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# The Poorhouse: Institutionalization of the Poor

Diane M. Huddleston

*Western Oregon University*, [dhuddleston07@wou.edu](mailto:dhuddleston07@wou.edu)

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## THE POORHOUSE: INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE POOR

*Into such a house, none shall enter voluntarily; work, confinement, and discipline, will deter the indolent and vicious; and nothing but extreme necessity will induce any to accept the comfort which must be obtained by the surrender of their free agency, and the sacrifice of their accustomed habits and gratifications.*

*English Poor Laws<sup>1</sup>*

The poor have always been with us, and our society has always made an attempt to offer some form of provision, which sometimes has not been enough and many times disputed. In colonial times and into the twentieth century, families were called upon to take care of their own poor, and if a destitute person had no family, the churches felt compelled to provide charity out of Christian duty. However, in countries where Protestantism took hold attitudes towards the poor changed and they came to be treated more harshly and judged as unproductive, indolent and vicious.<sup>2</sup> Being a pauper became synonymous with being a shiftless parasite, and pre-Progressive Era reformers felt pauperism could be repressed by punishment and discipline. Before the Progressive Era, people did not connect poverty with early market capitalism with its fluctuations in the economy which resulted in unemployment and other social problems. Rather, being poor was a character flaw that needed to be eradicated by punitive measures. Poorhouses were

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 33-34.

<sup>2</sup>Wagner, David, *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 4.

thought to be the answer and ultimate defense against the erosion of the work ethic in early industrial America.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will explore one of America's early institutions--the poorhouse, and how punitive measures would not deter poverty, because it was largely driven by low wages and unemployment, not character flaws. The argument is that while Progressive Era reformers sought better conditions and legislated for pensions which helped many avoid going into poorhouses, poverty could not be solved. As poorhouses began shutting down, the poor were redistributed into other institutions, namely mental institutions, where they became patients. The Progressive Era also brought the hygiene movements, including the Eugenics Movement. Eugenicists attributed poverty to inferior genetics, and when sterilization laws were passed to protect American racial and genetic purity, this was an indirect way to control poverty. In summary, poorhouses as institutions could not deter poverty by instilling a work ethic, because poverty was a socioeconomic impacted by the changes of modernization of industry and the growing Capitalist economy.

As primary sources, I have gathered some human-interest stories from old newspaper articles. I have consulted the Board of Charities and Corrections Biennial Report of 1892, which provided information to the governor and legislative assembly regarding the conditions of Oregon poor farms and their recommendations for them. I have consulted Census Bureau statistics from 1910, which lists the numbers of paupers in almshouses, and I have gathered general census statistics on populations from the 1890s to chart the trend in population growth and increasing poverty. I have taken samples

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<sup>3</sup>Michael B. Katz, *In The Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1986), 3.

from New York and Pennsylvania as older, more settled sections of the country to compare them with Oregon. Most of my secondary sources speak specifically about poorhouses in the Eastern United States where almshouses were first built in the eighteenth century. Oregon's poor farm system was roughly one hundred years behind the East in becoming established and in being phased out. I attribute this to the fact that the Eastern United States was established first as colonies and became more densely populated before the great migration west.

This topic is important because it informs the reader about the origins of our society's beliefs concerning poverty and its causes, and how this reflected the way the poor were treated. It is also important because the poorhouse was an early American welfare institution, which did not alleviate poverty because it did not address the social issues driving poverty. By the time of the Progressive Era, the poor were being politicized and it was becoming increasingly evident that institutions for the poor were not effective in eliminating poverty, but in many ways caused the poor to be enmeshed in a growing bureaucratic system along with being exploited by employers offering low wages. This was particularly true during downturns in the economy in the 1890s and 1907 when even the able-bodied who desperately wanted to work were unable to find jobs and had to seek public relief.

To avoid confusion, throughout this essay, I use the terms almshouse, poorhouse and poor farm interchangeably. They are all institutions for the poor; however, poor farms had working farms, which provided a large portion of food for the facility. The term outdoor relief is an allowance given to the poor by the county in which they lived if there was no poorhouse.

### **Brief History of Poor Relief**

The United States inherited many of its ideas and laws as transplants from Britain, including the concept of debtors' prisons, workhouses and almshouses. In colonial times, people who could not pay their debts were sent to debtors' prison, thus breaking up families. Children of these debtors could be put into service (like an indentured servant), as a way to help pay off debt. If the children could not be farmed out to relatives, being put into service also served as a type of foster home placement.

