



Chase County Poor Farm, Elmdale, Kansas.

“Over the Hill to the Poorhouse”: Kansas Poor Relief

by Marilyn Irvin Holt

Reflecting upon her Kansas childhood, Lettie Little Pabst wrote that despite uncertain times and financial insecurities, she grew up believing her parents’ hard work would keep the family from going “over the hill to the poorhouse.”¹ People might make offhand remarks about going to the poorhouse if someone overspent or seemed unable to keep ahead of debt, but the poorhouse, or poor farm, was not an imaginary place. It was a physical reality, and by the early twentieth century, most Kansas counties had one. This article explores the genesis of the poor farm as the centerpiece of local poor relief in Kansas, examines the working mechanics of these institutions, and finally considers factors that led to their demise.

While the terms “poorhouse” and “poor farm” were used interchangeably, state and local governments in Kansas generally referred to the institution as a “poor farm.” The concept had its origins in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legal and social traditions, including the English Poor Law of 1601 (which levied a public tax for the maintenance of the poor); the 1697 creation of workhouses for able-bodied poor; the 1788 English law that established almshouses for the aged, sick, and women and children unable to work; and the 1662 Settlement Act, which made residency in a town or parish a condition for receiving assistance. In America, state and territorial laws later followed the language and intent of English statutes as templates for enacting their own poor laws. The Wyandotte Constitution, under which Kansas joined the Union as a state, addressed caring for the impoverished who, for any number of reasons, were unable to support themselves. Under this constitution, each county was responsible for its resident poor, and county commissioners were charged with providing “for those inhabitants who, by reason of age, infirmity or other misfortune, may have claims upon the sympathy and aid of society.”²

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1. Lettie Little Pabst, *Kansas Heritage* (New York: Vantage Press, 1976), 12, 15.

2. Kansas Emergency Relief Committee (KERC), “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” *KERC Bulletin* 307 (October 1935): 1; Ks. Const. of 1860, art. vii, § 4; John E. Hansan, “Poor Relief in Early America,” 2011, Social Welfare History Project Online, <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/programs/poor-relief-early-amer>.

How the commissioners carried out their duties was not specified by the Kansas constitution, although commissioners could be charged with a misdemeanor if they intentionally tried to rid themselves of problem poor by sending them to another county. Acceptable options for poor relief followed common practices of the time. The county could provide “outdoor relief,” which kept the impoverished in their own homes, where they were supplied with “reasonable supplies of provisions” and “absolute necessities” such as heating and cooking fuel. The county could place the indigent in private homes under a contract system that paid a lump sum to a family willing to care for the dependent person. Poor families could be broken up, with children sent to orphanages or indentured to work as farm hands or domestics. Commissioners also sought, though not always successfully, to relocate individuals to state institutions, particularly those established to house and care for the insane. Osawatomie State Hospital (opened in 1866), Topeka State Hospital (established in 1872), and Larned State Hospital for the Insane (opened in 1914) were available. At one time or another, county commissioners in Kansas used all of these options, both before and after a county poor farm was established for local poor relief.³

Settlers arriving in Kansas from other states brought ideas and institutions that were familiar, including the poorhouse/poor farm that was commonly found in states east of the Mississippi. Charged with looking after the poor, county officials applied known methods to meet their responsibilities. The first poor farms were established in the years immediately after the Civil War, when homesteaders and town builders began to migrate into Kansas in large numbers. In 1866 Leavenworth and Douglas Counties were the first to open poor farms, with Doniphan following in 1867, Jefferson in 1868, and Nemaha in 1869. Between 1869 and 1879 sixteen more counties opened poorhouses. In the next ten years, thirty-three more were added to the list. Included in this latter group were Hodgeman, Marion, Pawnee, and Stafford

3. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Paupers in Almshouses, 1904* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 43; Hansan, “Poor Relief in Early America.” “Relief,” not “welfare,” was the commonly used term prior to the twentieth century; “welfare” began to appear more regularly during the second decade of the twentieth century and became the more acceptable term by midcentury. See Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 335.

Counties, which, like other counties, initially funded the purchase of land and construction of a residence by issuing bonds. State law allowed counties to issue bonds for building bridges, jails, or other public structures, but to ensure that counties would not incur more debt than they could handle, counties were required to petition the state legislature for bond sale approval. The legislature generally accommodated counties, but within limits. Stafford County, for instance, could issue bonds only to the amount of six thousand dollars for financing building construction and land purchase, and Marion County was limited by the legislature to spending no more than fifty dollars an acre on its land purchase. How much acreage made up poor farm property was left for county officials to decide, although legislative mandates set a maximum limit of 320 acres.⁴

Despite the start-up costs associated with establishing poor farms, the number continued to grow during the last years of the nineteenth century as settlers moved into the state’s western regions and new counties were created. By the end of the century, eighty of Kansas’s 105 counties maintained poor farms. By 1912 only eleven counties were still without. The majority of poor farms averaged in-house populations of twenty to fifty, but more populous counties such as Leavenworth, Reno, Sedgwick, Shawnee, and Wyandotte usually averaged between fifty and one hundred.⁵

In most counties, one commissioner was selected to act as the “poor” commissioner. The job entailed identifying those in need of aid and signing the written order for admission to the poor farm. By law, aid went to any persons unable to support themselves because of age, lack of family help, physical disability, or illness. No other requirements, such as meeting criteria for a

4. KERC, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 1; “An Act to Authorize the Board of County Commissioners and the Authorities of Incorporated Cities to Issue Bonds for the Purposes of Internal Improvements,” in *Laws of Kansas Authorizing the Issue of Municipal Bonds* (New York: National Printing Co., 1871), 3–5; *Session Laws of 1887* (Topeka: State Printer, 1887), 197, 184; *Session Laws of 1888* (Topeka: State Printer, 1888), 110; *Session Laws of 1889* (Topeka: State Printer, 1889), 152. Johnson County probably had one of the earlier poor farms, but sources do not agree on a start-up date, varying from 1863 to 1866 to 1868.

