



# Madison County Genealogical Society



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## **The Norfolk State Hospital for the Insane**

Fourteen members and two guests of the Madison County Genealogical Society met at 6 pm and we all got together in four vehicles and caravanned out to the oldest cemetery belonging to the Norfolk State Hospital. This cemetery is in the middle of the section, East of the State Hospital and Northwest of the new Ag building of Northeast Community College. It is not visible from any highway as it lies almost exactly in the middle of the section. It is surrounded by a wire fence with pasture all around it. There are a large number of walnut trees in the cemetery itself, and other trees outside the fence, but no walnut trees outside. It is a very peaceful and pleasant place.

It is not known how many folks are buried in the old cemetery. There are only markers for three persons, two of whom are Civil War veterans. A few obituaries have been located in the newspaper of persons who are buried there but most are unknown. It is a guess that the number of burials is probably between 45 and 75 or thereabouts.

Nancy Zaruba, talked about the founding of the State Hospital, and read some excerpts from newspaper clippings about some of the incidents, strange deaths, and other items of interest about the early days. This cemetery was no longer used after the new cemetery was opened in September 1916. The first patients were sent here in 1888 from the Lincoln hospital. Patients were then taken from across the state as needed.

It is important to remember that this facility, though technically for the "insane" was actually used almost more like a nursing home. Anyone who could not take care of themselves was sent here. Some that had had strokes or incidents of paralysis or senility or simply old age, etc. were sent here. Every able bodied patient was put to work doing something. The State Hospital was almost totally self-sufficient. There were animals to care for, cows to milk, eggs to gather, fields to be plowed, planted, weeded and harvested (with horses). There were gardens to tend, laundry to do, food to clean, prepare and serve, dishes to do, as well as all sorts of other activities to keep people busy. They went on picnics, they gathered flowers and berries, they took long walks.

In September 1901, a fire started in the West end and worked its way East against the wind. The new standpipe was not yet finished and the old water tank and pump did not allow for any water or water pressure with which to fight the fire. The fire began around 3:45 in the morning in the tunnel which contained the steam pipes, water pipes and electric light wires, under the middle wing on the male side of the building. With no water to fight the fire all that could be done was to salvage as much as possible. Since the fire moved so quickly in the West wing it was difficult to get all of the patients out. One was badly burned and later died and another was rescued only to get away from staff and return to his room where he died. The fire was very slow

moving, in the rest of the building and everything was saved from the women's wing and staff quarters, including plumbing fixtures, and door and window moldings, etc. The patients were housed in other buildings temporarily including the chapel, engine house, barn, storehouses, carpenter shop, etc. The kitchen was saved and thus the patients could be fed. Eighty patients were shipped out to Hastings and about eighty more were sent to Lincoln leaving about 150 to be cared for at the Norfolk facility which was easily done.

Many other stories are available such as Dr. E. A. Kelley, Hospital Superintendent being chased by assassins in 1889, the unusual deaths of some patients, etc.

We then moved the tour on to the "New" cemetery. The first burial in the new cemetery was William W. Osborne, aged 71, who died of "apoplexy" and was buried in Lot 1 on September 19, 1916. There are only about 10 markers or so in the newer cemetery of which one is a military veteran, of the Spanish American War or the Philippine Insurrection, either 1898 or 1899. More research needs to be done on these folks.

We do have a list of burials in the "new" cemetery and their graves can be found by "counting the dips" from a known location. There are at least 455 persons buried in this cemetery. In recent years, the trees and surrounding shrubbery have been removed and a small fence has been installed. It is now located next to the new Ag Complex building owned by Northeast Community College.

I have been collecting information about the State Hospital for some time, including news clippings of the hospital and as many persons as I can find that lived, worked or died out there. Many persons that died at the hospital were returned to their families for burial, but many had no family near or died of something that necessitated an immediate burial. This was especially true in the oldest cemetery where more of the folks were immigrants that had been born in the "Old Country" and had no family nearby.

I intend to publish all of this information in a booklet and would appreciate any other information or stories that you have. Thanks.

Nancy Zaruba