

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario: Inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry, 1877-1907

Stormie Stewart

Volume 3, Number 1, 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031050ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031050ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stewart, S. (1992). The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario: Inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry, 1877-1907. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 3(1), 217-233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031050ar>

Article abstract

Late in the nineteenth century, a number of Ontario county governments financed and built social welfare institutions. Essentially modelled after English and American work-houses, these institutions were intended to provide indoor relief to all indigent members of the community. By the turn of the century, however, the inmate population was almost uniformly elderly. This paper traces the demographic evolution of one such institution, the Wellington County House of Industry, and examines the circumstances and problems, frequently gender-specific, which compelled aged men and women to enter.

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1993

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario: Inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry, 1877-1907

STORMIE STEWART

Résumé

Late in the nineteenth century, a number of Ontario county governments financed and built social welfare institutions. Essentially modelled after English and American work-houses, these institutions were intended to provide indoor relief to all indigent members of the community. By the turn of the century, however, the inmate population was almost uniformly elderly. This paper traces the demographic evolution of one such institution, the Wellington County House of Industry, and examines the circumstances and problems, frequently gender-specific, which compelled aged men and women to enter.

* * * *

À la fin du XIXe siècle, un certain nombre de comtés ontariens entreprirent de construire et de financer des institutions de bien-être social. En vertu du modèle anglais et américain de la maison d'industrie, ces institutions auraient dû offrir un toit à tous les pauvres de la communauté, quels qu'ils soient. Pourtant, au tournant du siècle, la population des pensionnaires ne se composait presque plus que de personnes âgées. Cet article retrace l'évolution démographique de l'un de ces maisons, celle du comté de Wellington. De plus, il examine les circonstances et les problèmes qui poussèrent hommes et femmes âgés à y entrer et il montre que leur situation variait considérablement selon leur sexe.

The Wellington County House of Industry, erected near Fergus, Ontario in late 1877, was the fourth publicly funded and administered poorhouse in the province.¹ Several weeks after the official opening, the editor of a local newspaper visited the institution where he counted about thirty "very contented" inmates. He was happy to report that: "Hard times no longer stare [them] in the face, and they can look forward to a peaceful life until they are called to their last account."² A visitor to the poorhouse in neighbouring Waterloo County waxed even more enthusiastic:

1. Earlier ones were in Norfolk County (1868), Waterloo (1869), and Elgin (1875). Houses of Industry in Toronto and Kingston, though dating from the 1830s and 1840s respectively and largely dependent on funding from the provincial government, were run by private charitable groups. In contemporary usage, the terms House of Industry, poorhouse, poorfarm, Industrial Farm, and House of Refuge were synonymous, although there were in theory distinctions among them. The term almshouse was not used in any of the sources consulted for this study.
2. *Fergus Lightning Express*, January 20, 1878.

The comfort and happiness secured to our poverty-stricken old folks, by the application of Poor House laws and means, must be a source of the deepest pleasure to every one whose soul harbors the heaven-approved feelings of beneficence and love to erring and unfortunate humanity!³

These men, visitors to two separate but very similar institutions, paint complementary, not to mention complimentary, portraits. The county House of Industry, if they are to be believed, was a benevolent home where a group of passive and grateful elderly men and women would remain until they died.

Institutionalization has been viewed much less enthusiastically by historians. The construction of poorhouses in Ontario was part of an international institutional building boom in the nineteenth century. Michael Katz, in an attempt to explain the enthusiasm for institutionalization, argued that it coincided with the spread of capitalist relations of production. The institutionalized population, whether in asylums, old age homes, reformatories, or schools, represented the "casualties of the new social order," an order based on wage labour.⁴ New categories of dependents were identified as the marketplace was cleared of all those deemed economically unproductive. At the same time as increasing numbers of people fell by the wayside, traditional methods of dealing with the needy and infirm within the family and the community were becoming untenable, leaving few alternatives to institutionalization.⁵

Recently, a number of historians have challenged the image of institutionalized populations as either the passive beneficiaries of social welfare policies or the passive victims of them. In studies such as those by Bettina Bradbury and Wendy Mitchinson, institutions are seen as the focal points of and responsive to a variety of pressures placed upon them by clients and their families, as well as by the authorities.⁶ Michael Katz himself has moved away from a mechanistic, social-control interpretation of institutions to one in which the poor themselves are allowed a greater measure of historical agency.⁷ Also useful in adding to a more complex vision of institutionalization are studies which debunk the idealization of family care as an alternative. Family historians such as Michael Anderson have suggested that the decision to offer aid to a dependent relative was usually

3. William Jaffray, "A day at the Waterloo Poor House and what I learned there; a lecture delivered by Wm. Jaffray in the Town Hall, Berlin, on the evening of June 20, 1870," Waterloo Historical Society [annual volume], 57 (1969): 78.

4. Michael B. Katz, "Origins of the Institutional State," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (Winter 1978): 6-22.

5. *Ibid*: Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974), 279-280.

6. Bettina Bradbury, "The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness, and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885," in Joy Parr, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982), 109-128; Wendy Mitchinson, "Reasons for Committal to a Mid-Nineteenth Century Ontario Insane Asylum: The Case of Toronto," in Wendy Mitchinson and Janice Dickin McGinnis, eds. *Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine* (Toronto, 1988), 88-109.

7. Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983).

based on a careful calculation of cost and benefit. Those who could offer a degree of reciprocal benefit were most likely to receive help from kin.⁸

In the following analysis of one institution, the Wellington County House of Industry, both the victimization and the historical agency of the institutionalized population will be presented. Specifically, this paper will focus on elderly men and women who were forced to seek refuge in the House of Industry. Very little has been written to date about the historical experience of the aged in Ontario.⁹ This is particularly true of rural areas of the province. In social welfare studies, to the extent it is discussed at all, the countryside tends to be viewed as a haven of security and stability rooted in land ownership and family networks. Yet this vision ignores the plight of that portion of the rural population occupied in wage labour. It also ignores the existence of unmarried men and women, childless couples, and all those whose families lacked either the affective bonds or the resources to support infirm or indigent relatives.¹⁰ The construction in the late nineteenth century of a network of municipal poorhouses in Ontario counties is one indication that the countryside did not provide a haven for all residents.