By the 1830s, state governments started implementing legislation mandating that counties provide poor farms or poorhouses. The conditions of these poorhouses should be harsh to deter all but the most desperate from seeking relief.<sup>4</sup> The poor came under the jurisdiction of the county where they lived (reminiscent of serfdom in Britain). The county was responsible for providing them with outdoor relief, which was a monetary allowance. This provision allowed many widows or disabled people to remain in their own homes and avoid being placed in the almshouse. The government enactment of the Civil War Soldier's Pension (1862) helped keep many veterans and their families out of almshouses

In the nineteenth century, America started building institutions to house social deviants. These institutions included prisons, reform schools, mental institutions and poorhouses. Pre-Progressive Era reformers believed that all the ills of society could be eradicated by logical and scientific methods of reform, rehabilitation and education through institutionalization. Timothy Askin related this belief: "The stigma of dependence is contagious. It is communicable by way of physical contact and also

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<sup>4</sup>Iceland, John, *Poverty In America: A Handbook*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 12.

association.”<sup>5</sup> As such, the stigma of unworthiness, ill treatment and being forced into a jail with horrible living conditions clung to the poor and was transferred to poorhouses and poor farms, and the poor became pariahs. Reformers fought against providing outdoor relief for paupers and saw institutions as a way to put an end to it. According to Skocpol, “. . . they often impeded governmental provision for dependent people during the nineteenth century. This happened partly because social policies for dependents were not broadly popular.”<sup>6</sup> Institutionalization was a way that professionals could control the poor. According to Katz,

Everywhere, reformers wanted to classify; to divide children into grades, with clear criteria for promotion; to sort the poor into moral categories; to classify the insane; to grade prisoners and delinquents and demarcate clear standards for passage from one category to another . . . In the case of poorhouses, the problem was the forces that made poverty a major problem in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America and the dramatic increase in the number of poor people asking for relief.<sup>7</sup>

According to Wagner, “Like the mental asylum, penitentiary, and home for unwed mothers that paralleled or followed the origin of the almshouse, the poorhouses’ intent was to reform the deviant and turn him or her into a productive citizen.”<sup>8</sup> As a punitive institution, poorhouses were total control institutions by taking control of all aspects of a person’s life. Katz states,

Institutions would seal off individuals from the corrupting, tempting, and distracting influences of the world long enough for a kind but firm regimen to transform their behavior and reorder their personalities. Even poorhouses shared in this rehabilitative vision;

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<sup>5</sup>Timothy B. Askin, “Oregon’s Forgotten Public Social Welfare Institutions: The Oregon State Hospital and the Multnomah County Poor Farm as Case Studies in the Challenge of Preserving Stigmatized Places,” M.S. diss., (University of Oregon, 2010), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 92.

<sup>7</sup>Michael B. Katz, *In The Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1986), 13.

<sup>8</sup>Wagner, 40.

they would suppress intemperance, the primary cause of pauperism, and inculcate the habit of steady work.<sup>9</sup>

Katz also states, “Each institution responded to a specific set of concerns. However, all of them confronted problems inherent to the great transformation of social experience that accompanied the emergence of capitalism in America.”<sup>10</sup>

Many charitable institutions were founded by philanthropists and then taken over by the state. Even though most of the elite in society were in favor of building poorhouses for the homeless and paupers, that was where their benevolence and charity ended. A 1905 *New York Times* article reported that in Greenwich, Connecticut, Charles A. Moore, I. N. P. Stokes and William G. Rockefeller secured an injunction that would stop the intended construction of a new poorhouse. “The men did not like to have it said that they lived on the road to the poorhouse.”<sup>11</sup> It is plain to see that the poor have been stigmatized by the beliefs held by society and the use of poorhouses as a form of punishment.

### **Poverty: A Byproduct of Industrialization**

The transformation of the United States into a capitalist economy in the mid-nineteenth century, changed the lives of many people. It was difficult for farmers to compete against new mechanized farming equipment. Factories were displacing skilled artisans because of mass production of goods that could be made quickly and sold cheaply. These previously autonomous and self-employed individuals became part of the work force, selling their physical labor for wages at factories or for small business owners.

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<sup>9</sup>Katz, 11.

<sup>10</sup>Katz, 11.

<sup>11</sup>*New York Times*, “Fight Over Poorhouse,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1905.

Many people had to move to the cities where there were more employment opportunities. A lot of jobs were seasonal and there would be no work, especially during winter months. Besides seasonal job layoffs, others could be laid off because of the built-in highs and lows of the competitive nature of a capitalist market economy. Many men and women become transient with no roots. The first migrant farm workers were hobos who traveled by rail cross country in search for jobs.

The chart below shows that urban populations consistently increased in New York, Pennsylvania and Oregon. The year 1890 designates the beginning of the Progressive Era and 1910 is more than midway through the era, but it also designates a Census year. All three states show increases in urban populations between 1890 and 1910. New York is the only state that shows a decrease in rural population between 1890 and 1910. The increase in urban growth, particularly in the East, correlates to times when workers and immigrants were moving to the areas of industry where there were more factory jobs.

Populations –Urban and Rural<sup>12</sup>

<u>New York</u>	<u>1890</u>	<u>1910</u>
Urban	3,910,278	7,188,133
Rural	2,092,896	1,925,483
<u>Pennsylvania</u>	<u>1890</u>	<u>1910</u>
Urban	2,557,397	4,630,669
Rural	2,700,716	3,034,442

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<sup>12</sup>John L. Androit, Ed., *Population Abstract of the United States*, (McLean: Andriot Association, 1983).



