

Mendocino State Hospital: Where Mysteries Abound

Jasmin Blanc

The Mendocino State Asylum for the Insane, later named the Mendocino State Hospital, was the birth place of many ominous tales surrounding not only the mentally ill but also the criminally insane, in addition to a slew of unexplained deaths, rumored experiments, dramatic escapes and tragic suicides. A host of mysteries surrounds the Mendocino State Hospital.

The Mendocino State Asylum for the Insane was established in 1889. Programs offered at the site over time included treatment for the criminally insane, alcohol and drug abuse rehabilitation, and a psychiatric residency program, according to state archives (OAC).

The first patients, all male, were initially transferred from state mental institutions in Stockton and Napa but the Hospital eventually began accepting Female patients in 1894. Following the stock market crash in the late 1920s, patient population increased rapidly, hitting a high in 1955 at over 3,000 patients and 700 employees (OAC).

In February 1905, the first appointed Medical Superintendent Dr. Edward Warren King composed a letter to the Honorable W. D. L. Held in Sacramento imploring him to turn his attention to the matter of a proposed bill that, if passed, would transform the Hospital from the treatment of mental disease, to a Hospital for the treatment of the insane criminals and convicts of the state.

King's concern was that merging these "unfortunates" with the criminally insane and convicts would be a "dastardly outrage" (MCHS). King believed that combining and cohabitating the mentally ill with criminals would not only infuriate the friends and family of mentally ill patients but the combination would interfere with the recovery of said patients (ARCHIVES). It is curious to see the varied degrees of what was considered mentally ill in the early 1900s and how little we have come to gaining better understanding over the course of nearly 100 years. Ultimately, the bill was passed and the stage was set for some of the most outrageous, fantastic and scandalous cases and stories in the history of Mendocino County.

One case was that of the infamous Erwin Walker — few dared call him "Machine Gun" to his face — who was known for sitting on a gray wooden bench in a far corner of the criminal ward's exercise yard, with his back against the cement wall of a ward building, the visor of a high-crowned denim cap shadowing his narrow, pale face. Walker was invariably alone, and in- variably reading, usually a chemistry textbook. He'd look up occasionally from his book to ad- just his thick horn-rimmed glasses and glance contemptuously down the bench (Meister).

Some of the other patients in the yard paced up and down with what would have been military precision save for the odd flapping of their heavy work shoes and occasional need to hitch up their denim pants. They were denied the potential weapons of shoe laces and belts.

He was the hero-villain of countless stories passed around the yard, many stemming

from a popular 1948 semi-documentary feature film, “He Walked by Night,” which was loosely based on Walker’s crime spree that began in 1945. He had been a brilliant student at the California Institute of Technology, a radio dispatcher for the police department in his native Glendale and a World War II veteran.

But Walker returned from overseas duty deeply disturbed. So disturbed, in fact, that while still on active duty, he stole six submachine guns and a dozen pistols from an Army warehouse in Los Angeles and set out on a spree of more than a dozen holdups and burglaries — the purpose was to raise money, Walker said, for construction of a “death ray machine” that some- how would make another war impossible.

Following a tumultuous trial where he was found sane, placed on Death Row, then reevaluated and determined insane impending his own death, Walker’s execution was postponed indefinitely. Bound in chains he was once again taken before a jury that declared him insane, and was then committed to the state hospital on Talmage.

He spent 12 years at MSH and beyond that in other prison hospitals, during the course of which Walker underwent electroshock therapy and other treatments designed to make him fit for execution. Through a series of legal loopholes and filing petitions in several counties, he was granted parole in 1974 and released from Vacaville and lived out the rest of his days as a chemist.

The topic of various bizarre treatments, unusual therapies, and clandestine experiments are littered throughout the hospital’s history. There are some who believe that the isolated hospital site was specifically chosen as to keep classified experiments somewhat covert (Wellerstein).

Massive doses of LSD were given to alcoholic patients as part of what was thought to be mind-control experiments. Involuntary sterilizations were administered in a campaign to eliminate “feeble-mindedness,” poverty, “lunacy,” crime and other conditions considered to be social problems. Among these claims, whether they be legitimately medical with scientific backing or abhorrently true as some conspiracy theorists would maintain, some of the most shocking stories surround the psychiatric attendants. A college baseball player employed during a summer work program gives some insight as to what it was like being a technician at MSH.

In a fortress-like, supposedly escape-proof structure that was set apart from the rest of the hospital, escorts led employees and visitors alike into Ward 12, first by opening a heavy iron gate in a corner of a high electrified fence topped with barbed wire, then, 50 yards away, passed through a tall wooden door three inches thick.

