

The Poor Farm

Chaffee County owned two hundred acres of land on County Road 160 for the purpose of constructing a Poor Farm. Building of a three-story brick house began in 1891 and operation of the Poor Farm began in 1892. Cost of the structure was \$6,371.00 and a salary of five dollars a day was paid to the first superintendent, C. F. Lauder. Webster defines a poor house as a dwelling house for paupers, maintained at public expense. In a Colorado Country Life magazine article written by Arlene Shovald in February 1986, she quoted an item which appeared in the Salida Mail. It read "anyone seeking aid from the county now will do so only as a last resort when they find they must work if they are able. And many who now receive aid at home will be reluctant to ask aid of the county when they have to go to the poor house to receive such aid; thus the expenses of sustaining the poor will be greatly lessened."

Most residents were the older and the destitute and as depressing as it was, to be at a poor farm provided them opportunities denied those in the poor houses of the cities. They could be, if able, out of doors to walk about, to work the soil, to grow the crops, care for the live stock and thus provide some small contribution to their daily existence. Here is a good place to read you a letter our hosts, Herb and Dottie Hostetler, have been kind to share. It is from a former employee, Jennie Dotterer, enlightening us about day-to-day life at the Poor Farm.

March 5, 1984

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Hostetler,

The article about the poor farm in the Rocky Mt. News Travel, by Jean McCoy, brought back many memories. Back in 1925, May 28th to be exact, I went to work at the County Poor Farm. I was 16 yrs. old. I am now a 75 year old Mother, Grandmother and Great-Grandmother. The folks that ran the poor farm were Mr. and Mrs. Rose. We had much to do, we had long hours, from five in the morning until evening time. Mrs. Rose and I had all household chores to do.

There were from 15 to 20 inmates, that we cooked for, did the laundry for and kept the big place clean. Upstairs the inmates lived. There were only bare floors. We scrubbed and cleaned those floors with a liquid soap the County supplied. It had such a strong smell, I remember it vividly. I would think the smelly stuff would never leave my hands.

Beds were simple iron cots, one for each inmate. Bedding was rough sheets, pillow cases and old brown army blankets. The men's bathroom was a dingy affair, old stool that flushed with a chain. Bathtub was an ugly tinlike appliance. The Roses and I lived downstairs. The kitchen had a large black cook stove. Everything was prepared on that range. We cooked from scratch. We baked our own bread. We canned, we made jellies and preserves. We had to keep busy from early morning until the noon meal was served. Dishes washed, clean-up work. For a couple of hours in the afternoon we would rest. Mr. Rose had a large garden to take care of, milk cows, chickens and one horse. We made our own butter, I churned many a pound. We had a milk separator that was used morning and

evening. I was young and strong so most of the mopping was up to me. The kitchen and large dining room had inlaid linoleum. I kept the floors mopped and clean every day, including the hallway leading to the front door. We had blind people, we had the lame and the halt. All had to come down the stairway into the dining room to be fed. I scrubbed the stair steps more that I can remember, just plain boards. Every spring Mrs. Rose and I had a vigorous session of house cleaning. How I hated those high windows. I would have to wash them with a cake of Bon Ami. My arms ached, believe me. Talk about work! There was plenty of it. Many a night I went to bed with a leg ache and cried myself to sleep, after all I was only 16 yrs. old. I put four years in the old poor farm. My wages? Would you believe: Fifteen dollars a month plus my board and room. That's as true as I'm sitting there writing to you. I needed the job badly. Was so glad to get it because I came from a family of eleven children. Yes I did. . . You see I was a product of Smelertown. Was raised there and attended the little old school house facing the old Smelertown Stack. We went as far as the 8th grade. Being the oldest of this large Slovian family, I was obliged to leave home and find work. I came to the Poor Farm and grew to love the Rose's as my foster parents. To me, they were Ma and Papa Rose. After four years there, I left for a job in town. Went to work for a family that had an ailing Mother. There was just one son in this family. I was chief cook, laundry person, cleaning lady to this family. My wages were fabulous, I made \$25.00 a month, board and room. I was there 2 1/2 years when I got married. Back to the Poor Farm. I had 4 good years there. Our social life was attending the school dances, box suppers, the Elks dances, they were elegant ballroom dances. I would get my hair marcelled, put on my nicest dress, chiffon, hose and new shoes, dance until 2 in the morning, go back to the Poor Farm and sleep an hour or two, then get up and go to work. The area where you folks are is called Adobe Park. There were all kinds of farms around us. My what a flood of memories, I hope I haven't bored you. When my daughter flies in from Los Angeles, I hope I can pay you folks a visit. I've told my 5 kids about my young days at the Poor Farm. Much success with your Country Inn. So glad its in good hands.

