In the midst of many hours spent pouring over the old ledgers of the County House, I would take a break to catch up with current events on TV. I was struck by the realization that the people and their problems, now and a hundred years ago, were the same. The fabric of society was interwoven between its have’s and have-nots. Well-meaning citizens tried to help the helpless, then scoundrels and dead-beats moved in to take advantage.

In the 19th century, county government provided the organization for aid to the poor. The County Superintendent of the Poor ran the County Farm and provided leadership for Overseers of the Poor in each of the County’s twenty-six towns. These overseers of the poor could assess each situation of need and provide "outside relief," consisting of food, clothing or medical care. An article in the Dunkirk Observer explained that most Overseers provided flour, potatoes, pork, beans, rice, sugar, butter, and in some cases tea and coffee, and at times, tobacco. In cases where, even with these provisions, people could not care for themselves, they were transported to the County House at Dewittville. The Town government was then charged "per diem" for each individual sent from that town.
The overseers and the taxpayers tended to be compassionate and generous, but sometimes circumstances tried their patience. We see evidence of this on page one of the Fredonia Censor 4 March 1896, datelined, Laona: Our Overseer of the Poor, Malcolm Clark, went to Dewittville to try to make arrangements to have Henry H and family made a county charge. They move around to different towns, not staying long enough to gain a residence, living mostly on the town, and the bills are sent to POMFRET to pay, as they had gained residence here. One of them, called "Vet" gained residence in Pomfret, then moved with this family to Hanover where they were all sick and the bill for $90 had to be paid by Pomfret.

Finding this rather uncharitable bit of information, I started to search our records for Henry H and family. In December 1862 Henry shows up, aged 16 yrs, with five younger brothers and his pregnant mother, Phebe. They all stay for the winter and on March 1st a female child is born to Phebe. The husband and father, Kellogg H, is not with them. We don't know for sure if Mary C was that baby born at the Poorhouse in March 1863, but in 1899 Mary, age 36, who says she is the daughter of Kellogg and Phebe H, is admitted with a 3 month old daughter named Mabel. Mabel
was sent the next day to the Children's Home at Gerry. Notes taken at the home state Mary was born in the Town of Arkwright (not at the County Home). These notes, or patient histories, seem to focus on the record of the family regarding ability to be self-supporting. In Mary case, it states that her parents are receiving public assistance and that she has a pauper-brother (the aforementioned Henry) living at the County House. It also states that she is married and has four children in charitable institutions. Mary is described as "foolish and unable to care for herself." However, the record also states that she works in the laundry every day. She stayed there and worked for ten years until being discharged in 1909 in the care of C. B. Markham of Forestville. For some unstated reason, Mary was returned to the Poorhouse the next July and stayed for three days charged to the town of Hanover. She returned one more time in April 1915 and 10 days later died. At that time, her mother Phebe, and brother Henry, were well established as permanent residents of the home. Phebe seemed to thrive on the care there as she remained until her death in May of 1920 at age 104.

But lets take a look at the record of Henry H who caused the Town of Pomfret so much concern.
In 1883 Henry was brought to the County House by French Creek Overseer, reportedly on the complaint of his father. The attendant noted, "there is a large family of them and Henry is the most intelligent one and he is almost a fool and blind."

Henry was kept for three years charged to French Creek, discharged and was admitted a year later charged to the town of Pomfret. He was in and out (mostly in) until 1903, then in continually until his death in 1920. All this time he was charged to Pomfret, so Overseer Clark must have been unsuccessful in his front page attempt to get out of paying for Henry. The brief official history of Henry states that he was born in Arkwright, was single, foolish, and blind, and that many family members received public assistance.

Henry's younger brother, James, made news in August 1888 when he decided not to remain single. The Jamestown Journal reported that James H and Tussa D, both of near Laona, were married in Jamestown by Justice of the Peace D. D. Woodford, adding that Mr. H is white, Miss D is negro. The Fredonia Censor simply reported that "Young James H of Laona traveled to Jamestown recently where he was married by a Justice of the Peace to a colored woman." The Censor then scolded the Justice for not
having better judgement than to perform such a ceremony. They didn't give the bride's name but described her — "aged 50 and weighs 300 pounds."

