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# THE WEST END QUARTERLY

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HISTORY AND FOLKLORE IN THE WEST END OF UNION COUNTY

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"Grand Champion Corn Huskers," circa 1924. Photo courtesy of Emilie Jansma.

## **\*The Village, Part I\***

March, 2017

## Community Interviews: The Village at Laurelton

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**W**hen the Laurelton State Village for Feeble-Minded Women of Child-Bearing Age opened its doors in 1920, it was the largest, most expensive, and most modern institution the West End of Union County had ever seen. From the day the institution opened, however, it already felt like a part of the West End. Hydroelectric power provided lighting to buildings via Laurel Run. Water for the building came from mountain springs. The sizably out-of-place buildings were built with stone from the surrounding mountains. It was an odd combination - an institution representing the most modern and state-of-the-art planning and execution of science, industry, and technology situated in one of the most rural areas of the state. The same could be said about the people involved in the early years of the Village. Urban dwellers, doctors, nurses, and staff members worked alongside former farmers and odd-jobbers from the rural region. What the institution represented, how it was experienced, and how it is remembered depends upon who is telling the story. From the beginning, the Laurelton State Village could be described in multifaceted and sometimes contradictory ways.

### The Start of the Institution

Leading the push forward for the establishment of a State-funded institution was a group of prominent citizens representing the Public Charities Association, a state agency responsible for overseeing private and public institutions for "dependent classes." Institutions that received funding from the state, such as orphanages, nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals, almshouses, and jails were all subject to the supervision of the agency. In 1917, in a report to the State, the Public Charities Association addressed the urgency for opening a new institution for what they believed to be a growing number of "feeble-minded" citizens in the state. Although a training school for "feeble-minded children" and an institution for "feeble-minded" adults already existed in Pennsylvania, the agency advocated for a separate facility for women. After setbacks in the initial plans of a state institution fell apart in 1915, the Public Charities Association encouraged the state to recognize the importance of a women's-only institution, stating:

"Society demands the segregation of weak-minded, helpless women and we feel fully justified in recommending a liberal appropriation for the construction and completion of the buildings at Laurelton as now contemplated, thereby making early provision for the most of the class now at large, together with those now in other institutions where they are a menace to the other inmates of such institutions."

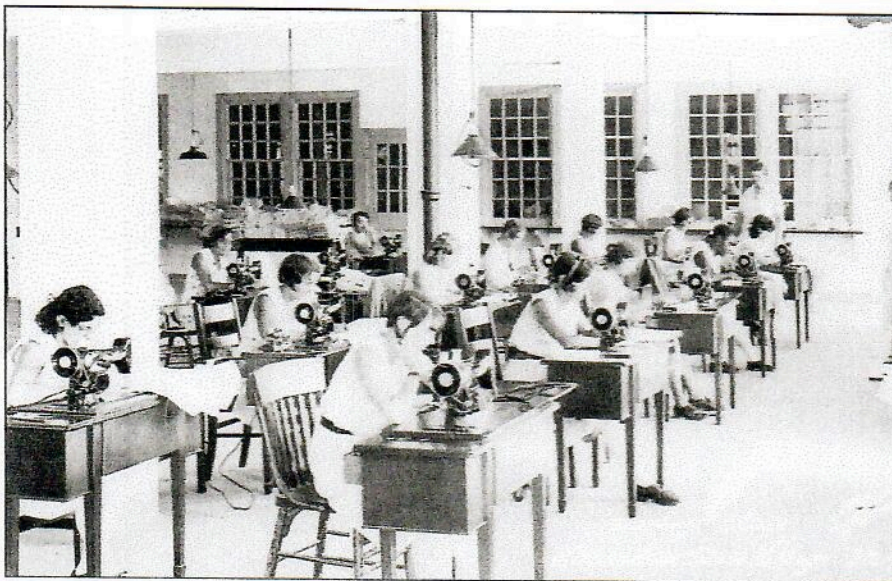
The agency also campaigned for public support to address the needs of a growing class of "feeble-minded" citizens. In 1917, the group displayed an exhibit in Wilkes Barre that highlighted the "extent of feeble-mindedness throughout the state." The exhibit sought to create a heightened sense of urgency to the matter of feeble-mindedness. A presentation by Miss Wagner, a teacher of a local school described as serving "the defective" spoke to attendees about the "growth of feeble-mindedness and its danger in (Pennsylvania)." The Public Charities Association stated that one of the organization's main objectives was "the segregation of all feeble-minded persons by 1918," and the agency warned that, should feeble-minded women be left without adequate care, that it would result in leaving them with the ability to "reproduce their kind."

