

Timbercrest Church of the Brethren Home, Inc.

Founded: 1889

Location: Mexico, Indiana (1889–1968); 2201 East Street, North Manchester (1968– )

In the early 1870s the Church of the Brethren at Mexico, Indiana, found that it had several older, single parishioners who had no place to live. At the same time that the congregation was petitioning its parent organization for permission to build an orphanage, it began allowing older communicants to live in the church building. The members who lived at the church were responsible for its upkeep, but outside members brought them food and fuel. After a time church leaders decided that some of those living in the church may need supervision, and the idea spread that a home for the elderly could be built alongside the future orphanage.

In 1889 Levi Miller, a Mexico Brethren Church leader, offered to donate fifteen acres of land and build a structure if the Middle Indiana District of the church would support the institution financially. Before support was formally given to the home, however, Miller built a large building with a central heating system. Miller was born in Virginia in 1817 and moved with his wife, Ursula, to Miami County, Indiana, in 1842. He became a very successful farmer and a devoted supporter of the care of orphaned children.

After Miller's offer was accepted in April 1889, Frank Fisher, an elder at the church, was appointed as the superintendent, and his wife, Lilly, accepted the post of matron. S. M. Friend and his wife took over the positions in 1901, but the Fishers continued to be involved with the home until after World War I. The office of superintendent was not an easy one, and a tremendous turnover rate continuously plagued

the institution throughout its existence in Mexico. Between 1909 and 1918 Frank Fisher sometimes would take over as manager of the property for months at a time. After the death of his wife, Fisher rejoined the home, as a resident, continuing to live there until his own death in 1937.

James M. Corbin entered the home as the first of nine adults accepted in its first year of operation on 22 August 1889. Minnie Iliff and Bessie Iliff were the first of eight children to make the orphanage their home in 1889, though they only remained there for a few months while their father found new homes for them. The building that all of them inhabited was a two-story frame house in which residents used coal oil lamps for light in the evening. A second structure was built around 1892 that included living and office space for the superintendent and a library. A third building was erected in 1903 and was used solely as an orphanage, thus separating older people from the children for the first time.

In 1891 the home was incorporated and named the Old Folks and Orphans Home of the German Baptist Brethren Church of the Middle District of Indiana. Miller became one of the first members of the board of directors, and a tradition arose that one of his relatives should always be included on the board. Of all of his descendants, Marion Elsworth Miller served on the board the longest, in various offices from 1912 through 1946. He and his family lived close to the home, and at times he was charged with overseeing the daily operations of the concern, while also farming his own land and working as an insurance agent with Indiana Farmers Mutual.

For most of its existence the home was a self-help institution, with much of the work, including mending carpets, sewing clothes, and fixing meals, done by the residents

themselves. In 1917 the home purchased fifty adjacent acres for a farm to be worked by the orphans, which could supply some of the food needed at the home. The home constantly struggled to remain out of debt. The trustees' most important duty was to hold fund-raising events and solicit donations from area churches. The original idea was that each church in the district would provide the means for the home through a small assessment and through endowment funds, but the plan never worked well.

Until 1905 no one was accepted into the Old Folks Home unless they were members of the Brethren Church in good standing in the same district as the institution. After that date only a selected few were allowed in who were not members of district churches, but who had the means to help the organization create an endowment for the future. From the beginning the home required incoming residents to turn over their assets in exchange for a lifetime of care. This usually proved advantageous to the home, but there were times, especially in the 1930s, when the property received contained liens or had to be extensively repaired before sale, actually costing the home more than it brought in.

As more children and older people were accepted into the home the trustees realized that the institution needed more space. From 1889 until the 1920s the growth in construction around the original home made Miller's fifteen acres take on the aspect of a campus. In 1903 a schoolhouse was built for the children, and later an addition provided for a boy's dormitory above the school. The township trustees paid for the desks and provided the teacher for the institution. Two years later the board approved a measure to move several buildings to grounds of the home for a hospital. A year later a heating plant

was built, and in 1911 a kitchen was constructed. Indoor plumbing was placed in the Old Folks Home in 1912, and electricity was added a year later.

