When There Really Was a "Poor House"

By Clarence R. Keathley

The traditional institution for the relief or care of the poor and indigent in America was the almshouse or county farm. It was a part of the system of public welfare patterned after the English Poor Law of 1601. Firmly established in the early colonies, it was carried westward by the descendants of the colonists and gradually came to be the fundamental institution for relief of the poor in every American commonwealth.

The almshouse was an institution which represented the principle of local responsibility for the care of the needy, a principle which has been central in the theory concerning responsibility of the state for the care of indigence and dependency. Missouri had a general poor law which provided a place where all aged, infirm, blind or sick residents of the county who were unable to support themselves and had no one else to support them could receive relief, maintenance and support, from the county. The almshouse was the primary institution designed to carry out this purpose. Since most Missouri counties did not have an urban center, the almshouse was primarily a rural institution serving farm and village people.

A variety of euphemistic names were substituted for the term "almshouse" with all its unpleasant connotations. The term "almshouse" was most frequently used in New England and some of the Eastern states, while the Middle West used the term "poorhouse." Terms used in other states were county infirmary, county home, county asylum, and county hospital. In Missouri one finds the terms almshouse, county infirmary, county farm and county home most common. In Iron County, Mo., the terms county farm and poor farm were most common.

On Feb. 12, 1912, our father, William T. Keathley leased the County Farm for a period of three years, beginning March 1, 1912. He paid $165 annual rent on the farm and received $8.95 for each inmate per month, to feed clothe and care for them. My father served as superintendent for 25 years, until his retirement in 1937.

Our parents and their eight children moved from the Brushy Creek farm, about six miles southeast of Annapolis, Mo. Three more children were born after we moved to the County Farm. A major reason for our parents to make this move was the opportunity for their children to receive a good education in the Ironton school system. All of the children attended elementary school; seven of them went on to high school. Four children graduated from college; three of them received master's degrees in education and geology and social work.

When we lived on the County Farm, the buildings included a two-story frame house for the superintendent's family, later replaced by a cobblestone house; a two-story frame house for the inmates with four rooms on the first floor and five rooms on the second floor, including one smaller room for mental inmates. Porches with bannisters surrounded both first and second story levels. There was also a two-room lean-to on the north side of the house for storage.

Other amenities included a spring house, smokehouse, chicken house, barn, an outside toilet for the superintendent's family and outside toilets for the inmates. Later we built a shed for farm machinery.

We had a wall telephone and were on a party line. There was no electricity, radio, television, inside plumbing or running water. Lights were provided by kerosene lamps in the house and lanterns to do chores. Wood stoves were used for heating and a large cast iron wood stove with an oven, reservoir and warming closet was used for cooking. We cut our own wood supply on the farm and nearby hills. A nearby well supplied our water. Bathing was either done in a wash tub by the stove in the kitchen or, in warm weather, in Stout's Creek that ran through the farm.

We did general farming, raising corn, hay, oats, wheat and other crops. The wheat and oats were cut with a binder, shocked, stacked or hauled and threshed by a threshing crew that came through the community. This was a big event when neighbors helped each other without pay. The threshers' dinner was a special occasion with a special meal. It took two groups of workers to serve the dinner prepared by our mother and her daughters. Our father owned horses, mules, beef cattle, milk cows and hogs to fatten and butcher for meat.

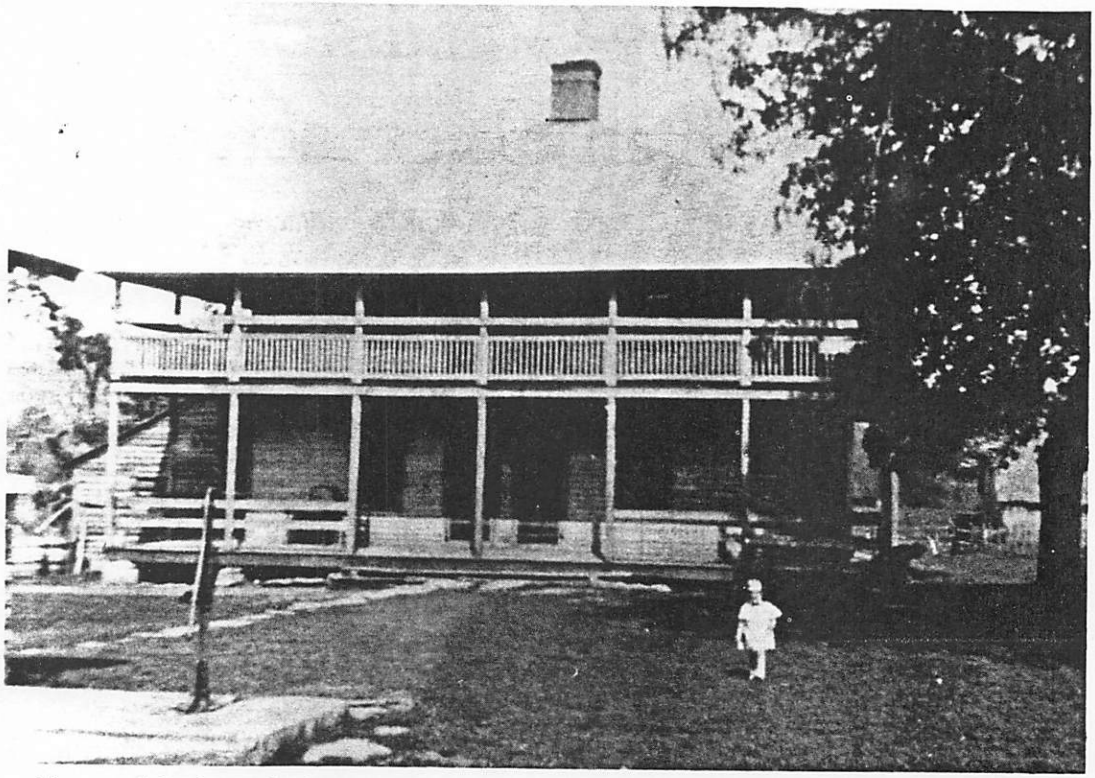
Our mother and her daughters cooked all the food for the inmates as well as for our family, and the menus were essentially the same for everyone. There were usually 12 to 14 inmates in residence at the county farm at all times and our own large family of 13 people meant that large amounts of food were prepared three times a day.