Over a thirty year period beginning in 1877, more than one thousand admissions were recorded at the Wellington County House of Industry. Based on a quantitative analysis of the admission and discharge registers, this study, by integrating the history of one institution with the insights to be gained from family and labour history, will attempt to reconstruct the historical experience of elderly inmates. Its goal is to explain not only why elderly men and women entered the institution, but also to locate those who became institutionalized outside as well as inside the House of Industry. The issue of gender is central to this examination, as the set of circumstances which preceded institutionalization, and the opportunities to leave or to avoid the poorhouse entirely, were essentially different for elderly men and women. A brief introduction to the foundation of the county Houses of Industry follows. However, the core of the study is about the elderly poor: ultimately, it was to them that the causes of indigence and the method of relief-provision for the aged mattered.

There is no doubt that genuine concern for the plight of the destitute elderly was an impetus for the establishment of the county houses of industry: humane care of the

8. Michael Anderson, "The Impact on the Family Relationships of the Elderly of Changes Since Victorian Times in Governmental Income-Maintenance Provision," in Ethel Shanas and Marvin B. Sussman, eds. *Family, Bureaucracy, and the Elderly* (Durham, NC, 1977), 36-59.
9. David Radcliffe, "Growing Old in Ontario: 'A Grey Area,'" in David Gagan and Rosemary Gagan, eds. *New Directions for the Study of Ontario's Past* (Hamilton, 1988), 179-186, gives an overview. One of the only published studies of the institutionalized elderly is Sharon Anne Cook, "'A Quiet Place . . . to Die': Ottawa's First Protestant Old Age Homes for Men and Women," *Ontario History*, 81 (March 1989): 25-40. James G. Snell, "Filial Responsibility Laws in Canada: An Historical Study," *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 9 (1990): 268-277 outlines government efforts to enforce maintenance of elders within the family.
10. One such study, which over-simplifies the urban-rural dichotomy is Jane Synge, "Work and Family Support Patterns of the Aged in the Early Twentieth Century," in Victor W. Marshall, ed. *Aging in Canada: Social Perspectives* (Toronto, 1980), 135-144.

aged was repeatedly raised as one of the main benefits to be gained by the erection of such institutions. And when many county councils proved loathe to provide funding for poorhouses, reform groups such as the Prisoners' Aid Society and the W.C.T.U. attempted to exert pressure by publicizing the plight of elderly men and women who languished in county jails for want of more suitable refuges.¹¹ After humanitarianism is given its due, however, one needs to look no further than the name "House of Industry" to detect a note dissonant with simple charity. This dissonance was at the very heart of nineteenth-century poor relief practices in Canada where, as in the United States and Britain, benevolence coexisted in an uneasy triptych with simple parsimony and with an ideology which stressed the moral obloquy of "pauperism."

In international terms, Ontario counties were relatively late, sporadic, and reluctant in adopting institutional poor relief (or indeed any organized system for public relief).¹² From the 1830s, periodic initiatives were undertaken by successive Upper Canadian and Ontario governments to try to force the counties, according to a population formula, to construct poorhouses. Under the House of Industry Act of 1837, the government of Upper Canada authorized the construction of a system of local institutions under public auspices, intended to accommodate:

all poor and indigent persons who are incapable of supporting themselves; all persons, able of body to work and without any means of maintaining themselves, who refuse or neglect to do so; all persons living a lewd, dissolute vagrant life or exercising no ordinary calling or lawful business sufficient to procure an honest living. . . .¹³

Not coincidentally, this emphasis on institutional relief came hot on the heels of the passage in Britain of the Poor Law Amendment Act, which championed the workhouse as the solution to "pauperism."¹⁴ The rationale behind the workhouse or House of Industry was that it would curb demand for relief, as none but the truly needy would be willing to enter.¹⁵

11. Prisoners' Aid Society, *County Paupers and County Houses of Industry* (Toronto, 1894). Regarding pressure exerted by the W.C.T.U. in Peel County, see Teresa A. Bishop, "Peel Industrial Farm and House of Refuge: A Case Study in Institutional Development," (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1982), 22.

12. See Richard B. Splane, "The Care of the Poor" in *Social Welfare in Ontario, 1791-1893* (Toronto, 1965), 65-116. When English civil law was first introduced in Upper Canada, Poor Law provisions were specifically excluded.

13. Upper Canada, *Statutes*, 1836-37, c. 24, cited in Splane, *Social Welfare in Ontario*, 71.

14. Sir Francis Bond-Head, one of English Poor Law Commissioners, arrived in Upper Canada as Lieutenant-Governor in 1836. See Rainer Baehre, "Paupers and Poor Relief in Upper Canada," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1981): 80.

15. In doing this it would serve to inculcate the work ethic in the labouring class and eliminate the "demoralization" which was allegedly rampant under the old system of "indiscriminate" outdoor relief. Relief costs would be lower, not only because demand would be reduced, but also because the labour of inmates would offset costs. See Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York, 1896); M. Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New," M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout, eds. *Essays in Social History* (Oxford, 1974), 121-153.

