

Dedication set for restored Ottawa County Poor Farm Cemetery

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Dawn Veltman | Muskegon Chronicle



Memorial: Gravesite of John P. Wolstron at Eastmanville Park, once known as the Poor farm along Leonard Avenue in Eastmanville.

OTTAWA COUNTY -- Dignity has finally been restored to a long-neglected, but never forgotten, graveyard.

A tranquil clearing high on a bluff above the now grassy, rolling former farmland at Eastmanville Park, is the site where 64 graves of the unclaimed remains of some Ottawa County Poor Farm residents are buried. Only four of the graves are marked with headstones.

After working for almost two years researching and renovating the site, the former Poor Farm Cemetery on Leonard Road was to be formally dedicated in a public ceremony 10 a.m. Saturday.

"The committee felt that the souls interred there were entitled to properly maintained grounds, the dignity of identification, and protection from disruption," said Marjie Viveen, chair of the seven-member **Poor Farm Cemetery Renovation Committee**.

"Those buried here were largely unknown, but aren't most of us?" Viveen said.

The history of the former Poor Farm in Polkton Township began in 1837 when brothers-in-law Daniel Realy and Harry Miller, a Great Lakes captain, pre-empted what was then a 198 acre parcel from the federal government in 1837.

Leonard Road, along the route of an old Indian trail, became the main stage coach line between Grand Rapids and Grand Haven. The property is about halfway in between those destinations, and by the 1840's the men had built the "Mid-Way House" to provide accommodations for their growing families and travelers.

Following the Civil War, as society became more sensitive to the indigent, Ottawa County commissioners purchased the property and converted it to a "Poor Farm."

It began operation in 1866.



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Rediscovered: Eastmanville Park cemetery chairperson Marjie Viveen pauses by the tombstone on Gert Smoor's grave, which Viveen tripped over in 2009 while searching for the cemetery, hidden in weeds and grass.

Four books of patient records of the time give a glimpse into the desperate physical and emotional condition of the people who sought out the farm, and of the seemingly heartless care they must have endured.

The first book, dated 1866-1883, includes grimly subjective references to many children and adults from throughout the county, including these from the greater Spring Lake and Grand Haven areas:

"He was a German, was so sick he died. I did not find out his name ... "Henry was not overstocked in the upper story. Didn't like to work." "There is not a single honest hair on this child's head and never will be." "Stole shoes and ran away - fast boy." "Insane. Shipped to Kalamazoo Insane Asylum..."

The original building served as the Poor Farm until a stately yellow brick building was erected in 1886 to meet the growing needs of the area. The Poor Farm then changed its name to "Infirmity," and the former building became a laundry. It changed hands many times, and in 2002, responsibility for the now 229-acre property shifted from the Department of Social Services to Ottawa County's Parks and Recreation Department.

Viveen said that while burials from 1866-1896 were not reliably documented, the committee was able to identify 64 who were buried in the Poor Farm Cemetery.

However, other than the four graves that bear headstones, the exact identification of the individuals buried in the unmarked graves, some of them multiple, will never be known. The graves date from 1897 to 1931. Viveen said for reasons not clear, residents began protesting burials at the farm and after 1931, people were interred in the Potters Field at what is now Lamont Cemetery.

"Efforts to restore the cemetery were made over the years, but nothing ever came of it," Viveen said. One day, she climbed through waist high weeds all the way up to see what, if anything, she could find. "Then I tripped over something and it was one of the four headstones," she said. "It was a 'Eureka!' moment."

As a member of the Friends of Ottawa County Parks, she brought up the abandon cemetery and was encouraged to present a renovation proposal. She then formed the committee and began raising money and securing donations of goods and services.



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Remembered: The poor farm cemetery memorial stone lists the names of those known to have been buried at Eastmanville Park, once known as the poor farm.

One of the cemetery's biggest benefactors is Eldon Kramer, a Holland native, now of Texas. When writing a book on his family history, he learned his great-grandfather, Isaac Kramer, was buried there in 1899. Viveen said Isaac's two sons are also buried in the cemetery. Eldon later found the cemetery neglected and overgrown and hoped that one day it could be restored.

With over \$40,000 raised, the committee purchased a newly erected boulder monument at the cemetery which bears a plaque listing all those interred there and the date they died. There are now also benches, a horse hitch, a bridge and fencing.

There is one story board that recounts the cemetery's history, and another that tells the personal history of Isaac Kramer. There are also funds set aside to provide perpetual care for the site.

With ground penetrating radar, they mapped the burial sites, discovering that some contained as many as five bodies buried on top of each other. The radar revealed the size and shape of the graves, and if those buried were children or adults. Coffins that were made out of wood had long since rotted away and any rock cairns or wooden cross markers that might have been place are long since gone.



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Gone: The former poor farm and its staff, in the early part of the 20th century. The building has long since been torn down.

Now all the graves are marked and the four sunken stones that marked the resting places of Robert Dick, 1913, Gert Smoor, 1916, T. Wassener, 1916 and John Wolstrom, 1917, were lifted, cleaned, and reset.

Anne Engvall, North Park Supervisor for Ottawa County Parks, said that the only other park in the county she knew of that had documented grave sites was Kirk Park.

"But that's not to say that many of our parks, which were former homesteads, don't somewhere have the buried remains." she said.

The public is invited to attend Saturday's ceremony for the "Ottawa County Poor Farm Cemetery - Dedicated to Isaac Kramer and Others Buried Here."

The event will feature light refreshments and a brief presentation in the park's barn, followed by the quarter mile walk up to the graveyard for a ribbon cutting. Viveen recommended wearing shoes fit to walk a grassy trail.

"It's about their life stories," Viveen said. "Everyone has a story. Whether they died alone or not."



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An aerial of the former Poor Farm in the early part of the 20th century.

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