One of the leading advocates for a state-funded institution in Union County was Dr. Mary Wolfe, a Lewisburg native and physician. Dr. Wolfe echoed the concerns of the Public Charities Association, arguing, "It is well known that feeble-mindedness is hereditary. We want to make a place in Pennsylvania where we can segregate these women between 16 and 45 reducing child birth among them. We will have the key for stamping out idiocy." For Wolfe, and other social reformers of the day,

creating an industrial training program and school were important markers of distinction from prison-like detention centers, while still providing a means to confine the women. Wolfe, herself, made a distinction between the "dangerous insane" and the "weak-minded women" that she hoped to accommodate in the planned institution.

In the early planning phases of the Institution, there were a number of competitive bids from potential areas in Pennsylvania. Final selection for the location came down to two towns - Pine Grove in Schuylkill County where the Reading Railroad provided a convenient access point for receiving patients and visitors, and Laurelton. Although the L&T branch provided access to the area, the state's final approval of Laurelton was most likely the result of fundraising and advocacy of prominent citizens in Union County including Drs. Mary Wolfe and Oliver W.H. Glover. Residents of Hartley Township raised several thousands of dollars to promote Laurelton as an ideal setting for the new institution. Laurelton also had an abundance of State Forest land, and it was here that construction for the new institution began. In early reports of the construction of the Village, the picturesque scenery of the surrounding mountains provided both important natural resources as well as a wilderness setting, a therapeutic bonus for patients. The state also provided funding for the construction of five additional cottages, an electric light plant, a sewage disposal plant, laundry facilities, barns, out-buildings, and additional land purchases.

When the institution finally opened its doors in January 1920, there was already a waiting list of 35 patients, more than enough to fill the first Cottage. In the first couple of years, the board reported that limitations to expand the number of inmates was not due to a lack of patients, but a shortage of staff members necessary for the expansion. Within a year, there were 142 attendees with an average

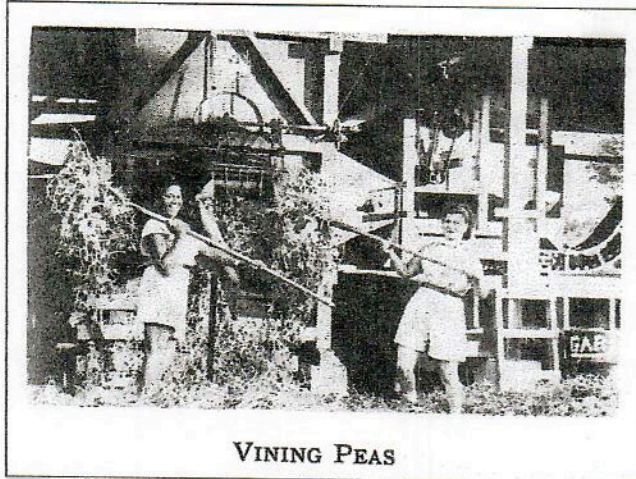


Sewing classes, 1920s. Photo courtesy of Tony Shively.

of 5 new applicants each week. The Village boasted the latest in modern conveniences, both in infrastructure and in the education of those deemed "feeble-minded." The institution emphasized the importance of academic, industrial, and social training for attendees. Limited schooling, up to the eighth grade, was provided to inmates who were willing and able to receive an education. In the 1929-30 year, the board reported that over 200 inmates had attended school at the Institution.