The House of Industry Act and subsequent plans to make local, institutional provision for the poor mandatory in Ontario foundered on the opposition of the rural press and rural taxpayers. Critics contended that neither the scope of the problem nor the traditions of the province justified the legislation of public responsibility for the poor.¹⁶ In the absence of mandatory legislation and in the face of strong opposition, most county governments were reluctant to spend tax dollars on the construction of institutions for the poor. One early exception was the Waterloo County Council. A House of Industry opened in Berlin (now Kitchener) in 1869 and proved to be the model upon which all subsequent county poorhouses were built.¹⁷

By 1875, Wellington County Council had decided to follow Waterloo's lead. Members of the Committee on the House of Industry reported that they were convinced "that their [sic] is a certain class of indigent persons in this County who can be more efficiently provided for in a House of Industry than they can be in any other way. . . ."¹⁸ Shortly after the report was tabled, the council purchased fifty acres of land and commissioned plans for a stone-block structure large enough to accommodate sixty-five inmates. Late in the fall of 1877, the building was completed and a local couple was selected from a number of applicants to serve as Keeper and Matron of the House of Industry. While Jane Parker oversaw the domestic chores and the activities of the female inmates, her husband Adam was responsible for the cultivation of the farm and the day-to-day management of the institution.

In the same county bylaw under which the duties of the Keeper, Matron, Physician, and Inspector of the House of Industry were elucidated, the categories of inmates were described.¹⁹ The wording of the county bylaw regarding eligible inmates was copied almost verbatim from the 1837 House of Industry Act and reflected the range of functions which a workhouse was intended to serve, from an almshouse for the "worthy" poor to a house of correction for the able-bodied unemployed. In fact, very few of the "unworthy" poor were ever committed to the Wellington County House of Industry. Shortly after the institution opened, the potential for overcrowding loomed and measures were taken to restrict admissions. Able-bodied unemployed men, or "vagrants," who were believed to have no legitimate claim on the sympathy of the ratepayers, were excluded for fear their numbers might overwhelm the institution and result in less capacity for the "virtuous and respectable poor."²⁰ The town of Guelph was also precluded from

16. Susan E. Houston, "The Impetus to Reform: Crime, Poverty, and Ignorance in Ontario, 1850-1875," (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1974), 260.

17. Prior to building the Waterloo House of Industry, county councillors inspected several poorhouses in New York State and Pennsylvania. See B. M. Dunham, "The Waterloo County House of Industry and Refuge," *Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Waterloo Historical Society* (n.p., 1948), 21. The information gathered on the inspection tour was made available to Wellington councillors in 1871. See Wellington County Archives (WCA), Wellington County Council (hereafter WCC) *Minutes*, June 1871. Even though the first county House of Industry was in Norfolk County, council members there purchased a farmhouse, rather than designing a building specifically as an institution.

18. WCA, WCC, *Minutes*, June 1875.

19. WCA, "Bylaw 263," WCC *Minutes*, December 1877.

20. WCA, "Report of the Inspector of the House of Industry," WCC *Minutes*, January 1880.

sending inmates,²¹ and over time long-term residence in the county became an increasingly stringent prerequisite for admission.²² Yet these restrictions on admissions had an ironic effect: the very groups at whom the punitive regime of the workhouse was aimed were not admitted. However within the context of nineteenth-century relief ideology, which had deterrence at its core, this did not prove to be entirely without logic. Unpalatable relief was considered wise even for the infirm aged since it would prompt individuals to make adequate provision for their old age and families to care for their aged members.²³

Given that the clientele of the Wellington County House of Industry was relatively limited from the start, the institution nevertheless underwent a dramatic demographic transformation by the turn of the century. Until 1898, children were a significant presence in the poorhouse, accounting for 22 per cent of all admissions. Also competing with the elderly for space during the first two decades of operation were deserted wives and unwed mothers. By the turn of the century, however, inmates under the age of forty-five had all but disappeared.²⁴ The change resulted from the passage of an amendment in 1895 to the 1893 Children's Protection Act of Ontario which stated that children could not be placed or allowed to remain under the same institutional roof as dependent adults.²⁵ Once the legislation was fully enforced, the House of Industry was no longer viable as an orphanage or as a short-term refuge for families in crisis. By 1900 the decks were cleared so that the only actual or potential inmates were elderly, infirm, or "feeble-minded."²⁶ Poorhouses became old age homes largely as an unintended consequence of reformist zeal for saving children from the stigma and "contamination" of pauper institutions. The elderly continued to languish without exciting much attention or comment.

From the beginning, the elderly comprised the majority of inmates in the House of Industry.²⁷ For the purposes of this study, the designation "elderly" should be understood to apply to men and women aged fifty-five and over. This age was chosen for the

21. *Ibid.* In Guelph, institutional poor relief was provided in the Catholic House of Providence, while the Guelph Town Benevolent Association dispensed outdoor relief.
22. For example, WCA, "Bylaw 410," WCC *Minutes*, June 1888; "Bylaw 492," WCC *Minutes*, January 1895; "Bylaw 623," WCC *Minutes*, June 1904.
23. R. A. Parker, "An Historical Background to Residential Care," in I. Sinclair, ed. *Residential Care: The Research Reviewed*, vol. II of the Wagner Report on Residential Care, (London, 1988), 11.
24. For a detailed demographic analysis of the institution, see Stormie Stewart, "The Inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry, 1877-1907," (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1991).
25. Ontario, *Statutes*, 1895, c. 52.
26. Mentally or severely physically handicapped young inmates continued to be committed throughout the period under study, but their numbers were always very low. The insane, as opposed to the "weak-minded," were not considered fit subjects for the poorhouse and they were committed elsewhere, usually to the Hamilton Lunatic Asylum.
27. Over the entire thirty-year period of this study, 56% of the inmates were elderly.

arbitrary reason that no inmate under fifty-five was designated as old in the House of Industry admission register.²⁸ The age of inmates was a category of data routinely collected at the time of admission to the Wellington County House of Industry, but inmates and administrators were frequently inaccurate either in providing or recording this information. For example, George Edwards (#677) was listed as forty-three years old in 1893, but as fifty-seven at the time of a subsequent admission only one year later.²⁹ As life-course historians have pointed out, the numerical calculation of age had relatively little significance as long as the two major adult roles, work and parenthood, tended to stretch over the entire life span.³⁰ In an era before statistical uniformity had been imposed by measures such as mandatory retirement and pensions, old age was an unspecific concept, based to a large extent on a subjective assessment of individual infirmity. Old age, as ill-defined as it was, was nonetheless believed to be a factor in much public dependence. In fact, one of the main reasons that the aged came to be classified as a group in need of ameliorative measures such as pensions was the strong identification of old age with indigence.³¹

