

EARLY INFIRMARY (POOR FARM) ON BIG WHEELING CREEK (Submitted by Donald J. Armstrong)

The History Section of this Web-Site contains references to various Infirmary Farms (Poor Farms) established in Marshall County apparently beginning sometime in the 1800's. A submission to the History Section by Colette Trader from the August 30, 1935 issue of the Moundsville Echo describes the information available at the time concerning a very early poor farm established on Big Wheeling Creek. That information is copied below:

“The early history of the Infirmary poor farm is very vague. County records show that a farm of 212 acres on Wheeling Creek near to the present Camp Agaming, was bought in 1859 from James Holliday for \$8, 742.56 and used as a poor farm till in 1866 it was sold to Henry Keltz for \$9,900.”

Based on local stories passed on to my family, I believe the Wheeling Creek Poor Farm was probably identical with an old brick house and the associated farm buildings that were located on the Hogg Family Farm that borders Big Wheeling Creek about 6 miles upstream from the Elm Grove suburb of Wheeling, West Virginia. The brick house had been vacant for a number of years when my parent's rented it as the only affordable residence my father could find that was within commuting distance of his employment in Elm Grove. We moved there in the spring of 1944 and it was our family home until about 1967, when my parents finally moved to a smaller, more easily cared-for home in Elm Grove. The picture below shows the house as it appeared when I visited the property in the 1977. At that time, it had been vacant for the past decade and was not in the best of repair.



In addition to the house itself, there was a large barn (in poor repair) and a smaller storage shed, as well a small brick/stone building at the back of the house which provided further storage. At the time in 1943 when my family moved there, the house was in terrible repair having been vacant for a number of years, but my parents, especially my mother, transformed the house into a home of which we all have fond memories. At the time we took up residence there, the house had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing. The house was subsequently wired for electricity, but water was always obtained by a hand pump serving a deep, hand-dug well in back of the house.

The local stories that credited this house and associated out-buildings as having once served as an early Marshall County Poor Farm are supported by a date of 1826 on the capstone over the central upstairs window. In addition, there was a small, very old cemetery associated with the property. The cemetery was located perhaps 100 yards or so from the front of the house and across a small tributary stream that emptied into Big Wheeling Creek. It consisted of perhaps 8 or 10 fallen stone grave markers at several depressions that also marked the graves and was located in a grove of honey locust trees at the top of a small knoll at the foot of a long gradually sloping ridge.

Stories passed on to us about the history of the house included that it was alleged to at one time have served as part of the under-ground railroad. There was a large earthen-floored cellar under the house and one of corner of the cellar (on the front and left side of the above picture) was walled off by more recent brick-work that was said to mark the entrance to what had at one time been an underground tunnel that extended from that corner of the cellar to a bank that dropped off into a field below the front of the house. This story was supported by a depression that followed that direction from the corner of the house and may have represented the path of the collapsed tunnel. Presumably, the tunnel served as a concealed exit and entrance to the house in association with activities of the under-ground railroad. The house was also said to have at one time been haunted by a youth known as "Hoppin Jimmie", a former resident of the poor farm who had a bad leg. His crutch was said to be heard clumping through the house at night. Jimmie must have vacated the premises before we moved there, at least we had no encounters with him of which I am aware.

At the time I visited the property in 1977 when these picture were taken, a coal company had purchased the part of the Hogg Farm that contained the old brick house. Sometime after my visit, the house was demolished to make room for coal company operations. At the time of my visit, the coal company had already constructed a bridge to provide vehicular access to the Hogg Farm property, which is located on the side of Big Wheeling Creek across from the Wheeling Creek road. Until that time vehicular access was only possible in the summer when the Creek was low enough to afford a safe crossing. For the rest of the year, to travel back and forth from the road and farm side of the Creek, one had to traverse a high swinging bridge by foot. The Sherrard school bus stopped on the road side of the bridge. This bridge was still in place at the time of my visit and is shown in the following picture. My son, J. West Armstrong is standing below the bridge.



Living there, one quickly became accustomed to crossing the swinging bridge, but it was sometimes a significant challenge for visitors who were less accustomed to its motion and height, and that was particularly true if the Creek was high and the waters swiftly moving.

Views of the coal company bridge from the Farm side of the Creek and the Creek itself as viewed looking upstream from the bridge are shown below. The coal company bridge is located a short distance upstream from the site of the old swinging bridge.



A view of the Hogg Farm property, as seen from the swinging bridge, is shown below. The old brick house is located to the left and not visible from this point. The Hogg Farm house and farm buildings are located to the right and not visible in this picture. The cut for a new road constructed by the coal company for vehicular company traffic can be seen on the left side of the hill in this picture. At the top of the hill which is centered in the frame, is a farm that is at one end of the Sorghum Ridge Road. Sherrard and the Sherrard High School (now demolished) that I attended are at the other end of Sorghum Ridge Road, approximately 3 miles from the top of the hill. From the Hogg Farm, Sorghum Ridge Road could be reached on foot by traversing an old wagon road that is concealed in the trees and wound upward from left to right as viewed in this picture. That is the route that I, and later my younger brother Eugene, followed to make our way home on foot after basketball practice at the high school. To reach the wagon trail from Sorghum Ridge Road, it was necessary to cross one of two fenced pastures at the top of the hill. On dark, moonless nights after a game at the school, it was always a little nerve-racking to determine in which pasture a large bull might be found on that particular night.



It may also be of interest that the Hogg farm is located about 3 miles down-stream from the alleged site of the Wetzel homestead, where Lewis Wetzel was raised in an earlier time. Wetzel gained fame in part as a character in three of Zane Gray's novels that centered on Gray's ancestors in the Zane family, who were early settlers of the region.. Lewis Wetzel was given the name Death Wind by the Native Americans who were the subject of his exploits. The novels are only loosely based on actual history, but realistic features of the history of the Wetzel family are interesting enough in their own right and can be found on this web-site. To my knowledge, there are also two biographies of Lew Wetzel and many details of his life can be found in a very readable history of the Ohio River Valley entitled "That Dark and Bloody River" written by Allan W. Eckert and published in 1995.