

Williamsport Girls: The poor, abandoned and delinquent

Williamsport Women

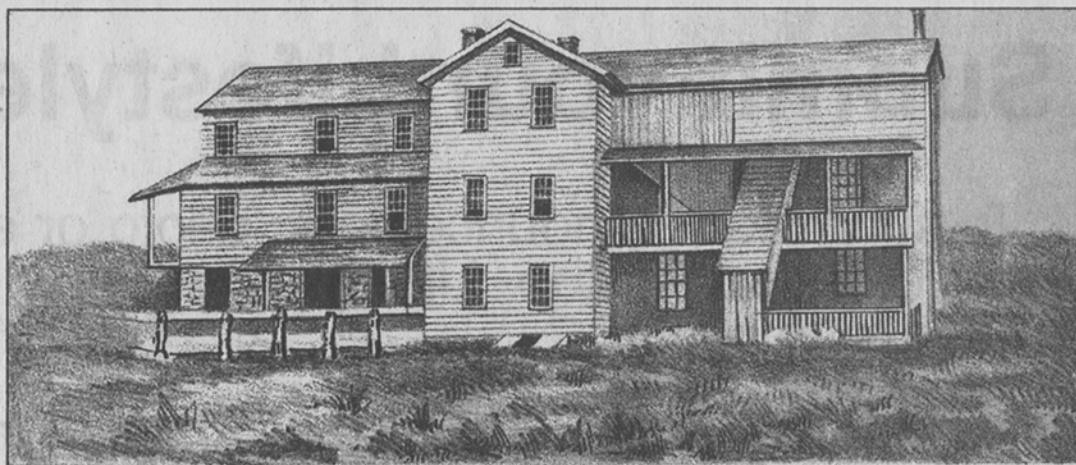
by MARY SIEMINSKI

The stories of Lycoming County's female teachers, nurses, physicians and of the women who lived on Millionaires' Row provide one view of what life was like for girls during and after the Lumber Era. But what about those who were not so lucky? What about poor girls, orphans, girls in trouble with the law or with their parents?

I started researching this question after listening to a story told by my husband, Richard Allen's mother. The late Mary Page Allen grew up on East Third Street; her parents, Herold Page and Mary Metzger Page, owned and operated the Page Funeral Home. Mary

always had stories to tell, and among them were stories of her birthday parties in the 1920s, held in the backyard of 125 E. Third St. The guests who helped her and her sister Jean celebrate frequently included the girls who lived next door at a group home.

Mary had an excellent memory; she could remember the name of the matron, the names of some of the children and even what some of them wore. What, I wondered, was this group home? Mary thought that the girls were from poor families and that they were taught



LYCOMING COUNTY—WILLIAMSPORT CITY POOR HOUSE.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is an undated postcard showing the Williamsport City Poor House. Several sources indicate that the poor house was located a mile north of Williamsport.

to cook and sew.

She was right. On Jan. 17, 1896, the Daily Gazette and Bulletin reported that "There has been inaugurated at No. 131 East Third street, a much needed branch of the feminine industry under the title of Girls' Training School in the science of housekeeping. A very desir-

able knowledge for pleasant home life and the girls thus educated will receive public preferment where assistance in housework is wanted." The article continued, "The foundation of a successful life is to teach young people industrious

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habits and to teach them the great, moral principle of good housekeeping and thorough cleanliness which will open for them many avenues."

Among the founders of the school were prominent ladies of Williamsport with familiar names: Mrs. William Emery, Mrs. J. Henry Cochran, Mrs. William Taylor, Mrs. Stephen S. Brown, Mrs. Moses Ulman and Dr. Jean Saylor Brown. Girls from poor families could apply for admission, and those accepted lived at the Training School. Most also attended public school, and Christ Episcopal Church set aside space for the young women to attend services without paying the usual pew fee. Each year, the Training School housed between 12 and 30 girls, from about 10 to 16 years old. Many of the girls went on to become domestic workers.

More than 20 years earlier, in 1872, another group of women had established a home for "friendless women and children, especially aged women." Called the Home for the Friendless, it was established by women associated with local churches. The organization continues today as The Williamsport Home, under the management of an all-female board. The building itself, located at the corner of Campbell Street and Rural Avenue, now houses physicians' offices.

The children placed in the Home for the Friendless generally was boys and girls who had lost a parent and whose surviving parent found it impossible to raise the child or children on his or her own. Frequently the families were reunited when their domestic situation improved, and often they spent holidays together. Dr. John Piper wrote extensively about the fascinating history of the Home in The Journal of the Lycoming County Historical Society (Winter 2013-14).

Although the Home for the Friendless filled an important need in the city, there were still many children at risk. The economy during the Lumber Era years was not always good; at times, unemployment was high. In 1877, the managers of the home for the Friendless reported that "many children are suffering

The terrible habit of street begging (is) greatly on the increase in our midst.



Children by scores frequent the streets; nothing but a life of shame is before these girls, and the penitentiary and House of Refuge will ultimately receive the boys. Shall we leave them to this fate that awaits them till the strong-arm of the law condemns them to punishment for crimes they were never taught to shun?"

It is hard for me to picture girls and boys begging on the streets of downtown Williamsport when all those beautiful mansions were being built a mile away, but the Home for the Friendless was the only institution in the city except for the almshouse that took and cared for children. In their annual report, the Home for the Friendless managers wrote, "Surely a city of our size and population should have such a refuge for this lonely class."

In 1885, another group of local women supported the founding of the Girls' Industrial Home, under the auspices of the City Mission.

The Gazette and Bulletin reported, "Girls who have no friends, no home, no advantage, with no outlook to better their condition can find a place of refuge



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown at top left, is the Boys' Industrial Home and bottom left is the home's laundry truck. The photograph was reproduced from the annual report of the School for 1902 held by the Lycoming County Historical Society. In the above photo from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is a postcard of the Home for the Friendless, dated 1911.

here. They will be fed, clothed, and will receive an education. They can learn to sew, cook, do needlework, and other domestic sciences."

The Girls' Industrial Home was located at 617 E. Third St., adjacent to the mission itself, and was under the direction of T.P.S. Wilson, city missionary. The girls did sewing for the public and also ran a bakery that delivered to local businesses and homes.

The Girls' Training School was founded when a dispute with the City Mission caused the women who had supported the Industrial Home to pull their support and found their own school, independent of the City Mission.

Under the headline "Trouble at the Home," the Daily Gazette and Bulletin for March 4, 1895 reported that most of the inmates had left the Industrial Home and taken with them some of the furniture. The furniture and the inmates ended up at the new Training School.

The City Mission then established a Boys' Industrial Home. Sometimes the courts "sentenced" children deemed delinquent to the Girls' Training School

or the Boys' Industrial Home. One device evoked often in an attempt to control these boys and girls was the threat of being sentenced to the House of Refuge in Philadelphia. There, according to the courts, delinquent girls and boys "would be placed in good hands, and ... the endeavor would be made to teach (them) to do right."

These homes served the county into the 1920s, when the Children's Aid Society and other established social service agencies became active. The 1920s also saw the establishment of the State Industrial Home for Women in Muncy. Girls as young as 16 were sentenced to that "home," which evolved into the State Correctional Institution at Muncy. A future "Williamsport Women" article will explore in more depth the treatment of the "incorrigible" girls of Lycoming County.

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