

Mount Pleasant Poor Farm

The Mount Pleasant Township Poor Farm as told to Patchwork by Ray Hock.

Interviewed by Hazley Williams and Casey Hess in the spring of 2005.

Ray Hock is seventy-nine years old. He has had three main occupations throughout his life. He worked in the milk business and was in the oil business for thirty years. He was also the superintendent of the Poor Farm for five years. He lives right outside Light Street and was born March 28, 1925 at the Poor Farm with many other brother and sisters.

Since Ray Hock worked at the Farm for five years, he told us about the life on the Farm. The Farm is located in Mount Pleasant Township. The Farm always had at least twenty guests at a time and at least four employees. The Farm was a place where people could go if they couldn't afford anywhere to live. He lived at the Farm with his mom, dad, and six brothers and two sisters.

PATCHWORK: How many generations did the poor farm go through?

HOCK: Hock generations? Three.

PATCHWORK: What was the objective of starting the poor farm?

HOCK: To help the poor and give them food and shelter.

PATCHWORK: Do you know how and why the poor farm began?

HOCK: Well, I guess it was to provide for the poor people. Back then they didn't have welfare, they didn't have social security, and if they didn't have a family, they didn't have anyone to take care of them. So they wound up in the poor house.

PATCHWORK: What was the poor farm all about? Would you describe the poor farm?

HOCK: Well, it was a home for the men and women, and it was more than just a home, it was also a farm. A lot of the guests there worked on the farm, helped provide the food and there was a big garden. They grew their own vegetables. Of course my mother and some of the guests there helped and they canned the food. At one time they would can over a thousand quarts of food, supplying all tomatoes, beans, corn, and you name it.

PATCHWORK: What was a typical day like, what did you go through each day?

HOCK: My job mostly was farming. My wife's job was to provide the meals and over seeing the cleaning and the laundry.

PATCHWORK: What was life like back then, like were people really that poor around here?

HOCK: Well back when that was started, yeah, they were. My grandfather and grandmother started out with \$500 a year, not a month that's a year, so that wasn't very much money. Back then it wasn't too bad. Then when my dad took over which I think was about 1960 of course things were a little better as far as pay. Even when I took over, they weren't paying very much. Of course we got our rent-free and food free, in fact all of our little expenses.

PATCHWORK: Do you really know why it was named the Poor farm?

HOCK: I guess because it was for the poor.

PATCHWORK: What kind of equipment did you use on the farm back then?

HOCK: Back then it was horses and plows, everything was pretty much horses. It was horse drawn when I was a kid up until 1939 when they bought the first tractor and then it was a combination of tractors and horses.

PATCHWORK: What were the people like that worked at the farm?

HOCK: Well, most of them were pretty good workers. Some of them were paroled patients from the Danville State Hospital, they had mental problems. For the most part they were just poor and maybe not educated, they were illiterate and just not able to take care of themselves.

PATCHWORK: What did you do at the Poor Farm? Were you just a farmer?

HOCK: Mostly the farming.

PATCHWORK: What did you grow and raise at the Poor Farm?

HOCK: About all grains and corn, oats and wheat, barley and we grew our own potatoes and we had a big garden. We grew all of our own vegetables. We had a pretty good-sized orchard where we grew our own apples and pears and of course they canned them.

PATCHWORK: When did the Poor Farm close and why?

HOCK: You know I'm not sure I can answer that. We left there in 1953 and then a fellow with the name of Troutman took over and I think he was there about 20 years and I'm not sure when the Poor Farm closed. I would say it was around 1973 or 1974. My grandfather went there in 1903 and then we were there until 1953 when I left. That was 50 years.

PATCHWORK: Did someone tell them to start it or did they just start it by themselves?

HOCK: No, the Poor District started it. The Bloom Poor District was comprised of Bloomsburg, Berwick, Scott Township, Millville, Greenwood, Sugarloaf, and Orange. I think, six townships, of course each township contributed a little bit towards the upkeep.

PATCHWORK: Was it located in any other county or just in our county?

