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OPINION
EDITORIAL

2012-12-09 / Community View

OAKDALE: Its storied place in Lapeer County history

BY JOYCE BONESTEEL Contributing Writer



The building above, known as Cottage C, was one of the earliest buildings at the home. It was constructed in the late 1800s. Inset, is a laundry room at the then-sprawling complex. Pictured below, men worked in one of the many

Editor's note: The County Press today begins a monthly series on the people, history and collective experience of the Oakdale Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities that once stood in Lapeer and was home to 4,600 patients in the mid-1940s. December winds sweep across the barren land south of Millville Road and M-21. The massive red brick buildings were torn down

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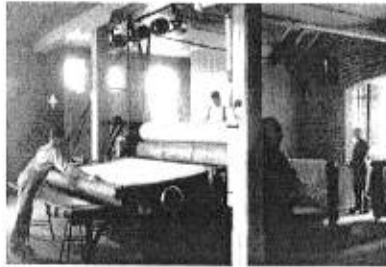
fields farmed to feed the patients and staff at Oakdale. Photos courtesy Don, Pat McCallum

years ago. All of the mentally impaired people are gone.

A state institution lived here. Born as the Michigan Home for the Feeble Minded and

Epileptic in 1895, it died by the name of Oakdale Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities in 1991.

In the 1940s, the middle years, when more than 4,600 patients lived here and 98 buildings were clustered on roughly 1,100 acres, the Lapeer State Home and Training School, as it was then called, reportedly was the largest such facility in the world. In 1941, the population was 815 higher than the City of Lapeer's.



For 94 years, the institution was a major player in our community. It was a linchpin to the local economy. For decades, it was by far the largest employer in Lapeer County. The men and women who worked here carried home fat paychecks and prospered. The state provided excellent health insurance, pensions and paid days off.

Patients were enrolled in programs designed to help them reach their greatest potentials. The capable learned to read and write and acquired job skills. They were taught arts and crafts, how to play musical instruments. They said grace before meals. They went to church services on Sundays.



The need for a state institution dated back to the late 1800s, when too many "mental defectives" were a terrible burden for poor families and orphanages. The desperate cry for a

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public facility grew loud enough to rattle the Capitol chambers in Lansing. On June 2, 1893, legislators passed a bill to build a 200-bed institution, and earmarked \$50,000 for it in the budget.

Governor John T. Rich, who grew up in Elba Township, was said to have strongly influenced the committee he appointed to recommend a site. Lapeer was chosen, partly because the town council promised to provide 160 acres, run a water line to the grounds and supply free water for the first five years.

The Michigan Home began with the construction of two three-story buildings east of the main entrance, a short distance south of M-21. The bricks were purchased from Lapeer Brick & Tile Works on Oregon Street near Mt. Hope Cemetery. The state home opened on June 1, 1895. Less than three weeks later the first patients were admitted.

Construction of the landmark administration building, better known as the Castle, began in 1902. The front end was made of field stones that nearby farmers hauled in on horse-drawn wagons. The castle doors opened in 1904. The magnificent structure ranked favorite by almost everyone who ever worked at the state home or saw it as they drove by. The castle was heavily damaged by fire in early January 1973, and torn down that November.



Two cupolas from Oakdale can be found in downtown Lapeer.

As the years passed, the institution grew. More cottages were constructed. More patients were admitted. In the early

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years there was always a long waiting list. A bigger power plant was built, and so was a laundry, a nursery, a central kitchen. In the 1920s or '30s they even had a small deer park.

Colonies south of the tracks housed older boys and men who pitched in with the farm work. There were barns, silos, granaries and a slaughter house. Prize-winning registered Holsteins were raised here.

The original chapel burned in 1937. Adult patients walked to churches in Lapeer. Woodside School was built in 1956, and some time after that worship services were held in the auditorium.

A double set of railroad tracks intersected the grounds. In the first half of the 20th century, trains routinely stopped at the loading docks to deliver huge cans of lard, 100- pound bags of flour and sugar and other sundry supplies. But for the most part, the state home took care of itself.