But, when James was admitted to the Poorhouse in 1917, someone (not the town of Pomfret) paid his cash board of $3.50 a week for five months until his death.

In the news recently I learned of the state of New Jersey's current plan to deny payments for children born to mothers already collecting welfare.

Then I noted the record of admission of Blanch C to the Chautauqua County Poorhouse a century ago, "..prostitute in deplorable condition, 4 children in Gerry Orphanage...... Cannot tell what will happen to this woman, authorities are trying to prevent further breeding of dependents by her."

I could have been reading today's paper when I noted in the Dunkirk Observer in January 1900 an account of a meeting of the Chautauqua County Overseers of the Poor. The following was passed. "Resolved: A pauper shall not gain residence in a town for the purpose of receiving aid therefrom until he has resided there and been self-supporting in said town for a period of one year....." These gentlemen then acknowledged that their resolution could not be put in force, being contrary to New York State law, so they passed another, urging the repeal of the present law in favor of
legislation to allow their newly-passed resolution.

In this same newspaper, different item, was a story making fun of the lifestyle of those on public assistance, reporting that in a "neighboring county poorhouse" inmates, given bottles of molasses and rum for colds, are allowing the medicine to stand until the molasses rises to the top, then use a straw to drink the rum.

Each ethnic group felt the sharp prejudice of the authorities. A woman simply called Catherine German was admitted at age 40 in 1863. In 1875, after Catherine German had been a resident for twelve years, it was recorded that her "age and marital status unknown, born in Germany, is quite insane and cannot speak English...Can find out nothing of her former life and has no friends that I know of." A similar report was written in 1875 about Catherine Holland who was admitted on Christmas day 1864, "Mildly insane, but can do housework This woman was found in the southwest part of the county badly frozen, unknown where she came from or how she came there. This is an assumed name, not having any means of finding out who she is...probably a fixture her for life."

The Irish are my favorites. Augustus W was admitted age 64 in Oct 1864, born at Goshen CT, parents b New England....INTEMPERATE. "This
man has the appearance of being a raw Irishman though he denies it. I verily believe him to be an Irishman — he is very untruthful and unreliable...." Thomas F was indeed born in Ireland. His history includes, "This man is like most of his countrymen, intemperate in his habits." About Sarah C, "This is a peculiar woman, full-blooded Irish." James O'B has another problem besides being Irish..."Said to be insane from study for the priesthood."

Some Swedes that came to the Poorhouse were also intemperate, but usually the notes simply say, "booze," or, "will be able to support himself when we get the booze out." My favorite Swedish note is the one on Sarah B, "...A stout Swede woman having raised a large family of children, most of them born in this institution, but begotten outside. Her husband is a good-for-nothing only to quiet the inclinations of a strong Swede wife." And there was Carl D about whom the attendant simply wrote, "This Swede stands 6 foot 11 in his stocking feet."

In 1900 these authorities could not look in the future and see what a great addition to this country were our Italian immigrants. In fact five of my wonderful grandchildren share in that great Italian heritage. But in 1900 the Chief of Police of the City of Dunkirk was also the Overseer of the
Poor for that city and advised of the Overseers of the County that Italian immigrants are "very undesirable citizens." He admitted that there were exceptions to the rule but declared that "Italians are, as a class, treacherous, and would live off public charity when having plenty of money to support themselves." This speaker recommended that aid be given to Italians only after the most careful investigation.

This same Police Chief a year earlier had transported Joseph N to Dewittville. On Dec 19, 1898 the County Hospital simply records, "An Italian came from Dunkirk with a cancer in his throat." Three months later the hospital record says, "The Italian died with cancer 1 am. He was buried in the County Cemetery." We learned that his name was Joseph N only by checking to see who was buried on that date. But Joseph N will gain some small fame because his gravestone, number 324, is one of those few that remain in the County Cemetery.

