

Here is the drawing I promised you of the Milwaukee County Asylum. I added the names of the buildings and am adding a brief explanation about them. The East Building housed female ambulatory patients. The wards were all open. The Main Building was the central administrative building with 2 female and 2 male admission wards. It also contained a large patient dining room. The Social Service Offices were in this building before it was torn down and we relocated into the West Annex. The West Building was a locked all male building. The West Annex was a three floor all male unlocked building. The attic was the sleeping area with beds lined up one after another... The basement was a lounge and smoking area. During this era the Medical Director lived on the grounds. One of them, Dr Depner, committed suicide hereby shooting himself. The pond was not put in for esthetic purposes but was to be used for fighting fires if such an event occurred. It was used as a swimming pool however mostly by student nurses from the neighboring nurse's residence. You may keep this picture. I have a copy. The old buildings, many of which are now long gone would have had many stories to tell. Thanks for your help on my mother's case. I will call you in July and get the papers together which you suggested. In the meantime, take care of the old West Annex, which I understand was originally intended and used for as a barn. But that's another story.

Sincerely,

Down on the farm

Or

Watching tax dollars at work and play

(But mostly at play)

By

T.R. Anthony

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End

Chapter 1

I began working for Milwaukee County in the state of Wisconsin in 1986. I was referred to Milwaukee County by the Department of vocational rehabilitation. I was injured in a car accident several years earlier and had applied for disability through SSA, but they denied it and instead referred me to the DVR. The counselor at DVR encouraged me to apply for a job with Milwaukee County, which I did. However, in a telephone conversation, the nice man from Milwaukee County told me that I was not eligible for his program if I could take the bus. I didn't try to make sense of what he said; I simply relayed this story back to the counselor at the DVR. He promptly got on the phone, and I guess he yelled at the guy from Milwaukee County who called me again and said I think you do qualify for my program after all. He had me come down for an interview, which I attended, and he proceeded to ask me questions about my experience and education.

At that time, I was working for the state of Wisconsin Department of revenue. I enjoyed that very much. My supervisors and coworkers seemed to enjoy my company. My supervisors encouraged me to apply to work there through the civil service system, but I was a little hesitant. Several people warned me that once hired, a person could get assigned to virtually anywhere in the state. I wasn't sure about following that route, so I waited for a notice from Milwaukee County. I received one not long after interviewing with the nice man from Milwaukee County.

I got a letter from a supervisor named Jack. He worked at the Department of Social Services. His letter told me that my name was on an eligibility list for the position of account clerk I. I was delighted to hear from him as my job with the state of Wisconsin was only temporary part-time. The post with Milwaukee County was full time with benefits. I proceeded to make an appointment with Jack at his office on 12th and Vliet St.

The building on 12th and Vliet was a former department store that was purchased by Milwaukee County some 25 years earlier. No remodeling or updating had ever taken place; the Department of Social Services simply moved in and set up operations. Before that, the department was squeezed in at the Milwaukee County Courthouse. Jack's office was in the basement of the building. The building was in the middle of the ghetto, a high crime area with security guards posted throughout the building, and even in the parking lots. The kind of neighborhood where employees walked no farther than they could see the building. The type of area where someone might push a dead naked woman from a car into the street. That happened right across from the building one day during work hours. It was the kind of area where someone might stand outside on his front porch and fire his rifle into the air to scare away pedestrians. That happened one day when I was outside during a smoke break. It did clear out the parking lot pretty quickly, though. If you did walk more than a block away from the building, you were in a kind of criminal, no man's land, and anything was possible.

The interview date came, and I went, and I met with Jack, whose last name I will not say. He doesn't work there any longer as he retired some time ago, but other people that I talk about might still work there, so I think it's prudent not to use last names. Jack was there with a woman whose name was Vera. I didn't know what she was doing there as she just stared at me blankly and then mumbled a few things to Jack. After a brief interview, I left, and then not long may be several days after, Jack offered me a position. I was so delighted I immediately accepted. I went to work at my state job and gleefully told them that I was quitting to go work for Milwaukee County.

Well, my supervisors were not happy; they were quite upset that I was leaving because they wanted me to apply to work for the state. I told them this was a sure opportunity. I couldn't understand why they were so upset that I was leaving. They told me that I was wasting my time to go work for Milwaukee County. In retrospect, I realize they were right. I should have stayed, but how could I have known. It was an opportunity, I thought, and it had excellent benefits, so I gave my two weeks' notice.

