

Fall 2016

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 26.03: Fall 2016

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Viveen, Marjorie; Reynolds, Geoffrey D.; and Post, Laurel, "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 26.03: Fall 2016" (2016). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 99.

<http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/99>

Published in: *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 26, Issue 3, Fall October 1, 2016. Copyright © 2016 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 26 Number 3

Fall 2016

Ticket to the Poor Farm

By Marjorie Viveen

When Keeper Herbert Taft welcomed the Poor Farm's first "inmate" in 1866, he could not have imagined the thousands that would follow from every corner of Ottawa County. In the aftermath of the Civil War and in the absence of modern supports such as Social Security and Medicare, the farm provided safe haven for those too old, too young, too sick, or too broken to live independently. Each arrived with slightly more than their personal histories. Seeming of little value then, their stories are now a treasure to those who would learn life lessons from a pauper's experience and to descendants seeking to fill gaps in family genealogy. After eight years of studying these wretched individuals, I've come to the conclusion that none is so unlike me and any could have been my family story...maybe yours, too. Consider this from the November 6, 1916, *Grand Rapids Press*:

"Look down my throat," said an inmate of the poorhouse to Rev. DeYoung of Coopersville. "Do you see anything down there?"

*"No," said Rev. DeYoung. "I don't see anything."
"Look again," said the man. "There's 160 acres of land down there. I drank it all up and that's why I'm in the poorhouse."*

County Clerk Jacob Glerum has looked up the records and discovers that out of 52 inmates of the County

Infirmiry in 1915, 17 were there because of alcoholism and the balance for other reasons. In 1916, of 62, 23 were there for alcoholism. The largest number committed for any other cause was 16 in 1916 ... feeble-minded. "Alcoholism is by far the greatest cause of Ottawa County's pauperism," says Mr. Glerum.



Pieter Ploeg Man with Snakes in his Boots

Pieter Ploeg was among those raising his glass too high. He was born in Etten, the Netherlands, in 1798. His father, Hendrik, was a shoemaker who taught his sons the craft. His mother, Johanna Boon Ploeg, was a midwife. Most influential in Pieter's life, however, was his older brother Benjamin.

By 1821, the brothers had married sisters in ceremonies celebrated at the Dutch Reformed Church in Klundert. Pieter and his new bride moved near his parents in Etten, where Vincent Van Gogh had resided after being fired from a Paris gallery. Van Gogh's paintings from that period give us insight into Pieter's life.

Over time, Pieter, and especially Benjamin, became increasingly disenchanted with the Dutch church and government. In 1846, conditions in the Netherlands were likened to that of our pilgrim fathers three centuries earlier. Seceders from the state-sanctioned Reformed

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



We continue to be blessed with willing and talented writers for the articles that appear here in the *Joint Archives Quarterly*. This issue includes one by Grand Haven resident, historian, and energetic organizer of all things history-related, Marjorie Viveen. Fresh off her outstanding effort in organizing the Poor Farm sesquicentennial at Eastmanville last month, we convinced her to write an article based on her presentation to the Holland Area Historical Society, also in October. Marjie's energy has also been noticed by documentary filmmaker Joshua Pardon of Ferris State University and his team. With Viveen's help, they hope to have a documentary on the history of the Poor Farm ready for next summer. We will let you know where and when you can see it. The second article was penned by archives student assistant Laurel Post and gives you a brief look into the impactful lives of Bernard, Bernice, and Margaret Rottschaefter, missionaries to India.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Ticket to the Poor Farm (continued from page 1)



Van Gogh's sketch of Etten, ca. 1881

Church were persecuted, setting the stage for mass emigration. Like countless others, the brothers aligned themselves with the Christian seceder movement. In 1855, they sailed to America, joining family members who had settled in Albertus Van Raalte's colony in Holland, Michigan, the year before. Pieter left behind his wife and 17 children to fend for themselves in economically depressed Etten. If ever he intended to aid their emigration, it did not happen. At age 57, Pieter was about to launch a new life.

While his brother Benjamin became irrevocably enmeshed in Pillar Church politics, there is no evidence

that Pieter did the same. The 1860 census found the 61-year-old working as a shoemaker in his brother's downtown Holland shop. At that time, Pieter was boarding with the August Jansen family. Precisely when Pieter began his downward spiral is unknown, but that he was a "Godless drunk" was widely observed. Like Van Gogh himself, Pieter Ploeg suffered "snakes in his boots," and perhaps felt the loneliness Van Gogh had expressed when saying, "There may be a great fire in our hearts, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a wisp of smoke."