5. KERC, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 1, 5; *Fifth Biennial Report of the Board of Control of the State Charitable Institutions of Kansas for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1914* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Office, 1914), 34; “No Poor Farms,” *Topeka State Journal*, November 18, 1916. For one enumeration of poor-farm residents by county, see Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Paupers in Almshouses, 1910* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 56.



The first poor farms were established in the years immediately after the Civil War, when people began to migrate into Kansas in large numbers. In 1866 Leavenworth and Douglas were the first counties to open poor farms. Pictured here is the Douglas County poor farm as it appeared around the turn of the twentieth century. Courtesy of the Douglas County Historical Society/Watkins Museum of History, Lawrence, Kansas.

defined poverty-level income, were imposed. Individuals receiving county aid were the “worthy” poor, as opposed to people who were able-bodied and capable of work but who seemed disinclined to help themselves. For this group, there was little sympathy and no county aid.

Determining who should receive help was usually obvious and straightforward. Two factors, however, had to be considered. First was the question of military service. After 1885 the poor commissioner, or the county commission as a whole, had to determine whether the destitute person was a Union veteran. The veteran, his wife or widow, and any children under the age of fourteen could not, under Kansas law, be sent to the county poor farm. The law, amended in 1901 to also include veterans of the Spanish-American War, required the county to “furnish them, at their home or place of residence, such necessities of life.” In other words, they were to receive outdoor relief. The second factor in determining whether the indigent—veteran or not—was eligible for aid was the residency requirement. Kansas counties required a residency of six months but gave emergency assistance

to non-county residents with the understanding that they would soon be moving on. This was not unusual; neighboring Oklahoma copied the Kansas residency requirement along with “temporary relief to non-residents.” Nebraska was more lenient, requiring only thirty days of residency, but it attempted to keep out the nonresident poor by fining anyone bringing paupers into a county one hundred dollars.⁶

The county commission sometimes appointed a board of visitors responsible for making periodic inspections and reporting their findings to the commission. Commissioners also arranged for doctors to visit the institution, and

6. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Special Reports: Paupers in Almshouses 1904*, 43, 45, 47; Grace A. Browning, *The Development of Poor Relief Legislation in Kansas* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 19, 94; “Soldiers and Sailors,” *General Statutes of Kansas, 1915, Being a Compilation of All the Laws of a General Nature, Including Session Laws of 1915* (Topeka: State Printing Plant, 1917), 1932; Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, The Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 17.



wide spectrum of health-related issues, ranging from cholera and typhoid outbreaks to diphtheria cases, registration of doctors and midwives, instances of suicide, and the health of inmates in public facilities. Poor farms fell into that category, and reports referred to poor farms, however briefly. In 1886, for example, the Allen County report said that the poor farm's eleven inmates drank well water and ate meals constituting an "ordinary farmer diet." The Jewell County report noted only that the farm's nine inmates were served "good" water. Russell County offered no information since it had no poor farm. "What paupers there are," said the reporting physician, "are being boarded

Under the Wyandotte Constitution of 1859, each county was responsible for its resident poor, with several acceptable options available to county commissioners. One such option was the relocation of individuals to state institutions such as the Osawatimie State Hospital.

they appointed the superintendent. The Kansas Board of Charities and Correction, which oversaw state-supported institutions and periodically inspected private charities and institutions, did not have the authority under state law to supervise poor farms. The board kept abreast of the number of poor farms in the state and the number of residents transferred from local farms to state facilities, but it did not directly involve itself with inspecting poor farms or selecting doctors and superintendents. That was the responsibility of county government, whose poor farms were public institutions. Both were outside the state board's mandate.⁷

Another state agency collected small bits of information on poor farms. The Kansas State Board of Health, established in 1885, required a designated county medical officer to submit a yearly report. The report covered a

by farmers in different parts of the county."⁸

To better understand the relationship between county commissions and poor-farm superintendents, the Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industry made a study of their contractual agreements in 1899. The bureau was stunned by what it found: "A study . . . of the contracts secured in this investigation leads us to believe that they [the contracts] should not be considered as an expression of public sentiment on the care and relief of the dependents concerned, but rather as expressing no sentiment." The study went on to publish what investigators considered to be the worst and best contracts in terms of how much detail and interest were given to the care of poor-farm inmates. Among the least desirable contracts, of which there were many, in the bureau's opinion, were those from Brown and Shawnee Counties. The Brown County document consisted of three pages in which "every possible attention" was given to the details of farm implements, planting, harvesting, and physical

7. William P. Letchworth, *State Boards of Charities* (Boston, MA: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1892), 13. The State Board of Charities and Correction underwent several changes over the years; by 1917, the board, by then known as the Board of Control of State Charitable Institutions, was abolished while the Board of Correction remained, overseeing the state's penal facilities, the State Industrial School for Girls, and the State Industrial School for Boys. In 1937 the Charities arm of the original board was reinstated as the State Board of Social Welfare; it was replaced in 1939 by the State Department of Social Welfare and reorganized in 1973 to become the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. For an analysis of the board's creation and how it compared to boards in

other states in the nineteenth century, see "State Boards of Charities" in *National Conference on Social Welfare: Official Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Meeting, 1893*, ed. Isabel C. Barrows (Boston, MA: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1893), 33-54.