The police chiefs in both Dunkirk and Jamestown were well acquainted with the Poorhouse, making many trip there escorting new residents to that facility. It was common practice to sentence habitual drunks, beggars, prostitutes and others in need, to short terms (from 10 days to 6 months), the sentence to be served in the County House. Of course, these were often
recorded as "absconded," often to be picked up again by the police and returned. 

One more example of who pays for the poor. In this case, as in most actually, the people who live, work, and pay taxes in Chautauqua County come out ahead of most in caring for those in need. This story is reported in the Dunkirk Observer in March 1900. On Saturday afternoon, Dunkirk police officer Krohn found a tramp, ill, with one foot severely frozen, at the Nickel Plate Station. His name was Edward D who said his home was in Ogdensburg. He had come from Buffalo on a ticket given him by the "Poor Authorities" there. Dunkirk police checked with Buffalo and learned that Edward had been arraigned that morning before Justice Murphy who recognized his need for care and ordered him sent to Erie County Hospital. However, instead of being sent to the hospital, he was given the ticket to Dunkirk. When his condition was discovered here, he was "taken at once to Brooks Hospital." When this item appeared in Monday's paper, it stated that it was not yet determined if amputation was necessary.

Tramps were a serious problem in Chautauqua County in the past century. The names of many are recorded in our books, but mostly at the bottom of each page was such a listing, "5 tramps overnight." In 1874 the
Overseers reported a "tidal wave of vagrants." That year 12,000 tramps were given food and lodging by county and town authorities at an average cost of 59 cents each. The biggest problem was along the railroad in the towns of Dunkirk, Portland, Westfield and Ripley. This nuisance caused the Superintendents to hold a special meeting. The problem was stated, "A horde of wretchedly filthy men, like the locusts of Egypt, cover the face of the land and eat up our substance. So they passed another resolution—advising Overseers to reduce the fare furnished tramps to a single slice of bread with a cup of water for a meal, for which the Overseer could expect compensation of 15 cents a meal, with lodging upon the floor for a like sum. Is it any wonder that I remember (and probably you do to) a soft-hearted mother feeding many a tramp who came begging at the back door. And my father often reported evidence that someone had slept in the hayloft overnight.

The "best families" of the county were not immune to commitment to the Poorhouse. On June 15, 1898, a death notice appeared in the Fredonia Censor for Miss Emma F, but she wasn't dead. We learn the on Monday evening, upon receipt of a note that Emma had taken poison, Dr. Pickett rushed to her home, found her unconscious from opium poisoning and
declared that she cannot survive. The notice continued in usual obituary form stating that she was the daughter of a prominent businessman, former postmaster, Village Trustee and Justice of the Peace, one of two surviving daughters. It also told the world that Emma was 43 years old, a cripple from infancy, had quarreled with her family and squandered her property, had also left several letters around the house written as she contemplated taking the poison. The Censor was a weekly paper and the following Wednesday we learn that, "Emma F gradually came out of it in spite of the declarations of Dr. Pickett. Her sister came from Franklin PA and on Friday, Emma was taken to the County House."  

My favorite question about these records concerns the fate of baby Krestena Amanda Baluuni, born at the County House Jan 20, 1909. Krestena's mother was Julia C, born in Sweden, no relatives in US. One outstanding feature of this birth is the recording of a full name — most were recorded as "born of ____ a female (or male) child." Another difference is that the birth is recorded with the father's name, and the father is described, "Chris Beluuni was a fruit dealer, born in Greece, who ran away to the old country." Then there is the description of the mother, "... a fine-looking girl, seems refined and unusually bright." The final unique feature
in this case was the fact that Krestena was taken to the Randolph Home when less than two days old. Virginia and I agreed when we took on this project that we would not make any assumption about these people, we would just record the facts as found and let researcher come up with his own guesses. But in this case, I can't help myself from guessing that Krestena was almost immediately put out for adoption, probably to well-chosen family waiting for such a child. She could be alive today, having just celebrated her 83rd birthday!

X

Martin T. Spellacy

was he the male ch. of St. Mary Oct 1858?