Education and training at the Village also included preparing women for industrial and domestic trades. Domestic work was one type of industrial training offered at the Village, and it had an added benefit of providing necessary labor to the institution. Inmates assisted in all aspects of domestic work at the Village including sweeping, cleaning, making beds, cooking, baking, washing dishes, and laundering. In the sewing room, inmates assisted in making clothing and doing any necessary sewing at the institution.

Inmates also assisted with the landscaping and outdoor maintenance of the Village. The institution reported, "this employment and the healthful life in the open, combined with wholesome food and regular hours, have greatly improved (the inmates') general health. Outside, inmates assisted with groundwork, brushing out and cleaning up of the surrounding woods, and reclaiming several fields and clearing fence rows. In addition to the health benefits of having inmates work outdoors, the institution also saved money on the cost of labor. They reported, "At the time Cottage No. 1 was built, about five years ago, this work was done as protection from forest fires, and cost between \$300 and \$400. The girls practically duplicated this work at no cost to the institution."



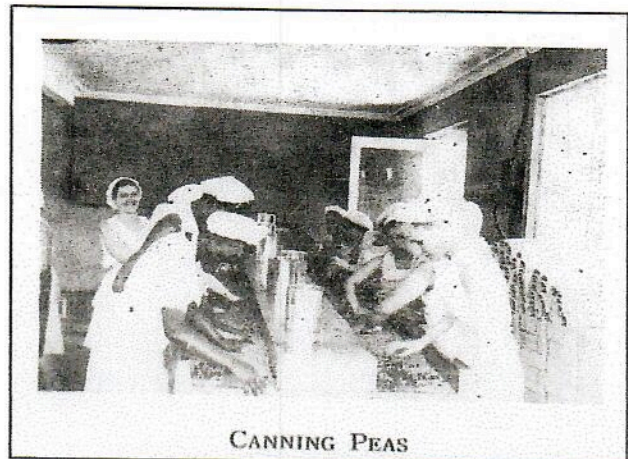
VINGING PEAS

*Photo courtesy of Emilie Jansma.*

The farm and food processing production provided food for the Village and also gave women experience working in certain industries, like canning (work in canneries was dominated by women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The Village had its own cannery to help preserve the thousands of pounds of produce each season. A large-scale farm produced rye, oats, buckwheat, potatoes, corn, spelt, beans, peas, hay, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes and a variety of other produce. An orchard provided fruits for drying, canning, and cider production. Livestock was also an important part of the farm at the Village. Inmates assisted staff members in both raising and butchering livestock.

Lulu Hoffman worked at the Laurelton State Village for over 25 years between the 1940s-1960s, and she remembers that inmates undertook a great deal of work in the Village:

"...Jim Pollack was in charge of the gardens. He had an old truck. They would have an attendant that would take a group of girls out to do garden work. But it wasn't just a garden - it was a field and...those were the field girls...Now, (the staff) could help if you wanted to, but the supervisor was the one that had to see that they did it. So they would bring these peas in and dump this truck load of peas...Then they had the cannery. Some of the girls worked in the cannery. The other stuff, well, they would bring the other vegetables into the kitchen. The kitchen they'd prepare the meals. They'd prepare the meals in the cottage too. We had a dining room. The kitchen was underneath and then the dining room was on the first floor. They had waitresses too. So we ate in the dining room. All the help ate in the dining room...some of the girls were waitresses. They waited on us. That's what they were taught. After they were trained, a lot of them could go out and get a job. They



CANNING PEAS

*Photo courtesy of Emilie Jansma.*

stayed in too...and some of the girls did the laundry, some worked at the kitchen, some worked in the sewing room. They worked in the hospital. They worked at anything. And they a dispensary and they had a dentist and one worked for the dentist and everybody had a job."