HOCK: It was just our county, as a matter of fact there was one time when there was two Poor Farms in Columbia County which a lot of people don't know about. One was

over back in Numedia and that closed down 1933 or 1934, that's when the county took it over and they all came over to Bloom and then was called Columbia County Institutional District Farm.

PATCHWORK: Where did you sell the stuff that you grew on the Poor Farm?

HOCK: No, that was turned into the county, well the Poor District, then when the county took over, it was turned into the county. Any surplus beyond what we didn't use was sold and turned into the county.

PATCHWORK: How long did people stay?

HOCK: Well, that varied, some of them were there for years, some of them died there and the ones that died there, they had a Potters Cemetery any unclaimed bodies were buried out there.

PATCHWORK: Any favorite memories of the Poor Farm or anything you found particularly remarkable about it?

HOCK: No, we always got along with the guests there and most of them were pretty good people, very congenial, never had any problems. I had 5 brothers and 2 sisters and you never heard of molestations back then, you know, they were pretty decent people. I have a book with the minutes. I gave the original to the Historical Society but these are the minutes starting in January 1903 up until 1914. I don't know why there are a couple years missing there because my dad didn't take over until 1916. I don't know where those minutes are.

PATCHWORK: What the purpose for keeping the minutes, was it required?

HOCK: Well see the poor district had a meeting every month and they approved the bills that were to be paid.

PATCHWORK: How involved was the Poor District over the years?

HOCK: They elected the Poor director, they were elected and they were paid \$100 a year not a month, and there was one elected from each township to represent that particular township. The minutes are all done in handwriting. It tells what the bills were for, who they were paid to and how much.

PATCHWORK: What sort of animals did you have at the Poor Farm when you were growing up?

HOCK: Well, horses and cattle and pigs. We provided our own milk and our own pork and our own beef. At one time it was pretty much self sufficient, well they produced enough stuff to pay all expenses and there were about, I would say, 18 to 25 people there at one time.

PATCHWORK: About how many people were there on average?

HOCK: I would say about 20.

PATCHWORK: What does The Almshouse mean?

HOCK: That's what we called the Poor Farm. It means the same thing as Poor House.

PATCHWORK: Do you have any favorite stories that you can recall?

HOCK: I don't know, I think I ought to write a book, but I can't remember all the things that went on. You can imagine that with all the kids, there were eight of us.

PATCHWORK: Did you guys work at it at all or did you help your parents?

HOCK: Oh yea.

PATCHWORK: Were all of you born at the Poor Farm?

HOCK: No, we weren't. Let's see, my older sister and two brothers were born in Evers Grove. All the rest of us were born there. Back then, I don't know what poor people would have done if they wouldn't have had a place like that, they had no family. The Potters Cemetery, it is still there. If no one claimed a body, it was buried out there. Just recently a Boy Scout, cleaned that up and erected the flagpole for his Eagle Award. Then there was one in Montour County, in fact they're going to tear that barn down; you know where Wood Bang Road is? There is a white barn, which was the Danville Poor Farm.

PATCHWORK: Did they record the daily going on or just the balances and bills and such?

HOCK: No, they recorded a lot of the bills for who they were paid to and how much.

PATCHWORK: How did you get some of the money? Did you get the money from the government or did you sell stuff?

HOCK: Well, our pay came from the Poor District until the County took it over, then the County paid. Other than local support, I don't think, well I know there wasn't any support for it.

PATCHWORK: How did people come to the Poor Farm, did they just walk in and ask for assistance, or what?

HOCK: Well, I guess. Their neighbors saw that they had no way of surviving. I guess, so they took them out there.

PATCHWORK: And you don't have, really on average, how long people would stay there?

HOCK: Not on average, I would say though maybe 10 years some of them were there longer than that and of course some were there shorter than that. Back during the Depression, there were a lot of unemployed people. Some of them would come out for a couple of months until they got back on their feet, find a job and then they would leave. That was more of the exception more than a rule.

PATCHWORK: What sort of an environment was there at the Poor Farm?

