

SEVEN DAYS IN THE MADHOUSE

Haunted by Kankakee Fire Hazards

The ever-increasing problem of caring for the unfortunate insane as wards of the state of Illinois is little known to the public. To ascertain conditions, Frank Smith, TIMES reporter, former college football player and life guard who tips the scale at 200 pounds, was asked to do this series of articles. In addition to interviewing officials and other persons interested in the problem, he undertook to spend a week as an inmate of the state hospital at Kankakee.

The story of his experiences and the statistics and other data he has secured should prove of interest to every citizen in the state as it is unfolded day by day during the next few weeks in the DAILY TIMES.

—THE EDITORS.

By Frank Smith

(Copyright, 1935, by Times Publishing Corp. Reproduction in whole or in part prohibited.)

A haunting specter of angry flames lashing through board-floored halls, sweeping up rickety stairways to block off escape for hundreds of panicky wards of the state of Illinois harassed me during many wakeful nights at Kankakee Hospital for the Insane.

The ever-present danger of fire is a constant worry to attendants at the asylum, to the fire department of the city of Kankakee and to the state fire marshal's office in Springfield, which for years has attempted to force compliance with safety regulations.

After regaining my clothes, all carefully stenciled with my pseudonym "John C. Ford," I was allowed to wander at will within the confines of my prison walls.

A-1, South, the receiving ward in which I lived, occupies the first floor of a three-story gray stone structure—the south and men's wing of the Administration building. Each floor houses a ward—A-1, A-2 and A-3.

Neither Building Has Fire Escape

The north wing, an identical building, has three wards for women. About 40 patients are kept in each ward. Neither of these buildings has a fire escape, although hospital officials were ordered to erect one on each building years ago.

The squeaky board flooring of the vast hallway in A-1, stretching at least 150 feet, first attracted my attention to the fire danger. I looked about for possible exits. Stout prison bars block escape at every window.

At either end of the hall, wooden doors lead outside. But they are always locked. The north door opens into a passage to the main offices. Outside this door a wooden stairway leading to the upper wards offers a dangerous opportunity for draft-fed flames.

The south door opens into the dining room, where another locked door leads into a passage to the hydro department in the "B" building.

"What," I asked Max Savoy, one of A-1's attendants, "what in heaven's name would you do in case of a fire?"

"We'd do our damndest, Ford," he replied. "We'd have to depend on some of you half-sane guys to help us out with these other nuts."

Lives in Hands of Attendants

One of the first duties impressed on new attendants, he told me, is the necessity for speed in opening doors and herding out their charges in an emergency.

At least two attendants are always on duty in the ward. These are the keepers of the keys, upon whose shoulders rests the safety of thousands of inmates.

Carelessness or any lack of vigilance on their part would be little short of a disaster. Locked doors and barred windows too much depends on the human element.

This danger registered deeply on my mind one night about bedtime. I was talking to my friend, Mr. Houdini, escape artist who had promised to get me a "master key" opening any door in the institution.

The bell at the outer dining room door rang sharply. Some attendant, nurse or parole patient checking in before the 9 o'clock deadline was seeking entrance.

One of the two attendants on duty cut short his conversation on the house phone and hurried to the din-

(Continued on page 4, col. 4)

7 DAYS IN THE MADHOUSE

INVESTIGATOR HAUNTED BY FIRE HAZARD

(Continued from page 3)

ing room door. He reached for his keys in a trousers pocket. His hand came out empty. He groped about his clothing. No keys. The bell rang again.

Hurrying up the hall the attendant called for his partner, busy in some distant bedroom. Minutes dragged, punctuated by repeated bell ringing.

A Human Error Possible Tragedy

At length the two attendants reappeared. No. 1 explaining to No. 2 that he must have forgotten to transfer his keys from his other pants.

Just a simple case of human forgetfulness. But such precious moments wasted in an emergency might easily turn A-1 into a raging crematory.

Near the middle of the hallway hangs a single fire extinguisher. Across from the dining room at the south end a wall rack holds six pails of water. This perhaps is a concession to the demands of a state fire marshal who more than a year ago found only one extinguisher on a floor, although orders had been given four years before to equip each floor with six extinguishers.

At that time, in May, 1930, the inspector was appalled at the fire-trap condition of the asylum. In his report to the state department of insurance he pointed out hazards that should be eliminated and recommended improvements to lessen the danger of a holocaust.