The rural setting of Laurelton provided numerous recreational activities out-of-doors. Outdoor games, hikes, picnics, winter rides "in the big farm sled," downhill sledding on bobsleds, and an ice pond for skating gave the inmates an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of their mountain surroundings in all seasons. Indoors, the institution supplied books, magazines, and Victrolas in each cottage. There were also opportunities for dancing, singing, and "making fancy work." Lulu also recalled some of the events held in the Village's auditorium building:



A picnic at the Village. Photo courtesy of Tony Shively.

"They used to have a movie every week for the kids...and there was a balcony there. It was a beautiful building - and a gymnasium underneath. They had a library there

and all of those buildings were beautiful...They had a choir...and they an orchestra, too. Mrs. Gelnett had the orchestra. They had a music teacher - her name was (Kathryn) Stoker (Walter)...Quite often, she would take the choir to the churches in the area and they would sing. She played the electric organ. Oh I loved to hear her play!"

In the early years, choir visits kept the inmates connected with Union county residents, as did other activities that provided trips outside of the Village. On occasion, supervisors would permit groups to go on trips to the movies and the summertime Chautauqua at Mifflinburg (a series of lectures, plays, and concerts organized by and for the community). At one time, the Village even boasted a Girl Scout Troop consisting of a select group of inmates. The Institution reported in 1948:

"The Girl Scout movement was begun in July 1947 with 24 alert and brighter girls. They have enjoyed special outside activities, chiefly in the early evening. They are accepted by the General Headquarters, not as a regular troop because of their ages, but are allowed to use all the Scout books, awards, and paraphernalia...We have an excellent relationship with the Union County women who are Girl Scout leaders."

### Women at the Village

The Laurelton State Village for Feeble-Minded Women of Child Bearing Age was a place where opportunities for women expanded and closed in conflicting ways. As one of the only institutions of its kind devoted to the care of women, it provided opportunities for women's advancement in fields where they had traditionally been excluded. In her efforts to establish an institution specifically for "feeble-minded" women, Mary Wolfe simultaneously advocated for the rights of women throughout the country. Born and raised in Lewisburg, Mary defied many of the social expectations of women living in her time, attending college, medical school, becoming a physician, and advocating for the political rights of women. In an era when many women in the country still did not have the right to

cast a vote in elections, Mary stood out as an exception. She attended and completed a degree with honors from Bucknell in 1896. Next, she attended one of the most prestigious medical schools in the country - the University of Michigan. Here, too, she graduated with honors in 1899. Her achievements are impressive, especially in an era where female students were rare or prohibited from enrolling in medical schools in the United States. After securing her medical degree, Dr. Mary Wolfe took her first job in the women's division of Norristown State Hospital for the Insane in Norristown, Pennsylvania (outside of Philadelphia). At the time of its opening in 1880, the state institution was the only one that hired female physicians and most likely one of Dr. Wolfe's only options for employment, despite her impressive academic achievements. Mary also returned to Bucknell on occasion, to obtain support from her Alma Mater. She advocated for the political slogan, "Every man at Bucknell for Suffrage," and helped establish a suffrage club on campus with a goal to "promote equal suffrage sentiment among college men and women." She became a leading member of the State Committee of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association and gave many public addresses advocating for women's suffrage. One newspaper, reporting Mary's address in October 1915 in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, observed, "Not in the history of the new square has it at any time been so crowded with people; men women and children from town and country...were attentive to the address."

Because opportunities in the field of psychiatric medicine were limited for women, Dr. Wolfe most likely knew she would have to continue to focus exclusively on the care of female patients. Having an entire institution devoted to female patients would have opened up numerous new opportunities for women like Dr. Wolfe to expand their role as physicians. She began advocating for a new state-funded institution for women in the early 1910's, and after years of campaigning and assisting with the planning of a new place, Dr. Wolfe was elected as the first Superintendent of the Laurelton State Village in July 1919.