Pieter's situation further deteriorated when in 1871 Holland burned to the ground, leaving him and 300 others homeless. An aghast Gerrit Van Schelven struggled to find the words, "No one unless he has been an eyewitness of such a scene, can conceive of its terror or its awfulness. We shall not attempt to describe it. The entire territory covered by the fire was mowed as a reaper; there was not a fence post or sidewalk plank and hardly the stump of a shade tree left to designate the old lines." Between 1871 and 1878 Pieter would be admitted and discharged from the Poor Farm three times, ever exercising his enthusiasm for ethanol. His final discharge would be in a coffin. We can only imagine the darkness that permeated the old man's last thoughts. Was there guilt in abandoning his family, hopelessness when losing his home and job to the fire, and insatiable grief upon his Benjamin's death in 1874? Where others might have turned to God for solace, Pieter sought consolation in a bottle. Poor Farm keeper Maxfield entered Pieter's name in the old ledger for the last time upon his death:

Died May 17, 1878

Died of the effects of hard drinking.

Professes to have repented and made his peace with God.

His age unknown possibly about 79 years.

Came from Holland

A. Maxfield, Keep

The June 1, 1878, edition of the *Holland City News* carried Pieter's obituary. It read: *Old Mr. Pieter Ploeg, died at the County Poor Farm on the 17th inst. at the ripe age of 78 years. He was confined to his bed for the last three months, and one of the directors of the poor informed us that the old man finally got reconciled to his lot, was very submissive and contrite and was continually seen reading and studying the Holy Scriptures, and the director expressed the hope that his end was all that could be wished for.*

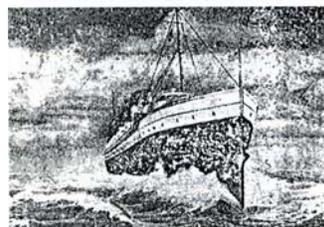
In an ironic twist, much of the research for Ploeg's profile was provided by Pieter's great-great-grandson, Gerrit Scheeres.....the Reverend Gerrit Scheeres, retired

pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. Sheeres and his wife, Janet, are regular contributors to *Origins*, the historic magazine of the archives at Calvin College, where the Ploeg family story was told in detail. The research on his great-great-grandfather must have been bittersweet for Reverend Sheeres. But in the end, Pieter did seek salvation. And, while Pieter Ploeg would poignantly be saved by his God, alcoholic John Van Geen would literally be “saved by a beer.”

John Van Geen Man Saved by a Beer

Like Pieter Ploeg, John Van Geen’s story begins in the Netherlands at the time when disaffected Dutch seceders were leaving the homeland in droves. One such discontent was John’s father, Peter. In 1847, Peter Van Geen’s life was being altered in ways he could neither control nor tolerate. Potato and rye crops had failed that year, adding to mounting economic hardship in South Holland, the province of his birth. Financially and increasingly spiritually disillusioned, Peter, a deeply committed Calvinist, joined the seceder movement when the leftist maneuvered to liberalize the Dutch Reformed Church. To bring protesters like Peter back in line, the government dispersed seceder meetings, billeted soldiers in separatists’ homes, and imposed fines on movement leaders. Peter’s outrage was matched only by his crippling grief upon the sudden death of his beloved wife, nine-year-old John Van Geen’s mother. That was the last straw. He booked passage on the merchant ship *Helene Catherine*, and 50 days later on June 5, 1848, disembarked in New York City. With young John in tow, the pair made the arduous journey to Albertus Van Raalte’s colony.

The Van Geens settled in. By 1860, Peter was an established millworker learning the blacksmith’s trade. He afforded a modest house and was well-respected in the pioneer community.....his son, John, not so much. Now, at age 20, John Van Geen lived with his father and worked odd jobs, never truly rooting. John’s life, seemingly going nowhere, went from bad to worse when on October 9, 1871, Holland burned. Holland, as they knew it, ceased to be. Like Pieter Ploeg, John was in despair. Rebounding, there may have been a glimmer of hope for happiness and greater stability, when a year later on December 20, 1872, John married “Ann.” Any calm sought in their relationship was, however, short-lived. John mourned his father’s death in 1873. Then, in 1878, Ann filed for divorce, charging that John had been “a habitual drunk for three years or more.” Distancing herself from him, she moved out of state, while John continued his backslide.



