



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the archival collection at the SCI at Muncy is one of the early cottages built to house inmates in a home-like surrounding.

# The State Correctional Institution at Muncy

## Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

Institution at Muncy, especially before the advent of a fence and razor wire. The prison intentionally was designed to look like a college campus, a place where residents would feel that they were part of an organiza-

tion with high standards of excellence.

The buildings, featuring intricate designs in mountain stone gathered from Bald Eagle Mountain, all surround an impressive administrative building with a central tower larger than any other in Lycoming County, based on a design influenced by Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Trees and landscaping created a park-like setting. Why? Because Muncy was built as a reformatory for women, not the maximum security prison that it has become today. The design is called the

“Cottage Plan” of reform.

The Cottage Plan originated in France about 1840. Judge Frederic A. Demente was disturbed by the practice of placing young boys in the same prisons with adult offenders. Believing that to live and sleep with depraved men only served to destroy their lives, he promoted the idea of placing juveniles in a community atmosphere of small cottages, where they were cared for by a married couple who created a family-like influence.

By 1860, both Ohio and Massachusetts had adopted this approach for dealing with

both boys and girls. And by early in the 20th century, Pennsylvania had opened Sleighton Farm, a facility in Delaware County for delinquent girls built on the Cottage Plan.

### Prison reform

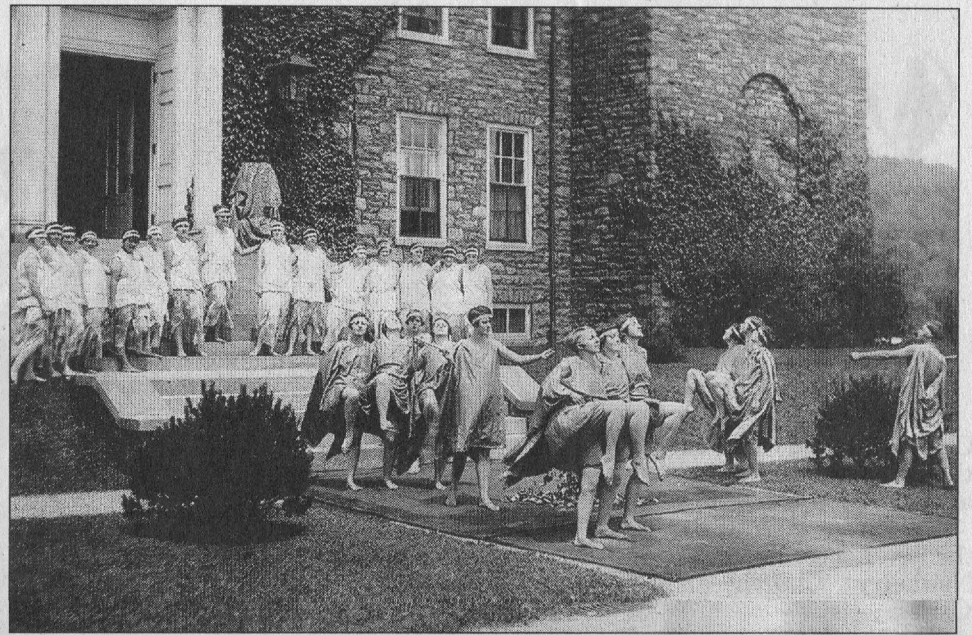
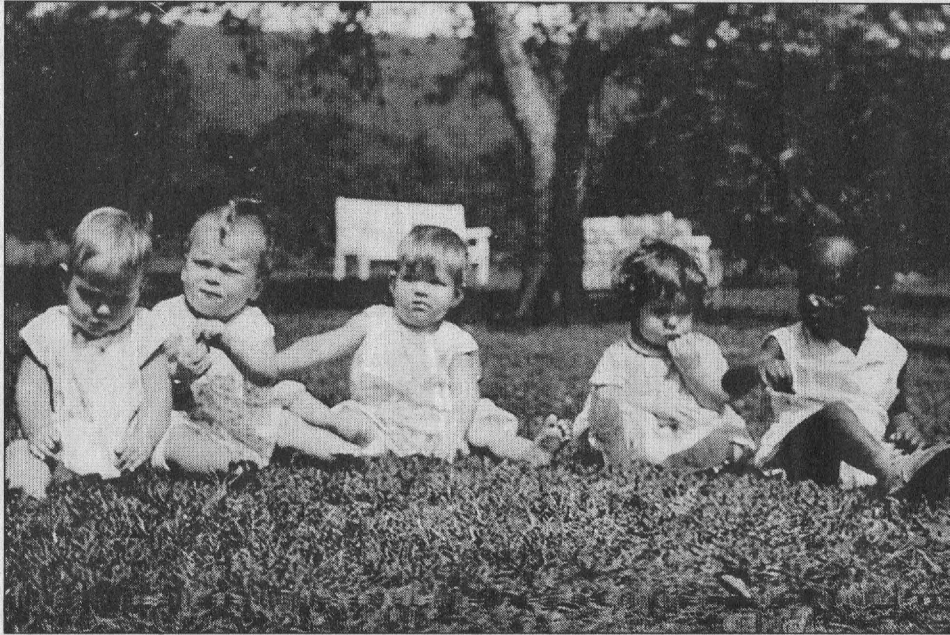
“The reformatories must not be prisons, which would crush the life from those unfortunate enough to be cast into them; they must be homes, homes where a tender care shall surround the weak and fallen creatures who are placed under

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By GREG RENN

Special to the Sun-Gazette

“It looks like a college campus” is a comment often heard about the State Correctional



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown above left, are five young children at the industrial home. Often inmates were allowed to bring their young children; some gave birth at the home. Above right, inmates held regular pageants that were open to the public. Both photos are from the archival collection at the SCI at Muncy.