Two weeks went by, and it came time to report for my new job on 12th and Vliet. It was February, and it was a cold, dark, cloudy, and miserable rainy day. The building was so drab; it looked so depressing, especially from a distance. I hadn't noticed before. As I drove up, I saw the windows were boarded up, probably because of the riots back in the 1960s. The parking lot had a high fence and guard towers. I wondered if I should just turn around and go back to work for the state. I thought about that, but in the end, I decided I had to go with a sure thing, so I parked and went inside.

My office was in the basement, as was Jack's office. I reported to the office where I worked to discover that the woman at the interview, Vera was the supervisor. The name of the section/department I was to work in was called Financial Resources. Jack was the real supervisor, but he was getting old and didn't want to supervise anymore. Jack had worked for Milwaukee County for some 35 years already and was waiting to get out. He was passing on his duties to whoever would take them, and Vera was one of those people. So began a quite peculiar relationship as I would find out in the weeks and months ahead. Vera was a fairly miserable, mean, flatulent little woman who just didn't seem to get as much out of life as she had hoped. She was married and had children, and she was always willing to engage me in conversations about her family, but she would never offer me any advice on how to do my work.

Vera showed me my desk, and I sat down. The first thing I noticed was that there was a pile of paper about 6 inches thick across the top of my new desk. I had no idea what to do with it. Vera brought me a stack of manuals and said, 'I don't know anything about your job' and walked away. I had no idea what to do, so I sat at the desk and smoked cigarettes. Vera's desk was right next to mine, so I had to deal with her, but she wouldn't tell me how to do anything. She was willing to engage in conversation as long as it had nothing to do with work. Her desk also was piled up with paper, but even more, like a snowball fort. It was in a semi-circle. I guess it was a shield for some imaginary enemy. 'Just because your paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.' Well, Vera was paranoid, and they were out to get her. Two other women that didn't seem to know any more than I did also worked in the department. Vera didn't seem to like them either.

So, the days went by, and I drank coffee and smoked cigarettes at my desk as it was allowed at the time. Vera kept complaining to Jack that she was not going to train me even though she was supposed to. As it turned out, there was a lot of drama with the previous person who had my position, and his name was Roger. Vera loved Roger, but he left to get promoted. Vera was so sad that he left, but he was gone, and she didn't want me, she wanted Roger.

Finally, Jack realized that he would have to get someone to show me what to do, so he contacted the training supervisors for welfare caseworkers and decided I should go to training. I would receive training as a caseworker that didn't have a lot to do with my job, but nobody seemed to know what else to do, and Vera wasn't going to budge. Over time I began to realize that nobody else understood what Vera did either. She wouldn't tell anybody anything about anything. She would sit at her desk and work on 'statements of assistance.'

I was sent away for training that went on for several weeks. I was glad to get it, but as I was to discover over time, job training was mostly self-taught. All of Milwaukee County operated this way as far as I could tell. People learned their job as they went along. The positions are usually rather unique, so there isn't an equivalent in the private sector or anywhere else. People had to learn their jobs without any assistance whatsoever. I did get one bit of news that made my day. One of the training supervisors, Pat, had me complete a mock welfare application and submit it for review. I did as instructed, and Pat told me afterward that the application I completed went through the system without any errors

detected. He said that was the only time he had witnessed such an event. He was so impressed he told Jack.

The basement of the 12th and Vliet building contained caseworkers and office workers and Sheriff's deputies. I eventually discovered that my job was to work on welfare fraud cases. The sheriffs would bring welfare fraud cases, and it was up to me to try to figure out how much money people owed. Vera's job was to get notified by a department called the Securities Division who would ask her to research old cases. She would check to see if somebody owed money from early welfare programs that were in operation dating back to the 1920s. She would go through old dusty, musty, paper folders, and she would dig out notices and figure out how much money people owed.