8. *Second Annual Report of the State Board of Health of the State of Kansas, from January 1, 1886, and Ending December 31, 1886* (Topeka: State Printer, 1887), 86-89.

maintenance of the grounds, but only one brief mention was made of the residents. The one-page Shawnee County contract contained a terse statement requiring the superintendent to “care for the sick, infirm, and insane, [and] bury the dead in a decent and humane manner.” (To be fair, the bureau’s report from eleven years earlier stated that Shawnee County’s “unfortunate[s]” were “well taken care of by persons who mingle humanity with business.”) Setting aside the worst, the 1899 investigation applauded several counties for their thoughtful, detailed contracts. Lyon County’s document clearly outlined the superintendent’s agricultural duties while also calling upon the administrator to “feed, care for and manage the poor . . . and to treat them in a proper and humane manner, and see that their clothing and rooms are kept clean, comfortable, and healthy.” Stafford County’s three-page contract said much the same thing, noting that the superintendent would “provide and furnish . . . plenty of plain, healthful and substantial food . . . and properly administer the medicine furnished in accordance with the direction of the county physician.”⁹

Contracts concisely stated the county’s financial arrangement with the superintendent. A study conducted in 1900 found that approximately twenty-five superintendents received no payment other than what the farm operation earned. The majority, however, received a salary; the average was \$540 per annum, with less populated counties paying as little as \$200 and the more populous paying as much as \$1,200 a year. Contracts were less forthright in listing the qualifications commissioners looked for in a superintendent. Given the emphasis on farm operations, however, a man’s ability in that area was essential in maintaining what was deemed a county investment.¹⁰

One would assume that superintendents were of good moral character and would show compassion toward and interest in their charges, but critics were not so sure. The 1900 study of Kansas poor farms complained that although it had been easy for investigators to obtain data on crops, livestock, and farm buildings, it had been almost impossible to learn anything of substance about the treatment of residents. As an example, the study

offered up the superintendent of Dickinson County’s farm. The man enthused over his accomplishments in bringing purebred livestock and chickens to the farm but said not one word about the people who lived under his care. Over thirty years later, relief workers during the Great Depression voiced similar complaints: “Seldom, if ever, are they [superintendents] employed primarily because of their knowledge and understanding of human beings and their ability to care for the aged and infirm.”¹¹

These criticisms had some basis in fact. On the one hand, considering the number of counties with poor farms and the number of superintendents who walked in and out their doors over the years, it is not surprising that some caretakers did an appalling job in maintaining sanitary living conditions or addressing the personal needs of those placed under their care and protection. When an elderly man died at the Douglas County Poor Farm, for example, the death ignited criticisms of the superintendent, described by some as a “common drunkard . . . a profane and brutal man.” The best that could be said of him was that he was “a good farmer,” but that did not preclude calls for him to be “removed as superintendent of ‘The Home.’” On the other hand, it was just as likely that superintendents were able to both manage the farm operation and look after residents. Of one superintendent it was said, “Since assuming the duties of superintendent of [the Reno County] poor farm and infirmary [he] has given it his undivided attention. . . [and] proved himself an efficient and worthy man for the position, and the county commissioners are to be congratulated in securing him for this responsible office.”¹²

When living conditions were substandard or care haphazard, superintendents were blamed, but a 1913 study of the Republic County poor farm cast a wider net. To the casual observer, the home looked very neat and comfortable, but inside, “a common basin serves for washing the face and hands of all and for bathing. A comb and brush are used in common. . . . The inmates are provided with none of the necessary toilet articles, such as tooth brushes. . . . The unsanitary conditions and the lack of attention to personal hygiene subject healthy inmates

9. *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industry for 1899* (Topeka: State Printer, 1900), 385–87, 389; *Third Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics* (Topeka: State Printer, 1888), 49.

10. “The County Charities of Kansas,” *Charities Review* 10 (March–February 1900–1901): 402. The range in salaries can be found in the county contracts published in the *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industry*.

11. “The County Charities of Kansas,” 403, 407; KERK, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 31.

12. Brian Hall, “The Douglas County Poor Farm,” *Watch This Space*, <http://www.tauycreek.com/2014/11/the-douglas-county-poor-farm.html>; “N.J. Yearout,” in *A Biographical History of Central Kansas*, vol. 1 (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1902), 432–33.



This is a view of the Allen County poor farm. The Kansas State Board of Health, established in 1885, required a designated county medical officer to submit a yearly report. The report covered a wide spectrum of health-related issues, including the health of inmates in public facilities like poor farms. In 1886, for example, the Allen County report said that the poor farm's eleven inmates drank well water and ate meals constituting an "ordinary farmer diet."

to unavoidable contamination from diseased inmates." Rather than accuse the superintendent of negligence, the study pointed at the county commission, which "has sought to spend as little as possible for the support of the inmates."¹³

While the study intended to bring improvements to that particular county poor farm, it underscored the conflicting impulses found in the larger world of social welfare. It was society's responsibility to look after the worthy poor, providing them with shelter, sustenance, and medical aid; social thought and state laws agreed on that. However, it was argued that making their surroundings too comfortable and providing them with what might be considered luxury items such as toothbrushes gave the poor little incentive to leave an institution. The aged and physically and mentally disabled found at poor farms challenged this conventional thinking. A case in

point was the Republic County farm, where the average age was seventy, three of the residents were blind, one was crippled, and only two were considered "normal in mind and body." There was little chance that the majority of these residents, whose demographics reflected the average poor-farm population in Kansas, would be able to find self-supporting work outside the farm and leave their impoverished condition behind.¹⁴