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to WHITE LAKE	7:30 AM	8:00 PM	6:00 PM	6:00 PM

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CHICAGO DOCKS - Foot of Michigan Ave

On the balmy evening of October 15, 1880, John Van Geen could be found alone in Grand Haven. At the Goodrich dock he purchased a ticket for overnight passage to Chicago. With time to spare before the 10:30 p.m. departure, John strolled up Washington Avenue, settling into one of its many watering holes. As was his habit, one beer inevitably led to another. Time ticked away. When the tipsy traveler finally returned to the wharf, the side-wheel steamer *Alpena* had cleared the channel. John

watched her form disappear into the dark night, then drowned his frustration in a few more pints.

Onboard the *Alpena* there was every expectation of a routine crossing. No one could have predicted her demise or their own. By midway across Lake Michigan, the clement day had deteriorated into the most violent storm in Great Lakes history. Temperatures plummeted below zero and gale force winds reaching 125 mph ripped at *Alpena*’s stack and wheel. While the storm vented its full fury, Captain Napier desperately tried to wrestle his ship from its chokehold. He cranked the rudder in a last ditch effort to come about and was side-swiped by mountainous waves. The *Alpena* was lost in what came to be known as “The Big Blow.” While 102 people met their Maker that horrifying night, John Van Geen was not among them. He would forever be the subject of local legend as the “man saved by a beer.”



Perhaps that night, even as Van Geen slept it off, another Grand Haven man was moved to poetry. Here is an excerpt from his “*Wreck of the Alpena*.”

Fiercer, wilder howls the tempest!
 Slower, works the engines now!
 Harder, harder lift the billows
 Up against her guarded bow!
 Hark! They've broken in the gangways!
 Fires are out! The decks are free!
 And the steamer lurches sternway,
 In the hollows of the sea!
 Standing at his post of duty,
 Shouting to the tempest tossed,
 Captain Napier cried, "I'm beaten!
 She is sinking! "We are lost."

The poem was penned by Judge David Fletcher Hunton, who 20 years later along with John Van Geen, would be a resident at the Poor Farm. The coincidence begs belief, but is the sobering truth.

Van Geen's story did not end at the Goodrich dock or with last call. Even dedicated drunk and poet Charles Bukowski knew, "You're going to have to save yourself." John Van Geen's brush with death had a profound effect on him. It was an epiphany. That happenstance offered Van Geen a second chance in life, and he grabbed the brass ring. Intoxicatingly sober now, Van Geen established a successful wood products business in Holland on the corner of 7th Street and Central Avenue. From that location he sold staves, bark, cordwood, shingles, and other wood necessities in a community still rebuilding after its 1871 fire. Van Geen was respected not only for his business practices, but also his intelligence. People liked the reformer and spoke of him fondly. He became one of Holland's most prosperous citizens.

Cruelly, over time and for whatever reasons, Van Geen's demons returned with a vengeance. According to the February 26, 1913, *Holland Sentinel*, "in various ways he lost his grip." His business failed. He was reduced to performing menial tasks at local restaurants and hotels. When he could not dependably fulfill those minor responsibilities, Van Geen's downward spiral led to his complete undoing. No longer able to live independently, at about age 60, he was admitted to the Ottawa County Poor Farm. Records of his residency are long lost, but there is reason to believe the place aided his recovery. Each year, despite the many miles, the old man returned to Holland to visit friends. They were always glad to see him. Van Geen lived the last 15 years of his life on the county farm at public expense. On February 25, 1913, he died of kidney failure. He was prepared for burial by the Nibbelink & Son undertaking parlor in Holland, where his funeral was well-attended. John Van Geen was interred at Pilgrim Home Cemetery in an unmarked grave near his father. He was warmly remembered in his

obituary, as we, too, remember him here. *Remember...because we can.* Not so with Joe Steel.

Joe Steel

"Memory loss is strange. It's like showing up at a movie after it's started." —Elizabeth Langston

On February 25, 1907, a tatterdemalion of a man was found aimlessly wandering Lamont, Michigan. Weighing only 115 pounds at five feet, four inches, and half clothed, the man was near hypothermia. He was without identification and penniless. He neither knew where he was or why he was there. The mystery man was transported to the nearby Ottawa County Poor Farm, where he was admitted as an inmate.