<u>Oregon</u>	<u>1890</u>	<u>1910</u>
Urban	88,491	307,060
Rural	229,213	365,705

### **Positive Progressive Era Reforms**

Even an old horse will be given pasture, or decently killed and put out of misery. A woman, no matter how well she may have done her duty in early years, is allowed to shift for herself . . . Must she starve or go to the poorhouse?

*New York Times* letter to the editor excerpt, 1907<sup>13</sup>

Institutionalization was still popular during the Progressive Era; however, poorhouses were becoming unpopular in the early 1900s and would eventually be replaced with old folks' homes and mental institutions. But first, reformers had to deal with the poorhouse populations. Poorhouses were becoming a burden on the counties that supported them.<sup>14</sup> Somewhere along the line, institutionalizing the poor with the intent to deter poverty by rehabilitating the poor by instilling the work ethic backfired. It backfired because the belief that sending people to poorhouses would deter poverty were in error. Increases in unemployment and economic hardships during the recessions of the 1890s and 1907 caused poorhouses and poor farms to become overcrowded and many had to be enlarged or replaced by new ones. The overcrowding was first blamed on able-bodied people taking advantage of the system; however, this was debunked when whole families were in need of public assistance because of lack of jobs.

Some counties were spending money on upkeep of poorhouses and others were paying contracted "caretakers" when there were no county poorhouses. Fostering the poor was a way to provide for additional income and many contractors abused the ones

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<sup>13</sup>*New York Times*, "Even Horses Are Treated More Mercifully, Says Mrs. Mulliner," *New York Times*, July 15, 1907.

<sup>14</sup>Iceland, 12.

they were being paid to care for. The public was becoming more aware of abuses and started insisting that the local governments do something. An 1891 *New York Times* article reported a fire that broke out in a poorhouse in Maine. It stated, “There were ten paupers in **two locked rooms** who were rescued with difficulty.”<sup>15</sup> When complaints were waged concerning the conditions in poorhouses and the treatment of inmates, reformers set about to make changes in conditions for humanitarian reasons which conflicted with the original intent that poorhouses be punitive to deter poverty. Due to public arousal, local governments stepped in to make inspections and make efforts to combat abuse. Poorhouse managers were compelled to make living conditions better with clean accommodations and wholesome food. Poorhouse managers and officials became frustrated with able-bodied men who took advantage of the system until the weather got warmer or until they found a paying job. Authorities wanted to make sure that the deserving poor were the ones that tax payers were supporting. The deserving poor were people who were truly destitute opposed to able-bodied workers who were believed to be taking advantage of the system. .

A 1913 article in the *New York Times* states, “To remove the stigma of pauperism attached to the designation ‘almshouse’ or ‘poorhouse,’ Assemblyman Levy (of Albany, New York) introduced a bill to provide for the establishment of a home for the aged . . . Many a poor and helpless man and woman have sought to die in starvation rather than submit to what they regarded as the shame attending their admission into almshouses and poorhouses.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*New York Times*, “Poorhouse Inmates Rescued,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1891. (My emphasis).

<sup>16</sup>*New York Times*, “Plans Home for the Aged,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1913.

The following chart is a sampling from the 1910 census. The country was divided into nine sections. The Middle Atlantic section includes New York and Pennsylvania (mentioned in previous charts). The Pacific section comprises Washington, Oregon and California with California having the largest poorhouse population. This chart shows higher numbers in the densely populated areas in the East and sheds some light on the numbers of paupers for whom Progressive Era reformers were trying to advocate changes.

#### Paupers in Poorhouses in 1910<sup>17</sup>

##### Geographic Divisions

New England	14,716
Middle Atlantic	23,937
East North Central	17,116
West North Central	4,583
South Atlantic	7,945
East South Central	3,086
West South Central	2,068
Mountain	3,505
Pacific	11,365

Out of the total geographic divisions above are the following total populations of poor in poorhouses. Oregon numbers are low because Oregon was not as densely populated.

All States	88,313
Oregon	504
New York	12,724
Pennsylvania	9,467

The following chart is compiled from the 1910 census and depicts a sampling of numbers of poor in poorhouses and their occupations. This shows that these people had

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<sup>17</sup>Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Bulletin 111, Cotton Production and Statistics of Cotton Seed Products, 1910*, (Washington: Government Printing Center, 1911), 695, 700.

occupations but were just not able to find work. Farmers could work their own land or work for someone else (this is not differentiated in the census documents).<sup>18</sup>

	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Manufacturing/Trades (Includes factory workers)	14,848	1,799
Farmers	6,255	481
Railroad laborers	1,214	--
Unspecified laborers	10,197	147
Textile laborers	499	426
House servants	14,057	10,622

Progressive Era reformers became disgusted by the corruption of patronage democracy and the political maneuvering of politicians concerning public welfare and pandering to whichever interest group would cast the most votes for re-election. Public authority was limited and weak at that time and bosses ran big cities. These bosses remained in power by giving services to get votes. They would support whatever profited them, either giving outdoor relief or institutionalization. Sutton states, “The fundamental task of any political regime is to legitimize its own existence and, in the modern state, policies of social control and social welfare play a central role in the legitimation process.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Katz states, “. . . lucrative contracts to supply poorhouses, fees for local doctors hired to treat their inmates, and the circulation of enough cash to sustain grocers and tavern keepers won the loyalty of small businessmen and professionals.”<sup>20</sup> Skocpol states that they were “alarmed by the rising costs and complexity of care for dependents in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society. . . reformers championed measures designed to take public welfare provision out of . . . the

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<sup>18</sup>Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Bulletin 111, Cotton Production and Statistics of Cotton Seed Products, 1910*, (Washington: Government Printing Center, 1911), 706-07.

