

Old law called for sterilization of 'feebleminded' residents

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The photos and documents at the Indiana State Archives tell how the state decided long ago to save money by sterilizing people deemed undesirable.

Indiana was one of many states to enact laws that sought to stop the insane and feebleminded from having children. The law stayed on Indiana's books for 47 years.

State archivist Bob Horton discovered the five musty boxes four years ago.

"Indiana in the late 1800s and early 1900s was in a way leading the world in its philanthropical ideas," Horton said.

Those ideas were based on eugenics, or breeding to improve the human race. Legislators translated those ideas into laws that targeted at least 56,000 of the state's residents for involuntary sterilization.

A lack of funds prevented Indiana from carrying out the policy in full, though at least 2,000 were sterilized in state institutions.

The Committee on Mental Defectives — eight lawmakers and doc-

Eugenics ideas lead to legislation to end procreation of undesirables

tors appointed by Gov. Samuel Ralston — in 1915 began classifying Indiana's residents to show that epileptics, the feebleminded and the insane were the root cause of poverty, degeneracy and crime.

A half dozen employees of the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., fanned out to 31 counties. They looked for "undesirable" families that continued to expand and cost the state money. They found them by asking doctors, judges and teachers for names of people who received public aid. They also talked to patients in state homes and asylums and tracked down their families.

Dr. Hugh Hendrie, chairman of the psychiatry department at Indiana University School of Medicine, notes the survey concentrated only on families who were poor or had a history of mental deficiency.

One way the committee mea-

sured feeblemindedness was by administering a version of the Stanford-Binet IQ test.

The first three parts tested verbal, logical and mathematical skills. But Hendrie said those tests measure not intelligence but how much people learn in school.

The fourth part of the test attempted to measure moral judgment.

"You have to be a sophisticated person to be able to make those judgments," Hendrie said.

Armed with data from the county surveys, the committee estimated that Indiana had 56,000 mental defectives.

They reasoned that 20 percent were epileptic or insane. The other 44,800 they considered feebleminded, a classification that ranged from mildly retarded to socially deviant because of alcohol abuse or sexual immorality.

"Many of these shiftless, feeble-

minded folks can barely eke out an existence for themselves, but that does not deter them from marrying and propagating their kind, thus adding to the burden of the state," the committee wrote in its 1918 report.

They suggested a cost-effective solution: A farm colony where such people could be put to work. With a \$300,000 grant from the General Assembly, the Indiana Farm Colony for the Feebleminded opened in Butlerville in 1919. Men farmed and worked in a stone quarry. Women sewed and did laundry.

In 1927, the General Assembly went further. It passed Senate Bill 188 "to prevent the procreation of mental defectives, idiots, imbeciles, morons, epileptics and the incurably insane."

The law compelled institutions to sterilize inmates for whom procreation was deemed inadvisable.

According to Dr. Eugene Roach, an Anderson physician who lobbied for the law's 1974 repeal, while the law was in place many parents of mentally retarded children had their children sterilized.