

Volume 12 Issue 8

December 1, 2011



Laurelton, PA Celebrating 200 years 1811-2011

Part IV

People living in Laurelton today...

DECEMBER 2011

The Millmont Times

LAURELTON STATE VILLAGE

When state officials were first considering where to situate an institution for feeble-minded women of childbearing age, several sites around Pennsylvania were under consideration. In the end it came down to two sites, and one of those was located in Union County. At the end of the decision making process the site north of Laurelton, located on state forestlands at the east end of the Seven-Mile-Narrows, was chosen. One of the determining factors was that there was no need for the Commonwealth to purchase any property, since the land was already under state ownership. One disadvantage to the Union County site was the requirement to find tillable farmland, and the financial burden that placed upon the state to acquire such lands.

Dr. Oliver W.H. Glover, along with fellow Laurelton resident David R. Pursley, were both instrumental in assisting the state obtain farmland in close proximity to what became known simply as the "Village". Glover and Pursley, along with others, were able to raise \$3,000 to purchase, and donate, 250 acres of tillable land adjacent to the institution.

Pursley was a contractor who was later responsible for construction of some of the buildings on the grounds of the Village. In 1927 his workers erected the dairy barn as well as a hay barn and sheep fold. Dr. Glover was a member of the board of trustees of the institution from May 1915 until his death on Thanksgiving Day 1949. Years later a cottage near the hospital building was named in his honor.

Farmland was an important aspect of the institution since officials wanted to be able to grow and harvest their own supply of fruits, vegetables, and root crops. They also needed farmland in order to raise and feed their livestock, which included milk cows, pigs, and poultry. Planting, harvesting, and canning seasons also provided opportunities for some of the resident girls to find meaningful work. The institution also provided numerous training opportunities to residents in their agricultural programs, including raising stock, and the cultivation of fruits and vegetables.

Dr. Mary Wolfe (1874 - 1962), one of the founders of the institution, was among the group who helped to select the site of the institution. She was a native of Lewisburg and the daughter of Charles S. and Martha (Meixell) Wolf. A 1896 graduate of Bucknell University, Wolfe continued her education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, graduating in 1899.

Following her graduation from University of Michigan she served as assistant physician at Norristown State Hospital. In 1901 she was selected chief physician of the women's division at Norristown and served in that capacity until 1910. Upon leaving Norristown, Wolfe opened a private sanitarium near Holmesburg, PA.

In 1913 when Pennsylvania Governor John K. Tener was looking to establish a new state institution he chose Mary Wolfe to oversee the site selection process. A pioneer in the field of mental health, Wolfe was appointed superintendent of the Pennsylvania Village for Feeble-minded Women of Childbearing age on July 15, 1914. As plans for the new institution were being

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 2)



The photograph above shows some of the men involved in the farm program at the Laurelton State School and Hospital. These men were gathered at Wehr's Dairy near Mifflinburg for a chicken and waffle dinner in January 1955. Front row left to right: Sherman Heims, farmer; James Pollock, farmer; Arthur Houtz, farmer; Harry Davis, dairy herdsman; Alvin Shoemaker, farmer; and John Mitchell, farmer. Back row left to right: William Z. Sleighter, steward; Samuel Z. Haire, farm manager; Harold Hackenberg, swine herdsman; James Hackenberg, farmer; Bruce Shirk, farmer; and Winey Mensch, farmer.

This photograph was published in the January 20, 1955 issue of the Union County Standard-Journal and was provided to me courtesy of Rebecca "Becky" Wenrick of Aaronsburg.

drawn she played an active and enthusiastic role in overseeing the project.

The site of the Village was a bucolic, or rustic, setting for a state institution designed and built to house and care for feeble-minded women between the ages of 16 and 45 years. The first of its kind, the institution was intended to detain, segregate, care for, and train feeble-minded women of childbearing age.

Once the site was chosen, plans were drawn for the erection of multiple cottages. The first major construction projects on the grounds were Cottages 1, 2, and 3, which were completed by 1918. Each of the three cottages contained a total of 25 rooms, and were constructed of native mountain stone, quarried from nearby state forestlands. The first cottages were furnished and ready for occupancy by December of 1919. The first female was admitted to the institution on January 2, 1920.

Subsequent cottages, including Sleighter and Edgett (both built 1926), Showalter (1928), Linn (1938), and McClure (1952) were spaced around a central open mall at the base of Stone Mountain. The impressive Wolfe Building, or A Building (1937), was built at the south end of the mall while Moyer Hall (1928) was built to the north of the mall.