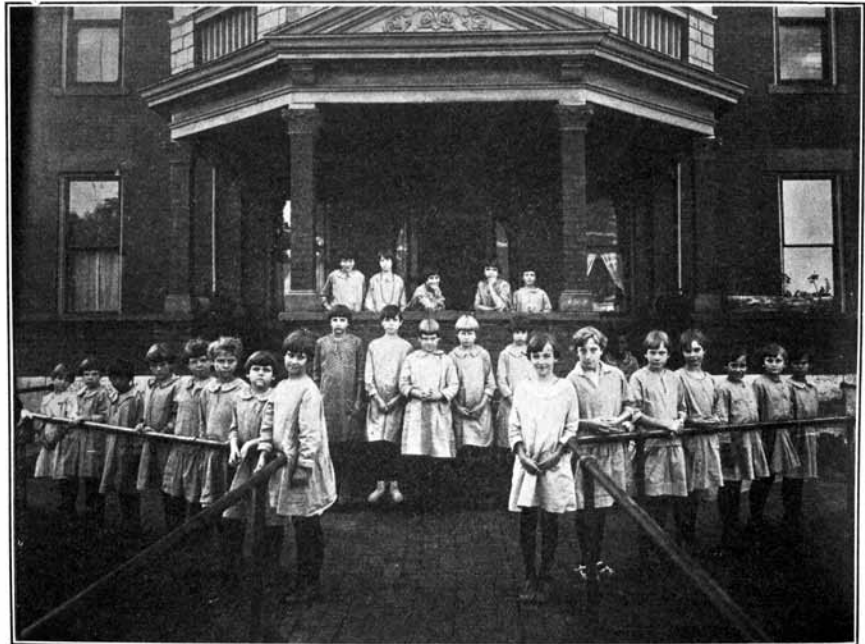
The poor farm was obviously meant to aid the truly poor who could not support themselves, but those requiring help represented a varied range of individual backgrounds and circumstances. The poor-farm population was a microcosm of the state's diverse mix of town and rural residents. They came from immigrant backgrounds or were American born; they were Caucasians, Native Americans, and African Americans. It was a certainty that many had not always been dependently poor. Women lost financial support when they became widows or

13. Guy T. Gebhardt, "Charity Survey of a Kansas Town," *Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Session of the Kansas Conference of Charities and Correction, November 1914* (Topeka: State Printer, 1915), 49–50.

14. *Ibid.*, 50.

were deserted by their husbands; men lost their livelihoods through physical disabilities, illness, or bad investments. The very act of settling in a place where droughts and other calamities could bring financial ruin turned people who were just getting by into the destitute. Age, mental or physical limitations, illness, or a sudden family crisis were all factors in commitment to a poor farm. There is also evidence, as reported by Marion County (as well as out-of-state facilities), that unwed mothers came to poor farms to give birth. Typically, however, a poor farm housed elderly men and women, some ill and others showing “definite symptoms of mental deterioration.” Almost all farms, at one time or another, also had residents who had been “declared insane or feeble-minded” by the court and committed for custodial care.¹⁵

Statistical reports from 1912 and 1913 give some insight into the number labeled insane or feeble-minded, the latter a nonclinical catch-all term that could mean anything from Down syndrome to reading or learning disabilities to a general less-than-average intelligence. In 1912 forty-two insane and 173 feeble-minded were reported as residents in the state’s poor farms. Although many of the same people were most certainly counted in the 1913 report, the numbers were slightly different: thirty-five were listed as insane, 146 as feeble-minded. Perhaps most telling was the number of poor farms that reported no persons in these two categories. In 1912 eighty-six counties stated that no poor relief was given to anyone adjudged to be insane, and fifty-nine counted no feeble-minded. In 1913 there was a slight increase, with ninety counties reporting no insane and sixty-one no feeble-minded. One can only guess at the factors shaping these numbers, but one reasonable explanation is that county commissioners were able to transfer residents to one of the state hospitals for the



COTTAGE II—GIRLS.

Finding accommodations for children, like these girls of the Orphan’s Home in Atchison, was a priority for county officials. Unlike states such as Ohio and Indiana, Kansas counties did not build children’s homes, choosing instead to rely upon other options, including state-supported orphanages. The Orphan’s Home, originally established as the Soldiers’ Orphan’s Home in 1887, was opened to all “dependent, neglected or abused children” in 1909.

mentally ill or to the State Home for the Feeble Minded at Winfield. Room may even have been found in one of the private charities that served specific populations such as women, war veterans, African Americans, or the elderly.¹⁶

Transferring poor-farm inmates was not without controversy, particularly when it involved a state facility. On the one hand, counties—which received payment (in the late 1880s, the amount was fifty cents a day) from the state to house the “incurable, and harmlessly insane”—complained that the state did not readily reimburse counties and that some residents who really should have been in state institutions had been denied with the excuse that facilities were already overcrowded. On the

15. “Open House Sunday at County Home,” February 21, 1952, *Genealogy Trails*, <http://genealogytrails.com/kan/marion/countypoorfarm.html>; Megan Birk, *Fostering on the Farm: Child Placement in the Rural Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 51; KERK, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 3.

16. *Fifth Biennial Report of the Board of Control*, 34–35; Frederick D. Seaton, “The Long Road Toward ‘The Right Thing to Do’: The Troubled History of Winfield State Hospital,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 27 (Winter 2004–2005): 252–53. The Winfield facility originated in Lawrence in 1881, then moved to Winfield in 1887, and initially accepted only persons up to the age of fifteen. Examples of available private charitable institutions are the Hygiene Home for Friendless Persons at Hillsboro (elderly whites only); Kansas State Protective Home in Leavenworth (destitute African Americans of all ages); the Hutchinson



Industrial schools, like orphanages, were viewed by county officials as a viable alternative to the poor house. Pictured here about 1908, the state Industrial School for Girls at Beloit was established by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1888 and taken over by the state in 1889.

other side, administrators of state institutions believed that counties simply wanted to make them a “dumping ground,” and it was not until 1927 that the state legislature tried to address this complaint by requiring counties to pay for some of the elderly poor in state institutions.¹⁷

While a number of the dependent poor were sent to state institutions, county commissioners were more likely to place those unable to support themselves in private homes under a contract system. An article on Bourbon County was highly critical of “farming out the paupers to the lowest bidder,” but many counties saw it as more cost-effective than keeping residents in a poor farm. In 1912–1913, for example, Edwards County—described as having a “well-kept poor farm without inmates”—along with Finney, Graham, and Thomas Counties provided poor relief solely through placement in private homes. Barton County took another tack. It rented out its poor farm and used the proceeds to support the poor through

Rescue Home (white women seeking maternity care); the William Small Memorial Home for Aged Women at Leavenworth (white women only); and the Southern Kansas Home for the Friendless Person at Parsons (white men and women).

