

The Early Years: Lyngblomsten Home for the Aged Stands Apart from the County Poorhouse

By Sam Patet

“Lyngblomsten” and “county poorhouses” are words you’ve probably not seen used together before now. This is the first story in a four-part series called “Backstories” where, during our 110th anniversary year, we will share some lesser-known parts (hence, stories behind the stories) of Lyngblomsten’s rich history.

In this case, you’ve probably heard a hundred times what Lyngblomsten’s founding women set out to do—create a Christian home for the elderly who had no one to care for them—but do you know what they were clear about NOT doing? Read on.

‘Impossible’ dream becomes reality

In 1903, Anna Quale Fergstad and 10 companions from her literary society (book club), set out to do what some thought impossible: create a home for elderly Norwegians who had no family to care for them and no means to afford care. After building support for the idea, the Lyngblomsten Society was incorporated in 1906. The name Lyngblomsten was chosen to honor the women’s home country of Norway where, at that time, the lyng was the national flower. Five years later, their dream had grown to include at least 14 branches with dozens of members and a bank account worth over \$12,000.

The women had also acquired a piece of land where the new home would be built. Approximately 800 supporters came to see the property—located at the intersection of Pascal Avenue and Como Avenue in St. Paul—on July 30, 1911. The



minutes from the Lyngblomsten Board of Trustees meetings provide a glimpse of what those supporters heard from Fergstad on that warm summer afternoon as she recounted the time back in 1903 when she first shared her dream.

“Mrs. Fergstad spoke to the people of her trip to Norway, when with her sister they had an opportunity to visit a home for Widow[s] that provided for six. Being much impressed with the home and surroundings, it never left her mind. And once again at home amongst her friends at a little literature club, someone exclaimed, ‘Let’s begin working for something.’ It was then Mrs. Fergstad said she had something on her mind a long time, but hardly dared to mention it as the undertaking might be to[o] great. But when the ladies urged her to tell, she did and all were unanimous about the idea, and from this Lyngblomsten grew to the present organization.”¹

The year following the viewing of the property, Lyngblomsten opened its doors to its first residents on November 5, 1912.

Lyngblomsten, a 'splendid haven of rest'

Early editions of the *Lyngblomsten Herald* (the charity's monthly newsletter) report how pleased residents were at being able to stay at the new home.

*"She says she is very contented and feels that the Lord has led her to the Lyngblomsten Home."*²

Minnesota, seven in the Twin Cities and three in rural communities.⁷

Where, then, did elderly persons who could not afford to care for themselves go if there weren't any privately run homes?

They went to the county poorhouse.

Poorhouse conditions not ideal

A poorhouse was "a house or institution for paupers, supported from public funds."⁸ In her 1968 study of Minnesota's county poorhouses, *More Than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota*



2



3

1—A view of the original Lyngblomsten Home from the neighboring yard of Grant and Mildred Dent, 1488 Midway Parkway, in 1928. Pictured is Grant Dent.

2—Parlor in the original home.

3—A resident in his room.

*"She often spoke about how glad she was that she had such a good home."*³

*"She says she is very glad that there is such a place as Lyngblomsten Home that affords such a splendid haven of rest for worn out old people."*⁴

"Our Old People's Home is not a Poor House," wrote Sophia Stearns in the August 1914 edition of the *Lyngblomsten Herald*. Stearns served as Lyngblomsten president between 1910 and 1916. "It is a real Home for the old people, a place where the aged, who have no one that can specially care for them, can join a large family."⁵

Today, we take it for granted that these residents enjoyed living at Lyngblomsten. But in the early 1900s, it wasn't a given that the elderly would have a clean, well-kept place to live in their old age. Before 1867, there were no privately run homes in Minnesota for elderly persons who were poor.⁶ And by 1900, there were only 10 such homes in

Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged, Minnesota Department of Health worker Ethel McClure paints a grim, yet accurate, picture of what elderly persons had to look forward to if they entered a poorhouse.