Other medical professionals were also able to take advantage of the new opportunities now available to women at the Laurelton State Village. Dr. Elsie Blanchard, the Institution's first Assistant Physician, arrived in April 1920. Dr. Effie Ireland was an Assistant Physician at the Institution beginning in 1929, and she advanced to the position of Senior Physician by 1934. Mary Vanuxem, a Professor of Psychology at the Philadelphia Normal School also came to the Institution to study and conduct psychological tests on the inmates.

For women in the West End, the Institution also provided new opportunities for employment and advancing one's career. Lulu Hoffman described the limited opportunities women had to make an independent living during her time working at a nursing home in Lewisburg, "I worked there for two and a half years. I worked for the superintendent. I got \$20 a month - a month!" Lulu was able to negotiate a \$5 raise at her job in Lewisburg, but when she learned that they were hiring caretakers at Laurelton, she took advantage of the considerably higher wages:

"I had a friend that we ran around together when we were kids. She started to work up (at the State Village). I heard they were hiring up there. This is before WWII. Not much before, but it was before - 1941. And I said, well, I heard that they needed some help...I should stop the job for \$25 a month when up here I got \$55 a month. \$25 to \$55! Well, if I could manage on \$25 a month, then that extra \$30 a month I put it in the bank and bought my first car. It was during the Depression so a lot of people didn't have cars. And I saved it until I could buy a car. I didn't buy a new one - that cost too much...But I got a second hand one."

With her new car, Lulu took advantage of being able to travel to see her family and friends during her days off from work:

"We only got one weekend a month off. We got a day and a half off during the week. I wasn't married at that time...My parents lived out in the country on the other side of Forest Hills. So I could find somebody with a car that could pick me up at Mifflinburg after I went on the bus. But then after I got my own car, then I thought I was just it! I had my own transportation. I'll tell you what, there's nothing like your own transportation!"

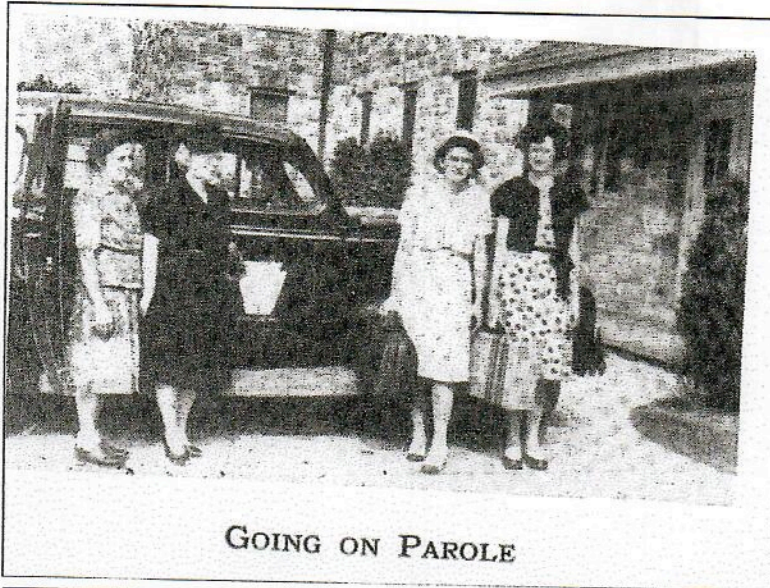


Photo courtesy of Emilie Jansma.