Upon intake, the disoriented gentleman could neither state his name nor the names of any friends or relatives. He did, however, recall having two fine oxen named "Duke" and "Dime." Officials guessed that he was about 40 years of age, and others speculated that he had worked briefly in the lumbering camp at Steel's Landing in Lamont. Nothing more was gleaned from locals. Not knowing under what name to enroll him, the keeper dubbed the amnesiac "Joe," and because he was found near Steel's Landing, the surname "Steel" was assigned. Though all were quite certain that Joe had sustained a head injury, there was no physical evidence to support the assumption. Failing to fit neatly into any diagnostic category of the era, Joe was listed as "insane" in the old farm ledger.

Joe integrated rather easily into his adoptive Poor Farm family. When inquiries into his past were repeatedly met with blank blue eyes, the search for Joe's true identity was gradually abandoned. Joe was a man of few words, yet responsive when others initiated conversation. He was an able and willing worker on the farm's 250-acre spread, and particularly liked tinkering with farm machinery. He never caused problems. Over time, Joe became a fixture at the farm. Decade upon decade passed.

***Identity of Man,
102, Still Mystery***

By John H. Hill
EASTMANVILLE — The offi

beyond the Ottawa County area.
All that the old keeper of the
infirmary could determine

By 1965, Joe had lived at the farm for 58 years. The infirmary doctor for 38 of those years reported that Joe had never suffered a serious illness. He walked with the slight stoop expected of a near centurion, but was upright

in his cognitive skills. That same year, a journalist from the *Holland City News* was sent to write a feature story about life at the county institution. Among countless questions, he asked, "Who's your oldest resident?" Who, indeed! The strange story unfolded, and the public was challenged to solve the mystery of Joe Steel's true identity on the front page of the May 13th edition.



Days later the call came. "I am positive Joe Steel is my uncle," asserted an amazed Monroe Eaton. He had frequently heard his mother lament the disappearance of her brother, Monroe Ruty, in whose memory Monroe Eaton had actually been named. Based on a notation in the old family Bible, Monroe Ruty was born in Eden, Michigan,

south of Lansing on March 31, 1860. Family lore revealed Monroe had sought employment and adventure in the north woods in 1882. Years rolled by without the family knowing his whereabouts or fate. In time, the family moved to Saugatuck, but never forgot their lost loved one....but, was Joe Steel *that one*?

A meeting between Monroe Eaton and Joe Steel was soon arranged. The strangers fumbled to find common ground. After years of searching for his missing uncle, Eaton recounted working with a pair of beloved oxen on the family farm. Did Joe remember Duke and Dime? Mining for greater proof, Eaton asked, "Does 'Little Mony' mean anything to you?" The old man's eyes brightened, locked into Eaton's gaze, and softened sentimentally. Duke and Dime were farm heroes, and 'Little Mony' was his mother's endearing name for her son. There could be no doubt that Joe Steel, now proven to be 104 years old, was in reality Monroe Ruty.

Joe went on to celebrate seven more birthdays on the pages of the *Holland Sentinel* and surrounded by family and friends at the Poor Farm. His 110th birthday party included greetings from Governor Milliken and then president, Richard Nixon. NBC news anchor David Brinkley even kept tabs on Joe. When he died on May 30, 1971, at age 111, Joe Steel (aka Monroe Ruty) was the oldest man in Michigan. He was interred at the Riverside Cemetery in Saugatuck, fittingly next to Polly Ruty. Mother and son were finally reunited after their 89-year separation.

Your Ticket to the Poor Farm

Like many of you, I've always had a vague awareness of the county farm, but, for me, a far greater knowledge of the county parks. When the two merged at the Eastmanville site in 2010, becoming Ottawa County Farm Park, my interest in farm history soared. Working with Eldon Kramer (see the *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Vol. 26, #2, Summer 2016), I chaired a committee to restore the long abandoned Poor Farm Cemetery. That, in turn, led to researching the lives of individuals buried there. Fully expecting the stereotypical, starting with Isaac Kramer's story, I was proven wrong in my narrow thinking. The research grew into dozens of profiles, each effort inspired by just a kernel of information. I'm going to plant such a kernel here. I hope it will interest and challenge YOU! So, here's your ticket to Poor Farm history:

Believed to be from the *Coopersville Observer* under an *Eastmanville Echoes* column dated October 10, 1913:

Lucus De Weerd of Holland, an eccentric old man who frequently posed as a disciple of Edward Payne Weston, the aged pedestrian, has shaken the Holland dust from off his feet and has taken up his abode in the county infirmary at Eastmanville. Two years ago De Weerd claimed he walked from Arkansas to Chicago and last year he started on a long-distance hike from Holland to Everett, Washington, with a view of emulating the fame of Weston. He started out over the Pere Marquette track, but returned three hours later owing to a raging blizzard. De Weerd is nearly seventy-five years old.