17. *Third Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, 49; Mary Scott Rowland, “Social Services in Kansas, 1916–1930,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 7 (Autumn 1984): 222. Biennial reports of the State Board of Charities and Correction also routinely contained a section devoted to reimbursements owed to counties as well as disallowed claims.

“outdoor relief.”¹⁸

Finding outside accommodations was a priority when the poor were children. In 1912 and 1913, child residents at county poor farms statewide numbered thirty and thirteen, respectively. The next year, 1914, the number stood at fourteen, leading the *Topeka Capital* newspaper to announce that there were “No Child Paupers” in ninety Kansas counties. In reality, it was not that the state lacked child paupers, but that county officials were doing their best to divert youngsters to other forms of child care. Unlike states such as Ohio and Indiana, where counties established county children’s homes to accommodate those who would otherwise go to the county poorhouse, Kansas counties did

not build county-supported children’s homes as alternatives to the poor farm, choosing instead to rely upon other options. Sometimes, private households could be persuaded to take in children, especially if a foster care stipend was offered. Children might be sent to privately run or state-supported orphanages, reformatories, or industrial schools. Officials also used the long-held practice of indenture. A legal contract that bound children to their “employers” until they reached maturity, indenture was sanctioned by the Kansas legislature for placing out youngsters from the state-supported State Industrial School for Girls, State Industrial School for Boys, and the Soldier’s Orphan’s Home. Kansas law also allowed county courts to approve child indenture at the local level, despite growing criticism among reformers who condemned it as a “relic” of the distant past and who, by the late 1920s, adamantly called upon the twelve states, including Kansas, that still allowed indenture to abandon it in favor of more “humane methods” of child rescue.¹⁹

18. Albert Bigelow Paine, “A Kansas Alms-House,” *Agora* 4 (July 1894): 33–34; “State Boards and Commissions,” *Charities: A Weekly Review of Local and General Philanthropy* 8 (January–June 1902): 505; *Fifth Biennial Report of the Board of Control*, 34–35.

19. *Fifth Biennial Report of the Board of Control*, 34–35; “No Child Paupers in 98 Counties,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 9, 1914; Birk,

Clearly, placing children on poor farms came with its own special set of problems. Although Kansas was considered progressive in the areas of public health, regulation of child labor, and prison reform, the state's approval of indenture went against contemporary social work philosophies that adhered to the argument (first voiced in the mid-1800s) that youngsters did not belong in the "pauperizing influences" of almshouses or poor farms where they mixed with an adult population that included the mentally ill, physically disabled, and possibly morally deficient. For Kansas county commissioners, there was also the more practical concern of providing children with an education, as mandated under law, and the cost that entailed.²⁰

Although Kansas had no law prohibiting child placement in poorhouses, officials tried to quickly relocate children, as evidenced by the records of the Dickinson County poor farm. Of the fifty child admissions recorded between 1885 and 1914, most spent only a few months, if not days, at the farm. A sixteen-year-old boy arrived sick but left after only three days for "parts unknown"; a ten-year-old boy was sent to the State Home for the Feeble Minded soon after his arrival at the farm; a sixteen-year-old girl, described as "deaf and illiterate," stayed for nine months before officials found her work as a domestic in a county household; and an eleven-year-old boy, recorded as an "orphan," stayed one month before being indentured. Three of the five Kerning children, ages six, five, and three, were indentured after only a three-month stay. (Another sibling was adopted by an aunt, and the youngest Kerning, not quite two, stayed with the mother at the farm.) The records offer no insight into the decisions that determined different outcomes for children of the same family. After an eighteen-year-old (listed as married) gave birth at the farm, her infant "went to a home in Salina," while the young woman's other child, a toddler, remained with the mother. It would be reasonable to assume that the newborn went to an adoptive home, but the records are not clear. Nor

are they more forthcoming when discussing the Crook sisters: one was indentured, while her older sister was simply "placed" with a local family without the legally binding contract of indenture. Sometimes youngsters left the facility with a parent (usually the mother, who was also living there), but in one unusual case, a father (newly released from jail) retrieved his two young children after the mother was committed to the state insane asylum at Osawatimie.²¹

Children were also taken in by relatives, though this aid was entirely voluntary. Kansas law did not require close kin to take any responsibility for family members committed to a poor farm. One Dickinson County girl came to the farm because her mother was dead and her father refused to support her; two other children were abandoned by their parents. Refusal to aid a relative was not limited to dependent children. A case worker studying Kansas poorhouses was shocked when relatives "frequently showed annoyance at and irritation over being asked to assume some form of interest in his relative in the poorhouse, even though this relative was his father or mother." After all, some argued, the poorhouse was a tax-supported institution, and their taxes went toward maintaining both the farm and its residents.²²

Resident populations generally posed a quandary for the maintenance and support of the farm. In theory, the institution was supposed to be self-supporting, with residents doing the required farm and domestic work. Don Darling, whose grandfather served as Dickinson County poor-farm superintendent during the 1920s and 1930s, recalled that "inmates worked in the large summer gardens, planting, hoeing, and harvesting vegetables. Others practiced animal husbandry. . . . All but the most physically and mentally debilitated were able to contribute in some way." That not all could participate because of physical or mental disabilities, as well as age, made it difficult, if not impossible, for poor farms to function without outside help. It often became necessary

Fostering on the Farm, 50–51; "State Boards and State Institutions," *General Statutes of Kansas, 1915*, 1952; Neva R. Deardorff, "Bound Out," *Survey* 56 (July 15, 1926): 459; "Indentured Children," *School and Society* 26 (November 26, 1937): 674.

20. Grace Abbott, ed., *The Child and the State*, vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 63; Homer Folks, *The Care of the Destitute, Neglected and Delinquent* (1900; repr., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1978), 24, 35–36; Department of Commerce and Labor, *Special Reports: Paupers in Almshouses, 1904*, 43.

