

The following article was written by Sid Wade for "SEVIERVILLE 1795-1986"

## THE SEVIER COUNTY FARM

The Sevier County Farm or more commonly known as the "Poor Farm" or "Poor House" was located on Middle Creek Road where the Sevier Medical Center and Cherokee Mills are today. It was the County's answer to orphanages, homes for the elderly and retarded, and a place for the lonely and sick who had no money to take care of themselves. Its existence began sometime in the middle to late 1800's to 1953. As the County became more populated the number who resided in the house grew. One thing never changed in this household. Everyone be he Black or White lived in this house as one big family with one thing in common. They had no money.

The Superintendent of the County Farm and House with his own family was selected by the County Court to operate and manage the farm and the people who were sent to live there. The County paid the Superintendent so much per boarder and so much per meal to reside in the house. Whatever the managing family made off the farm was theirs to keep as long as the boarders and Farm remained in respectable shape. Many of the managing families had farms of their own to manage as well as the County Farm, but the Superintendent's family resided here in a private area to maintain the household. Sometimes the boarders if they were able helped with the chores of the household and farm, but it was the responsibility of the Superintendent to make sure the place was maintained and there was peace among all who lived there.

The physical description of the County Farm House varies as to what year one may be referring. In the early 1920's the house was a large white clapboard building. The house had 8 rooms which were 24'x24' each. There was a large kitchen on one side with a large porch where food was prepared, butter was churned, soap was made, water was boiled for drinking and washing, and wood was cut and stored in the dry. Each room was heated by a fire in the house. There was a long front and side porch where many of the boarders gathered on warm days and gossiped with each other or visitors. The house had no plumbing. There were bedpans under each bed or cot. Around 1920 a new outhouse was erected and soon destroyed by the grandchildren of the Superintendents. The boarders went back to using the woods for restrooms.

From 1897-1917 the County Farm Superintendent was Henry Harrison Franklin. His wife and four sons and daughter lived here also. From 1917-1923 his son Richard Thomas "Tom" Franklin was Superintendent. Many orphans who came here during the Franklin's tenure took the surname Franklin. A Black abandoned child "Aunt Jane" Franklin not only took the name but remained on the farm as a worker-tenant up until she was an adult. Both Franklin families lived on the County Farm but did have farms of their own near the Kings Branch and Huskey's Grove area below Gatlinburg. According to land records the Franklin's' owned these lands from 1848-1964.

The late M.B. "Johnny" McMahan, Sr. said of Tom Franklin that he was the hardest working man he ever had as an employee in his lumber business. "He had more energy than any man I ever saw," said Mr. McMahan of Tom Franklin. His wife Rebecca Adeline Templin who bore him 17 children could probably attest to his energy as well.

One of Tom Franklin's daughters, Maude (Mrs. West Reagan) who is today in her 90's remembers the Farm when she was a teenager visiting her grandparents with her friend Mary Quarles. On Friday they would leave their home near Gatlinburg, arrive at the County Farm that

night do a few chores around the kitchen and make a shopping list, and get up early on Saturday and head for Sevierville to shop and spend the day. Before she and her friend would leave on Sundays to return home, she remembers engaging in some of the homespun arts such as quilting, sewing, and knitting. "My grandmother tried to get all the women in the household busy doing something they could do to contribute to the household," Mrs. Reagan said. "Everyone seemed to try to take care of everyone else," she continued, "It was one big family."

Herb Franklin, a son of Tom Franklin and brother to Mrs. Reagan, recalls two residents at the Farm named Sanford Allen and Charlie Christopher. Mr. Allen was the woodcutter for the household. Mr. Christopher was a semi invalid and very religious. One night after being at the Farm for a week Mr. Christopher prayed for a good nights sleep. Mr. Allen jumped from his bed, picked up Mr. Christopher, and carried him to the lawn. As Mr. Allen placed him on the lawn he said, "Now, we'll both get a good nights rest."

"I carried him back to his room the next morning, after making sure he had a cover that night to keep him warm," said Herb Franklin. "Turns out Mr. Christopher could shake an entire room when he snored," he said.

In 1923 Joe Proffitt became Superintendant after Tom Franklin moved to Missouri with some of his children and wife to begin more farms with his large family. He later returned to his homeplace before he died. Mr. Proffitt lived on the Farm with his wife and six children. The Dave Ownby family followed and managed the Farm until 1936.

From 1936-1948 the Superintendant of the County Farm was John J. Sims. He and his wife Kate Snapp and five children lived on the Farm making many changes during their tenure. Water was piped to the kitchen from tanks at the barn. A phone and electricity was installed. Sets of outhouses for the residents and guests were built. The Sims also cleared and landscaped most of the land on the entire Farm. Two of the Sims children, Shanon and Rachael, recall how hard their mother worked to make sure everyone was fed. At that time the County paid 10¢ per meal for each boarder or 30¢ a day for all three meals. "If one died my father was paid \$20 for the burial," said Shanon. He recalls one time taping Rev. J. Harold Smith in conservation at the Farm when he was holding a tent revival on Thomas Hill near the Church of God Orphanage.

According to Malcolm Hodges and the Sims and Franklin children, Dr. A. W. Roberts would visit the boarders around lunch time to make sure the residents were in good health. Some times his nurse Helen Sharp would come in his place. Dr. Roberts or Miss Sharp was supposed to be paid by the County for their services, but many times their only reward for their services was the lunches at the Poor House.

After 1948 Willie Clabo was selected Superintendant of the County Farm. The next and last Superintendant was Claude Ownby who with his wife Nina helped close the Farm and House in 1953. Parts of the old house were moved to McMahan Addition by J.B. Waters, Sr. His pet name for this area as to most of the area residents was "Frog Alley" which Dolly Parton made famous in one of her songs.

In "Frog Alley" sections of the "Poor House" remain, as a reminder of "The Good Old Days When Times Were Bad". The "Poor Farm" lasted through at least four wars, two depressions, and many changes but its final blow was most probably, social security, unemployment, and nursing homes. When the late Ethel T. Chandler refered to the "Poor Farm" to be her last home before she died, little did she know it would die before she did. She never really would have qualified, because to live at the County Farm, one had to be poor and have no one. Hopefully there is no one like that today.

*-Sid Wade*