

# ELOISE

*(from 1951 Dearborn Independent)*

The official name of the group of buildings on Michigan Avenue a few miles west of Dearborn, now known as Wayne County General Hospital, has had almost as discursive a history as the origin and growth of the institution itself.

In 1832, the date of its organization, it was known simply as Wayne County Poor House, until 40 years later, when the term was superseded by Wayne County Alms House, which in turn became Wayne County House in 1886.

It was in 1911 the poetic appellation "Eloise" became official; its virtues lay in the fact that it was short and unique; it was not until recently the name was replaced with the one it now bears.

From its small and unpretentious beginnings more than 100 years ago, Wayne County General Hospital has increased to accommodate the growth of the county by adding new buildings, tearing down old ones and increasing its facilities, until at the present time it is coordinated into the comprehensive institution that it became under the supervision of Dr. T.K. Gruber, superintendent from May 1, 1929, until his death Aug. 7, 1949, and continues to be under the direction of Dr. R.M. Athay, superintendent since August 1949.

As for a parallel growth in purpose, we will merely quote one of the early acts for the erection of a County Poor House (1828) and leave you to decide:

"... shall erect suitable buildings for the reception, use and accommodation of the poor of the county, and also for the reception of vagrants, vagabonds, lewd, idle or disorderly persons, stubborn servants, common drunkards, common nightwalkers, pilferers, persons wanton and lascivious in speech, conduct or behavior, common railers or brawlers, such as neglect their calling and employment, misspend what they earn, and do not provide for themselves and their families ..."

The principle factor in the location of the County House was Ammon Brown, a directing force of the Board of County Commissioners. The property, consisting of 160 acres in Nankin, was bought from a farmer named Torbert for \$800 cash. This remarkably low price included the Black Horse Tavern, a log cabin structure that represented one of the ventures of farmer Torbert.

Another building was erected and 35 people were transferred there in 1839, the former tavern being reserved as office and living quarters for the "keeper," and general dining room. One of the old attendants at the tavern stayed on and spent his last 10 years at the institution. The cabin was later sold, considerably depreciated in value, it seems, for the sum of \$2. The new building erected on its site was built of hand-fashioned lumber and nails, with dug-out cellar for two cells supplied with chains for the then-termed crazies.

Baths were given on doctor's orders only, otherwise inmates used the river. Two of the physicians attending in the early days, Dr. Hume and Dr. Carroll, received \$1 a visit.

Ten years later, in 1854, expansion was necessary, and the next new building had a board fence around it, kept locked to prevent the inmates from sampling forbidden fruits in the neighboring orchard. The first orchard of 100 trees survived until 1912, when the last of the trees were cut down. Reputedly, board meetings were occasionally held in their shade.

Another acquisition was the Catholic Cemetery purchased from a bishop in 1892 and now covered by an artificial lake. Prior to legislation, this was a fruitful ground for the medical students in Ann Arbor, who are remembered for incredible exploits of body-snatching.

Constant improvements were being made during this time, and in 1885, a new appropriation permitted the addition of five fire escapes, steam heating and gas lighting. Two new wings were also added.

The first distinction between the rational and the insane was made in the institution in 1841. The first insane inmates were designated on the register as "crazy," a term applied for several years. In the early 1840s, a "crazy house" was erected for the violently insane.

Reputable persons had described the house as having chains fastened to the wall on the upper floor for securing inmates, and the lower floor as being at one time used to house swine, so that the discordant cries of pigs and men might have echoed to someone's literate ears the transformations of Circe described in Homeric legend.

Although subject to journalistic criticism at that time, the crude tactics were apparently necessary due to the limited funds available for during this period, babies, children, the old, the blind, the idiotic, the rational, the crazy, were all housed together with the keeper and his wife, and it was necessary that the dangerously insane be kept apart. The asylum was forced to take on the surplus from the lack of ample quarters at the Michigan Asylum for the Insane.

It is a fact that the history of the pioneers of this institution is a struggle for appropriation and legislation, and a constant effort to maintain that the institution was legitimate and necessary.

Were it not for these efforts, Wayne County General Hospital might never have been able to grow to the inclusive institution that it is at the present, with a program designed to meet the increasing needs of an expanding community.

Friends of Eloise  
by Daryl A. Bailey,  
member of Westland Historical Commission.

At one time, Eloise was a self-contained village in Nankin Township. Behind its gates lived thousands of Wayne County's mentally ill, tubercular and indigent residents.

It was a great humanitarian effort to serve those in need. Sadly, most of its buildings have been demolished. While much is gone, Eloise still lives in the minds of those who lived or worked there. A group called the Friends of Eloise is now forming to preserve these memories for future generations.