After a person had passed away, a worker from the Securities Division would send that person's name to Vera. Vera would check to see if that person owed any money, then she would write a statement and send it to the securities division. The Securities Division would send the report to the person's estate. It often didn't go over very well for families to find out that their parents or relatives were on welfare during the Great Depression, but that's what the job entailed. The problem was, there was no adjustment for inflation, so if somebody received five dollars' worth of assistance back in 1932, for instance, they were billed for that exact amount even 50 years later. Vera would frequently spend a week or more on individual cases, going through old records. She got paid about \$10 an hour plus benefits. Vera might spend a week, and Milwaukee County would pay her over \$400 in wages plus benefits for her to prepare a statement saying someone owed maybe

\$25 from 50 years earlier. There wasn't a lot of logic to Vera's job. I think that was the reason why she was so secretive as it gave her job security.

The job that I had entailed going through welfare records and trying to figure out how much money people owed—most of the cases related to unreported wages. People would not tell their caseworkers that they were working, and eventually, they would get caught, usually, sometimes. Then the cases would find a way to the sheriff's fraud squad, and then they would send the case to me, and I would try to figure out how much money they owed. Since I was brand-new on the job, it was kind of a guess at first to figure out how much money people owed.

Most of the cases that the sheriffs gave me were for clients that weren't eligible for any assistance anyways. It meant that they had to pay all the money back to the County. But some people had to go to court sometimes and sometimes they went to prison for welfare fraud. There were several cases where I had to figure the amount owed to determine the client's prison sentence by the judge and district attorney. Situations like that made me a bit nervous since I was usually figuring out things as I went along.

The two coworkers I had were in the same situation as me. Carol and Regina were their names, and they never seemed to understand what it was that they were supposed to do. Vera wouldn't tell them any more than me, although Vera did complain about both of them to me for some reason. Both Carol and Regina did have colorful histories. Carol was a former suburban mother whose father was involved in some kind of shady

dealings, which required the family to have an armed bodyguard at all times when she was a child. Eventually, Carol married a man who became very successful in business and then dumped her and the kids. That was how Carol ended up working for Milwaukee County. Regina was also a divorced mother, and she had a drug-dealing brother nicknamed “king tut” who had a penchant for torturing his rivals.

Across the room from us were a group called the home visitors. They would spend their days driving around the county, visiting people who couldn't come into the office. They were older, more experienced workers who put their eccentricities on display for us nearly every day. Behind my desk was a room that had a sink that we used occasionally that would give us a surprise one summer. Most of our workspace contained file cabinets that Vera had filled up with useless records. I discovered over time that Vera was a little fountain of knowledge when she was in a good mood.

Vera claimed that the people who were running the Department of Social Services weren't using money from title programs for proper purposes. Title programs refer to things like Medicare, which is title 18 and Medicaid, which is title 19. She claimed, among other things, that title money went to buy Milwaukee Bucks' basketball tickets. There were entries on a computer printout showing the purchases of Bucks basketball tickets. She also made an interesting claim about the General Assistance program, which no longer exists. The program required people to work at a recycling company. Vera claimed that the county executive and at least one county supervisor, and I think, one of the county department heads owned the company in secret.

She claimed that the General Assistance program would force these people to work at the recycling company, but then the owners of the company got to keep the money that was generated by the labor from the clients. The money didn't go back to Milwaukee County; it went to the people who owned the company, which was the county executive and his friends. She also claimed that they changed the name of the company, which was a corporation every year. Vera knew that because she said she went to the library every year to look at the list of corporations in Wisconsin. She had a list of corporation names that were used over the years and even showed it to me. Vera claimed they did this to throw off anyone that might try to investigate like a newspaper or TV station. She claimed that these guys were getting rich off of that General Assistance program because they were getting free labor for recycling, and then they got to keep the money.

Vera knew all kinds of neat little tidbits like that. Sometimes I wondered if that was the reason why she got stuck in the job she had. Vera was a supervisor, but at the lowest pay range possible. Maybe the reason why she got stuck in the basement was nobody liked her because she spent her days investigating people for no apparent reason. Hardly anyone seemed to like Vera, and it showed.

Adjacent to our workspace separated by a temporary wall was the inactive records department. Whenever Vera or I would request old records from this department, we would have to wait as long as three days because Vera didn't get along with the supervisor. Vera claimed it had to do with race as at least one of the employees in that

department wanted to work in Vera's department, but Vera and Jack wouldn't let them. Unqualified Vera claimed.