# The State Correctional Institution at Muncy

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their shelter," said Josephine Lowell in 1879, speaking at a national conference on charities and corrections. Lowell was one of many women concerned about the plight of female adult offenders in the 19th century.

Women were cast into the shadows of male prisons, forgotten except to tend to domestic needs of the prison and the sexual desires of its guards.

The humanitarian women who created the Women's Prison Reform movement believed that the cause of "fallen women" was "fallen men" — the men who established the demand for prostitutes and the men whose "masculine will," or brutality, led to women's crimes of fornication, drunkenness, lewdness and larceny.

The reformers believed that if a fallen woman was taught employable skills so that she was no longer dependent on men, she would be more likely to lead a moral life and find a man of a better caliber. The solution lay not in prisons, but in reformatories built on the Cottage Plan.

Lycoming County women also were concerned about prison reform. According to a Sun-Gazette article, published Feb. 24, 1915, the topic of the previous day's meeting of the Civic Club was prison reform.

The leaders of the discussion were Mrs. Howard Cheyney,

Elizabeth Hunter and Mrs. Newton C. Chatman, the president of the group. At that time, Lycoming County women convicted of crimes in the local courts served their sentences in the female unit of Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary.

## Industrial home opens

By the time the reformatory opened its doors to its first three residents on Oct. 28, 1920, many of the ideas of the woman's reformatory had been perfected, and every aspect of life had a psychological reason behind it.

Most residents came from the backwoods or tenements and had never experienced electricity, plumbing, bed sheets, a porcelain tub, a private bed, linens or even china. Introducing women to these daily luxuries was thought to give them a desire to continue living in a more civilized way.

The stone cottages and gardens sported porches, ivy and window boxes to give an impression of clean neighborhood living.

Each cottage, which held 25 to 30 women, had its own kitchen, enabling residents to learn to cook, bake and dine in a family atmosphere with linens, tableware and china.

Living rooms were furnished as in a middle-class home. All the upholstery and making of

drapes, curtains, rugs and lampshades was done at the reformatory teaching the women domesticity and the skills they would need to decorate and furnish their own homes.

Tea parties were encouraged between cottages to encourage the development of entertaining skills. Each woman was allowed to decorate her private room as she chose, so that she could learn responsibility for her own space and learn to quiet her mind through peaceful reflection. The women were encouraged to take up needlework and the like to entertain themselves.

Daytime was spent learning life skills. School was mandatory, as was learning skills in such areas as tailoring, pattern making, sewing, nursing, weaving, quilt making, culinary sciences, industrial sewing, commercial canning, laundry, secretarial tasks, farming, animal husbandry, meat processing and vegetable and flower gardening.

Culture and the arts were emphasized.

School ran from October to April, and a large pageant was presented each spring, ranging from Shakespeare to Gilbert and Sullivan. Neighboring communities were invited to attend, and local bands performed.

Interaction with the community was encouraged to dispel

any feeling of isolation and teach the joy of community involvement.

Reporting on June 15, 1928 on a Shakespeare festival held at the Home, the Sun-Gazette said that such a large crowd had gathered on the lawn in front of the administration building that some had to stand: "Not only was Muncy largely represented, but many from Williamsport, Milton, Montgomery and other nearby places drove to the institution to witness this production."

## Children

Children were a part of the reformatory. If a woman had a child under one year old, she could possibly bring the child with her. If a child was born at there, the infant could stay with the mother for up to two years; this limit was thought to minimize any negative imprint on the child. If a mother seemed unfit, the child could be taken away.

The reformatory mostly was self-sufficient. In 1926, the women canned 15,000 quarts of 47 varieties of fruits, vegetables, jams and sauces, ranging from asparagus, crab apples and kale to spinach and plums. The farm raised enough chickens, cows, and pigs to satisfy institutional needs for meat, as well as milk and butter, and earned \$3,700 selling the excess.

In its time period, Muncy was a success. The recidivism rate for 1929-30 only was 27 percent (about half the current rate). But the crimes were different. In the early years, about 40 percent of the women at the reformatory were there for crimes of a sexual nature, such as fornication, adultery, bastardy and sodomy, which would not even be considered crimes today.

As times changed and security and cost effectiveness became the main concerns of prisons, the Cottage Plan came to be seen as woefully obsolete. Possibly the last intact reformatory built on the Cottage Plan, Muncy, remained in use as built until 1986, when modernization started with a fence.

*Renn, a native of Muncy, and began his career at the State Correctional Institution at Muncy in food services in 1984. His interest in its history was based on why it is a prison, yet looked like a college campus in a park-like setting.*

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