As a cottage attendant, Lulu remembers that education and instruction were important aspects of the job. "We taught them as much as we could in the cottage. The idea was to try to teach them enough that they could live on their own on the outside." For those women who were able to demonstrate an ability to work and care for themselves independently, there were opportunities for "parole" in which inmates remained under the control of the state but could work outside of the Village. Having the opportunity to work outside of the Village also provided inmates with a small amount of money (inmates were paid

an average of \$1.74/day in 1944). The staff believed this small amount of money contributed to the overall well-being of the inmates. In a 1946-48 report, the board observed:

"First choice is given to the girl who is perhaps becoming somewhat discouraged or entirely lacking in funds. It means so much to her morale to have some money for canteen, beauty parlor, or mail orders. It also, of course, helps us to evaluate the training she has received and reveal what part may need further special stress."

During and immediately following WWII, the inmates also provided important labor for area farmers. The institution reported in 1948:

"A number of farmers have contracts with the canning companies for their crops and have come to depend upon our girls for help, especially in the harvest season. Some of them



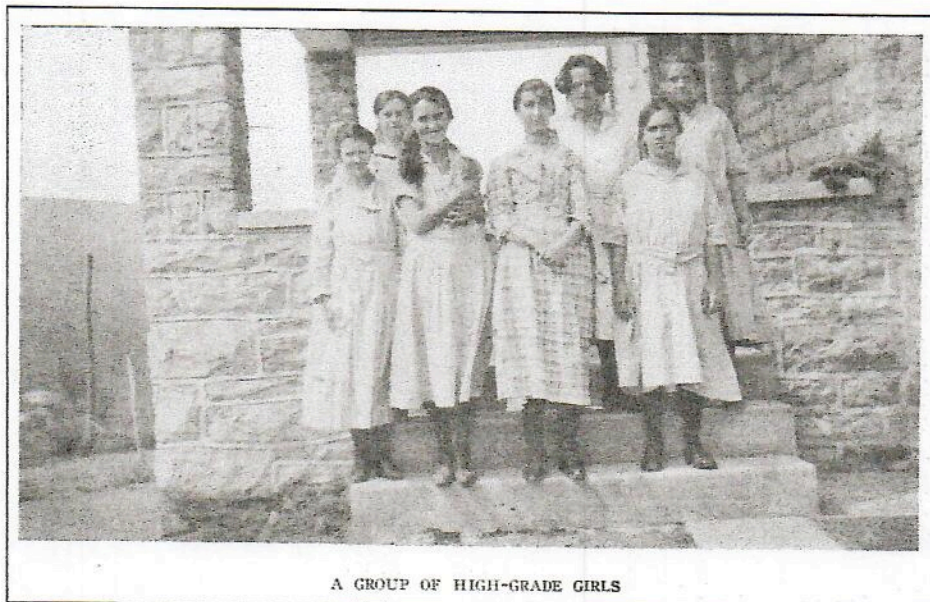
Photo courtesy of Tony Shively.

consulted us as to securing this help before planting their crops. In each instance, the situation has been investigated and the employer has furnished transportation and a suitable female supervisor. This work has been given mainly to the younger girls who appear to be promising and who have had experience in field work."

Although the education, training, and employment available at the Village provided inmates with new opportunities to improve their own well-being, the institutionalization of "feeble-minded" women also created circumstances that restricted the freedom of some. Throughout the early twentieth century, researchers, social reformers, and politicians cast a wide net for classifying people as "feeble-minded." The term lacked clear standards or definitions of who constituted "feeble-minded" in the reports of the government agencies, as well as the report of directors at the Laurelton State Village. During the planning stages of the institution, an article described an institution that would "provide several groups embraced under the terms 'idiotic,' 'imbecile,' or 'feeble-minded.'" By the time the institution opened, a report from the Board identified variations in these categories, labeling a population that was comprised of 25% "morons," 55% "imbeciles," and 20% "idiots." Doctors determined classifications through a variety of tests to measure intelligence and motor skills. The "Moron Class" demonstrated "a better use of hands than heads;" the "Imbecile Class" demonstrated "approximate" head and hand use; and the "Idiot Class" were described as having very limited use of hands that was below "even the small amount of intellectual power at their command."