<sup>19</sup>Sutton, John R., “The Political Economy of Madness: The Expansion of the Asylum in Progressive America,” *Sociological Review* 56, No. 5 (Oct. 1991), 669.

<sup>20</sup>Katz, xi.

grip of patronage-oriented political parties . . .”<sup>21</sup> In the Progressive Era regulatory boards were established, such as the State Boards of Charities and Corrections. Sutton states, “Local officials as well as national reform associations agreed that poorhouses offered neither a convincing deterrent to the able-bodied nor a humane refuge to the helpless.”<sup>22</sup> The State of Oregon designated a Board of Charities and Corrections that inspected the Oregon poor farms in 1892.

One progressive reformer was Josephine Shaw Lowell of New York. She worked for various agencies such as the Sanitation Commission, and founded the New York State Charities Aid Association. She was appointed to the State Board of Charities after she reported on conditions of jails and almshouses. In 1890 she left the State Board of Charities to begin advocating for laborers and labor unions because it became apparent to her that the major cause of poverty among the able-bodied was due to low wages. She helped found the Consumer’s League of New York and tried to organize protests against sweatshops.<sup>23</sup>

Due to growing management problems, ill-treatment and increasing numbers of the poor, Progressive Era reformers tried to find ways to empty the poorhouses. In the early 1900s, emphasis began to be placed on the importance of children and preservation of families. As unemployment rose, whole families were in need of public assistance and at risk of being placed in poorhouses. Before 1909, children had been forced to work long hours in dangerous and unhealthy sweatshops to help families stave off poverty, but progressives brought reforms to the workplace by endorsing laws to prohibit young

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<sup>21</sup>Skocpol, 95.

<sup>22</sup>Sutton, John R., “The Political Economy of Madness: The Expansion of the Asylum in Progressive America,” *Sociological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 5 (Oct. 1991), 667.

<sup>23</sup>Katz, 68-69.

children from working in factories. Reformers believed that children should be saved from anything that would rob them of their innocence.<sup>24</sup> This is in contrast to earlier reformers' beliefs (before the 1880s) that children should be taken away from poor families.<sup>25</sup> During the 1909 White House Conference on Children, it was determined that children of worthy parents and/or deserving mothers should be kept at home with their parents."<sup>26</sup> But in order to keep children out of poorhouses and prevent the breaking up of families, officials would have to reinstate outdoor relief. A way to do this and place controls on who was obtaining relief, was the provision of mothers' pensions.

This pension would enable widowed mothers and other deserving mothers (who had no other support) to keep themselves and their children out of the poor farm. The pension would also enable mothers to stay at home to take care of their families instead of having to take low-paying jobs. These pensions also were to keep children in school. These women were carefully screened before given the pension to make sure they would keep good homes. Taking mothers and their children out of poorhouses brought inmate numbers down.

In 1904 Theodore Roosevelt ruled that old age was a disability, and the legislation concerning Civil War pensions (given to Confederate veterans) reflected this by changing the pension to reflect old age as being a legitimate claim for the pension. This kept a lot of veterans from being placed in institutions. While mothers' pensions and War pensions

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<sup>24</sup>Anthony Platt, "The Rise of the Child-Saving Movement: A Study in Social Policy and Correctional Reform," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 381, The Future of Corrections (Jan. 1969), 28.

<sup>25</sup>Katz, 124.

<sup>26</sup>Katz, 124.

were enacted, unfortunately, provisions for old age pensions (for everyone) were not because of fears about new public social spending.<sup>27</sup>

### **Oregon Poor Farms During the Progressive Era**

During the Progressive Era, poorhouses in the Eastern United States were beginning to be slowly phased out. However, in 1892 Oregon had seven counties with poor farms and by 1926 it had seventeen. During the Progressive Era, poorhouses began transferring inmates into old age homes and mental hospitals. John Sutton notes: “. . . as reformers succeeded in shutting down almshouses, asylums were forced to absorb many of the more difficult cases of dependency.”<sup>28</sup> According to Katz, “. . . by the early twentieth century poorhouses had been transformed from family refuges to old-age homes. The process . . . took nearly a century . . .”<sup>29</sup> Oregon poor farms began slowly phasing out after World War II.