In the House of Industry admission register, old age was attributed as the "cause of pauperism" in 31 per cent of admissions of inmates over fifty-five. Of that percentage, the vast majority were at least seventy years old and they likely exhibited a noticeable level of infirmity. In reality, no direct causal link existed between advanced age and public dependence. In the nineteenth century, freedom from material want in old age depended on three factors: control over resources, such as land or savings; the ability and opportunity to work; or reliance on relatives willing and able to lend support. Of these options, control over resources was the most favourable, allowing the aged individual to maintain him or herself, to wield the influence of inheritance over children, or to pay for substitute care in the absence of kin. The ability or inability to amass wealth as a safeguard against want in old age was clearly based on class. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the vast majority of inmates in the House of Industry were wage

-
28. The age of fifty-five also seems reasonable. David Gagan suggests that Upper Canadians considered old age to begin at fifty, while British workhouse rules recognized sixty as the onset of old age. See David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto, 1981), 93; David Thomson, "Workhouse to Nursing Home: Residential Care of Elderly People in England since 1840," in *Ageing and Society*, 3 (1983): 54.
 29. These discrepancies proved common in cases where an inmate's recorded age could be checked in multiple admissions or against an independent source such as the census. Please note that in this and in all subsequent references to inmates, pseudonyms have been used. The number following each name corresponds to the number recorded next to that inmate in the House of Industry admission register.
 30. Tamara Hareven, "The Last Stage: Historical Adulthood and Old Age," *Daedalus*, 105 (1976): 19.
 31. The link between old age and "pauperism" was reinforced by the statistical studies of early social scientists such as Charles Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (London, 1894).

labourers or their dependents, who rarely had sufficient savings to tide them over brief periods of unemployment or illness, let alone the potentially long-term hardships of old age.³²

If savings is discounted as a viable option for the working-class elderly, it is to opportunities for waged work and family support that we must look as the only sources of security against public dependence. In examining these factors, the implications of gender soon become clear. The ability to work and the availability of employment were the critical means by which aged men were able to avoid the poorhouse, while family co-residency and support was the most important issue for women. If the relative frequency with which men and women entered the House of Industry is any indication, women found family support more dependable than men found waged work. Over the entire period under study, males represented 69 per cent of all inmates. However, among aged inmates, 82 per cent were males. Such a gender imbalance obtained in most nineteenth century poorhouses.³³ Radically curtailed admissions of young females and children after the passage of the Children's Protection Act exacerbated not only the dominance of the aged, but the imbalance between the sexes as well, so that over the remaining years of the study an increasingly large proportion of inmates were males.

Among men who entered the Wellington County House of Industry, over 90 per cent were drawn from the working class and 70 per cent were unskilled labourers.³⁴ As Guelph was the only centre of large-scale manufacturing in the county, and Guelph residents were not permitted in the House of Industry, it can safely be assumed that most of these labourers were agricultural rather than industrial workers. In labour history, wage workers in the rural economy have tended to be overlooked.³⁵ Temporary work was the dominant feature of agricultural employment and most farm workers were "casual labourers dependent upon irregular spates of ill-paid waged work for several different

32. Bradbury, "The Fragmented Family"; Michael J. Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921* (Ottawa, 1979).

33. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 76; M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929* (London, 1981), p. 234. For the sex ratios in other Ontario county Houses of Industry, see Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no. 61, 2-3. For similar information about the Toronto House of Industry, see the annual reports of the Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities. In 1890, for example, the Inspector noted that of a total of 147 inmates in the Toronto House of Industry that year, 109 were males. See "Houses of Refuge," *Twenty-third Annual Report of the Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities for the Province of Ontario for the year ending the 30th of September 1890* (Toronto: 1891), 6.

34. Most skilled artisans who entered the poorhouse were concentrated in a handful of occupations — carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and stonemasons — which were either subject to high seasonal unemployment or were dying crafts. Only 2% of all elderly male inmates were farmers, and it is unknown whether these men were landowners or tenant farmers.

35. Joy Parr, the author of one of the few studies on agricultural labourers, calls them "a little known group." See Joy Parr, "Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (1985): 91-103. According to the Census of 1881, approximately 15% of all adult males in Wellington County were labourers without any specific trade or craft skill.

employers in order to maintain material subsistence."³³ Although complaints about the scarcity and high cost of labour were legion among Ontario farmers,³⁷ and the enduring myth of the agricultural ladder presented hired men as yeomen-in-waiting, the security of rural labourers was as tenuous as that of any other wage workers. Agricultural production depended on the existence of a reserve labour force of underemployed workers who could be recruited during periods of peak demand, particularly during the harvest. The records of the House of Industry provide evidence to suggest that elderly men were over-represented in that reserve force.