21. *Records of Paupers Received and Discharged, Superintendent's Record of Infirmary Inmates*, book 2, 30, 41, 60, 64, and *Dickinson County Poor Farm Rolls*, transcribed by Mary Jane McIntire, 2000, Dickinson County Heritage Center, Abilene, Kans. The quick removal of children can be found in other counties; Shawnee County, in just one year, for example, placed three children under the age of five in private "comfortable homes" and paid the expenses of sending two other children to their father in Dakota Territory. See *Third Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, 50.

22. *Dickinson County Poor Farm Rolls*; KERC, "A Study of Kansas Poor Farms," 41.



Joseph Denison, the first president of Kansas State University (originally Kansas State Agricultural College) and a founder of Manhattan, lived with his wife Frances in this house beginning in 1859. Kansas State professor Julius Willard took this photograph in 1932, when the home functioned as the Riley County poor farm. Courtesy of Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries.

for county commissions to hire domestic help for the house and farm labor to work alongside the superintendent.²³

As mentioned previously, poorhouses were supported through local taxes, but institution commissioners also turned to leasing pasture and cropland for ready cash. By 1914 a report on the state's charitable institutions stated that many poor farms had either been "turned into agricultural demonstration stations" or "are now being rented to private individuals by the county boards, and . . . this rental is often used to help out the poor of the county."²⁴ This supplemental income was crucial in helping to support the indigent. Nevertheless, it became increasingly difficult to fund poor relief. In the early 1920s, a recession resulted in reduced farm prices and a decrease in individual incomes. Although there was a rebound in 1925, the ups and downs of the Kansas economy created a situation that endangered a county's ability to fund poor relief without going into debt itself. Between 1927 and 1930, five counties levied more tax money than was

legal; in 1927 thirty-three hit the legal maximum; and by 1931 sixty-four counties were operating beyond their limits. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the cost of maintaining poor farms statewide stood at \$346,000, and counties faced a financial crisis.²⁵

The county poor fund was tied to providing outdoor relief, private home placements, and poor-farm housing, but the Great Depression complicated this relationship. Poor farms simply could not accommodate the increasing number of people seeking relief, and most of those needing aid did not meet the criteria for admittance. As discussed earlier, simply being poor did not qualify a person if he or she was able bodied and under other circumstances able to support themselves. Those needing assistance could not be ignored, however, as counties were legally responsible for giving aid to their resident poor. Providing this critical assistance grew increasingly difficult as counties struggled to fund poor relief in the midst of economic disaster. Local governments relied

23. Don Darling, "The Poor Farm Revisited," http://www.poorhousestory.com/KANSAS_rural_heritage.htm.

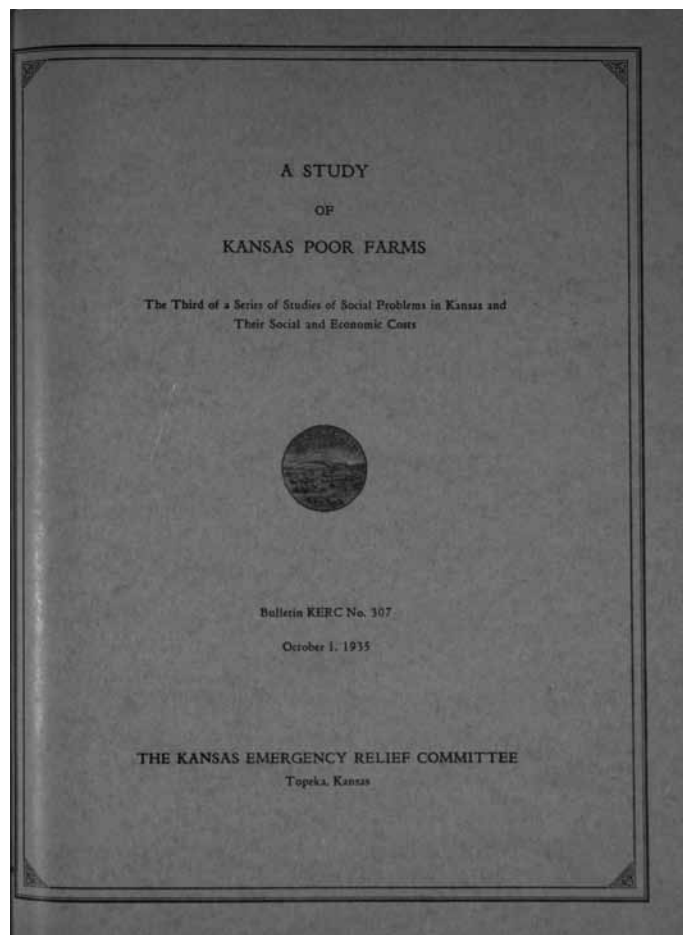
24. *Fifth Biennial Report of the Board of Control*, 35.

25. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (St. Charles, MO: Forum Press, 1974), 225, 231–32; Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression*, 18.

on property taxes, but depressed property values translated into fewer tax dollars. Despite owing less, landowners were often unable to pay. By 1933 almost one-third of all Kansas farmland was tax delinquent, and local governments struggled. In Cherokee County the poor fund “was in deficit” by 1931, although at least two hundred families plus poor-farm inmates required help. By 1933 the situation was so desperate in Hamilton County, with a poor farm that generally averaged only three to five residents, that all forms of poor relief were discontinued for lack of funds.²⁶