In 1892 the Board of Charities and Corrections wrote a report to the governor of Oregon regarding its findings after conducting inspections of Oregon’s various institutions, including the state penitentiary, county or city jails, the state insane asylum, reform schools and county poor farms. In that report, the philosophy (or mission statement) of the Board of Charities and Corrections states the following under general principles:

The hospital for the insane, poor farm and the county and state institutions for “God’s poor” or afflicted, are not places of punishment, and while every effort should be made to carry them on economically, this economy should never be carried to the point

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<sup>27</sup>Skocpol, 427.

<sup>28</sup>Sutton, John R., “The Political Economy of Madness: The Expansion of the Asylum in Progressive America,” *Sociological Review*, 56, no. 5 (Oct. 1991), 671.

<sup>29</sup>Katz, 85.

of depriving these dependents of any of the necessary comforts of life.<sup>30</sup>

The Board of Charities and Corrections members were Reverend C. E. Cline of Woodstock; Thomas N. Strong of Portland; W. E. Carl, M.D., of Oregon City; Reverend J. S. White of Salem; D. Solis Cohen of Portland; and W. E. Rinehart, M.D., from The Dalles. From looking at the Board members' names, titles and where they were from, it can be assumed that these men were professionals and/or experts and all were upstanding members of their communities. The Board was divided into committees that oversaw inspections of assigned institutions; however, the whole committee oversaw inspections of the poor farms. It published its first and only report in 1892 concerning finances, descriptions and recommendations for all the above institutions throughout the state.

By 1892, seven counties, Baker, Coos, Douglas, Marion, Multnomah, Umatilla, and Union, had poor farms. Most counties supplied everything, including the facility, and it hired help and paid bills, including maintenance, medical bills for the sick and burial expenses. Poor farms were under the supervision of the county judge, and a superintendent and matron ran them.<sup>31</sup>

The counties without poor farms did not justify building a facility so the poor were maintained on outdoor relief or by contracting with private who bid the lowest price per inmate. In other words, the county would pay private contractors to take care of the poor, similar to foster care today. Sometimes the contract system provided excellent homes and sometimes it did not. Some private contractors did it solely for the money. When giving the positive report on the Umatilla poor farm, the Board reported, "It is only

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<sup>30</sup>State Board of Charities and Corrections, *First Biennial Report For the Partial Biennial Period Ending 12/31/1892*, (Portland: F.W. Baltes and Company, Printers, 1892), 7.

<sup>31</sup>Board of Charities, 142.



in extremely rare instances, if ever, that any thing so good as this is secured by the contract system. Human nature is human nature, and a contractor has always before him a motive for slighting his work in the interest of an economy that directly benefits himself.”<sup>32</sup> The Board stated, “Even worse is the situation of that person who is provided for by relations who demand pay from the county for performing a duty they should be ashamed to shirk.”<sup>33</sup> The Board also commented on the considerable neglect shown by some officials who thought the poor farms were a waste of good land and county funds.<sup>34</sup>

Hillside Farm, in Multnomah County, was built in 1868 and located west of the city limits.<sup>35</sup> It was situated on 200 acres. The land was purchased for \$3,000 and at the time of the Board’s report, it was worth \$200,000.<sup>36</sup> The rest of the land was covered with buildings. The facility was run under the complete ownership and control of Multnomah County with supervision by the county judge. A superintendent and matron ran the farm. The property consisted of a heavily wooded area that provided firewood, an orchard and garden. The report goes into detail describing the different buildings and their uses, consisting of the main house, living quarters, bathrooms, kitchen and laundry facilities. The main house was split into segregated wings for men and women. There was another outer building for the men. In the main building there was a chapel, dining room and kitchen. The women’s rooms were big enough to hold two persons and they were responsible for keeping care of their own rooms. The report noted that the rooms and hallways were clean and the ventilation and atmosphere was pure (especially during

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<sup>32</sup>Board of Charities, 156-57.

<sup>33</sup>Board of Charities, 21.

<sup>34</sup>Board of Charities, 22.

<sup>35</sup>Sharon Nesbit and Tim Hills, *Vintage Edgefield: A History of the Multnomah County Poor Farm*, (McMenamins, Inc., 2002), 8. In 1911 Hillside Farm was replaced with the Multnomah Poor Farm, which is now known as Edgefield Manor.

<sup>36</sup>Board of Charities, 141.

warm weather when windows were open). It was suggested that a sitting room be added with provision for a fire so the women could congregate and not have to stay in their rooms. There was a bathroom with running water; however it was recommended that hot water be connected so that the tub could be more readily used. There was an operating room and dispensary for the county physician and a dormitory upstairs for the men. The men's quarters were clean but not as tidy as other rooms that were inspected. There was a bathroom upstairs with tub connected to hot and cold water. There was an outhouse provided for the occupants of the outer buildings. Men ate their meals at tables in the dining room and women took their meals in their rooms. It was recommended that the poor farm have a separate hospital ward because there had been two cases of typhoid fever, an inmate with an abscess and a woman who was confined (pregnant).<sup>37</sup>

The Board reported that the overall management was very good and the inmates appeared to be well cared for. The report states, "It takes care and close attention to preserve even a semblance of neatness and cleanliness in such a place, and the appearance of this one speaks well for its management."<sup>38</sup> Cooks baked bread daily and the food was well prepared, consisting of meat and vegetables. The farm had ten dairy cows and abundant chickens. During the year 1891 the farm had helped 266 inmates (122 native born and 144 foreign). The farm usually had more male residents than women. By the end of that year, there were 49 men and 9 women in residence.<sup>39</sup>

Umatilla County was listed as the best poor farm in the state. The Board reported the following:

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<sup>37</sup>Board of Charities, 142-46

<sup>38</sup>Board of Charities, 143.