Okay, readers, I'm passing the pen to you. Help unravel Lucus De Weerd's story for a future *Quarterly*.



Marjorie Viveen, Ed.S. is a retired school psychologist and lifelong resident of Grand Haven. She chaired committees to preserve the Ottawa County Poor Farm Cemetery, the Grand Haven Central Park Fountain, their Town Clock, and led a year-long celebration of the Grand River Greenway in celebration of Ottawa County Parks' Silver Anniversary.

Viveen founded the Dusty Dozens History Group and was named Tri-Cities Historical Museum's 2010 "Historian of the Year." In 2012 she authored "Historic River Road: A Self-Guided Auto Tour for All Seasons, co-authored *Our People, Their Stories* with Wallace Ewing, Ph.D., and has written numerous articles. A second book on Grand River fur trade is in the works. She currently serves on the Ottawa County Parks Foundation Board, the Tri-Cities Historical Museum's Editorial Board, and is the chairperson of the Ottawa County Poor Farm Sesquicentennial Committee.

From Construction to Leper Colonies: The Story of the Rottschaefer Family in India

By Laurel Post

The extraordinary Rottschaefer family gave a good portion of their lives to serving those in India through the Arcot Mission. From 1909 to the 1950s, the members of the Rottschaefer family served tirelessly in the name of God through the construction of medical buildings and schools and helping heal the bodies and souls of those with leprosy. There are three notable members: Rev. Dr. Bernard Rottschaefer and his wife Bernice, and Bernard's sister, Dr. Margaret Rottschaefer. Bernard was actively involved in the construction of many buildings in India, as well as the founder and first principal of the Katpadi Industrial Institute. Margaret's influence could be seen throughout India within the leprosy community. Together, these two helped transform mission work in India.



*Bernice and Dr. Bernard Rottschaefer,
and Dr. Margaret Rottschaefer, n.d.*

Bernard Rottschaefer, also known as Ben in some sources, was born in the Netherlands, and he was a 1906 graduate of Hope College and 1909 graduate of Western Theological Seminary. On December 9, 1908, Bernard was selected as a missionary to India. He did not leave for India until September 25, 1909, and his wife, Bernice, followed shortly in 1910.¹ Bernard and his wife stayed in India until 1955. While there, Bernard and Bernice had five children, all who attended the Kodaikanal International School. (More about this school can be found in the Rottschaefer collection at the Joint Archives of Holland.)

As a station missionary in India, Bernard was known to be a man who wore many hats. He was a builder, architect, and engineer. He was also a financier, treasurer of the Arcot Coordinating Committee (A.C.C.), Indian Church Board (I.C.B.), Arcot Assembly, and the Mission. He was chairman of the Western Circle,

director of several electric corporations, and minister of the church of South India. Bernard was also a member of the governing body of Voorhees College, the Union Mission Medical School, the Union Mission Sanatorium and the Scudder Memorial Hospital Committee.² He was also the founder, manager, and principal of the Katpadi Industrial Institute in Katpadi, India.

When he first arrived in India, Bernard was involved in many construction projects. He helped build missionary residences and numerous buildings of the Church of South India, which included buildings at the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, South India. He was also the architect and builder of the Union Tuberculosis Sanatorium near Madanapalle.³ Bernard had a hand in building Voorhees College and the Scudder Memorial Hospital.⁴ The most important project that Bernard worked on, though, was the American Arcot Mission's Katpadi Industrial Institute in Katpadi, India.