With local governments unable to meet their obligations to the poor and over 46,000 families looking for aid by 1932, Kansas applied for federal support, first from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and then under provision of the Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Act. Beginning in late summer of that year, poor relief was administered through the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee (KERC) which oversaw the state’s application of federal funds and adherence to federal policy. County poor commissioners were still responsible for deciding how relief should be distributed and who should receive it, but they were supposed to follow the advice of KERC caseworkers who determined the eligibility of anyone asking for public assistance, including candidates for the poor farm. This hierarchy created some friction between the KERC and local officials, with KERC workers complaining that poor-farm admissions were not centralized, poor commissioners lacked the qualifications to make informed decisions, and commissioners did not always investigate applicants seeking admission or identify those in need. To make its point, the KERC reported in 1936 that caseworker investigations had found a “relatively small” number (actually, only seventeen) statewide who could not “properly care for themselves” but had been overlooked by local authorities.²⁷

The federal response to poor relief not only aided families that suddenly found themselves in need but ensured the continuation of county poor farms, at least in the short term. In 1934 the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee reported that seventy-seven counties had operational farms, with a total of 2,540 residents. Almost one-third of that total, 824 inmates, were housed in the



The onset of the Great Depression created a situation whereby poor farms simply could not meet their obligations to the poor. In 1932 Kansas applied for federal support and beginning in late summer of that year, poor relief was administered through the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, whose 1935 bulletin on Kansas poor farms is shown here.

state’s four largest facilities, located in Leavenworth, Reno, Sedgwick, and Wyandotte Counties. The smallest populations, less than ten residents per farm, were found in Barber, Chase, Cheyenne, Elk, Graham, Kingman, Morris, Pratt, Rush, Stafford, Trego, Wabaunsee, Washington, Wichita, and Woodson Counties. Among the two thousand-plus individuals on poor farms statewide were sixty-two children. This increase over what had been a downward trend earlier in the century was another indicator of the stress placed on charitable institutions during the depression years. State institutions and private

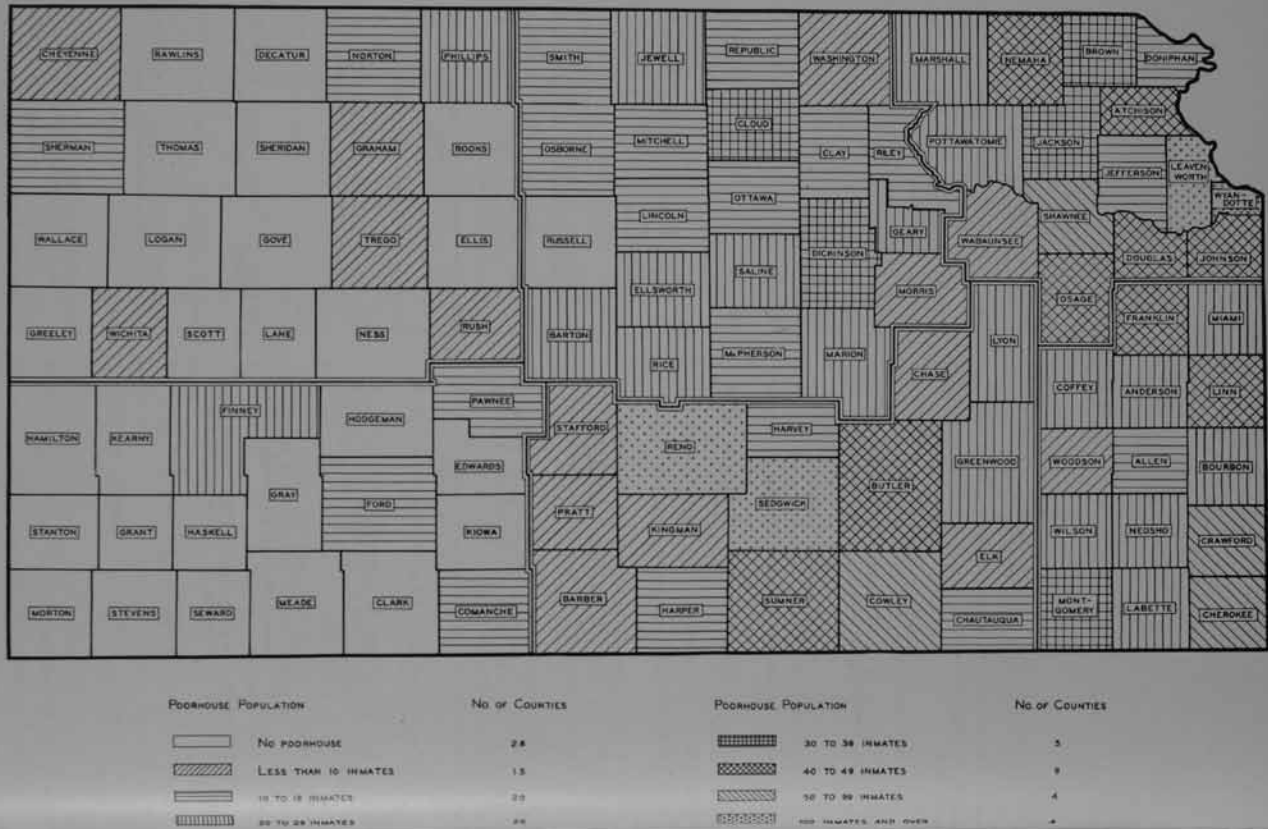
26. Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression*, 30–31, 32; Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 68.

27. Peter Fearon, “Taxation, Spending, and Budgets: Public Finance in Kansas during the Great Depression,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the*

Central Plains 28 (Winter 2005–2006): 237; KERC, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 39–40; “Public Welfare Service in Kansas, 1935,” *KERC Bulletin* 355 (July 1, 1936): 274.