All the milk came from its own dairy herds. The bakery produced hundreds of bread loaves daily, as well as cakes, cookies and pies. Hundreds of hens laid enough eggs for breakfasts. Vegetables and fruits were grown in an 80-acre garden the size of the average Lapeer County farm. Pork and beef were raised and processed on the grounds.

Meanwhile, thousands of lives were neatly woven into the fabric of this industrious facility. Employees reported for duty on days, afternoon and midnight shifts. They counted the days to payday (every other week), and worked side by side with patients in the buildings and on the grounds.

The Employees Reporter, a monthly newsletter first published Jan. 31, 1931, documented the institution's history, the countless goings on, the social networks and staggering numbers of supplies. The cover story in the October, 1931 issue, for instance, said the sewing room

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In 1948, the Lapeer Parents' Association for Retarded Children was initiated by Mrs. Eleanor Preuss, the lonesome mother of a boy in Colony 10. She generated the interest of other parents and won the approval of administrators at the state home. From its humble beginnings, this group grew from a handful of members to a strong and sophisticated group that influenced state legislation and raised tens of thousands of dollars to enhance patients' lives.

The institution's name changed four times over the years to better reflect its purpose, and to distinguish it from other state facilities that had opened. It was called the Michigan Home and Training School, the Lapeer State Home and Training School, and finally, two variations of Oakdale, from 1973 to its demise.

Michigan's mental health codes were drastically revised in the early 1970s. Reforms made life better for the residents and harder for employees. To subdue aggressive patients, they now had to get a doctor's permission to put someone in a strait jacket or other restraints. Reams of paper streamed out of the buildings as the employees wrote daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual reports.

By this time, the act of segregating and warehousing the mentally impaired was rapidly falling into disfavor among social workers and administrators of the Michigan Dept. of Mental Health. Disabilities no longer mattered. Everyone was entitled to a normal place in the community.

And so the DMH began downsizing state institutions, like Lapeer, and sent the people out on community placement, into the newly built Adult Foster Care homes that popped up like mushrooms in subdivisions and rural neighborhoods. AFC homes were normal, ranch-style houses, handicap accessible, licensed and inspected by



the state. Unlike the state home's cavernous dayrooms and dormitories and cafeteria style dining rooms, AFC homes featured regular living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens.

Many of the people who left the institution years ago are still in AFC homes.

Economics was another factor in the closing of the state home. With fewer residents, it wasn't fiscally sound to continue operating an institution. More residents were sent out on placement, employees were laid off or transferred to other facilities in Mt. Pleasant or Caro.

The last few residents left the state home, forever, in September 1991. A small employee crew stayed to operate the power plant and patrol the grounds until the following July, when the closing was complete. Only 400 acres and vacant buildings remained. The state sold that parcel to the City of Lapeer for \$1. Grants were awarded to tear down all of the buildings, except the nursery, that is now a satellite campus of Mott Community College, and the school, now part of Lapeer Community Schools.

There are no traces of the red brick buildings, the barns, the thousands of people who lived here, except the souls who died and were buried in the forlorn cemetery south of the railroad tracks.

Not enough years have passed for people to forget the magnitude of the state institution. Still, the stories must be told and handed down to new generations, for this was a way of life we will never see again.

Did you know?

The facility opened its doors to patients in 1895. At that time it was called **The Michigan Home for the Feeble-Minded and Epileptic**. It was comprised of only two dormitory buildings, one for men and one for women.



By 1956, the name of the facility had changed to the **Lapeer State Home and Training Center**. The grounds had significantly changed, with dozens of three-story brick buildings hosting the total population of residents and staff of nearly 6,000 people.

It was a nearly self-sustaining village by itself, as Oakdale housed a hospital, school, dairy farm, bakery, butcher shop, garage and laundry mat. At its height, it was one of the largest facilities for mentally impaired patients anywhere in the world.

A set of cupolas from the former Oakdale home can be seen as part of the landscaping throughout Lapeer, including two found at either end of downtown Lapeer along Nepessing Street. The design is also featured in the official logo of the City of Lapeer.

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