

Harrison Clay Lott (1848-1924)

Harrison Clay Lott was born on August 16, 1848, in Madison, Indiana. At the age of 15, he joined the Union Army to fight in the United States Civil War. One of the hardest things he remembered from that time was marching for 48 hours straight without food. After the war, when he was 19, Lott left home and moved to McLean County to start life as a farmer.

On January 29, 1873, Lott married Mary J. Waddington from Downs, Illinois. She was born on May 12, 1848. Together, they had six children, but only four lived to adulthood. Their first two children died when they were very young. Mary passed away in October 1899, and two years later, in November 1901, Harrison married Josie Davis, who was still alive when he passed away in November 1924.

Lott became a successful farmer and also got involved in local politics, holding a few minor offices. However, he is best remembered for his work as the Superintendent and Manager of the McLean County Poor Farm. The remains of this place can still be seen if you go south on Main Street/Route 51, about a mile past Interstate 74. There, you'll see a water tower and one remaining building.

Lott served as the Superintendent of the Poor Farm from 1883 to 1893. He and his family lived on the farm, and he was paid \$1,000 a year, which was a decent salary at the time, similar to what public officials like fire and police chiefs in Bloomington made. It only cost about \$1.50 a week to feed and clothe a resident at the farm, which is very different from today's costs. At that time, the people living there were called "inmates," a word with a different meaning than it has today.

During Lott's time as Superintendent, the farm usually housed between 50 and 100 people who needed food, clothes, and sometimes work. Over the years, around 5,000 people passed through the Poor Farm, staying for different lengths of time, sometimes even until they died. Although the Poor Farm was meant for people who had little to no money, it also housed a wide range of people with many different needs. Back then, doctors didn't know much about mental or emotional problems, and their knowledge of physical illnesses was limited. An 1877 article explained that to be admitted to the farm, people had to be examined by the supervisor of their township and, if they were eligible, were given an order of admission. People admitted to the farm included the elderly, sick, mentally ill, and others who had fallen on hard times.

After leaving the Poor Farm, Lott and his second wife, Josie, moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. He passed away on November 18, 1924, after struggling with poor health for several years. His body was returned to McLean County, where he was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

Poor Farm in Bloomington

It was probably not a coincidence that the farm was located four miles away from the center of town, because it served people that society often ignored. Old newspaper articles give us a glimpse of how people viewed poverty in the late 1800s. Some people criticized families who didn't care for their own and sent them to the farm instead. There were also complaints about "professional paupers" – people who didn't want to work and took advantage of the farm as a place to live for free. Records also show that some people were sent from the farm to other institutions for the "insane," "criminally insane," and "feeble-minded."

Not everyone who needed help ended up at the Poor Farm. Some people who were in temporary need could get help from the office of the "poor master," who might give them a little money or other support until they could take care of themselves again.

Over the years, many people died at the Poor Farm. Some were buried by family members, but many others ended up in a cemetery on the farm grounds. This cemetery was unlike any other in McLean County. There are about 300 graves, but none of the headstones have names on them. The first row of graves has headstones made of concrete, with just numbers on them – 1, 2, 3, and so on. Each row has about 25 stones, and there are about a dozen rows. Not everyone buried there lived at the Poor Farm. Strangers who died in the county without family or money were also buried there. This cemetery became known as "Potter's Field," a term used for places where poor or unknown people are buried.