<sup>39</sup>Board of Charities, 147.

The poor farm of Umatilla county is conducted on the system the board deems the best calculated to fulfill the object that should be sought, the supplying of a comfortable home, with plenty of good food and comfortable clothing, to the unfortunate poor the county is called upon to support. . . Umatilla has done wisely in adopting the poor farm system, and the kindly, intelligent and thorough supervision of her officials . . . so far as it relates to the matters examined by this board, merits this high commendation.<sup>40</sup>

The land was four acres and purchased in 1886 for \$1,000. Its value at the time of the Board's report was \$7,000. It was located within the city limits of Pendleton. It consisted of two buildings. One had a large sitting room where the men stayed. The larger building had rooms for women downstairs and rooms for men upstairs. It had a dining room and kitchen. There was hot and cold running water for the two bathrooms and an outhouse for the yard. The report stated, "The inmates are required to bathe at least once a week, and to change underclothing as often."<sup>41</sup> The farm had an orchard, a garden and two cows. The farm usually had about 15 in residence. By the end of 1891, it had helped 36 people. There were usually twice as many men as women inmates.<sup>42</sup>

The Marion County poor farm was located three miles north of Salem on the Willamette River. It was on 33 acres and consisted of an orchard, timberland and a garden. There were two houses connected by a porch and dining room. The big house was where the superintendent lived and had a kitchen in the back, which was used for the whole farm. The other house was for the residents and had a 15-person capacity. Downstairs there were six bedrooms a bath. The upstairs had nine bedrooms. The bathrooms had hot and cold running water. The Board reported,

Inmates bathe once or twice a week. They presented a cleanly appearance. Bedding is washed occasionally. Some of the blankets were not very

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<sup>40</sup>Board of Charities, 154, 157.

<sup>41</sup>Board of Charities, 156.

<sup>42</sup>Board of Charities, 154-56.

clean. Wire mattresses are used on the beds, with straw and wool ticks. Sheets and pillowcases may be had by all who desire them, but some prefer blankets only. Underclothing is washed weekly at a laundry at the county expense. The house is much in need of repairs. . . In this respect it was inferior to some other poor farms in the state.<sup>43</sup>

The residents did not have to work, but they were required to take care of their own rooms. They could help out in the dining room or in the yard if they wanted to. Books and papers were provided by outside donors and church services were held monthly. The county physician would come out if someone was sick. There were a total of 27 residents (20 men and 7 women) at the time of the inspection. After inspection the Board recommended a new building as the house was in dire need of repair. Apparently this facility was actually run by an outside contractor, as the reported stated,

The contractor in charge at the time of this inspection was receiving \$2.75 per week for each inmate. A new contract to another person has since been let for \$2.49. This is but little more than one-half the amount paid the sheriff for boarding county prisoners and is about one-third the amount paid the city marshal of Salem for feeding drunks and tramps in the city lock-up. . . There is an unfortunate tendency in this county, as in many others, to visit honest poverty with more severe punishment than crime, and to feed and care for its prisoners better than its poor.<sup>44</sup>

The Board of Charities and Corrections concluded that the poor farm system was better than contracting out the poor. However, it stated that money spent on outdoor relief was more (\$14,153) than the cost of the farms (9,675).<sup>45</sup> Part of the cost was due to outdoor relief being given to some who were unworthy, thus promoting pauperism and burdening taxpayers. Along with its benevolent attitude toward the poor, the old concept of punishment was also expressed as the Board was adamant in its opinion that those that

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<sup>43</sup>Board of Charities, 122.

<sup>44</sup>Board of Charities, 123.

<sup>45</sup>Board of Charities, 23.

would not work should be disciplined by cold and hunger into a more honest and manly frame of mind.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1892 report, the Board of Charities and Corrections was candid in its descriptions of all facilities and its recommendations by reporting abysmal conditions of some of the jails and poorhouses. After the publication of this first and only biennial report, the Board was disbanded. (The reasons for this were not discovered during this research). This made Oregon one of the few states to have no state-level supervision of poor farms.<sup>47</sup> As a result, Oregon's poor farms continued to deteriorate because there were no official inspectors. If there were inspections, they were carried out by concerned private citizens and usually to follow up when complaints of abuse surfaced.

On taking another look at Multnomah County Poor Farm, by 1911 the Hillside Farm had become terribly run down. According to Nesbit and Hills, “. . . grim-lipped do-gooders found a scene straight out of Dickens . . . raising such a fuss that the county hustled to build a new poor farm . . .”<sup>48</sup> Hillside was replaced by the Multnomah County Poor Farm (now known as Edgefield) and became quite successful, providing enough produce to feed its inhabitants as well as those at the county jail and hospital.