Historians have noted that workers, even highly skilled ones, tended to be forced into casual and unskilled jobs as they aged. The demands of factory production allegedly wore out older workers and relegated them to the industrial scrap heap.³⁸ Because the skills and demands of farm work remained relatively constant over time, rural aged workers, it has been suggested, did not suffer the same decline in status as did their urban counterparts.³⁹ Without necessarily rendering this hypothesis invalid, the experience of the inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry reveals that the employment patterns of rural workers also tended to change as they aged. Failing health certainly contributed to the economic marginalization of many elderly men; illness or disability was recorded as a "cause of pauperism in approximately 40 per cent of all admissions of men over fifty-five. However, a less readily explicable process also appears to be present, whereby some men were forced into less skilled and more casual work as they aged, thus becoming gradually disengaged from the labour force. It is possible to reconstruct employment patterns for a number of inmates by tracing repeat admissions in the institutional registers or by linking individuals named in the registers with prior census records. Several such cases follow which will demonstrate a number of points. Rural men were not immune from the 'de-skilling' process. If an elderly man reported more than one occupation over time, chances are that he moved from a higher status or skilled job to a lower status or unskilled one. Yet older men continued to work whenever possible. The seasonality of admissions and discharges, particularly of repeat inmates, shows that many men, though becoming marginalized in the labour force, continued to participate on a seasonal, casual basis.⁴⁰ As they continued to age, these

-
36. Parr, "Hired Men," 96. Most had to attempt to dovetail farm work with other seasonal employment, such as gravelling roads or clearing roads and railbeds of ice and snow.
 37. Robert Leslie Jones, *History of Agriculture in Ontario 1613-1880* (Toronto, 1946), 199. Farm labourers were one of the most heavily recruited groups of immigrants.
 38. Brian Gratton, *Urban Elders: Family, Work and Welfare among Boston's Aged, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia, 1986), 81; Tamara K. Hareven, "The Last Stage: Historical Adulthood and Old Age," *Daedalus*, 105 (1976): 20. According to Sue Weiler, this idea gained currency during early debates on the merits of old age pensions. See N. Sue Weiler, "Family Security or Social Security? The Family and the Elderly in New York State During the 1920s," *Journal of Family History*, 11 (1986): 78.
 39. Gratton, *Urban Elders*, 95; Anderson, "The Impact on the Family Relationships of the Elderly," 40.
 40. In fact, the practice of discharging aged men for the summer and recommitting them in the winter was so common that the management committee of the House of Industry complained on several occasions that the practice was interfering with the smooth operation of the insti-

men found less and less demand for their labour; repeat inmates tended to remain institutionalized for increasingly prolonged periods with each sequential admission.

Andrew Blyth (#640) was a seventy-eight year-old farmer at the time of his first admission in 1892. He absconded after five months in the House of Industry and was not committed again until the fall of 1895, when he was listed as a labourer, as he was in one subsequent entry. Likewise, Thomas Smart (#377) was a sixty-nine year-old carpenter in 1885, but by 1888, he had most recently been employed as a labourer. John Cushing (#396), the most frequently admitted and discharged inmate, entered the poorhouse a total of seven times between 1886 and 1907. As was the case for a number of other inmates, circumstantial evidence suggests that Cushing was returning to work for the same employer during periods when he was not in the poorhouse. First committed as a vagrant in January 1886, Cushing was discharged a month later. As he had been a resident of the town of Elora for twelve years, the use of the word "vagrant" indicates that he was unemployed and perhaps homeless, but not transient. In September 1889, he reappeared in the poorhouse, sick in that instance, and was again discharged after only a month. On August 30, 1893, he was committed for a third time and discharged in May of the following year. His next entry was on September 21, 1896, and again he left in May after wintering in the institution. The seasonal pattern of fall entrance and spring exit was repeated in 1902 and 1903. His seventh and last entry took place in September 1904 when, at the recorded age of seventy-seven, he was "old and destitute." Cushing died in the House of Industry in April 1911 and was buried in the poorhouse cemetery. Only in connection with his final committal was old age given as a "cause of pauperism."

John Ridgeway (#618) was a sixty-five year-old stonemason who had lived in Wellington County for twenty years. He was first committed to the poorhouse in July 1891 because of sickness. After apparently regaining his health two months later, he was discharged. In November 1892, he was again committed because of illness. When he left in June of the following year, the Keeper noted that he "got his discharge and was not to be admitted again."⁴¹ However, administrators relented on the ban, for Ridgeway returned to the poorhouse on November 21, 1893, this time as a result of destitution. Once more he spent the winter and left in June. After remaining independent for more than a year, he entered the poorhouse for the last time in December 1895 and remained there until his death from heart disease in early 1899.

The entrances and exits of John Gulliford (#558), another repeat inmate, were not seasonal in nature, but were related to failing health, perhaps as a consequence of alcohol

tution. See, for example, WCA, "Report of the Standing Committee on the House of Industry," WCC *Minutes*, November 1885; *Ibid*, December 1888. Circulation by aged men in and out of the institution continued unabated. In the matter of seasonal discharges, the interests of inmates, who could regain a measure of independence, of farmers, who could draw on this source of seasonal labour, and of township councils, who were able to save money which would otherwise be expended on institutional relief, coincided.

41. WCA, Wellington County House of Industry Discharge Register, June 12, 1893.

abuse.⁴² Between September 1889, at which time Gulliford was fifty years old, and September 1894, he was committed four times. On each occasion he spent a period of approximately six weeks in the poorhouse before returning to work for the same farmer, John McGowan of Peel Township, who was a substantial landowner and prominent local politician.⁴³ Gulliford was committed for a fifth time in July 1896 and was not discharged until February 1897. His final committal did not occur for more than seven years after that, but once admitted in May 1904 it appears he did not leave again. Long-standing employment with the same farmer did not provide security for Gulliford, as his employer was apparently unwilling to provide room and board during periods when he was incapable of working. Personal bonds between hired men and their employers did not guarantee protection from the poorhouse in cases of illness, disability, or waning strength. And because co-residence was usually a condition of agricultural employment, an aged farm hand who was let go was in effect rendered homeless as well. The physician appointed to the Peel County jail commented on the grim fate which could await elderly hired men when he observed the circumstances surrounding the death of an eighty-five year-old man in his care: "After a drive of twenty-five miles in inclement weather a poor emaciated object after having all his strength taken out of him by his employers . . . is inhumanely sent to die in a gaol."⁴⁴

In contrast to aged men and in spite of the fact that the dependency of elderly women was socially prescribed, very few aged women were committed to the Wellington County House of Industry. The only readily available waged employment available to women in rural Ontario during this period, domestic service, was reserved for the young and unmarried.⁴⁵ Ironically, the very circumstances which made elderly women particularly vulnerable to poverty also served to protect them from the indignity of the poorhouse. According to Mary Roberts Smith in her 1896 study of women in the San Francisco almshouse, "the world recognizes the inevitable dependence of women by considering it a most disgraceful thing for relatives or children to allow an old woman to go to the almshouse."⁴⁶

42. At the time of his second committal, Gulliford was regarded as intemperate, one of only four cases to be so perceived.