HOCK: It wasn't the ritz, but it wasn't that bad and they got good food, and they were free to go, they could go to town, which some of them did on a Saturday night.

PATCHWORK: What were the living conditions were the people housed?

HOCK: At the time it was inside plumbing.

PATCHWORK: Did families share a room?

HOCK: No, most families, if they had any family, they didn't pay any attention to them. Sadly. There were a few that had family that came to visit them, not many.

PATCHWORK: Was it mainly just individuals that worked on the farm? Did you ever have any families that came in as a group?

HOCK: No, never had any families. There were a couple of boys that came in that were brothers, which were there for a while. They were albinos. Did you ever hear of an albino that had pink eyes and white hair? Yea. And they were pretty near blind. You know, with pink eyes they couldn't see too well, especially in the bright sun. I don't know whatever happened to them. Their last name was Cox. They were around Bloomsburg for quite a while. I don't know whatever happened to them.

PATCHWORK: Do you remember how long they stayed at the farm?

HOCK: They were only there a short time, less than a year, I would say.

PATCHWORK: Did most people leave? Did they have another place to go, or did they just leave and try to find a place?

HOCK: Well, sometimes a relative would take them, but if they didn't, they would stay there until they died. Of course the life expectancy wasn't as long then as it is now. I would say the ones that died there are all probably under their seventies, below seventy.

PATCHWORK: Were there cases when people left and came back?

HOCK: Probably, I can't think of any off hand. Then you would have a few that would run away out there. They were not too bright. And then they would run away and we would have to get them and bring them back.

PATCHWORK: Did you keep track of the people that lived there? If they ran away, did you know who they were?

HOCK: We always knew, yea we always knew who they were. That didn't happen very often, and they didn't go too far.

PATCHWORK: What would be the difference under the circumstances in leaving or running away?

HOCK: I don't know. I guess they thought they were going home. They were not too bright. When you stop to mention it, they would figure that they were going home, but didn't know where home was so they would just take off. They probably had Alzheimer's, but at that time they didn't diagnose it, they didn't know what Alzheimer's was. I remember one time, well more than once, this older fellow would run off and he would get lost out in the woods and we would have to go hunt him. We would find him and he didn't know where he was or where he was going. We'd bring him in and he would be all right for maybe for a week or so and then the first thing you know he would be missing again, and we would have to go hunt him.

PATCHWORK: How long did it usually take before you were able to find him?

HOCK: Usually we would be able to find him pretty quick, because he didn't get that far away. Occasionally we would have to hunt for him for quite a while.

PATCHWORK: Did he usually go to the same area?

HOCK: No, not necessarily, but he would wind up in the woods somewhere.

PATCHWORK: How many of the people at the Poor Farm had mental problems or were not mentally well?

HOCK: Well, earlier on there weren't too many, they were just poor. Towards the end when the County took it over, most of them were parole patients from the Danville State Hospital. And while they weren't dangerous, they didn't know too much.

PATCHWORK: What sort of jobs were they given?

HOCK: Well, they couldn't do too much. Well, they could only get hay down for the cows, or feed the pigs, or gather the eggs in the chicken coop, minor things like that. Empty the garbage cans. They couldn't do much that required any thinking. But at the same time it gave them something to do. Actually, it was good therapy for them to be able to do something. Then they cut that out. You were too young to remember when the Danville State Hospital had those farms that go into Danville. They had huge dairy herds and the inmates there would help with the milking, of course that supplied the milk, butter, eggs, and meat and for some reason they cut that all out. The government wouldn't let them do it. They said they couldn't work for nothing. Actually they weren't working for nothing, they were getting their room and board. But they weren't getting any money for it.

PATCHWORK: Were you ever short on work hands at the farm? Did you ever not have enough people to work on it?