Nesbit and Hills state, “From its opening in 1911 until 1947, Edgefield was the largest county-funded relief institution in Oregon, and for that, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.”<sup>49</sup> Even Edgefield enforced some disciplinary actions. The inmates were segregated at meal times and the ones who refused to work sat at ‘mush tables’ and those who worked sat at “meat tables.” Inmates at the meat tables

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<sup>46</sup>Board of Charities, 24.

<sup>47</sup>Askin, 51

<sup>48</sup>Nesbit, 8.

<sup>49</sup>Nesbit, 6.

were served meat three times a day, and the musers were served meat once or twice daily.<sup>50</sup>

### **Negative Progressive Era Reforms**

Between 1880 and the 1920 poorhouses declined and mental asylums expanded. It was becoming clear that poorhouses were not economical but expensive and they did not deter poverty as was once thought they would. The poor that were not eligible for mother's or widow's pensions or soldier's pensions were dispersed into other types of institutions. According to Katz,

Within policy, the great theme was the attempt to siphon special groups from the poorhouses into separate institutions. The blind and the deaf and dumb were the first to receive separate institutional care, but the three groups that caused the most controversy and the most difficulty were children, the mentally ill, and the able-bodied. In time, their removal from poorhouses produced greatly enlarged orphanages, huge custodial hospitals for the chronic insane and flophouses for the newly homeless."<sup>51</sup>

The expansion of mental hospitals was more rapid in states with more money that could be mobilized from fiscal resources. Sutton states, "Given the high levels of dependency among the aged and fluid definitions of insanity that prevailed at the turn of the century, there was a surfeit of candidates for institutional treatment."<sup>52</sup> The elderly poor were transferred to mental hospitals, which saved counties money because these hospitals were funded by the state. During the Progressive Era, mental hospital populations were outnumbering state and federal prisons, reformatories and poorhouses, and Sutton states, ". . . their expansion resulted from reformers' persistent failure to address the problem of poverty."<sup>53</sup> Sutton also states, ". . . the expansion of asylums was

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<sup>50</sup>Nesbit, 11.

<sup>51</sup>Katz, 85.

<sup>52</sup>Sutton, 675.

<sup>53</sup>Sutton, 666.

driven by the incapacity of U.S. government to generate systemic solutions in the problem of poverty.”<sup>54</sup>

During the mid-nineteen century and steadily on, massive numbers of European immigrants were coming to the land of opportunity and African-Americans were moving to the big Northern cities to escape Southern racism. These factors contributed to the increasing numbers of poor in urban areas because there were more people than there were jobs. According to Katz, “The availability of work for every able-bodied person who really wants a job is one of the enduring myths of American history.”<sup>55</sup>

As it became clear that poverty may not be inherently because of moral issues, social Darwinists and eugenicists (considered at the time to be a reform group) began theorizing that poverty among immigrants and the non-white races was due to laziness and other negative characteristics passed on through faulty genetics and base heredity.

In the early 1900s, the Eugenics Movement established close ties to welfare and justified punitive treatment of paupers and brought back the worthy and unworthy categories for the poor. Dependence was considered a problem passed through genetics.<sup>56</sup> Mental hospitals and other charitable institutions became targeted by eugenics groups, but according to Katz, “Sterilization was easier than institutionalization.”<sup>57</sup> As the Eugenics Movement gained momentum as one of the many branches of the Hygienic Movement, legitimized by its ranks of professionals who administered scientific methods. These professionals began transitioning paupers into patients.<sup>58</sup> In 1914, the Model Eugenic Sterilization Law was proposed to allow sterilization of those thought to be

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<sup>54</sup>Sutton, 675.

<sup>55</sup>Katz, 6.

<sup>56</sup>Katz, 182.

<sup>57</sup>Katz, 183.

<sup>58</sup>Katz, 185.

socially inadequate. This encompassed a broad range of people, including the “feebleminded, insane, criminalistics, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed and dependent, including orphans, ne’er-do-wells, tramps, **the homeless and paupers.**”<sup>59</sup>

When more immigrants were filling the poorhouses and the Hygiene Movement’s education and reform measures were starting to be addressed in the big cities, the Eugenics Movement started a campaign of genetic hygiene as well. According to Michael Mezzano, new immigrants were believed to be eroding the racial quality of the American people and there was “pervasiveness of the belief that new immigrants were biologically inferior to older immigrants and native-born Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>60</sup> Paul Popenoe was a biologist and journalist who advocated for eugenics. He believed that charity was the reason society had so many degenerates that had survived for so long.<sup>61</sup>

Bethenia Owens-Adair, M.D., was a predominant advocate for eugenics in Oregon. She lobbied ten years for a sterilization bill. It was signed by Governor Withycombe in 1917 and codified into Oregon Law in 1920. When addressing a W.C.T.U. convention, she referred to hygiene and heredity as being one of God’s great laws. She went on to state,

Through the knowledge of this law we can and must protect our nation from insanity, epilepsy and the varied train of abnormalities that follow in their wake. . . I believe it will not require more than one century to effectually close the doors of our penitentiaries, insane asylums, rescue homes, reform schools and all like institutions under whose burdens we are now groaning, mentally, physically and financially.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Paul Lombardo, “Eugenics Sterilization Laws,” Cold Spring Harbor Lab Research Archives, <http://eugenicsarchive.org>. (My emphasis).