43. In the 1860s and 1870s, McGowan served as a councillor, deputy-reeve and reeve of Peel Township, and as a member of the Ontario legislature. See, *Historical Atlas of the County of Wellington Ontario* (Toronto, 1906), 45.

44. Journal of Dr. D. Heggie, 29 January 1895, cited in Teresa Bishop, "Peel Industrial Farm," 82. Prior to the construction of a poorhouse in Peel County, the jail tended to serve as one.

45. Unfortunately, occupation was not a category of information routinely collected for female inmates. However in 1881, when nineteen adult female inmates were enumerated for the census, eight reported occupations, all but one as domestic servants. None of these women was over the age of fifty-five, and in fact only one was over thirty. A reporter for the *Brantford Courier* newspaper, December 12, 1890, refers to an old woman who supported herself through the summer months by doing farm work, so it is possible that elderly women participated to some extent in casual agricultural employment.

46. Mary Roberts Smith, *Almshouse Women: A Study of Two Hundred and Twenty-Eight Women in the City and County Almshouse of San Francisco* (Palo Alto, CA, 1896), 26.

Much more than just the spectre of shame, however, countenanced the relative ease with which elderly women gained access to support in the households of kin. For one thing, bonds of affection tended to be stronger between children and their mothers than between children and fathers.⁴⁷ Aside from emotional reasons, the decision to support an indigent relative appears to have involved a conscious or unconscious calculation of costs versus benefits. In this calculation, aged women were reckoned to be a positive sum. Older women, unless very infirm, were able to make significant contributions to the households in which they lived by continuing to perform the same chores which they had done as wives and mothers. With this to offer, they "were most likely to be welcomed, while those who imposed a particular strain on the family were most likely to be rejected."⁴⁸ Aged men were not prepared to undertake useful chores in the household when their breadwinning days were suspended or over. They were therefore regarded as burdens by their children.⁴⁹ For all of these reasons, elderly women were much more likely than elderly men to be found living with relatives.⁵⁰

The differing degree of family acceptance extended to men and women is starkly illustrated in the enumeration of poorhouse inmates recorded in the census of 1881.⁵¹ Seven aged men who were married (not widowed) were resident in the poorhouse in the spring of that year. Only one of the seven was accompanied by his wife. Presumably, the wives of the other six men were being cared for by kin.

It is nevertheless easy to idealize family care as a means of avoiding the poorhouse. When institutionalization was the only reliable alternative to family care, as it was in Wellington County, the sense of obligation to offer shelter to a destitute parent intensified. If family responsibility was coerced, even subtly, families may well have been "sanctuaries . . . less benevolent and receptive than they appear."⁵² Co-residence compelled by poverty "obviously involved considerable tension" and was frequently perceived as an unwelcome state of affairs by all concerned.⁵³

While elderly women were much less likely than elderly men to be committed to the poorhouse, those who did enter were far more likely to remain institutionalized for extended periods of time. Seventy percent of admissions of elderly women ended in death, compared to only 40 per cent for men aged fifty-five and over. The majority of aged men either were discharged (49 per cent) or absconded (7 per cent). In contrast, only 25 per cent of elderly women were eventually discharged and only one woman over the age of fifty-five left the institution without permission. Very few aged women

47. Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), 77; Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 234.

48. Anderson, "The Impact on the Family Relationships of the Elderly," 51.

49. Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge, 1983), 86.

50. Katz, *Poverty and Policy*, 122.

51. Canada, Census of 1881, Wellington County, Ontario, Nichol Township.

52. Gratton, *Urban Elders*, 126-7.

53. Anderson, "The Impact," 50-53. He notes that when adequate pensions made it possible for the elderly to live alone, co-residence with children became much less common (49).

were repeaters and none entered more frequently than twice. The relatively static institutional residence of aged women can be attributed to the lack of options available to them. Once committed, they were not induced to leave, as were men, by the prospect of employment.

One of the few female repeaters was sixty-four year-old Elizabeth Fletcher, initially committed in May 1881 with her husband William, a sixty-six year-old labourer. William Fletcher left the institution alone and was subsequently recommitted in November 1883. Both were discharged in April 1884, but were forced to return to the poorhouse just over a week later. Elizabeth Fletcher never left the House of Industry again and died there in 1890. William, on the other hand, continued to leave in the summer months until he became too frail to work. He too eventually died in the poorhouse.⁵⁴

Relatively few elderly couples like the Fletchers were committed to the Wellington County House of Industry.⁵⁵ Married inmates in Ontario county poorhouses were forced to live apart in segregated dormitories, as no provision was made to enable them to share quarters.⁵⁶ Only seventeen elderly couples entered together. In some cases, they spent a brief time in the poorhouse before leaving for good; in most, though, one or both partners died soon after admission. Thomas McLaughlin (#594), an eighty year-old labourer and his wife entered the House of Industry in early November of 1890. Both were dead before Christmas. Similarly, ninety-eight year-old John Adair (#907) and his seventy-five year-old wife Catharine entered in the spring of 1900 and both died in the fall. Aged couples were forced into the institution only when extreme circumstances made entry unavoidable.