In August 1927 a railroad spur was built from the main line at Laurel Park northward through Laurelton then on toward the Village property. Nearly three miles of track were laid from Yagel's Mill to the heat plant. This spur essentially followed the narrow gauge line that was used by the Laurelton Lumber Company decades earlier, and was used primarily to transport coal to the heat plant. Steam generated at the heat plant was piped to the cottages, laundry, kitchen, cannery and other building's on the property.

The Great Depression slowed construction as well as expenditures at the state institution. In 1938 a building spurt took place at the Village thanks in large measure to federal and state monies allocated for various construction projects. During that period of time the administration building, two additional cottages, hospital, recreation building, addition to heat plant and steam tunnels, and a sewage plant were constructed. These buildings were erected during the administration of Governor George Earle, who was on hand for groundbreaking ceremonies held at the institution. Governor Earle's mother was a longtime member of the board of trustees. It was during the 1930's that a reservoir was constructed north of the institution. The large dam captured water from Stony Run for use at the institution.

The impact this institution had on the nearby community of Laurelton, both in construction jobs as well as full time employment is undeniable. In May of 1938 there were 710 girls in residence, 110 on parole, and a waiting list of 600 girls. There were 122 employees at Laurelton during this period, and the institution encompassed a total of 1,413 acres.

After more than 20 years at the helm, controversy surrounded the departure of Dr. Mary Wolfe in 1940. Wolfe was regarded as a formidable superintendent. She was also a registered democrat who became a thorn in the side of republicans who wanted her replaced. In 1940 Republican Governor Arthur James was in charge in Harrisburg, and the board of trus-

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

tees of the Village was made up primarily of republicans. Her future was sealed at a June 1940 trustees meeting when members split 4-4, with one absentee, on the motion of whether or not to retain her services as superintendent of the Laurelton State Village.

On September 1, 1940, Wolfe retired and took up residence at Lewisburg, where she owned a home. She died October 18, 1962. With the exception of a hiatus during WWI she had been at the state institution from its inception, through its construction, and then as superintendent, having spent more than two decades of her life actively involved in the affairs of the Laurelton State Village.

Dr. Wolfe was succeeded by senior physician, Dr. Effie C. Ireland. Ireland was a native of Jeanette, Pennsylvania, and like Wolfe, she was also a graduate of Bucknell University (1924). Ireland attended the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, and was employed at the Harrisburg Hospital before her appointment as physician at the Laurelton institution.

The Village was practically self-sufficient when it came to food, as they were able to grow a large percentage of what was consumed at the institution. The tillable farmland surrounding the institution also provided a means of supplying food for the dairy herd, pigs and other animals raised on state owned land. In 1950 the institution was producing 50% of its food costs, while at the same time supplying other state institutions with their surplus. Wheat, corn, and oats were planted and harvested for use by the dairy operation. Vegetable and root crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, beans, carrots, and onions were grown on state owned lands for use by the institution. The 1949 potato harvest was so bountiful that the Laurelton State Village shipped an estimated 200,000 pounds to other state institutions.

In the 1950's Bruce Folk was responsible for the dairy herd, and during his tenure the Village was the recipient of awards for both quality and production of the milk produced by their herd. Harold Hackenburg was in charge of the pig farm and butchering operation. The farm manager was J. Frank Snyder, while James Pollock headed the truck garden.

It was estimated in 1951 that 90% of the girls in residence were able to perform some type of labor. At that time the resident population was around 915 girls with an additional 200 on parole. The cannery at the Village employed as many as 55 to 60 girls, while the kitchen and bakery employed an additional 100. There were 120 girls employed in the fields as well as grounds keeping and another 55 working in the laundry. The girls were also instructed how to do other routine work at the institution including - sewing and cleaning. The girls produced a majority of the clothing they wore on a daily basis at the facility.

In the mid 1950's several employees leveled allegation of mistreatment by staff members against the residents. Those claims had the institution in an uproar and soon controversy enveloped the superintendent (Ireland), her assistant, Dr. Catherine Edgett, the board of trustees, and numerous employees. After a short time state and local politicians were involved in the matter before it spread to Harrisburg and the head of the Department of Welfare (Harry Shapiro) and eventually into Governor George Leader's office. Storm clouds brewed as a stream of charges including administrative malpractice and the barbarous mistreatment of inmates were leveled. Much of the hullabaloo surrounded residents housed in Johnston Cottage, which at that time housed girls who were incorrigible.

Ireland and Edgett were both on the hot seat as the head of the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare investigated the allegations. Soon a committee of state House and Senate members were investigating the matter on site and holding weeks of hearings in Harrisburg. The controversy eventually led to the retirement of both Ireland and Edgett.