The Katpadi Industrial Institute grew into a success under the management of Bernard. It began as a school that offered classical education to young men but, by the 1930s, an increase in the number of boys from other villages wished to enroll in the institute's school and learn a trade or skill. Thus the school grew and developed into not only a school of learning but also a business. Under the direction of Bernard and Bernice, the elementary school attached to Katpadi expanded to offer its services not only to the children of the employees, but also to the people in the surrounding areas.⁵

The mission of the institute was not only to teach the young men to become quality craftsmen, but to also develop Christian character. "A primary goal of the Katpadi Industrial Institute was to enable the underprivileged boys whose families had become Christians to grow into economic self-reliance and thereby to grow in self-respect."⁶ Along with the other missionaries who founded the industrial school, Bernard hoped that the young men who were employed there would become workmen evangelists. In addition, the members of the South India Union (S.I.U.) Church wrote to Bernard stating, "You have taken care not to neglect the mind and soul of your students, as they get their physical and technical training, and have established schools for their intellectual improvement and hostels for their comforts, with classes for the education of the children of workers and special spiritual meetings for the welfare of all."⁷ The Katpadi Industrial Institute offered many people numerous opportunities to grow and learn both intellectually and spiritually.

The industrial school became the largest and leading institution of its kind in South India in the 1920s and 30s. The institute included a workshop that housed up-to-date machinery. Programs offered included instruction on cabinet-making, rattan work, blacksmithy, and motor mechanics. The motor mechanics program was very profitable, due to the mission cars needing repairs and no other garage or repair shop was in operation at the time.⁸ The workers of the American Arcot Mission Industrial Institute wrote that thanks to the Katpadi Industrial Institute, “the entire economic fabric of our Christian community in these parts has been entirely rebuilt on a very sound basis and hundreds of families have become economically independent and thus freed from the economic and Social bondage. As Industrial workers we are second to none in India.”⁹ The Institute created a much-needed stability in the economy.



Bernard in his office in Madanapalle, n.d.

In the 1940s, Bernard realized that the workers needed better living quarters. Soon after this realization, thirty-three cottages were constructed near the institute. The workers were then able to live in these cottages and pay for them in installments. This village “was a model Christian village with well-built homes that the workers were allowed to purchase. In order to maintain its character as a village for the workers, there were a certain number of restrictions in place, including some restrictions on lifestyle...All of these provisions had been put in place with the best intentions and appreciated at the time.”¹⁰ The workers were so grateful that they named the small village Bernice-puram after Bernard’s wife, Bernice.

Unfortunately, Bernard’s faith was put to the test during an especially turbulent time with the institute and the workers. As time went by, ideas amongst the workers started to change. This was largely due to the influence of Communists who were active in the area. Alien ideas started to spring up that the workers were being exploited and they were urged to make demands about salary and working conditions. This resulted in a work stoppage in early 1948.¹¹ It’s to be noted that the institute was started by the mission and for almost 100 years the institute has worked well and even flourished under the idea that they would only accept workers who upheld the Christian moral standards that were put into place. The Area Coordinating Committee met twice

during this dispute; whether it was a strike or a lock-out is undetermined. The committee brought forth an amendment to have differential wage rates between those who are single and married. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the workers were trusting in the Communists and not in the mission workers, the workers did not accept the deal. The result was that the Katpadi Industrial Institute, boarding school, and training course in carpentry were all closed down, and the employees were dismissed. The elementary school continued to operate, but its attendance dropped by fifty percent due to the workers’ strike.¹²

In a farewell address to both Bernard and Bernice Rottschaefer, the workers of the American Arcot Mission Industrial Institute wrote addressing the unfortunate events that had occurred and noted how Bernard stood strong in his faith. They wrote, “the workers lost their Christian bearing for a while and behaved in an unchristian way, but you have not spared anything to make the Christian ideals rule supreme.”¹³ After much discussion and consideration, the institute was later reopened in 1954 under cottage industry rules, which gave workers the opportunity to continue using their craft skills in making furniture and other items, but instead of being considered employees, they were paid by the items they produced.

The one person who stood fast and strong by Bernard’s side throughout the forty-five years he lived in India was Bernice. There is nothing but praise and kind words written about Bernice. She was known to have a “quiet gentle counsel... everyone knows of her genial nature and hospitality.”¹⁴ Another source wrote about Bernice stating, “no poor or needy person who came to your doors for help has ever returned empty-handed. Your home has been widely known for hospitality and kindness to friends, visitors and strangers.”¹⁵ Bernice was known as a welcoming women. She was also known for her maternal ways, especially when it came to the welfare of the women in the villages. She visited their houses and was always willing to help them in times of hardship. Bernice played the organ in church and helped maintain the school for the children of the employees who worked at the institute.