If family care represented a viable alternative to the poorhouse for elderly women, it seems reasonable to assume that aged women who were forced to enter "shared a paucity of family members."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the marital or familial status of elderly inmates from the poorhouse records alone. What circumstantial evidence there is supports the consensus among scholars that the institutionalized aged population has always been heavily biased towards the never-married, widowed, childless, and people who have few relatives.⁵⁸ For example, William and Elizabeth Fletcher, discussed above, were living alone at the time of the 1871 census, even though both were then in their early fifties and could reasonably be expected to still have co-resident children in their household. Similarly, a census enumerator in 1871 found future inmates

54. The census of 1871 reveals that William Fletcher, like many of the inmates of the House of Industry had turned to labouring in old age. In 1871, he was a brickmaker.

55. Aged couples were also rare in British workhouses. See Thomson, "Workhouse to Nursing Home," 57.

56. This was the norm in poorhouses elsewhere as well, although living arrangements for elderly couples were more humane in some English workhouses than in others. Anderson, "The Impact on the Family Relationships of the Elderly," 42; Parker, "An Historical Background," 16.

57. Gratton, *Urban Elders*, 8.

58. For example, Katz, *Poverty and Policy*, 122.

James (#22) and Fanny Duffy living alone.⁵⁹ James, a farmer in his mid-fifties, and Fanny, who was somewhat younger, had only recently wed, and if either of them had been previously married, there is no evidence of offspring.

The presence of kin could not by itself guarantee security. Even for women, the extension of family support did not preclude its subsequent retraction. As Michael Anderson discovered in his study of family relationships in Lancashire:

an unemployment rose and fell, so did the number of old and invalid persons described as completely unable to work who appeared in the relief lists. Some at least of this fluctuation must reflect changes in the willingness of kin to support those in need.⁶⁰

Unfortunately for the elderly, their period of greatest potential need coincided with the "child poor" stage in the life cycle of their married children.⁶¹ For a young couple, the pressure to support an elderly relative in addition to dependent children could push the entire family network below subsistence. In cases where the income of a household was insufficient to support all members, there is little doubt that elderly or extended household members were forced to seek public relief first. The Garland family provides an example of this. In January 1884, eighty-nine year-old Harriet Garland (#311) entered the poorhouse with her son, who was ill, his wife, and their two young children. The four members of the nuclear family unit left the House of Industry in early May, but Harriet remained for an additional three months before she also returned home. She was subsequently readmitted by herself in November 1884 and spent the winter in the institution before returning to live with her son's family.

Some elderly women, like Harriet Garland, became inmates when the households in which they lived experienced a short-term crisis as a result of unemployment or illness. Other elderly women may have been committed as they became increasingly infirm and, in effect, outstayed their welcome. Because a degree of reciprocal benefit was expected in instances where elderly members were cared for within the family, obligations of support may not have been limitless in time. The longer a parent required aid and the less he or she could contribute in return, the more likely a child was to consider the filial obligation discharged.⁶² Adding credence to this is the fact that 46 per cent of aged female inmates were described in the admission register as "old," which may, as speculated earlier, refer to a noticeable level of infirmity.⁶³ An additional 30 per cent were committed as a result of a specific illness, injury, or mental or physical disability. Aged women were, on average, seventy-five years old at the time of first admission, whereas elderly men were an average of seventy-one years old.

59. James and Fanny Duffy entered the House of Industry, along with James' older brother Samuel, in December 1877. At the time of entry, both men were listed as labourers. James and Fanny were discharged in the spring of 1878, but Samuel died in the poorhouse.

60. Anderson, *Family Structure*, 165.

61. Anderson, "The Impact," 56.

62. Anderson, *Family Structure*, 95.

63. Twenty-nine percent of men were recorded as "old."

The reasons for committal and experiences upon committal of elderly men and women were essentially different. The largest group of inmates, aged men, entered the House of Industry as a result of marginalization in the rural labour market. Declining health certainly accounted to a large degree for the problems of elderly workers, but it also appears that wage workers were forced into less skilled and more casual employment as they aged. Many aged labourers repeatedly entered and left the House of Industry in seasonal cycles which were related to the availability of employment. Aged women were much less likely than men to resort to the poorhouse because, for a variety of reasons, aid within the family was more readily available to them. In the absence of kin willing or able to support them, however, women were in a position of double jeopardy. Once committed to the House of Industry, there were no employment opportunities to draw them out again. Aged females, while far less significant than males in total numbers, were more likely to be long-term inmates and to end their days in the institution.

We do not know how inmates themselves viewed their fate, nor how many old men and women chose to endure extreme privation rather than enter the House of Industry. An indication of the sentiments of the elderly can be gained from the comments of "poor old Mary Allen." When the police magistrate in Brantford suggested to her that admission to the Brant County House of Industry was the obvious solution to her problems, she replied: "I would sooner sit under a bush on the roadside than go up there."⁶⁴ She also rejected the possibility of going to live with her children in Nova Scotia as they "had as much as they could do to keep themselves without looking after her."⁶⁵ In the end, the magistrate bowed to the woman's wish to be committed to the county jail for the winter.⁶⁶ Ironically, while reformers found the presence of elderly men and women in the jails scandalous and publicized this presence in order to increase public support for the construction of poorhouses, the indigent elderly apparently found jails preferable.

In all likelihood, repugnance towards the workhouse accompanied British immigrants to Canada. In England, the terrible fate which befell those who entered a House of Industry was widely circulated in newspaper reports of abuse, and in songs and gossip.⁶⁷ Conditions in the country Houses of Industry in Ontario were doubtless better than they were in England. For one thing, because of stringent admission requirements, severe overcrowding was not a problem.⁶⁸ In addition, the exclusion of able-bodied young men, a group deemed in need of correction, meant that the poorhouse regime was less punitive for the inmates who were admitted.⁶⁹ Workhouse goals — to keep inmates diligently employed and to offset costs with the fruits of inmate labour — were

64. "A Very Old Timer," *Brantford Courier*, November 11, 1890.

65. *Ibid.*

66. See also *Brantford Courier*, December 12, 1890 for the case of another elderly woman who applied for a short jail term.