Despite the coded and dated language used to describe the inmates at the Village, the institution provided many women with the opportunity to exercise their potential in a new environment aimed at expanding their well-being. Mary Vanuxem, a Resident Physician and Professor of Psychology at the Philadelphia Normal School conducted a four-year comparative test to the first 50 inmates at the Village. There were marked improvements in most of the women's scores, which Vanuxem attributed to the additional education the women were receiving at the institution. Vanuxem also concluded that industrial training at the Institution assisted in improvements in motor coordination, as did "play and game," and "instruction work." The report concluded that, "...many of these women who, for various reasons, have not received either sufficient education or proper training prior to their admission...have profited both academically and industrially by further education and training carefully directed and scientifically applied."

For some patients, "feeble-minded" was not a marker of one's physical or intellectual capabilities, but a marker of their deviance from what was considered proper social behavior for the time. In the Institution's early years, physicians distinguished between "low-grade" and "high-grade" girls, with the latter capable of doing much of the industrial work at the Village



A GROUP OF HIGH-GRADE GIRLS

*Photo courtesy of Emilie Jansma.*



independently. In studies on inherited traits of "feeble-mindedness" in the inmates' children, a number of descriptions suggest that environmental factors played a role in the "feeble-minded" category the institution gave to them. Observations made from these studies suggest that feeble-minded classifications were also applied to women who came from families that did not appear to be "industrious" or had children out-of-wedlock (this particular study also notes several of the men that fathered illegitimate children. Most were not institutionalized, and in one case, the father was a medical student with a college degree). For many inmates, these case studies may be the only records left to understand who the Village's earliest inmates were. In Dr. Vanuxem's study of the hereditary effects of "feeble-mindedness" the research gives a glimpse into the lives of the inmates prior to their incarceration:

"Case No. 1. This girl has had seven children by seven different fathers. Three of these children are dead...The offspring of this woman show wide variations in mental ability, the oldest child was able to pass the examinations for the Navy; the youngest child is of very low grade; with the others more nearly of the mother's mental level. It would be interesting to know what factor or factors produced this variation."

"Case No. 6. ...She was legally married and, so far as can be learned, was faithful to her husband. In this instance, it was possible to test the father...He was slow, dull and a casual laborer, but was devoted to his family...All of the I.Q.'s of the children of this family are considerably higher than those of either parent. What has caused this?"

"Case No. 12. ...Her low mentality is shown plainly in her appearance, conduct, and lack of industrial ability. She has had two illegitimate children by two different fathers."

"Case No. 15. This is, perhaps, the most striking case on the list...At two years of age, she had infantile paralysis. The members of her family are unusually bright...She has been married but had no children by her husband. She has, however, had three illegitimate children, one before her marriage and two while she was living with her husband. On a reliable test, her oldest child, a daughter, secured an I.Q. of 130. The daughter's school history and accomplishments confirm the accuracy of this test. Everything went well until the beginning of the girl's fourth year in high school, when suddenly she disappeared...A search was instituted and she was found living with one of the boys of her high school class. She was brought back, placed in school again and at the end of five weeks disappeared a second time...At the present time, although only twenty-one years of age, she is serving a sentence for bigamy. Apparently...the daughter has inherited the mental ability of the family together with her mother's sex delinquencies."

Finding no obvious hereditary connection to "feeble-mindedness" Dr. Vanuxem concluded, "Many of these mothers when young were very pretty and, on casual acquaintance, did not reveal their mental lack. For this reason, in the majority of cases they attracted men of higher mentality than their own, who became the fathers of their children."