The dirty apple green walls and ceiling engulfed all who entered. The heavy smell of disinfectant was everywhere. Up on the second floor, barred cells lined halls that reached as far as the eye could see. On the first floor, men were kept behind locked wooden doors, but only at night. There was the constant sound of shuffling as men paced the corridors.

The uniformed psychiatric technicians — white dress shirts, white duck pants, black

bow ties — stood distinctively apart from the patients. The patients wore blue — blue denim shirts, blue denim jeans, even slippers made in part of denim.

Men who might be robots walked the exercise yard in short, halting steps, staring straight ahead in silence. They were lobotomy patients, men who had raged in their cells, shouting and kicking walls, until “they cut into their brains to calm ‘em down” (Topix). Their faces were drained of color, and there were black circles like smears of charcoal beneath their sunken eyes.

Technicians were not allowed to carry weapons, but were allowed blackjacks, or leather saps filled with buckshot, that were made by a local shoe repairman. For only five dollars, one could knock one of the, “Animals cold with one hit!” as one technician used to exclaim. These psychiatric attendants were essentially guards, regardless of their job title, and were put in charge of controlling the ward by administrators who made it clear that they preferred patients to be as docile as possible.

What little treatment psychiatrists and their aides did give seemed to be aimed almost entirely at keeping the patients under control rather than curing them. There were the lobotomies, the dispensing of much medication also designed to calm, and extensive use of shock therapy, that frightening and highly questionable procedure which sends jolts of supposedly healing electricity through the brain. With virtually no medical training, technicians assisted in pressing electrodes against the subject patients’ temples, holding them down as they flailed about in great and obvious pain.

Many technicians happily accepted their role as enforcers, keeping the “animals” in line by treating them as prisoners rather than patients, and the hospital’s administrators seemed unconcerned that some of their employees thought it enjoyable to use a blackjack to keep “inmates” under control (Topix).

These atrocities came to a halt after several psychiatric technicians were formally charged with brutality on the basis of evidence provided by agents from the State Department of Justice who had posed as technicians. One such charge became known among locals as “The Case of the Talking Reindeer,” which was one the most outlandish cases to take place in the Mendocino Courthouse; not for the case itself that tragically resulted in the death of an elderly patient in 1950 in which the attendant went to trial for murder, but for the spectacle that transpired in the court room as the two key witnesses were patients at MSH.

The opening scene in what was to result in California’s weirdest law case at the time took place in the early morning hours of September 20, 1950 within the gloomy confines of the Hospital.

Thomas Simmons was a 70-year-old patient at the institution and had been described by Dr. Olga Miller — the physician in charge of his ward — as a “stooped old man, hardly able to lift his feet off the floor, who wandered aimlessly about the ward as if he were looking for some- thing.” Simmons was a little old man weighing 138 pounds, with gray eyes and white hair. He arrived at MSH only three weeks before his vicious death.

The attendant being charged with manslaughter for the death of Simmons was 43-year-old Samuel A. Leech, a large man with graying hair and steel-rimmed glasses. He was an experienced mental institution attendant or, in the vernacular, a “bughouser.” He was married, had two children and made his home in the little town of Redwood Valley 10 miles north of Ukiah. When questioned, Leech included in his testimony:

I pushed him in the [chair] and he fell backward on the tile floor. Simmons did this several times and each time I pushed him and he fell on the floor. The patient made me pretty angry and I probably pushed him down pretty hard. Simmons did not have a weapon of any kind nor did I (MCHS).

Dr. Max Frank, the hospital surgeon who performed the autopsy on Simmons’ body testified that besides the seven broken ribs, the patient had sustained a 3 1/2-inch wound on the left lobe of the liver, and that the lower surface of the liver showed an open, crater-like wound with torn edges the size of a child’s palm.

At the request of the District Attorney’s office, a second autopsy had been performed by Dr. J.B. Massengill. “Just falling to the floor, or over a chair or bed, wouldn’t produce such an injury to the liver,” Dr. Massengill stated.

The setting for the legal drama that followed was the newly completed county courthouse in Ukiah. The People vs. Samuel Leech was the first case to be heard in the new court room.

The State called the two witnesses who had purportedly seen the fight. They were William Wilkes and Edward Jones, mental patients at the hospital. It had been determined that both patients were capable of the normal ability to recall and relate, meaning that they were fit to testify. It was at this point that the trial entered into the realm of the fantastic.

Wilkes, as a man who suffered from delusions of grandeur, claimed to have seen both Leech and Dink Beaver, another attendant, kick the old man. He said that all the attendants carried blackjacks and clubs and that they, “Beat up all the patients all the time” (MCHS).