In 1955, Bernard and Bernice decided to retire and depart from India. Many of the organizations and groups of people that were affected by the good work done by both Bernard and Bernice sent them farewell addresses. One of particular note stated that the couple was “not only a missionary but also a visionary.”¹⁶ Many expressed sorrow over their departure, which demonstrates the great impact Bernard and Bernice Rottschaefer had on the lives of the people of India.

Bernard and Bernice were not the only ones to impact India. Another major influence in the missions in India was Bernard's sister, Dr. Margaret Rottschaefter. Margaret served at seven centers throughout Wandiwash, India, treating those who had leprosy and administering the word of God.



Margaret Rottschaefter, n.d.

When Margaret first arrived in India with her brother in 1909, she was there as a teaching and preaching missionary. While there, she was moved by those she saw that had the "cancer of the jungle," which consisted of feet and hands being eaten away. She returned to the States when she was 30 to study medicine at the University of Michigan.

After receiving her M.D., she went back to India in

1924. For two years, she was part of the staff at the Union Missionary Medical School at Vellore. She then spent three years in Bahrain as part of the Arabian Mission.¹⁷ Afterwards, she began doing pioneer work in the villages of India and set up shop in the village of Wandiwash, where her work was done almost entirely in the field. Margaret had seven centers that served and provided medical care to over 5,000 patients.¹⁸ It is also important to note that Margaret was, at the time, the only missionary living in Wandiwash, South India.¹⁹

When Margaret began her new life as the woman doctor of Wandiwash in 1933, she only lived in a tent on a church compound. "After several years, she permitted the mission to erect a building around the tent... consisting of a inner tent surrounded by a screened, verandah-like living space. Later she also built two simple little houses for in-patients."²⁰ Margaret was a no fuss no muss kind of person. She kept things simple and wanted to focus largely on those with leprosy. It wasn't until 1935 that she started to drive out to roadside clinics.²¹

While Margaret was working in Wandiwash, her day typically started at the crack of dawn. She would drive to one of the clinics that was usually held in a clearing by a banyan tree or near some shrubs. Then her assistants would set up two folding tables and begin setting up the medicine and pills and prepping for any surgeries that might need to take place. While the assistants were setting up, one source writes, "The first thing the doctor did was to tell of the saving and cleansing power of Jesus, to a group of several hundred who sat at her

feet."²² In addition, a Bible woman would also accompany Margaret who would tell Bible stories and sing. Afterward, each patient would be given a slip telling of the medication dosage needed, as well as a little parcel of food containing two days' ration that usually had to last a family a whole week. This was due to the fact that for four years the monsoons had failed to come, leaving no water to grow rice and little in the way of food. The food handed out would range from milk with jaggery (a coarse brown palm sugar), cooked beans, or cereal.

Most of the time, Margaret treated these people for next to nothing in return. One author wrote, "In gratitude, patients often leave a coin on the table. Those who can afford to give something are expected to do so. It is never very much; usually an anna which is a little more than a penny, or an eight-anna piece, roughly the value of a dime."²³ When asked why she has invested so much into the leprosy patients of Wandiwash, Margaret responded with, "It was a leper with fingerless stumps that first made me realize the great blessing of healthy hands and inspired me to make use of mine in bringing help to others."²⁴

Margaret was visited by many other missionaries and authors who later wrote about their adventures with Margaret. One particular missionary and author noted that at the first center they arrived at, over four hundred were waiting to receive treatment and "each person received personal attention. Each was treated kindly. Each was given a helpful word."²⁵ Another described Margaret's work by writing of her mission stating, "We feel the importance of the work is not valued in numbers treated but in the personal contacts which have been possible from day to day. We aim to make all our work serve the main purpose of preaching the gospel... we have tried in every way to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and preach the Gospel to the poor."²⁶

Margaret tried to do her best for these people in India by giving what she knew, which was her faith and her education in medicine. She saw a need for someone to help



these people and instead of waiting for someone else to come along and take care of them, she decided to do something herself. Another wrote about her ability to stay calm and collected in the face of infected, decaying

hands and feet. Fortunately, members of missionary societies in the states were kind enough to send footwear, like knitted moccasins, to Wandiwash to distribute among those whose feet were in especially bad condition and needed some protection from the ground.²⁷ Margaret also took record of every single one of her patients, part of which can be found in the Rottschaefer collection along with Margaret's diaries from 1918-1957. In Margaret's eyes, these people were not just patients, but they were also friends.