<sup>60</sup>Michael Mezzano, “The Progressive Origins of Eugenics Critics: Raymond Pearl, Herbert S. Jennings, and the Defense of Scientific Inquiry,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 4, no. 1 (Jan, 2005), 83.

<sup>61</sup>Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 106.

<sup>62</sup>Bethenia Owens-Adair, *Dr. Owens-Adair: Some of Her Life Experiences*, (Portland: Mann and Beach Printers, 1906), 387-88.



The very poor, the mentally ill, handicapped, feeble-minded and foreigners were targeted for sterilization because they were easy targets and unprotected. This was a backdoor way of preventing poverty, by not allowing dependents and those thought to be deficient to breed. In a letter to the *Oregonian*, Owens-Adair presented sterilization as a solution to eradicating the vicious criminal classes. She stated, “. . . and to my mind this is the lament that should be dealt with, not by chloroform or strangulation, but by the science of surgery . . .”<sup>63</sup> Again, the theory of dependency being a genetic trait was proved wrong when so many thousands of people were unable to get work and poverty was becoming an economically-imposed epidemic. “Vicious” criminals may only be ordinary people doing desperate deeds because of socioeconomics.

The chart below is a sampling of the years 1890 through 1915 with national unemployment percentages. Within this time span there were historically two periods of economic downturns in the mid 1890s and around 1907.<sup>64</sup>

1890	4.0%	1908	8.0%
1894	18.4%	1910	5.9%
1898	12.4%	1915	8.5%
1902	3.7%		

### **Conclusion**

The history of poverty and public relief is an interesting and sad one. It seems that the poor have always been on the lowest rung on the ladder in our society and at the mercy of others writing laws and making rules for their provision. The Progressive Era brought positive and negative reforms for the care of the poor.

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<sup>63</sup>Oregon State Museum Project, “Suffrage and Sterilization: Dr. Owens-Adair, <http://oshmuseum.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/suffrage-and-sterilization-dr-owens-adair>.

<sup>64</sup>George Thomas Kurian, *Datapedia of the United States 1790-2005 Year by Year*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Lanham: Bernan Press, 2001), 85.

Soldiers' pensions were changed to include old age benefits for veterans and kept a lot of elderly men out of poorhouses. However, the only safety net for most elderly people was their family. Families usually took care of their aged relatives, but this became more difficult with industrialization when family members were out of work through no fault of their own but affected by the instability of the capitalist market. If families could not support their relatives, many times the only recourse was to go to the poorhouse, ask for outdoor relief or be contracted to a caregiver. As poorhouses became more burdensome and costly for local governments to manage, some became old folks' homes; however, many of the elderly poor were transferred into mental institutions where they would be cared for by the state.

When Progressive reformers began promoting the importance of children and healthy families, they argued that poorhouses and other institutions were no places for children. They believed families should not be split up as long as the children had a deserving parent or parents that could care for them. With the institution of mothers' pensions, mothers and their children could be kept out of poorhouses and remain in their own homes. These pensions were also intended to provide enough money so that women could stay at home and provide a nurturing environment for their children instead of working long hours at a low-wage job. Reformers also brought about changes in labor laws, which would prohibit children from working in factories and mandate that every child should be in school and provided an education.

During the Progressive Era, the poorhouse, as an institution, was phased out and the mental institutions gained renewed popularity. Mental hospitals, along with institutions for the handicapped, were total institutions run by professionals. Although

these medical and psychiatric practitioners claimed to be scientific, many of their theories have been proved to be erroneous and harmful. With their lack of knowledge, the categories of mental illness and insanity incorporated many thousands of people who were not insane, which led to the needless suffering of many. The Eugenics Movement is an unfortunate stain on the Progressive Era in that its so-called scientific expertise in genetics was nothing but a cloak for elitist prejudice and racism against minorities, the handicapped, and other unfortunates.

The poor have always been present in the fringe of society. Today we do not have debtor's prisons or workhouses to punish them, and poverty is no longer considered to be a moral issue or caused by defective genes. However, the stigma that has surrounded poverty for centuries remains. Throughout history, most causes of poverty have been socioeconomically driven. As seen in some of the Census Bureau documents and as commented on by Frances Fox and Piven and Richard A. Cloward, industrialism and capitalism brought instability to many people's lives, especially during downturns in the economy.<sup>65</sup> When masses of people could not find jobs, the numbers of paupers rose and more needed to claim public relief. In the end poorhouses did not deter poverty, because they could not protect people against downturns in the economy.

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<sup>65</sup>Piven, 4.

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