

## Mentally ill found a refuge at Fair Oaks farm

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Secluded among the oaks and maples, alongside a crystal-clear lake, Fair Oaks farm was a place of refuge, compassion and revolutionary health care for the mentally ill. Attractive cottages dotted the pristine landscape of the government-funded asylum colony where residents were encouraged to take advantage of nature's healing powers.

The refuge and its adjacent farm, both with access from Parkview Avenue, would ultimately include seven cottages: Pitcher (1887); Van Deusen (1888); Palmer (1889); Pratt (1892); Mitchell (1892); Grosvenor (circa 1907-1908); and Rich (1910). It would also include a heating plant and numerous support structures.

The "Illustrated Atlas of Kalamazoo County," published in 1890, lauded Fair Oaks' colony system as "a departure from the plan of providing for all the insane in one large, crowded institution. The idea of a home and a garden to work in is one

of the grand features of the plan."

In addition to home-like cottages, residents were provided an opportunity to learn new skills on the 240-acre Colony Farm, south of the living areas and north of Parkview Avenue. According to information included in the Atlas: "The land is divided into farms, one for stock raising, one for fruit growing, another for dairying and so on."

Referring to the colony's buildings as "cottages" does not do justice to the manor-like structures that were built there. In an article dated Nov. 30, 1889, a Kalamazoo Gazette reporter described the Palmer Cottage for women: "The building is brick, three stories, plain in style but tasteful and substantial. The sleeping apartments are large, cheery, well ventilated and supplied with fireplaces. The floors are oak. The wood finishing of the interior is mostly yellow pine. The fireplaces are laid in tile of various patterns. The beds have immaculate white counterpanes and pillow shams, worked in many pretty conceits, the handiwork of ladies of the

institution."

Vintage photos, part of the Kalamazoo Public Library's local history collection, reflect a resort — not a mental institution — atmosphere. The cottages bear a striking resemblance to a neighborhood of private homes, overlooking Asylum Lake, with expansive verandahs and a surprising air of the regal.

(Before it was known as Asylum Lake, the watery home to bluegills and muskrats was known as Lorings Lake. It was named after landowner Rodolphus Lorings. In 1873, bordered by two parcels of land owned by D.D. McMartin and N. Hinds, it became known as McMartin Lake and, later, Hinds Lake. Today, 28 years after the last of the Fair Oaks buildings were demolished, it is still known as Asylum Lake.)

Recognized as a humanitarian effort, the colony system was also economically beneficial. "In most large institutions, the cost of caring for room patients will range from \$1,000 to \$3,000. In the colony it will not exceed \$300," said Dr. George C. Palmer, superintendent

of the Michigan Asylum for the Insane during the 1890s, in the Atlas.

A wide range of agricultural pursuits were carried out at the Colony Farm, resulting in significant harvests — enough to feed the residents of the asylum — from strawberries to green beans. The farm also included a large herd of dairy cows.

In a Gazette article dated Nov. 29, 1990, Mark Maher wrote, "At its peak, the 300-acre colony supported 200 full-time residents and the community's buildings included a large male dormitory, a smaller women's building, a power plant and, overlooking the lake from the oak-covered hillsides, grand residences for the doctors."

By 1958, milk was cheaper to buy than produce and the colony began to decline. Al Selby, the Gazette's farm editor, wrote in a May 18, 1958, article: "The Kalamazoo State Hospital herd of 115 registered Holsteins goes on the block at 10 a.m. By Wednesday sundown, four barns of the Colony Farm — including the huge, 70-stanchion milking barn — may be emptied of cattle. Already, 160 acres normally planted to corn are standing idle."

The final demise of the colony came in 1969 when its five remaining cottages were abandoned. Dynamite, used to demolish the buildings, would rock the adjacent Winchell Avenue neighborhood two years later in 1971. Several area residents reported feeling the ground tremor with each blast.

Vandals and curiosity-seekers were equally attracted to the vast network of underground tunnels connecting the colony's buildings. Entrance was gained through manhole covers of through the power plant — walking down a set of circular steps. Light fixtures remained fastened along the brick walls but, with no power plant to generate illumination, trespassers crept through the murky tunnels guided by the beams of their flashlights. By the time the power plant was demolished, the last building to be leveled, vandalism had taken its toll on the tunnels.

Since 1975, the land has been owned and maintained by Western Michigan University. Students, as well as area residents, use the land for research, nature walks and relaxation. It remains a place of inspiration, solitude and peace. The concrete foundations and glimpses of flagstone walkway, once linking the cottages together, are the only testament to the legacy of Fair Oaks.

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