Another department that caused us problems was a computer department that did all of the data entry. This department provided us with printouts of benefits paid to clients, which we needed to prepare our statements. One of those people wanted to work in Vera's department as well but didn't get hired. Not qualified again, Vera said. The result was that when we asked for printouts of benefits, we would have to wait up to a week. It was due to the data entry operator not liking us Vera claimed. There was nothing we could do about it. Vera claimed it all had to do with race because the people not hired were a minority and were quick to file grievances.

I think the most disgusting part of my job was working on cases from the old-age assistance program. It was a side job that Vera dumped on me. The old-age assistance program was in operation in Milwaukee County up until about the 1950s. By the 1960s, there were programs like Social Security and SSI to fill the void. How the old-age assistance program generally worked was if someone was old or disabled and they could not provide for themselves any longer, they would apply to Milwaukee County. The caseworker would interview the person and figure out how much money they needed, but then they would also force the person to give up something of sentimental and real value.

The idea was to force someone to give up some token items to ensure they paid back the assistance they received. Gold watches, for instance, or a pearl necklace or maybe a diamond wedding ring or ivory comb set or something along those lines—all kinds of really unique family heirloom type items. People had to give these up to the caseworker to qualify for the program. The caseworker would make a note of the object taken from the client and then turn the item over to the Securities Division. The Securities Division had a large safe out at the county grounds where they stored all of these items.

The problem that developed over time was no one knew what to do with the items. The old-age assistance clients had long since passed away. Milwaukee County didn't want to broadcast the fact it had forced these people to give up these items of value. It was, by any measure, a tacky thing to do. I do recall one case in particular that Vera gave me. The person was born when Abraham Lincoln was president and had died in the 1950s before I was even born. Unfortunately for him, he resided in Milwaukee County in his time of need. His case then sat for more than 30 years after he died before anyone (me) worked on it.

Vera's job and mine sometimes were to go through these old-age assistance files and find out how much money people owed to Milwaukee County. That value of the item and the amount owed were entered in a county ledger somewhere, and the file or account was then closed. Vera claimed the money made from the sale of the items disappeared. I do wonder from time to time what happened to all of the items in that safe. It was supposedly

quite a large safe, according to Vera, and I'm sure that whatever was in there was worth quite the fortune for someone.

The saddest part about that particular program was that the caseworkers of the day had to come up with a synopsis of the person's life and put it into writing: so much grief and anguish and sorrow condensed onto a county-issued index card. The caseworker would write a summary of the person's life. Each one would describe in such concise and efficient detail how things had taken such terrible turns for people, how they had lost so much, and ruined by some cruel twist of fate like the economy or ill health.

It was quite tragic reading through the cards because most of the people lost everything, and it all happened at the same time during the Great Depression. There were thousands of these summary cards filling up the file cabinets, all containing variations of the same story. People just kept trying to hang on, but whatever they did, it was never enough.

They weren't able to regain any of their wealth or their bank accounts or their homes, and they ended up living in rooming houses and such. It's quite sad to think of what an emotional toll it was to lose everything and then have to apply for assistance.

Besides the indignity of applying for welfare, they had to give up something of value to the caseworker. Perhaps it was the last thing of value that they had in their possession.

They were supposed to get back at some point the item they had given to the

caseworker. But the money was rarely if ever never paid back, and eventually, the program closed out as the Social Security and SSI programs took over. There were thousands of these unresolved cases left over from the old-age assistance program. I don't know what became of them.

As the days and weeks went by, I began to settle into a routine. I even ventured outside from time to time, but I learned not to walk too far away from the building. It was in the middle of a high crime area. I also had to learn to watch where I walked around the building. I was required to walk the facility to obtain paperwork and documents.

However, I discovered through Vera that many minorities in the building were watching me. Many of the minorities that worked in the building did not like me for whatever reason. Vera claimed it had to do with race.

About the time that I started, another young white guy also started who was about my age. His hiring was covered in the local newspaper at the time because it was kind of scandalous. The guy's father was a Milwaukee County supervisor, and this county supervisor had approached one of the managers in the Department of Social Services and asked him to get his son a job which the manager did. The county supervisor's son got a temporary position in the photo ID booth on the first floor of the building.

Unfortunately for him, that put him in contact with the public, which meant he had to deal with mostly minorities who didn't like white people. I was cautioned by several white people who came to our department for the record's research to watch out. The problem was the minorities in the department couldn't tell us apart. They couldn't tell

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