At the turn of the twentieth century, prominent members of society not only frowned upon deviant behaviors like these, but actively worked to eliminate them. Arguments favoring the complete control of "feeble-minded" women's reproductive rights were rooted in the Eugenics movement, a popular belief that society could benefit from state-controlled reproduction policies. For women at the Laurelton Village, advocates like Dr. Wolfe believed that restricting the opportunities to reproduce would lead to a stronger, more industrious, and intellectual breed of citizens. Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, people in the US and abroad applied the "science" of Eugenics in an attempt to create an ideal human race - not only along lines of intellectual capability, but also along

lines of race and ethnicity. The end result was the implementation of state-funded institutions and reproductive controls throughout the early part of the twentieth century. In the biennial report for 1946-1948, the Board reported that, out of 166 admissions 147, or 82.5% were institutionalized for being "sex delinquents."

Recalling some of the inmates in the Village Lulu explained how "feeble-minded" women could easily work outside of the Village:

*"Did you feel like some of the girls could live on their own?"*

"Well, yes, some of them. And the better ones - a lot of people - and it would be people with money - you, see, the doctors' wives, they don't do the cleaning, it's only the poor people who clean. And so they would put the better (inmates) who could work pretty good, and they'd place them out into homes...anybody with any money like that would get...the better ones - the ones that were the best.

*So they would be housekeepers?*

Yes, for the doctors, the lawyers, for anybody with any money...You could get 'em, I could get 'em if I needed help with housecleaning."

Lulu recalled during one season, arranging to have some of the inmates come to help pick corn that was flattened in a strong storm. After a day of hard work, she provided a meal at her home for the inmates that assisted her. Lulu also remembered one particular inmate that was paroled out to a private home:

"I especially know this one girl...she was a nice girl. Never caused any problems and she was a smart kid. And one of the doctors down here, they had her. They kept her, and it was his wife that kept her under lock and key almost. I was going down the street past there, and she was out washing windows so I just stopped for a little bit to talk with her because up at school she was in the cottage where I was. And it wasn't long 'til the doctor's wife come out there and she said, 'You get out there and finish these windows!' I wouldn't dare stand out there and talk to her a couple of minutes. But that's the way it was. My hands were tied. There was nothing I could do about it."

*Because you had a job and didn't want to get fired?*

"Yes, that's right. That's the way it was and we had to accept it the way it was."

*And they just kept her? For how long?*

"Well, I'm gonna tell you something, I don't think they ever - she worked for that doctor until she was too old to work anymore, then I'm not quite sure what they did. But that girl, she could have had a home of her own. But she never had a chance."

It was stories like these that provided conflicting narratives of what the history of the Laurelton State Village for Feeble-Minded Women meant to those associated with it. For women like Dr. Wolfe and Dr. Vanuxem, the Village provided an opportunity to live life as a leading physicians of an institution during a time when professional opportunities were almost unheard of for women in the medical field. For women like Lulu, working in the Village provided some of highest wages working women could get in the area and the opportunity to live independently. And certainly there were many inmates that benefitted from the attention, care, and education provided to them in the Laurelton State Village. For other women, those perhaps now only known as #6, #12, and #15, the Village represented a place that limited opportunities to live on one's own, to have a family of one's own, and to be independent. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Laurelton State Village for Feeble Minded Women of Child-Bearing Age represented a conflicting story.

What do these stories mean for the history of the Village? Like any good local history, we learn to accept the complexities that are always a part of history, hopefully learn a lesson or two, and continue to remember the good times. Lulu Hoffman is one of the few surviving people that worked at the Village in the years it was referred to as a "Feeble-Minded" institution for "Child-Bearing Age" women, and it's the good memories that endure in her mind. When asked if she liked working there during her 25+ years of service, Lulu shared a story from the weeks after she left her post there:

"I drove tractor - our farmland goes up over the hill. There's a couple of places where when you get to the top...you could see the State School from up there. I said for about two weeks Ernest would be working and I'd be out getting the ground ready to plant and I'd be wiping tears while I was up there working the ground down for about two weeks. I wiped tears...well, I was there a long time and the people that worked there, I just missed them so much. And that's what I did. I wiped tears for two weeks."



Inmates posing with Governor George Earle, September 23, 1937. *Photo courtesy of Tony Shively.*