

THE PATIENTS GROW THE FOOD

By J. Gregory Pirmann



PICKING PEAS

As noted proudly in the photo (page 2) for decades, “the majority of food consumed by patients and employees is grown on the school’s own farm.” The land where Pennhurst was built was specifically selected because it was already being farmed successfully before the Commonwealth purchased it. Despite that history, by the time that I began working there in October 1969, the farm operation had virtually ceased.

At that time, the only remnants that remained were the dairy herd and an annual crop of corn destined to feed the cows. These two holdovers meant that there was fresh milk available on the living areas every day and that for a day or two in the summer there would be free “all you can eat” corn on the cob in the employee cafeteria. Beyond that the fact that Pennhurst had produced most of the food eaten

there for decades was merely a memory, preserved in old pictures. It was never clear to me why the farm had been shut down. "Peonage (the unpaid labor of the residents used to operate most of the facility) was still legal so the absence of workers was not the issue. [When peonage was finally outlawed in the mid-1970's the dairy herd was moved to the Graterford prison.] One story I heard was that the farms at Pennhurst and all of the other facilities like it across the Commonwealth were phased out because of pressure to purchase the facility's food from commercial vendors. While I never found any proof of this, it seems as likely an answer as any. For whatever reason, the Pennhurst I walked into was surrounded by hundreds of acres of no longer productive farmlands. But those fallow acres held a story that was decades old.



The Farm

THE PATIENTS GROW THE FOOD!

The majority of food consumed by patients and employees in the dining room is grown on the school's own farm. Between 35,000 and 65,000 gallons of surplus fresh fruits and vegetables are canned each season for consumption during the winter months. The school has approximately 500 hogs, 3,000 chickens, and a dairy herd of 200.

Above are working patients picking fresh vegetables for the "table" and cannery...and a working patient operating the "corn harvester" in our corn patch. Pictured below is one of the farm buildings...and a patient driving a team, hauling a load of hay.

Page 11



The 1903 legislation that created Pennhurst specifically directed *“that the process of an agricultural training shall be primarily considered in the educational department; and that the employment of the inmates in the care and raising of stock, and the cultivation of small fruits, vegetables, roots, etcetera, shall be made tributary, when possible, to the maintenance of the institution.”* With those words, the legislators set the course for the lives of hundreds of people who would spend years working for no pay on the Pennhurst farm. In another time, this might have been called slavery but in the institutional mindset of the early 20th century it simply made the work of the “inmates ... tributary to the maintenance of the institution.” The photos below are taken from two different informational booklets produced at Pennhurst, designed to tell the public about the facility.



Not everyone worked on the farm. Some individuals had to prepare the food once it was delivered to the kitchens; others had to serve it to the “officers.” People were found to do whatever was needed to be done so that the institution could live on.

The importance of the farm (and the unpaid labor which made it feasible to operate) is illustrated by the chart reproduced below. In the two-year period ending May 31, 1926, the farm turned a profit in excess of \$50,000. While this may not seem to be a lot given the scope of the farm operation, the importance of these “net earnings” becomes clear when you realize that \$50,000.00 in 1926 is equal to nearly \$700,000 today. Without the labor of the people society sent to Pennhurst, the facility would have been too expensive to operate. And those people working the fields, the kitchens and the dining rooms might instead have been living in their home communities with their families, working to earn a salary and live an “everyday life.” Without peonage, Pennhurst (and all of the facilities like it) would not have existed for as long as they did.

FARM REPORT			
For Two Years from June 1, 1924 to May 31, 1926.			
	Costs for 2 Years	Earnings for 2 Years	Net Earnings 2 Years
Farm	\$47,598.84	\$69,225.63	\$21,626.79
Truck Garden	13,686.22	18,672.39	4,986.17
Dairy	65,167.58	86,279.30	21,111.72
Piggery	8,696.86	10,307.28	1,610.42
Hennery	8,034.53	9,286.40	1,251.87
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	\$143,184.03	\$193,771.00	\$50,586.97
SUMMARY			
Gross Earnings for period of Two Years,		\$193,771.00	
Costs for period of Two Years,		143,184.03	
		<hr/>	
Net Earnings for period,		\$ 50,586.97	

One last historical note: a large portion of the Pennhurst farm is now a public golf course located on Route 724 outside of Spring City. A barn and silo used on the farm has been incorporated into the course’s clubhouse. The highway marker commemorating the existence of Pennhurst is located on the edge of their property. [<http://www.springhollowgolf.com/>]

-- Greg Pirmann