Children were accepted into the orphanage regardless of their religious background and after 1905 were increasingly wards of the county. Children who were sent to the orphanage from the county became a source of income for the institution because the state paid per diem fees to the home. In the 1930s the per diem fees collected for orphans supplemented the care of the aged. Children who did come from Brethren households were placed with Brethren families. Non-Brethren children were given to “persons of good moral character who could provide education opportunities and religious training” to the youngsters. While at the orphanage each child was expected to read the Bible daily and attend the Mexico Brethren Church on Sunday.

The 1920s proved to be a financially stable period for the home, but by 1933 the board noted annual deficits of \$5,000. Beginning in 1933 the trustees asked the district meeting of the church for set amounts of money in addition to the assessments given by individual churches. Because of the severity of the depression, some individual churches were allowed to send produce in place of payments. Money woes did not stop the officers of the home from moving elderly church members from county poor farms—where trustees believed they received minimal care—to the Mexico Old Folks Home.

In 1942, with fewer children coming to the home and an increasing number of older people seeking entry into the institution, a board of directors planning committee declared that the home should discontinue the orphanage. The children’s home was closed on 10 December 1942. With the loss of the children, and the money that came

with public wards, the board had to decide what to do about the farm and the buildings that had been used for the care of the children.

With the closing of the school and orphanage, costs continued to rise for the Old Folks Home, whose name was changed in the 1940s to the Mexico Welfare Home. In 1943 the board of directors decided to ask the Northern Indiana District of the church to support the home, providing 50 percent of the money needed to run the institution. Within a year the board also asked the Southern Indiana District to participate. In November 1944 the Northern Indiana District agreed to help support the home, but the Southern Indiana District did not, remaining independent of the partnership until 1951.

With the help of the Northern District and many area volunteers, as well as professional carpenters and plumbers, the Welfare Home was refurbished and rededicated in 1948. Rising costs continued to plague the institution, however, and the board was forced to accept federal and state aid in the early 1950s. With the implementation of rigorous accounting methods and the hiring of Ervin and Hattie Weaver as the superintendent and matron, costs came under control, and the debt of the institution began to drop. The home expanded in the early 1950s as the old school was turned into an employee dormitory and nursing unit. In 1953 the board voted to change the name of the agency to the Church of the Brethren Home.

By 1956 sixty-five residents lived in the home. Money was tight in part because the individual Brethren churches could not afford to support the people that they sent to the home for care. A 1957 report noted the need for a larger retirement home facility, not only for the poor, but also for the financially stable, and mentioned the possibility that the home needed to be relocated. Two years later a committee that included members from

all three districts decided that the home should be moved to a twenty-acre site in North Manchester for several reasons, including the fact that the town was close to the center of all three districts.

After years of constant turnover in the superintendent post, changed to administrator in 1959, Orville Sherman accepted the position in 1960, and his wife Lois took the post of matron. The pair had been missionaries in the 1950s. They helped to secure a good financial footing for the home by visiting as many Brethren churches as they could and reporting on the needs of the institution. Because of their work in the individual churches, donations to the home more than doubled between 1960 and 1964. In addition the Shermans helped with organizing the building fund needed to construct Timbercrest, the name of the new home to be built in North Manchester. They started the Timbercrest Auxiliary, which solicited subscriptions for the new facility. Sherman continued as the administrator for eighteen years.

Work began on the new \$1.3 million, one-story brick facility in October 1966. On 12 March 1968 the residents were moved from Mexico to North Manchester. The original site had four wings and a central unit, complete with health and dining facilities and a chapel. Two additional wings were added in 1969 and 1970, bringing the total number of possible residents to 124. Later a new chapel and library were added. Air-conditioning was installed in some areas of the institution in 1973. Crafts and hobbies have been added over the years; one in particular—the quilting club—generates funds for the home.

Since 1970 the home has purchased surrounding land for expansion, constructing duplexes that serve as off-site housing, as well as room for orchards that by 1989

amounted to more than sixty acres. David Lawrenz became the administrator in 1978, a post he continued to hold in 1999. In the 1980s a new set of construction plans added twelve-unit buildings to the Timbercrest campus. A beauty parlor, barbershop, and a branch office of the Indiana Lawrence Bank also opened at the complex during the mid-1980s.