"Our Old People's Home is not a Poor House."
—Sophia Stearns, president of Lyngblomsten 1910–1916

To start, the houses were old and not designed to house several dozen people.⁹ This meant that persons of the opposite sex often roomed together.¹⁰ Sanitary conditions were poor: Of Minnesota's 24 county poorhouses in 1884, only five of them had bathtubs.¹¹ Bathroom slops were carried through kitchens and dining rooms, and vermin (insects, flies, lice, or rats) was a nearly universal problem.¹²

Often located on sizeable pieces of farmland, poorhouses in theory were to be self-sustaining.

continued on page 12

continued from page 11

Residents would work the land, and the proceeds would be used to support them. Unfortunately, as the secretary for the State Board of Corrections and Charities reported in 1884, “There are very few able-bodied paupers in the poor houses of Minnesota. The popular idea that pauper labor ought to be utilized would find little useful material to utilize.”¹³

No wonder a health officer reported in 1872 that people felt “a perfect horror ... at the thought of going to the poorhouse—in fact, starvation and death were considered preferable to removal to that establishment.”¹⁴

Lyngblomsten not a poorhouse

But Lyngblomsten, as Sophia Stearns emphasized in 1914, was not a poorhouse.

To start, the building itself stood apart. The three-story home was large enough to house 43 residents—and no more.¹⁵ Soon after Lyngblomsten opened, its board of trustees had to create a waiting list for those seeking admission.¹⁶ All of the single- and double-occupancy rooms had running water, and there were two bathrooms on each floor.¹⁷ A dining room in the basement and a living room on the building’s south side were comfortably furnished, complete with table linens, curtains, potted plants, and a fireplace.¹⁸ It even had an electric elevator, allowing residents who weren’t able to climb the stairs to traverse the building’s multiple levels.¹⁹ (McClure points out that rooms on the first floors of poorhouses were often used to house persons who could not climb the stairs.)²⁰

Daily life at Lyngblomsten was also remarkably different from life at the county poorhouses. First to note, Lyngblomsten was located on 10 acres of

land, not several hundred. This made managing the home’s livestock, large garden, and orchard much more doable.²¹ While residents were expected to help with canning, baking, weeding, cutting hay, and caring for livestock, they weren’t required to do so if they were frail or sick.²² There to pick up the slack were volunteers and the home’s small staff, which included a matron, a cook, two maids, and a janitor in 1921.²³

Lyngblomsten residents also had time to relax. Screened-in porches at the front of the building allowed residents to enjoy the outdoors.²⁴ There was a work (hobby) room and smoking room for the men, and there was plenty of yarn, thread, and rug material for the women to use.²⁵ Groups visited residents several times throughout the year, including at Christmas and at the annual Mid-Summer Festival.²⁶

Clearly, life at Lyngblomsten was better than life at the county poorhouse. What had seemed impossible had been accomplished.

Following those early years of garnering support for the idea and raising the funds to build, Lyngblomsten’s 30th anniversary book records how happy the founding women were that the home was finally open. “As the women walked away from the Home that night [following the first move-ins in November 1912], it was with the complete joy of having begun, developed, and completed a worthy and soul-satisfying project.”²⁷ Those 11 women achieved creating a *home*—not a poorhouse—for the elderly. Their dream still thrives 110 years later. 



¹Lyngblomsten board of trustees minutes. July 30, 1911. Pgs. 69–71.

²Lyngblomsten Herald Aug. 17, 1914.

³Lyngblomsten Herald Feb. 17, 1915.

⁴Lyngblomsten Herald Aug. 17, 1914.

⁵Lyngblomsten Herald Aug. 17, 1914.

⁶McClure, Ethel. *More Than a Roof: The Development of Minnesota Poor Farms and Homes for the Aged*. Pg. 40.

⁷McClure, Ethel. Pg. 52.

⁸Wester’s New College Dictionary. “Poorhouse.”

⁹McClure, Ethel. Pg. 78.

¹⁰McClure, Ethel. Pg. 80.

¹¹McClure, Ethel. Pg. 78.

¹²McClure, Ethel. Pg. 78.

¹³McClure, Ethel. Pg. 83.

¹⁴McClure, Ethel. Pg. 33.

¹⁵Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 22.

¹⁶Lyngblomsten: *90 Years of Service and Commitment to Seniors*. Pg. 10.

¹⁷Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 22.

¹⁸Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 23.

¹⁹Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 23.

²⁰McClure, Ethel. Pg. 80.

²¹Lyngblomsten: *90 Years of Service and Commitment to Seniors*. Pg. 9.

²²Lyngblomsten: *90 Years of Service and Commitment to Seniors*. Pg. 9.

²³Lyngblomsten: *90 Years of Service and Commitment to Seniors*. Pg. 13.

²⁴Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 29.

²⁵Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 28.

²⁶Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pg. 33.

²⁷Lyngblomsten: *Thirtieth Anniversary*. Pgs. 23–24.