Sincerely,

Jennie Dotterer

In the era that the Poor Farm was built, another type public building we hear little of, was erected, known as Pest House. When dreaded contagious diseases were visited on a member or members of a family, private homes could easily be quarantined, its well members vaccinated, if vaccine was available, and closely watched so as not to contaminate others. Public housing such as hospitals, hotels and so forth were more difficult to control at such times. This is another subject entirely, but I mention it because a Pest House was built on the original Poor Farm property belonging to the county. It was erected approximately one quarter of a mile from the main building and when residents of the Poor Farm became ill with a contagious disease, they were placed there until they died or were miraculously cured. That Pest House stands today, slowly disintegrating, with several rusting iron beds and rotting bedding. There are remains of shelving in a tiny kitchen with an old porcelin sink, a place for patients to prepare food for themselves,

when and as they could. Subdivision of land over the years has placed the Pest House on other private property, a great loss, historically, for the present Poor Farm owners.

The Poor Farm ceased operations in the early 1940's. The large building was used, for a brief time, as a dance hall and a meeting place for the Farmer's Union. Then, as far as the general public was concerned, it was abandoned. Falling prey to total neglect, the three-story derelict suffered the likes of transients abuse., complete with their disrespectful wrecking abilities. For a period, chickens were cooped within its walls and it takes little imagination to picture the damage incurred by that condition.

Ninety years from ground-breaking, Dame Fortune smiled on the Chaffee County Protégé by leading Herb and Dottie Hostetler to its portals. They did not "duck" reality and blind themselves to the circumstances at hand. They looked and saw it for what it could be and is today, a beautiful and unique Bed and Breakfast Inn. They bought the place and set to work, doing most of it themselves. Their talents and creative spirits abound quite obviously, I think their middle names must be "Can do" and "Willing".

In our research, we could find little on the subject of the Poor Farm. Mrs. Edlund at the Salida Library gave every assistance. We derived our information from Dottie, personally, and from the articles she supplied us. Three, written by Arlene Shovald, appeared in the True West magazine, the Colorado Country Life and a Mountain Mail Special Edition. One fascinating statistic of the "clean-up account" was the fact that it required five one-gallon pails to remove the dead bees from a honeycomb on the second floor. Another time-consuming detail mentioned was the tremendous amount of chicken debris to be cleaned up and hauled out of the building. Can you believe the combination library-living room was once a coop? The second floor open area has been partitioned and made into five separate bedrooms with four baths. Gone is the stool with the pull chain flush apparatus and the dingy men's room.

The Poor Farm Country Inn Bed and Breakfast was listed with the Colorado State Historical Register soon after opening. The grand opening was held August 7, 1983. It was the publicity of that opening which prompted Jennie Dotterer to write her letter. Most, if not all of us, were present that August day to witness and share in the joy of the occasion. If you are unaware of the fact, I am happy to tell you that Herb and Dottie have received notification and the plaque bestowing National Historical Registry of the Inn. You will find it on display in the hallway just off the library. It is a testament also of their hard work, their faith in each other and the life they have chosen together here in Chaffee County.

Thank you,

Herb and Babs Taylor
27 September 1987
Historical Prospectors Meeting