samuel Parker was the proprietor of the Marion County Workhouse in Salem. He and his wife, along with a servant, were taking care of five men who suffered from inflammation of the bladder, old age, general debility, rheumatism, and paralysis.

### ***Wasco County Poor Home and Hospital***

Mrs. H. E. Hawn was the head of the Wasco County Poor Home and Hospital in Dalles City. Three men were in the hospital. Their disabilities were rheumatism, diseased brain, and a broken leg.

### ***Multnomah County Poor Farm***

The Multnomah County Poor Farm was established in June 1868 on 160 acres of what was originally the Eli and Ann Stewart Donation Land Claim. The Stewarts sold the land to Thomas Carter in 1861. Stephen Coffin purchased the land in 1865 and then sold it to Multnomah County.<sup>2</sup> The farm was about two and a half miles west of the Portland city limits on Canyon Road. It was home to the poor, the sick, and a colony of lepers until 1911. Visitors entered through a swinging gate on the north side of Canyon Road and proceeded about 100 yards up a wagon road to the main building. That structure measured about 60 X 20 feet and was two stories high. A graveyard marked the last resting place of those who ended their days in the facility.<sup>3</sup>

The purchase of the farm by the county commissioners, as reported in the *Daily Oregonian*, was controversial. Doctors Hawthorne and Loryea had contracted with the county for several years to take care of the paupers at their hospital. For this service, they were paid \$8.00 per person per week, averaging \$500.00 per month. The editor of the *Oregonian* opined that “The proprietor does not want to give up the good thing he is enjoying in keeping the paupers of the county, and is therefore opposed to the purchase of the farm.”

“It is certain that the present system encourages unworthy persons to make themselves a county charge. To get the opportunity to go to hospital and be supported is often as good a thing as a lazy vagabond wants. Person who are ruined by dissipation and debauchery, who have lost all honorable ambition and who are too spiritless to make any effort to support themselves even though they may have bodily strength to do it, often manage to obtain admittance to the hospital and are very loth to be driven away. The keepers are not anxious to get rid of them because they get full pay for their keeping and have little or no trouble in furnishing them medical attendance. At eight dollars a week there is a large profit in most cases to the contractors.”<sup>4</sup>

The 1860 census enumerator found twelve men lodged at the Multnomah County Poor Farm on the first of June. Their ages ranged from 24 to 61, and the average age was 44. Eight of the men were listed as laborers, one was an accountant, two were sailors, and one was a gardener.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of June 1870, a complaint had been lodged by a former inmate against Mr. Hart, the keeper of the Poor House. It was alleged “that the keeper of the County Poor House has been receiving pay for keeping persons that are not at the Poor House as follows: Mr. Taylor, left four months ago; Dan Ellis, left last of May; Mr. Emery, never there; Mr. Williams, never there; Mr. Collins, never there; James Overton, left two months ago, and has been at work for John Geutz, near town. Also that Mat Kinney is well and is now and has been employed by Mr. Hart as cook, etc., at \$25 per month.”<sup>6</sup> The court deliberated and determined that the allegations were false and “originated from a bad spirit in the complainant, possibly infused and cultivated by bad advisers.”

On 11 February 1871, an enumeration of how many people had passed through the poor house for the quarter ending 31 January 1871 was printed in the Daily Oregonian.

“Number of inmates Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 20; admitted during the quarter, 33; discharged, 24; readmitted, 3; transferred to town for medical treatment, 1; removed by friends, 2; deaths, 1; sent to Insane Asylum 1; remaining in the institution Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>, 22. All the bad cases are improving.”<sup>7</sup>

In July 1873, the county commissioners extended an invitation to the Oregonian staff to visit the Poor House and Farm. The newspaper account of this visit describes the facility in glowing terms.

“A brisk drive of twenty-five minutes from the city brought us to the Farm. The house is situated on the north side and about 100 yards from the road. It occupies a high point of land overlooking a long stretch of the winding road, and a commanding view of the wooded hills which surround the locality. A more eligible and pleasant site could hardly have been selected. One glance at the neat and handsome building with its fresh coat of paint, as it stands on an elevated point of land, surrounded by green gardens and a fruitful orchard, at once invites the eye and pleases the fancy. These agreeably pleasant surroundings are well calculated to instantly dispel all ideas of gloom, want, disease and sadness, which even the name of the place would cause one to naturally associate in the mind. Entering the gate to the right hand side of the road, we passed through a narrow lane leading up to the house. On one side was a meadow, at this time covered with a light coat of timothy, and on the other rows of green and luxuriant vegetables that appeared to thrive exceedingly well in the fertile soil. In a few minutes we arrived at the house. If one is agreeably surprised at a cursory glance at the houses, gardens and the general arrangement of the institution, a closer inspection of the premises is likely to impress the visitor with greater favor. Neatness and a very creditable degree of good taste meets the eye at every turn.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1880, twenty-six men and two women, roughly one-third of all of the people being cared for by all counties, were enumerated on the census as residents of the Multnomah County Poor Farm.<sup>9</sup> Five men had rheumatism, four were crippled, and four had syphilis. Two men were destitute, and the remainder of the residents had other conditions that would make it difficult to work. Two men had been at the institution since 1877, but the majority, including the one with Consumption, had been admitted in 1880.

The Multnomah County Poor Farm is the only institution listed in the 1880 schedule where Chinese were found. In 1888, David M. Dunne, newly elected Multnomah County Commissioner, arranged for passage back to China, on the English brig "Kitty" for fifteen Chinese lepers who were living at the Poor Farm.<sup>10</sup> In 1911, the farm was closed down, and the residents were moved to a new facility near Troutdale.

For further reading, the Oregon DDD schedules are on microfilm and are at the Genealogical Forum Library in Portland.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Byron Bellinger and William Wick Cotton, *Bellinger and Cotton's Annotated Codes and Statutes of Oregon* (San Francisco: Bancroft-Whitney Co, 1902), 432; digital book *GoogleBook* (books.google.com/books : accessed 14 September 2008).

<sup>2</sup> "Recovery of Bones Reopens State History," *Oregon Journal*, 2 June 1956, page 12, col. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Courtney M. "History of the Origin and Growth of the Multnomah County Hospital." March 30, 1933. Manuscript; Multnomah County Poor Farm folder, Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon. "The County Poor Farm," *The Daily Oregonian*, 21 July 1873, page 3, col. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> "Maintenance of the Poor," *The Daily Oregonian*, 27 June 1868, page 3, col. 1.

<sup>5</sup> 1860 U.S. census, Multnomah County, Oregon, Sauvies Island, Portland Post Office, page 147 (stamped), 72 (penned), dwelling 542-543, family 538-539, Multnomah County Poor House; digital image ProQuest HeritageQuestOnline (access through participating libraries : accessed 22 September 2008), citing NARA microfilm publication M593, roll 1287

<sup>6</sup> "Poor House Investigation," *The Daily Oregonian*, 22 July 1870, page 3, col. 2.

<sup>7</sup> "City," *The Daily Oregonian*, 11 February 1871, page 3, col. 1, para 4.

<sup>8</sup> "The County Poor Farm," *Daily Oregonian*, 21 July 1973, page 3, col. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> 1880 U.S. census, Multnomah County, Oregon, population schedule, Western Pct. Sheet 213, line 22, dwelling 111, family 125, Peter Fistilius household; digital image ProQuest HeritageQuestOnline (access through participating libraries : accessed 22 September 2008), citing NARA microfilm publication T9, roll 1083

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Rev. Arthur M. Schoenfeldt, grandson of David Dunne, 13 June 1994.