HOCK: We had a men and women work for us, besides the help from the guests there. Then occasionally like threshing or hauling in hay or grain, sometimes we would hire some extra help. Not very often, because we had enough help. We used to fill the icehouse every winter. That seems odd to you. If you needed ice, you would get it out of the refrigerator. We had an icehouse. We cut the ice out of the pond and haul it up and put it in the icehouse, put one layer down, then put a layer of saw dust on top of it, put on a layer of ice and then another layer of saw dust on top of that. I'd say it lasted until mid July or early August.

PATCHWORK: How old were you when you started working on the Poor Farm?

HOCK: I was born there, so whenever I got big enough to work, my dad put me to work. And then I was there until I was twenty-five, and that's when we left. Of course I was in

the Marine Corps for two years there in between. That was an interesting job, it was a hard job for the women, the men didn't have anything, but my wife worked pretty hard. When she first went there, she was pretty young, only nineteen. First year she was there she canned over a thousand quarts of vegetables and fruit and you girls aren't too far from that. Can you imagine doing that? Baking pies and bread every day and for that many people too. It must have been a lot. Yea, it wasn't easy. Things have changed since then. Considerably.

PATCHWORK: So there is just a caretaker now, no one else lives there?

HOCK: Just a caretaker. No they rent the farm out. The 1972 flood they put a dump out there and they practically ruined it.

PATCHWORK: What did you do during the winter when you couldn't grow very much of anything? Did you just stock up for then?

HOCK: We helped the women clean house and of course you always had the chores, the barn work, like the milking and feeding the animals, and a lot of times we baled hay in the winter time, and fill the icehouse.

PATCHWORK: Did you just put stuff in there that needed to be kept cold?

HOCK: Well, you couldn't put anything in there really, because there was saw dust all over it and if you wanted a piece of ice, you went out and put the saw dust out and dug the ice out and washed it off.

PATCHWORK: Were there any additional jobs you would do in the winter?

HOCK: No, not really. We kept the roads open, and helped with the laundry and stuff like that.

PATCHWORK: Was there ever a time when you didn't have enough food?

HOCK: I can't remember any, no. It may have not have been exactly what we wanted. We didn't have steak and lobster tail that's for sure. Also in the winter time there was painting and repair work we always had to do. We also had wood stoves, we didn't have oil heaters, and in fact we didn't have electricity. Not in the early days.

PATCHWORK: So did you just use candles instead of electricity?

HOCK: You know what, they had carbine lights, but I don't remember them before I was born. I think they made their lighting from carbine. You probably don't know what carbine is. It makes a gas. Did you ever see the minors, with these lights on their hats, they were carbine lights. Only this was in a bigger scale. They had copper-tubing lines running around through the house, they would light these lights. At that time that was a pretty modern thing. Not many people had that.

PATCHWORK: How up to date was the technology at the farm?

HOCK: Well I would say it was about as good as anything around there. In fact, maybe a little bit better. We used to pump our water from the creek. We had a steam engine down at the creek and we pumped it up the hill to the reservoir and then it ran by gravity over to the building. And a lot of people at that time were pumping their water by hand, with a hand pump.

PATCHWORK: What things changed over the years at the Poor Farm since you were born there?

HOCK: Probably the biggest change was when the electricity came in. We had electric lights and that was about 1932. Very few people had electricity then except in town.

PATCHWORK: How far away or what was the nearest place that people would go from the poor farm?

HOCK: Well the Poor Farm was three miles from Bloomsburg. And a lot of times they would go into town. In fact I went to Bloom High and I walked there for four years, six miles a day. Plus when we got home we had to do milking and stuff like that. You guys think that you have it tough. There were no buses. You either walked or you didn't go to school.

PATCHWORK: How long would it take you to get to the school?

HOCK: About an hour. Three miles per hour, but a lot of times we would get a ride. We would hitch hike and sometimes someone would stop and give us a ride. But you couldn't depend on that. If they didn't, you walked.

PATCHWORK: Were there any young people that you can remember who would have maybe been in high school that worked on the Poor Farm?

HOCK: I don't remember any. But when I was real little there was one there, I think, that had a child. But I can't even tell you the name. I remember my older brothers talking about it. But I don't think they were there very long. But very seldom any families had small children.