

Harrison Clay Lott (1848-1924)

Harrison Clay Lott was born August 16, 1848 in Madison, Indiana. When Lott was fifteen years old he enlisted in the Union Army to fight in the Civil War. His recollection of his greatest hardship during that time was when his outfit had to march for 48 hours without any food. A few years after the war, at the age of nineteen, he left home and came to McLean County to begin his life as a farmer.

On January 29, 1873 Lott married Miss Mary J. Waddington of Downs. She was born May 12, 1848. The marriage of Harrison and Mary produced six children, four of whom lived to adulthood. Their first two children died very young. Mary died in October of 1899 and in November of 1901 Harrison married Miss Josie Davis. She was still living at the time of his death in November of 1924.

Lott was a successful farmer who also had some interest in politics and held a few minor township offices. He is remembered however, for the time he spent as Superintendent and Manager of what was called the McLean County Poor Farm. Remnants of this institution can be found by going south on Main Street approximately one mile past Interstate 74. On the west side of the road are a water tower and the one building that remains.

Lott was Superintendent of the Poor Farm from 1883 until 1893. He and his wife and children were provided housing on the grounds and he was paid \$1000 a year. While this number seems low by today's standards it seems to have been fairly equal to what the fire and police chiefs and other public officials were being paid in Bloomington at that time. Another number to reflect the difference in times is that it cost less than \$1.50 a week to feed and clothe a resident of the farm. At that time residents were called inmates, a word with a much different meaning now.

At any given time during Lott's tenure there were between 50 and 100 inmates at the farm who needed to be fed, clothed and, where possible, assigned jobs. It seems likely that during the eighty or so years that the farm operated about 5000 people spent time here, some for a short period, some until they died.

Despite being labeled as a place for the "poor," the institution housed a wide variety of people with many different problems. Medical science knew practically nothing of mental and emotional problems and was fairly limited in their knowledge of physical ailments. An 1877 article stated that to be admitted an inmate had to be examined by the supervisor of their township and if they were deemed eligible, were given a written order of admission. The following was a kind of guideline: "The infirm, the aged, the sick, the idiotic, the insane, and those who may be temporarily, through accident or misfortune, thrown upon the common charity..." This was a time when people suffering illnesses like epilepsy could easily find themselves placed in such an institution. Mr. Lott had to deal daily with a place that was part for the poor and homeless, part hospital, part insane asylum, and a home for unwed mothers.

After leaving his post as Superintendent, Mr. Lott and his second wife Josie moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. When he died on November 18, 1924, after several years of poor health, his body was returned to McLean County for burial in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

Poor Farm in Bloomington

It was probably no accident that the farm was placed four miles from what was then the center of town since it dealt with people that many in society would much rather ignore. Papers of the time give a little insight into views toward poverty in the late 1800s. There was criticism of families who would not take care of their own but would send them to the farm and there were references to the “professional pauper” who was “too high-toned to work” and used the farm as kind of free living accommodation. There are also records of transfers of inmates to other institutions for the “insane”, “criminally insane”, and the “feeble-minded”.

Not everyone in need of help ended up at the Poor Farm. Some whose situation was judged to be temporary could apply for help from the office of the poor master. They might be given a small amount of money or other help to tide them over until they could get back on their feet.

Over the many years the Poor Farm was in operation a large number of inmates died. A few were buried by family, but many ended up in the cemetery on the grounds, a cemetery unlike any other in McLean County. There are about three hundred headstones in the cemetery and not a single one of them has a name inscribed. In the first row the first headstone is made of concrete and has the number 1 marked in the middle of the stone, next to it is the number two and so on. Each row has about 25 markers and there are about a dozen rows. Not everyone in the unmarked graves lived at the Poor Farm. A stranger in the county who died without family or money would also likely end up in the cemetery that many called “Potter’s Field”. This was a name long used to describe this kind of cemetery where paupers and the nameless were buried.