THE KANSAS EMERGENCY RELIEF COMMITTEE
TOPEKA, KANSAS

NUMBER OF INMATES IN KANSAS POOR FARMS
DURING THE YEAR 1934



Included in the 1935 KERC bulletin is this map illustrating the number of inmates in Kansas poor farms. KERC reports created some friction between that organization and local officials, as the latter were now supposed to follow the advice of KERC caseworkers regarding the eligibility of anyone asking for public assistance.

orphanages that might have taken these children now faced overcrowding and, more often than not, had to turn away those that otherwise would have found a place.²⁸

Even as local officials struggled in handling relief cases, President Franklin Roosevelt sought ways through which the aged, the blind, dependent and crippled children, and dependent women with children could receive federal assistance. Roosevelt's position on this ultimately led to passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, one of the most notable pieces of New Deal legislation. One aspect of the legislation was aid to dependent children, whereby

financial aid was available to any child under the age of sixteen living with a close relative but deprived of parental support because of a parent's death, a parent's "continued absence from the home," or physical/mental incapacitation. Dependent parents that once would have gone to a poor farm with their children now had the financial support necessary to keep the family out of the institution. The law also aided the elderly, who were the most likely to become poor farm residents. Title I stated that the federal government would enable each state "to

28. KERC, "A Study of Kansas Poor Farms," 5, 44. Leavenworth's original poor farm was sold in 1914 and its residents moved to the newly established County Hospital, but the people still used the term "poor farm" to refer to those sent by county commissioners to the hospital. See Jesse A. Hall and LeRoy T. Hand, *History of Leavenworth County, Kansas*

(Topeka, Kans.: Historical Publishing Company, 1921), 269. Sedgwick County also combined a county hospital with the poor farm; in 1930 it sold the farm to finance the hospital. See "Then and Now: Kansas Sanitarium," Historic Preservation Alliance of Wichita and Sedgwick County, http://www.historicpreservationalliance.com/WichitaHPA/Kansas_Sanitarium.html.

furnish financial assistance . . . to aged needy individuals.” Although the effect on poor farms was not immediately apparent, KERC workers in Kansas anticipated that such assistance “would materially reduce the number [of the elderly] in poorhouses by removing the aged men and women, in relatively good physical and mental health, who are able to live outside an institution if given financial assistance.” The law’s impact was slow but noticeable, leading the *Kansas City Times* in 1938 to report that the Social Security Act was contributing to the closure of poor farms.²⁹

The federal law did play a role in bringing poor farms to an end. In 1941, for instance, Harvey County decided to “no longer maintain it [the poor farm] as a refuge,” leased the property, and later sold it. Still, a few farms remained operational into the 1950s and 1960s. Among examples of county poor farms that continued for a period of time after the Great Depression and World War II are Marion County’s farm which closed in 1949, reopened in 1952, and closed permanently in 1964; Chautauqua County’s farm which closed in 1966; and the Wilson County facility that remained operational until 1968. The Douglas County farm also continued after World War II, but its closure at one site did not entirely end its presence in the county. After a fire in 1944, in which eight residents died, the poor farm site was closed permanently in 1946, but the farm’s few elderly residents were moved to a house in Lawrence that served as convalescent hospital. Johnson County also repurposed its poor farm, specifying that it was a care center for the aged. Both in Kansas and nationally, institutions that once operated as poor farms took on new identities as nursing homes or hospitals for the elderly.³⁰

Closure or redefinitions of purpose stand as the end results of a system not broken by the Great Depression, but damaged by it. The Depression accentuated the shortcomings of poor farms and Kansas’s traditional forms of poor relief. Small poor farms, which predominated in Kansas, were simply not economical. In

one example offered in a KERC 1935 report, it cost one particular poor farm (unnamed) \$2,320 in payroll and daily necessities such as food and medicine to maintain just two inmates, but the farm’s income was only \$1,500. Even when partnered with public taxes set aside for poor relief, farm income was not always enough for counties to fund adequate care. Increasingly, public officials and social welfare advocates nationwide assailed the poor-farm model, calling for an end to a system rooted in the seventeenth century. They further argued that “catch-all” facilities had no place in the twentieth century. The physically ill or mentally incapacitated elderly should be in hospitals specializing in geriatric care, because such people deserved treatment in facilities that offered more than a roof over their heads and meals at the table. It also went without saying that poor farms were not a place for children.³¹

The state’s constitution laid the foundation for poor relief. County poor farms provided the structure. Whether housing the poor or producing income for outdoor relief and contractual home placement, poor farms were regarded as the means to an end. Other than state institutions for specifically defined populations, the poor farm was the state and local government’s response to meeting the needs of those who required public aid. This situation changed only after Depression-era federal assistance gradually shifted poor relief from the county level to the state. One direct outcome of this shift was the State Board of Social Welfare, founded in 1939 and responsible for overseeing application of the Social Security Act. It also shaped the state’s general policies for all forms of social welfare, including the supervision of programs administered by county boards. Once regarded as a time-honored, acceptable form of public welfare, poor farms disappeared, remembered only occasionally by locals who could point to where the farmhouse once stood, or the cemeteries in which the paupers were laid to rest. [KH]

29. *Social Security Act of 1935*, HR 7260, 74th Cong., 1st sess., Title I, sec. 1, and Title IV, sec. 406; Dianne Creagh, “Science, Social Work, and Bureaucracy: Cautious Developments in Adoption and Foster Care, 1930–1969,” in *Children and Youth in Adoption, Orphanages, and Foster Care: A Historical Handbook and Guide*, ed. Lori Askeland (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 33–34; KERC, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 45; “Poor Farms Are Passing,” *Kansas City Times*, May 25, 1938, County Farms and Almshouses clipping file, vol. 1, p. 25, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

30. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 3; “Harvey’s Poor House,” *Harvey County News* 1 (Fall 2012): 3; “Poor Farm Passes,” *Marion County*

Record, November 26, 1964; Hall, “The Douglas County Poor Farm”; “About Us,” *Evergreen Living Innovations*, <http://www.eliinc.org/about-us>; “Poor Farms in Kansas, Bibliography,” Kansas Historical Society, <https://www.kshs.org/p/poor-farms-in-kansas-1855-1974-a-bibliography/13587>.

31. KERC, “A Study of Kansas Poor Farms,” 7, 45.