

## **Demolition of the 1926 County Home Building –The End of an Era**

**By Preston E. Pierce, County Historian**

The text of this article was originally published in "Visions," the newsletter for Ontario County employees. Dr. O'Hanlon's article, mentioned in the text, as well as numerous documents and clippings relating to the Poor House/County Home/Health Related Facility are available at the County Archive and Records Center (RAIMS). Photographs of the County Home complex, prior to 1940, are also available at RAIMS.

The imminent demolition of the "old" 1926 "County Home" signals the turning of another page in the history of county services. In the early 20th Century, the responsibilities of county government grew quickly. County highways were created. The Sheriff began to patrol the countryside, use radios and enforce laws unimagined just a few years earlier. Specialized courts developed, new generations of veterans were born, and the terms "public health" and "public welfare" were coined to fit emerging progressive ideas. When the 1926 County Home was built almost the entire government of Ontario County, except the Sheriff and the Poor House, operated out of the Court House and the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors numbered only about 200 pages.

Perhaps no other area of county government has seen more drastic change than what is now known as the Health Related Facility. The campus which includes half a dozen county buildings became county property in 1825. That year, Ontario County followed the lead of other county governments by establishing a 112-acre Poor House Farm. There, vagrants, tramps, and the unfortunate poor, mentally ill, and afflicted were collected.

Each town elected an Overseer of the Poor in those days. It was sometimes their job to deliver those who could not care for themselves to the Poor House. From that duty came the old saying about being "driven to the poor house."

For more than a century, the residents of the Ontario County Poor House were called "inmates." Their simple burial place near the Safety Training Center gives mute testimony to the low esteem in which they were held by the public. The age range of Poor House residents stretched from one to 84. Most were in their 30s and 40s, however. The resident "inmates" were divided into regular residents (who lived there all the time) and temporary residents including tramps, vagrants and ill-defined "transients."

By the mid-19th Century, some of the mentally ill residents of the Poor House were sent to Willard and other state institutions. By 1893 all of the mentally ill had been moved to state institutions. In 1896 residents suffering from epilepsy were transferred to the Craig Colony, also operated by the state. Orphans were also moved out of the Poor House. An unpublished history of the "Alms House" (another popular term), written by Dr. Edward P. O'Hanlon in 1995, provides a great deal of detail about these changes.

Shortly after the turn of the 20th Century, the State Board of Charities issued a series of reports pointing out the deficiencies at the Ontario County Poor House. Increasingly insistent, the negative state reports became very blunt in 1909. That year, Board of Charities inspector, Gertrude E. Hall, described the Ontario County facility as unsanitary, inadequate, antiquated, unclean and unsuitable. Running water was available only on the first floor of the three-floor building. The Board of Charities threatened to sue the county.

Some of those harsh words were the result of the Supervisors appropriating money for the Oakmount Sanitarium in East Bloomfield. In the early 20th Century Ontario County led the way in some areas of

public health. In 1906 a County Bacteriological Laboratory was created to help fight infectious and epidemic diseases. It was the first such county facility in the state. Four years later, Oakmount was authorized. It provided care for those suffering from tuberculosis; a disease feared as much then as AIDS is today. However, the Board of Charities was angry that its recommendations had not been taken seriously while the county appropriated money for other facilities.

By 1925, Fred Hollis had served the county for 15 years. He was elected county Superintendent of the Poor in 1910. In 1925, he retired as Commissioner of Public Welfare. His career marked an important transition. In 1915, part of his job had been to personally butcher 27 hogs for the Poor House kitchen. That transition was even more in evidence as the new County Home and infirmary went up.

The new brick building was designed by the Elmira firm of Pierce and Bickford. Tiff Construction of Buffalo erected the building, while the Geneva firm of Riggs and Jensen provided the heating and plumbing work. When the first patients were admitted Ontario County had a first class facility to start a new century of service.

Throughout the life of the 1926 County Home reminders of the 19th Century were present. In 1936, the Ontario County Times-Journal reported that 100 pounds of butter were made and used there each week. Most of the meat, served at least three times a week, was dressed on site. The staff consisted of two nurses, two cooks, one orderly, one janitor, and two farm hands. With the help of "inmates" from the home and jail, they worked the fields and tended four horses, 21 cows, 5 heifers, 15 goats, three sows, 17 pigs, 200 hens and 270 pullets. In 1931, the Temporary Emergency Relief Agency (TERA) insisted that the Supervisors hire a county Social Worker for the first time. (The Supervisors also authorized uniforms for the Sheriff's deputies that year.) The Superintendent's family was also provided with a house nearby; his wife was the cook. The house was torn down in 1989.

By 1970 new state standards, and complicated regulations, were causing new troubles for the county. The county farm closed in 1966. In 1969 the state Department of Public Health (new agency, new emphasis) condemned the 1926 facility. The next year the Supervisors began the process of replacing it with a modern Health Related Facility which opened in 1976.