67. Parker, "An Historical Background to Residential Care," 8-9.

68. The most serious crowding at the Wellington County House of Industry took place in 1896. While the capacity of the institution was at that time eighty inmates, ninety-six were resident. WCA, "Report of the Inspector," *WCC Minutes*, December 1896.

69. Parker, "An Historical Background," 17.

spectacularly unsuccessful in Wellington County, despite the existence of rules to enforce work by inmates. Asked in 1889 to estimate the annual value of goods and crops produced by inmate labour, the Inspector of the House of Industry stated: "No estimate has been made and it would be very hard to furnish any that would be reliable. Many do nothing and others do so very little."⁷⁰ By definition, most of the categories of the "worthy" poor were not healthy or strong enough to labour. Consequently money was expended on hired help, both for domestic and farm chores.⁷¹

Administrators of the Wellington County House of Industry appear to have been conscientious about the health of inmates. The diet of the institutionalized likely compared favourably with that of independent labourers and their families. Breakfast consisted of porridge, milk, bread and tea; dinner, the only substantial meal of the day, of soup, meat, vegetable, and bread; and supper of bread and butter with tea. Infrequent outbreaks of infectious diseases such as diphtheria and scarlet fever were contained without fatalities.⁷² Inmates who succumbed while in the poorhouse died because of illnesses or injuries which were the cause, not the result, of institutionalization.⁷³ Despite the fact that medical dissection of the bodies of paupers was common practice, the Inspector of the House of Industry refused to send the bodies of inmates to the medical school in Toronto in compliance with the wishes of the provincial government. He believed that the threat of dissection caused undue misery to elderly inmates.⁷⁴

Despite evidence of adequate care and occasional sensitivity towards inmates, institutional residence was nevertheless unpalatable. Once committed by authorization of any Reeve, Deputy-Reeve, or justice of the peace in the county, an inmate was subject to a custodial regime which severely limited his or her autonomy. A set of rules governed

70. The statement was made in response to a provincial questionnaire about municipal poor relief. See Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no. 61, 30. The situation in Wellington County was not unusual. Institutional relief costs were rarely, if ever, offset by the sale of workhouse goods. See, for example, Judith Fingard, "The Relief of the Unemployed Poor in Saint John, Halifax, and St. John's, 1815-1860," in Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F. J. Artibise, eds. *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*, (Toronto, 1977), 357; John Garraty, *Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy* (New York, 1978), 46.

71. Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no. 61, 31. In 1887, for example, \$568.28 was spent on wages for domestic servants and farm hands. The situation was exacerbated in the 1890s when young, sole-support mothers left the institution, as they were no longer available for domestic and nursing duties.

72. For example, WCA, "Report of the Doctor," WCC *Minutes*, January 1885. A hospital wing was added to the poorhouse in 1892, at which time the capacity increased to eighty inmates.

73. In the mid-1880s, the physician of the institution, Dr. Grove, was censured by the Standing Committee of the House of Industry for allegedly performing "dangerous operations." The exact nature of these operations is unknown and there is no evidence that they were unwarranted. Rather the Committee felt the patients in question should have been transferred to Guelph General Hospital for treatment. Dr. Grove was not removed from his position. WCA, "Report on the Standing Committee on the Reports of the Physician and Standing Committee of the House of Industry and Refuge," WCC *Minutes*, June 1886.

74. WCA, "Report of the Inspector," WCC *Minutes*, June 1885. A cemetery was maintained on poorhouse property where the bodies of inmates unclaimed by relatives were interred.

most activities from rising in the morning to retiring in the evening. No inmate was allowed to go beyond the boundaries of the poorhouse property without the permission of the Keeper. Permission to be discharged from the institution had to be obtained from the same civic leaders who had authorized admission. No exchange of any commodity was allowed between inmates. All mail sent or received by inmates was opened and read by the Keeper or Matron.⁷⁵ Inmates had, in theory at least, recourse against capricious mistreatment at the hands of the Keeper or Matron by complaining to the Inspector. Very few complaints were lodged by inmates, but it is impossible to know whether this reflects benevolent treatment or simply the fact that all communication between the Inspector and inmates took place in the presence of the Keeper.⁷⁶

Apathy and tedium likely prevailed within the county House of Industry. The location of these institutions on rural farms no doubt had unfortunate consequences for elderly inmates who were cut off from the community. Visitors were allowed at the Wellington County House of Industry (provided they were pre-screened by the Keeper, of course) but the distance between the institution and far-flung points in the county, combined with the lack of public transportation, made it difficult for family and friends to maintain personal contact.

At the same time as inmates were isolated from their communities of origin, they were thrust into a new and completely artificial community, forced into close proximity with a large number of strangers with whom they shared no ties of family, workplace, or neighbourhood. They could not choose their associates, nor could they escape from the disturbing behaviour of others.⁷⁷

Repugnance towards the House of Industry was understandable and there "was clearly a tension between the dislike of institutions and the weight of problems to which they offered a solution."⁷⁸ The Wellington County House of Industry served a number of different purposes for the elderly poor of the county: as a depot for the seasonally unemployed; a chronic-care hospital; a hospice for the dying; and a refuge where families could place aged relatives during periods when material subsistence was threatened or when care within the family became too arduous. For the majority of inmates, including many who died there, the House of Industry was a temporary expedient.

If the elderly poor and their families were "using" the institution for their own purposes, they were doing so in the absence of more attractive alternatives. There is no way of knowing how many inmates might have been able to remain outside the institution if a system of outdoor allowances had been available. The inmates of the House of Industry were not passive and contented, but a group compelled to enter an institution built on a punitive and deterrent model, the workhouse. Even if self-congratulatory, middle-class visitors to the House of Industry could not detect the stigma of "pauperism," the elderly poor of Wellington County could.

75. WCA, "Bylaw 263," WCC *Minutes*, December 1877.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Parker, "An Historical Background," 10.

78. *Ibid.*, 23.