

County officials had a welfare-to-work plan in 1881

"Pauper — a person destitute of means except such as are derived from charity; specifically one who receives aid from public poor funds; a very poor person." Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.

It is not clear whether the article that appeared in the May 28, 1881, issue of the *Saturday Courier* was intended to be a news item or an editorial. The writer depicted himself as "we" in the text.

The subject was people considered as paupers and begins, "We believe that there is a big leak in the way of the pauper management of Monroe County. The County Commissioners advise the Trustees to keep the paupers in the county, as they can be kept at a less expense there than at the poor house."

According to the writer, the foregoing policy sounds good, but did not work out quite right in actual practice. As the writer put it, "But the great trouble is, and where the leak comes in, Trustees are too apt to conduct the business on the once-a-pauper-always-a-pauper system."

Explained the *Courier*, once a person gets on the list of recipients, he or she remains there, even though the circumstances change.



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

"It seems that in many cases, through outside influences, or other cause, the Trustees do not like to cut off the support after it once has been begun."

And then the writer came up with a plain way of putting the previous statement. "A great many persons in this county are now, no doubt, receiving aid and will continue to accept it as long as they can get it, who would endeavor to shift for themselves if their allowance was cut off."

There is no other way to describe it. The newspaper writer was suggesting that the trustees' rolls included some deadbeats.

The *Courier* was even willing to cite an example of trustee vigilance in meting out welfare funds. "We know a case in one township where a family was paid \$2.00 per week by the county for a long time, but the Trustee

has now got them down to \$1.00 per week and will probably soon have them looking out for themselves entirely."

Apparently some of the trustees had given the problem some serious thought, and someone from the *Courier* had scouted around to get some details. "A good plan has been adopted by some of the Trustees: About this time of the year paupers living in the country are furnished with seed potatoes, corn, etc., and are told to go to work and put in small crops ..."

The catch was that the trustees had to follow through to make sure the paupers did the actual spading, planting and weeding necessary to ensure there would be a crop in the fall. Continued the article, "When fall comes around these crops will go far toward keeping the paupers raising them all winter."

The article didn't make allowances for the lazy. "If some system of this kind is not adopted, the consequence is the paupers lay around all summer in idleness at the expense of the county, and when winter comes that expense is increased."

The *Courier* also described a bit of "shock treatment" used by the trustees. "Another

plan adopted by some Trustees is in cases where paupers are likely to become 'chronic dead-beats' and are able to do something for themselves is to tell them to go to work or 'over the hills to the poor house.'"

Some trustees believed that was a superior plan. The *Courier* explained why. "This threat generally wins. The name 'poor house' has a terror to even the veteran pauper."

After suggesting that the pauper-relief system was full of holes, the *Courier* eased up a bit by concluding that as a whole they did well. The point was the newspaper felt there was some room for improvement.

The *Courier's* parting shot was "...they (the trustees) are able to judge as to who are really the needy. All such should receive the support they are entitled to, while the chronic cases should be weeded out."

Then some advice: "Many a dollar can be saved the county annually if the plans this article suggests are faithfully carried out."

It would be interesting to know how many of the county's deadbeats could read the handwriting on the wall, or at least the newspaper.

HT 9/30/96