The second to take the stand was Edward Jones, a normally jovial and smiling man of color who for reasons of his own preferred to be addressed at all times by the name “Alice.” He testified that he saw Leech drag Simmons from a side room to the ward, then go on to kick and “stomp” on the old man as he lay on the floor. Every time he attempted to describe the condition of Simmons before his death a shudder went through his body and he covered his face with his hands. To the jury, there was little doubt that he had seen something horrifying. It was not long before Jones’s credibility as a witness became shaken.

Jones told the jury that he was Alice, a cousin of Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer. Jones continued to gleefully identify characters portrayed in a milk advertisement as his mother and father. When the crowded court room broke into laughter at his testimony, Jones laughed too. Jones proved to be a vulnerable witness and repeatedly contradicted himself on small matters and became confused as to details.

However, Jones was adamant on the subject of what he had seen on the morning of Sept. 20. "I know what I see with my eyes," he said over and over (MCHS). When asked finally, point-blank by the defense, "Are you absolutely sure you saw what you described?" Jones answered equally point-blank. "Yes," he said, "just as sure as I'm sitting her as a reindeer" (MCHS).

During the course of the trial, Leech had maintained a stoic attitude, hardly ever changing expression except on the occasions that he nodded or winked to friends in the courtroom. "It was," said Leech, speaking of the ward, "a frequent occurrence for patients to fight and injure each other." He continued that the incident with Simmons was "just routine on the ward, not a fight" (MCHS).

After hours of deliberation, the jury was hopelessly deadlocked and in the end Leech went free. Both he and Dink Beaver resigned from their positions at the hospital. The only non-controversial fact the trial had determined was that Thomas Simmons was savagely and brutally beaten which conclusively resulted in his death. Moreover, the only lasting impression made throughout the trial was one of that of Edward Jones — the object of ridicule and laughter throughout the proceedings.

However, perplexing this case was, there were certainly cases of legitimate patient violence and on many accounts, successful escapes.

In December of 1913, two attendants and a trustee were viciously beaten by three inmates plotting their escape. On a stormy Friday evening, Robert McIntosh, who had been committed from San Quentin, Frank Peoples, a deserter from the marines, who had been committed from the naval prison, and Bert Zavits, a dangerous lunatic from the coast made their attack.

McIntosh obtained possession of an iron bar from one of the beds in the dormitory. On the evening of the break he waited until two of the attendants on the ward were at supper and then slipped up behind Walter Droge and struck him over the head with the bar, which he had concealed in his sleeve. Droge went down and Bob Gilley ran up to take a hand in the brawl. While he was wrestling with McIntosh for the possession of the bar Peoples seized Gilley from behind and McIntosh thereupon dealt him a heavy blow. Gilley ran into the lavatory and attempted to hold the door, but Davits forced it open and dragged him out and McIntosh beat him into insensibility. Meanwhile, a man simply identified as "Getz" had gone to the aid of Droge and Gilley but he was no match for the three patients and McIntosh soon had him stretched out insensible with the other two victims. The three patients then took the keys of the ward and slipped out of the building by a rear stairway.

The alarm was given by a patient and a search was made in the vicinity of the hospital but as the night was dark and stormy no trace could be found of the escaped men. All were shoeless, with only stockings on their feet and had little clothing and as the night was inclement it was thought that they could not get very far. Sure enough, all were located the following day (MCHS).

In 1962, California's mental hospitals were immortalized by Ken Kesey in his first book, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. By the end of that decade, a reform movement was gaining strength, arguing against large-scale institutionalization of the mentally ill in favor of community-based housing and treatment. By then, however, the number of mental patients had already declined dramatically from its peak in the mid-1950s, when the first effective psychiatric drug, Thorazine, became widely available. In the early 1970s, then-California Governor Ronald Reagan closed many of the state's mental hospitals, including Mendocino State Hospital (Moon).

In January of 1972, Bob Tuttle, the president of Chapter 22 of California State Employees Association (CSEA), launched a probe after it was determined that the Department of Mental Hygiene planned to close the formidable hospital following the abuse claims from ex-patients. The 18-page report claimed the standards of care and treatment for mental patients released from MSH and or other state hospitals have slid back to the "dark ages". The charges claimed that California's mentally ill were not receiving adequate care under the Reagan administration (MCHS).

In a report written by Dr. R. A. Cushman, M.D. the Medical Superintendent in 1937, Cushman radically claims that the hospital was "being very well conducted." The questionable assertion carries on:

There is a spirit of harmony, cooperation and a sense of responsibility on the part of each employee that is very praiseworthy. The people of Mendocino County should be very proud of the fact that they have an institution of this magnitude and character located here which has become a credit to this locality and which also affords a source of great financial support to the to the industrial and commercial life of the community (MCHS).

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