Life for the residents at the Laurelton Village was more than just work. Some of the girls attended home economics classes. A new education building was constructed in 1969, one of the last major building projects on the grounds of the state institution. Recreation was also a part of life for residents. The recreation hall, later named Moyer Hall, was built in 1938. Residents were involved in various activities including chorus, operettas, drama club, and Christmas plays. The choir also traveled outside the institution into neighboring counties to perform. Religious services were offered to the girls, and some folks may remember going to the Village to watch a movie with the resident population on "movie night".

When the order was handed down that the girls were no longer permitted to work in the fields, dairy, and other operations at the institution it came as quite a shock. Many of the girls were distraught, and some actually shed tears, when they were no longer permitted to carry out the duties, chores, and responsibilities they had performed for years.

A radical change took place at the institution in 1969 when the decision was made to admit males into the resident population. Previously only females were admitted to the institution, and henceforth there was a mix of both sexes.

The state owned and operated institution experienced several name changes during the eight decades it was in operation. In 1923, under an order by Governor Gifford Pinchot the name was changed from the Pennsylvania Village for Feebleminded Women of Childbearing age to the Laurelton State Village. Thirty-eight years later (1961) the name changed to the Laurelton State School and Hospital. The last name change occurred in 1976 when the facility became known simply as the Laurelton Center.

In 1977 plans were announced to demolish buildings on the grounds, including Cottage 4. State representatives and other elected officials intervened and the Department of Welfare dropped plans to raze any of the beautiful mountain stone buildings. However, some cottages were shuttered and the resident population continued to decline. In 1982 the Department of General Services held a public auction of much of the state owned farm machinery that had been used at the Laurelton Center.

In 1996 the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare announced plans to close Laurelton Center and transfer the

(Continued on page 8)

wrapper. Full two columns of wrapper

(Continued from page 5)

193 residents to other state institutions by June 30, 1998. That news came as a shock to the 400 employees. Efforts to find a new use for the state institution began shortly after the announcement. A task force consisting of 25 local leaders was empanelled to assist state officials in their efforts.

Following a series of hearings the task force settled on two acceptable uses for the facility. Those two recommendations from the task force to Governor Ridge in April 1998 included Hickernell Springs Resort and Hampton Laurelton Associates L.P. When the decision was made to sell the property the asking price was nearly \$4 million dollars. A deal between the state and Hampton Laurelton Associates L.P. fell through in September 2000. The Hickernell Springs Resort plan also crumbled when the state balked at putting any money into their project.

An exciting use of the former state institution arose in late 2002 when Gary Ream, then owner of the Woodward Camp, expressed his desire to purchase the property. However, like earlier proposals, the Woodward Camp deal collapsed and once again the Laurelton Center was on the market.

The state advertised the 50 building, 623,426 square feet of space, and 340 acres in September 2004. Once more there was hope that someone would come forward and get the property onto the tax rolls, while at the same time create employment opportunities for folks living in this end of the county. When Firetree Ltd., a drug and alcohol treatment center, announced plans to purchase the property local residents were quick to express their reservations about such a facility in close proximity to their homes. Concern from local, county, and state politicians, as well as the public scuttled Firetree's plans.

In 2005 the state finally found a buyer for the property. Gary Murphy, head of Mountain Valley Inc. purchased the former Laurelton Center for \$1,632,500.00. Murphy's proposal to turn the former state institution into a convention center, restaurant, dude ranch, along with other outdoor recreation activities have yet to come to fruition. While the property has been returned to the tax rolls, for the most part the mountain stone buildings and the beautifully landscaped property, eight decades in the making, remain off limits.

TLS

Editor's Note: My thanks to the following people who provided information used in this article: Laurelton residents Raymond E. Middleswarth Jr., and Lois (Shirk) Pick; Becky Wenrick of Aaronsburg; and Lulu Hoffman of Millmont.

Sources: The Biennial Report of the Laurelton State Village at Laurelton, Union County, Pennsylvania for Period Ending May 31, 1950; The History of the Laurelton State Village written by Dr. Mary Vanuxem in 1938 and published in Volume II of the Union County Heritage (a publication of The Union County Historical Society); The Mifflinburg Telegraph; and The Lewisburg Saturday News.

From the diary of the late Elder Greene Shively, born in White Springs in 1870 and a resident of Millmont from 1918 until his death in 1954:

Saturday December 25, 1943—CHRISTMAS - 13 above at 9, clear. Mother and I ate fried potatoes and mush for dinner. We are going to have our Christmas dinner tomorrow when Edmund's and Kenneth and his wife will be here. Edmund's came to our place this evening. David's called this evening, and Miss Blackford (Mrs. Charles Blackford's daughter) is home for a visit.