Cooking was done on the big cast iron stove. The evening or supper meal was usually cornbread, rice or mush with milk and butter. My sisters and brothers and I remember the good desserts my mother made, especially on Sunday. Food for the inmates was carried from the kitchen to a dining room in the inmates' house, a distance of about 50 feet. A few of the women inmates helped carry and serve the food and would help with cleanup and dishwashing after the meal.

Our mother was an excellent cook. She did not use a cookbook; it was a "pinch of this" and a "pinch of that." She was up early to grind the coffee beans in a coffee mill for breakfast. Her meals were varied, seasoned with extracts and spices from the Watkins man who came by the farm about once a year. We gathered wild greens and water cress from the spring branch. Our mother baked cakes, cookies, cobblers, pies and other desserts. She always made a fruit cake for Thanksgiving. She taught her six daughters her knowledge of cooking.

The weekly laundry was another family activity. Laundry was done for both our family and the inmates, but it was my brothers and sis-

ters and I who carried buckets of water about 50 yards from the well attached to the front porch to the black wash kettle over a fire in the backyard. The boiled clothing was then transferred to several large wash tubs, scrubbed down on wash boards using homemade lye soap and P&G soap bought at the store. The laundry was then transferred to other tubs to rinse in clear water with bluing added to whiten the clothing, hung on clotheslines to dry in the sun, then ironed with flat irons heated on the stove. We did not have a Maytag washing machine until the late 1920s.



Picture of the house for inmates. The small boy in the foreground is Allen Ray Keathley, son of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Keathly. (Courtesy Hardy Studio, Ironton, Mo.)

Most of our clothing was made on a White sewing machine. Our mother and her daughters mended and patched our clothing and darned the socks. Our father repaired our shoes on a shoe last, fashioning heels and half soles and cutting leather shoe laces. He rubbed beef tallow on our work shoes to waterproof them.

During the 25 years our father was superintendent, 100 inmates were sent to the county farm by the Iron County Court. The general reasons shown for sending them to the county farm were: lack of income, old age and misfortune. They could care for themselves no longer and had no relative to care for them. Twenty-three were classed as feebleminded and 29 were classed as insane. Some of these were transferred to the county farm from State Hospital No. 4 at Farmington, Mo., (mental hospital) when it was deemed that they needed custodial care only.

Some inmates were diagnosed as having cancer, epilepsy, syphilis or tuberculosis. A local doctor, paid by the county court, visited the inmates when notified by the superintendent.

All but two of the inmates were white. Sixty-three were male and 37 were female. Seventy-one of them were 50 years of age or older; 40 were 65 years and older. Three unrelated teenagers, ages 13, 15 and 16 lived at the county farm for a time. It was unusual, but entire families might be consigned to the care of the county: one woman and her three grown daughters lived there for several years. In another instance, a father, mother and three children came to live at the county farm and a fourth child, a little girl, was born while they lived there.

Some of the residents had better health than others and helped with the farm work. Four of the men helped saw and split stove wood; two others helped with hoeing the garden and potatoes. One negro man had enlisted in the Union Army and fought in Fort Davidson in the Battle of Pilot Knob, Mo. One resident was a former butcher in Ironton; another had been a construction worker in Chicago.

During the 25 year period there were 37 deaths. Almost all of them were buried in the cemetery on the county farm. The superintendent and sons dug the graves and buried the inmates in caskets provided by the Iron County Court. Sometimes neighbors would help with the burials. No markers or headstones were placed at the graves except possibly a native stone.

In general the inmates of the county farm were good people, well-behaved and caused very little trouble. One purpose in writing this article has been to record a brief memorial to the residents of Iron County, Mo., who lived on the Iron County Farm.

The passage of the Federal Social Security Act and state welfare legislation brought about the gradual closing of county farms as a system of public welfare. In Sept., 1948, the Iron County Court sold the Iron County Farm to Dr. Paul Newman and his wife Grace for $6502.

I dedicate this article to our parents, William Tyler and Martha Evaline (Lewis) Keathley, who dedicated 25 years, 1912-1937, to operating the Iron County Farm and caring for the inmates sent there. □