By the time Margaret retired, sometime after 1955 when she was well into her 70s, she had treated over 5,000 patients. Leading up her departure from Wandiwash, it was evident that her presence would be missed. When Margaret retired, Dr. Ranji John took over her work. It was noted that, "Dr. Rottschaefer has laid well and truly the foundation. She sowed the seed of the gospel in the hearts of these patients."²⁸ Margaret preached the gospel of compassion, which was known throughout the region from her patients.

Bernard, Bernice, and Margaret Rottschaefer spent a great deal of their lives in India, helping the people through the Arcot Mission. Their faith, hard work, and dedication made it possible for them to accomplish all that they did. From church and medical buildings, to the Katpadi Industrial Institute, to helping heal and comfort the sick, there was no stopping them. These three selflessly dedicated their lives to helping those in India, and their work is to be remembered for generations to come.

Notes

¹The Rev. B. Rottschaefer." *Church Herald*, 8 December 1967.

²"The Members of the S.I.U Church and the Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute to Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 17 June 1941, An Address Present to The Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer by the Members of the S.I.U Church and the Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute, Katpadi, South India, 1941, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

³"The Rev. B. Rottschaefer." *Church Herald*, 8 December 1967.

⁴"The Staff of Scudder Memorial Hospital to Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 4 April 1955, A Farewell Address Presented to Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer from the Staff of the Scudder Memorial Hospital, 1955, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1, Joint Archives of Holland.

⁵"The Members of the S.I.U. Church and the Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute to Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 17 June 1941, An Address Present to The Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer by the Members of the S.I.U. Church and the Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute, Katpadi, South India, 1941, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

⁶Eugene P. Heideman, *From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India*, 2001.

⁷"The Members of the S.I.U. Church to Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," n.d., A Farewell Address Presented to The Rev. and Mrs. B. Rottschaefer, Katpadi from the Members of the S.I.U Church, Katpadi, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

⁸Ibid.

⁹"The Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute, Katpadi to Rev. Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 16 April 1955, An Address of Farewell Presented to The Rev. Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer from the Workers of the American Arcot Mission Industrial Institute, Katpadi (South India), 1955, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

¹⁰Heideman.

¹¹Heideman, 2.

¹²Ibid.

¹³"The Workers of the A.A.M. Industrial Institute, Katpadi to Rev. Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 16 April 1955, An Address of Farewell Presented to The Rev. Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer from the Workers of the American Arcot Mission Industrial Institute, Katpadi (South India), 1955, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

¹⁴"The Staff of Scudder Memorial Hospital to Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," 4 April 1955, A Farewell Address Presented to Dr. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer from the Staff of the Scudder Memorial Hospital, 1955, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

¹⁵"The Members of the S.I.U. Church to Rev. & Mrs. B. Rottschaefer," n.d., A Farewell Address Presented to The Rev. and Mrs. B. Rottschaefer, Katpadi from the Members of the S.I.U. Church, Katpadi, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 1.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷"Margaret B. Rottschaefer, M.D." 14 February 1969, *Church Herald*, WBF, Rottschaefer, Margaret B.

¹⁸Marcus Bach, "The Woman Doctor of Wandiwash", November 1956, Dr. Margaret Rottschaefer article, 1956, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 2.

¹⁹Elizabeth G. Bruce, "A Woman Called Margaret Rottschaefer and Her Leper Clinic," 17 April 1951, *Church Herald*, p. 12.

²⁰Heideman.

²¹Ibid.

²²Bruce.

²³Bach.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Bruce.

²⁶Heideman.

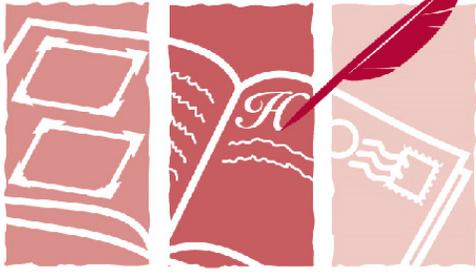
²⁷Bach.

²⁸"Greetings from Wandiwash Leprosy Centers," Newsletter, 1959, W16-1440, Rottschaefer Family Box 2.



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In India, Dr. Margaret Rottschaefter leads a worship service before medical services are provided, n.d.