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Havens for Those in Need

Women residents of the Wood County Infirmary pose in the day room about 1900. Curtainless windows and bare floors assured sunny rooms and low-cost maintenance. As other institutions took over the care of the orphaned, disabled, and mentally ill, infirmaries began to specialize in the care of the elderly. Gift of Wood County Historical Museum.

Hospitals and nursing homes paid for with county tax dollars are today's descendants of nineteenth century welfare institutions, the county infirmaries. Infirmaries were established in response to the growing number of citizens in need of long-term care because of disability, age, illness, or family disruption. Their evolution can be traced through the public records, books, and manuscripts found at the Center for Archival Collections.

Traditionally, the family looked after its own aged, disabled, and ill members. In close-knit communities, friends often stepped in when a family's resources failed. Churches and other private charities provided institutional care, and wandering hobos were not unusual and had their own place in the social scheme. (The police department in Bucyrus maintained a *Record of Tramps* for some twenty years around the turn of the century, to keep track of the transient population.)

The nineteenth century, however, was a time of tremendous social change, and the welfare system had to adapt to it. Settlers founding new communities left the support systems of family and friends behind. A few of the larger religious denominations established institutions such as orphanages and nursing homes, but these were primarily to serve their own members. The apprenticeship system as it had been practiced for centuries began to die out as factories replaced individual craftsmen, and people expected a longer period of formal education before their children learned a trade. Advances in medicine and a growing understanding of mental illness called for improved care of those affected in an institutional setting.

In 1816, the Ohio General Assembly authorized boards of county commissioners to construct facilities for the care of their paupers. Most counties in northwest Ohio did not build their poor houses (by then called infirmaries) until after legislation passed in 1853 transferred responsibility for the care of paupers from the townships to the counties. The earlier practice is documented in township trustees *Poor Relief Records*, showing that assistance was largely a matter of coordinating community resources (locating work for the temporarily unemployed, perhaps a small cash assistance, finding guardians or apprenticeships for orphans, etc.) When the courts assumed responsibility for orphaned children, they often followed the long-standing practice of arranging for apprenticeships. Records of these proceedings are found in Probate Courts' *Wills, Estates, and Guardianships* of each county and in the *Indenture Records* of the county infirmary. Soon, a variety of people took up residence in the infirmaries, from the physically or mentally disabled to the mentally ill, from the aged to children who had lost one or both parents, as well as the destitute--in short, almost anyone who didn't fit into society.

◄ *Pictured during the late summer of 1940, residents of the Wood County Infirmary prepare vegetables for canning. The vegetables had been raised on Infirmary farmland and helped to defray the cost of feeding the residents. Gift of Wood County Historical Society.*

Because they were funded with public taxes, infirmaries had to be accountable for the money they spent. The Board of Directors *Minutes, Physicians' Contracts*, and *Superintendent's Reports* or *Journals* show activity at the infirmary from the administrative point of view. Finances were recorded in *Account Books, Financial Reports* or *Ledgers, Receipts of Bills*, and similar records. The actual construction of the Erie County Infirmary is documented in the *Blueprints* held in the CAC. Among the many types of records kept by the infirmaries, of greatest interest to genealogists and social historians are the *Admission and Release Records* or *Registers* which detail the resident's name, nativity, age, case number, date admitted, local address, condition on admission, and date of discharge or death. Revealing, too, are the *Record of Deaths* which took place in the infirmary, giving the name, nativity, age, race, date and cause of death, name of mortician, and burial location. The CAC holds some infirmary records for all nineteen counties of northwest Ohio, except Crawford. Indexes to many of these records are being compiled and will soon be available for use at the CAC. Some records, such as *case files*, may contain private information to which access may be restricted.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, social awareness grew along with the population. Reformers realized that coping with a seriously ill or disabled person was more than many families, of whatever income, could handle alone. As farmland and cities filled, unemployment could no longer be dealt with responsibly by simply encouraging the worker to leave the area. Overburdened infirmaries in smaller counties often transferred infirmary residents to the care of nearby counties with more appropriate facilities. Orphanages and Insane Asylums were soon mandated by law to handle the specialized needs of their residents, separate from the ill, elderly, and homeless.

◄ *Spring housecleaning at the infirmary included airing out mattresses. This picture, taken in 1942, shows resident Bert Gifford in the foreground. Gift of Wood County Historical Society.*

Gradually, the role of the infirmary changed. The Great Depression marked the last time that entire families lived in the institutions because of poverty. During this period, the population of the Wood County Infirmary doubled, and it has been estimated that for a time, forty percent of the nation was receiving some form of emergency public relief. Because the burden was too great for local governments to handle, the federal government stepped in with a variety of New Deal programs. It was less disruptive to the family for the government to pay a dole and keep people in their own homes. People believed that children were better off being cared for in a foster-family situation where they would receive individual attention, rather than warehousing them in large numbers in orphanages. With new facilities, today's county nursing homes continue to serve their communities' needs for the long-term care of the aged and chronically ill.

--Lee N. McLaird

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE depict life in the Wood County Infirmary from 1900-1942, typical of such institutions throughout northwest Ohio.