“The County Farm”

My first exposure to a county farm came in 2016 on a barn tour in Whitley County, Indiana. My barn scout explained that this farm served as a place to live for older folks, those who couldn’t operate their own farm and had no kin to help, for the indigent, and for some who were physically or mentally handicapped. But it wasn’t a total freebie; the boarders had to work – planting, harvesting, and doing general farm chores – as much as they were able. Yes, there was no free lunch. According to an article written by county historian Jeanette Brown, “My home sweet home” is what one of the residents, Rosebud Slim, called the county farm. Though he often camped out in nice weather, as he aged, he stayed at the infirmary.

Whitley County purchased an Indiana farmstead in 1857 for this purpose and added a new barn in 1909. When demand outgrew the housing, the infirmary was expanded to its present size in 1936 – during the Great Depression and the beginning of the federal welfare system – and operated as a county home until 2001. At that time the large brick building was turned into apartments and the barn and fields were sold to a farmer. The Wood County farm started around the same time.

Called by various names – the poor farm, the county infirmary, the county home, the poor house – this farmstead-infirmary began in 1869 (four years after locals voted to establish it) when the main housing building was built. Barns came soon after, allowing the residents to pitch in and raise livestock and crops, giving the home a degree of self-sufficiency, which helped Bowling Green to be chosen as the county seat.

The Ohio Board of Charities and Corrections regulated the poor farms, whose purpose was to care for “the poor who have become permanent dependents or of those who have become temporarily more or less helpless.” Most of these people had enough pride to work on the farm and many left when they were financially able.

In 1885 the complex added a home for the mentally ill but this stopped being used only as a holding place for those awaiting transport to state run mental facilities in 1902. Later, it served as a dormitory for me. In the 1890s, thanks to the oil boom in northwestern Ohio, oil wells sprang up on the farm and helped to supply heating and lightning to the buildings until 1904.

Over the years more farm buildings were built – two ice houses and an ice pond, two chicken coops, another large barn, a granary, a hog barn, and a laundry house, circa 1870. Some of the original buildings have been preserved; some are replicas. Two pestilence houses were built for people with communicable diseases and one remains. And, when residents died, they were buried in a cemetery on the farm in a pine box with a numbered grave marker, not far from the corn barn. There are approximately 275 confirmed burials; a monument noting their names was dedicated in 2019.

When Wood Haven Health Care, a new facility, opened in 1971, the county infirmary closed – after 102 years of public assistance – and was acquired by the Wood County Park Commission. However, as is the case with many old barns and historic buildings, the county farm had outlived its usefulness and was slated for demolition. But Lyle Fletcher, a historical preservationist at heart as well as reporter, editor, meteorologist, author, professor, and Wood County historian, rallied the county to convert these 50 acres into a living museum, the best preserved county home in Ohio. An arboretum featuring many of the trees and shrubs planted under his direction, bears his name. Today the county maintains the grounds and pays the employees of the museum, assuring financial stability.

Although the museum offers exhibits and tours of its many buildings, its most impressive display is the documentation of each of Ohio’s 88 county homes, an exhibit that has won the Ohio State Historic Preservation Award for Public Education and Awareness as well as an Outstanding Achievement Award from the Ohio Local History Alliance.

The exhibit, *For Comfort & Convenience*, features photographs from local photographer Jeffrey Hall, who traveled over 5,000 miles to all 88 counties to documented each former county farm. Hall, also a senior lecturer in Bowling Green State University’s Visual Communication Technology program, spent over a year in tracking down sites, some of whom had been demolished, some that were about to be demolished, and, in the case of Columbiana County, one where, according to Hall, “I photographed a house that was being demolished.”

These farms began about a decade after the state’s birth, as an effort for Ohioans to provide for those less fortunate. In 1816, the Ohio General Assembly authorized Ohio’s county commissioners to construct poor houses to care for the indigent, which, in some cases, led to the growth of the county farm. The Ohio State Board of Charities began in 1867 and eventually transitioned in the 1930s to the Ohio Department of Public Welfare. The museum features many photographs, including some of superintendents and matrons at Wood County poor farm.

The barn featured in this painting – with its three distinctive cupolas – burned in 1965 but was built in 1892 and, at that time, was the largest in Wood County. It was primarily a cattle barn. Today, the historical society has a scale model of this barn, courtesy of Herman Aufdencamp

However, the museum has been fortunate to preserve one of the original barns, called “the corn barn,” one that features exquisite hand-hewn beams and mortise and tenon joints, held together with wooden pegs. Built in 1874, it was a general-use barn – for grain and crop storage as well as for housing livestock – and one that enabled residents to work and maintain their pride on what is now one of the best preserved Ohio’s county farms.