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## Cemetery for poor a part of subdivision

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**BY STEPHENIE KOEHN**  
News Special Writer

Nestled in a valley in the midst of the Blossom Farms subdivision in Marion Township is something you don't expect to see in a residential development: a small cemetery.

Known as the County Poor Farm Cemetery, its several dozen limestone tombstones inside a black wrought-iron fence mark the final resting places of some of the county's less-favored residents from times long past.

Owned by Livingston County, which maintains it still, the cemetery - just east of County Farm Road - was established in 1871 as a place to bury the poor and those county residents who were boarded in "poor homes," according to local historians and historical records. The county's poor home was near the cemetery on the grounds of the 200-acre County Poor Farm, land that is now home to the subdivision.

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Keith Christianson, who lives with his family in a new home adjacent to the cemetery, said it's no big deal living next to a graveyard. "The kids play over there sometimes," he said. "We don't think it's spooky or scary. And it's certainly not haunted."

Christianson's wife, Elizabeth, said she heard that some people who were considering purchasing homes in the subdivision decided not to buy because of the cemetery next door. "But I don't mind it," she said. "They're quiet neighbors."

According to Paul Curlett, editor of the **Pinckney Dispatch** during the 1940s and '50s, residents of the poor house raised food enough to feed themselves and sold any surplus to provide funds to operate the facility. In addition to poor and elderly people, the farm was home to some children and also "took mental cases," Curlett wrote in an article reprinted in "**Pinckney Pathways**," a history book compiled by Milton Charboneau, archivist at the Howell Carnegie District Library.

Poor farms provided a way for communities to deal with indigent and mentally deficient residents in the days before the Social Security and welfare systems. Livingston County historical records show the farm was a 215-acre working farm, purchased by the county in 1871 from farmer Hiram Wing.

The Livingston County Board of Supervisors directed that a poor house or infirmary, to house "the poor and insane," be built on the property within the first year after the county took possession of it. That two-story brick building served until 1937, when a fire destroyed the facility.

The infirmary was relocated to a former golf clubhouse on the northeast shore of Thompson Lake in Oceola Township. That facility housed indigent and mentally impaired people until 1967. It was razed in 1971.

As the holidays approached last month, no wreaths or flowers brightened the

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County Poor Farm Cemetery. While it's not untended, warm weather has allowed the grass to continue growing, partially obscuring some of the stones. Some of them have fallen over. The cemetery stands as a rather shaggy, poignant reminder of the past.

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"The markers tell a story, not always a happy one," said Susan Beardsley, a member of Marion Township's Cemetery Preservation Committee, which works to maintain the township's cemeteries. Beardsley, who has done much research on local cemeteries and is compiling her own index of those buried in the County Poor Farm Cemetery, tells of a man whose three wives all died before their 20th birthdays, and of the many children who died in infancy and childhood during the not-so-good-old-days.

The youngest person interred in the cemetery, according to records gathered by genealogist Pam Rietsch, is 2-month-old Albert Peterson, who died Oct. 16, 1884. The oldest is 91-year-old Susan Green, who came to Livingston County from New York state and was a resident of the poor house when she died Sept. 24, 1910.

Between 65 and 87 people were buried in the cemetery, depending on which records you use. Discrepancies exist, partly because these histories are often oral and reflect a lot of second-hand information, Beardsley said.

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Also, rumors abound. Christianson said he has heard that the cemetery, as it is located now, isn't where the bodies are actually buried. Instead, he has heard they were buried throughout the 200-plus acres - and when developers began digging basements, they found a lot more than dirt.

Beardsley said a more likely explanation is that some folks who couldn't afford burial plots in other cemeteries sneaked their deceased in and buried them unmarked, and it could be those remains that have occasionally been discovered - if any remains have actually been found.

"I would think that (the present location of the cemetery) is the general vicinity of the original cemetery," she said.

The first burial on record at the cemetery, according to Rietsch's research, was that of 1-year-old Edith Roebacher, who died March 3, 1872. The last recorded burial was that of John Park, who was 69 when he died on June 29, 1934. After that time, burials for the indigent apparently shifted to the potter's fields set aside in some other area cemeteries.

There is little or no information available for most of those buried in the County Poor Farm Cemetery, Beardsley and Rietsch say. Most of the deceased had no relatives in the area. Some were widows without children. Others were simply the last of their lines.

Some probably survived one or another infectious disease that took their toll on families and the community as a whole. Interestingly, only one death is noted to have occurred in 1918 and one in 1919, the years of the Spanish flu pandemic, which killed an estimated 50 million to 100 million worldwide.

The tidbits of information that are available - in census records, newspaper clippings and genealogical records - do little to explain how someone ended up in the County Poor Farm Cemetery. Samuel Bell, for example, died in 1928 at age 83. As recently as eight years before his death, Bell - a single man - was the head of a household in Green Oak Township. But by the time he died, he must have been destitute. Did he lose his home because he was too old to work? Did an injury or illness sideline him? Did he have no friends or relatives to take him in at the last?

The records found so far for Bell and many others, unfortunately, don't provide enough detail to answer those questions. But Beardsley, Rietsch and others in the county continue to search for more information.

"These cemeteries are our history," Beardsley said. "We want people to know they're not being forgotten or neglected."