Fire escapes were to be erected on the west side of the two wing buildings. Windows were to be lowered to floor-level and some of them provided with out-swinging doors. An escape system was to be provided for the first floor wards, where there is a 10-foot drop from window to ground.

Fire Marshal's Orders Unheeded

A 500-gallon automobile fire pumper was recommended, since the meager apparatus of the institution was hand-drawn and distances are so great that attendants would be exhausted after a long run. All fire hydrants were to be connected with river water to provide a necessary fire-fighting supply, and a special pump was to be installed to cope with any emergency.

Four years later, in February, 1934, another deputy state fire marshal made a recheck on the 1930 report.

He discovered that none of these recommendations had been heeded. The water supply was still inadequate. Corrosion of pipes and mains caused by hard well water was so great that two-inch pipes were found to have openings of less than half an inch. Back in 1930 the inspector had been assured that a water treatment plant would be installed to remedy this condition. Five years later there is no treatment plant.

Fire escapes were still wanting. One or two extinguishers were found in buildings where six or eight had been ordered. Electric wiring was reported in dangerous condition.

DAILY TIMES

Daily Except Saturday

SUNDAY TIMES

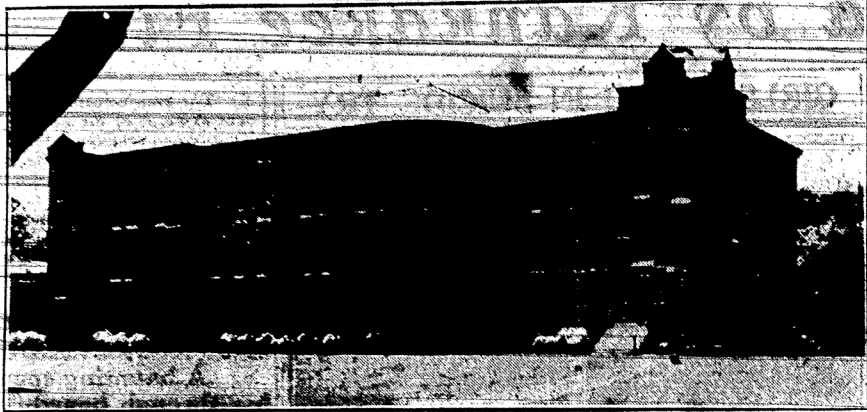
Published by Times Publishing Corporation, 311 W. Wacker Dr., Chicago, Ill. B. S. Thomson, Publisher; Richard F. Fineman, Editor; Louis Ruppel, Managing Editor.

Subscription rates: Outside Chicago, in Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, \$3.00 per year, daily only, 25¢ daily and Sunday, 40¢ Sunday only.

Published by Times Publishing Corporation, 311 W. Wacker Dr., Chicago, Ill. B. S. Thomson, Publisher; Richard F. Fineman, Editor; Louis Ruppel, Managing Editor.

Subscription rates: Outside Chicago, in Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, \$3.00 per year, daily only, 25¢ daily and Sunday, 40¢ Sunday only.

NO FIRE ESCAPE ON WOMEN'S WARD AT KANKAKEE



Women inmates of state hospital for insane at Kankakee are housed in the B-North ward. Note absence of fire escapes.

many places. Fire-conscious, I seized on every opportunity to observe conditions throughout the institution during the seven days I spent there as an inmate. As far as I could see, they have not yet got around to acting on the fire marshal's reports.

35 to 40 Deaths a Month at Asylum

One morning, after regaining our clothes, sun-washed summer breezes stirred the active patients in ward A-1 to restlessness. Mrs. Ray, ward supervisor, recognizing the symptoms of inactivity, ordered a walking party organized. Thanks to my good behavior I was included in the group of 20 chosen for a hike around the hospital grounds under the watchful eyes of an attendant.

Two by two we lined up and started our jaunt. Anxious to soak in every possible bit of information, I trailed at the end of the troop, close to our guard, questioning him about everything I saw.

Past the carpenter shop we strolled. Inmate workers were loading newly finished coffin boxes onto a truck.

"We have 35 or 40 deaths a month," the attendant told me. "Most of them are old age cases or paretics. Some of them have no families, so the state buries them in potter's field. They have room for about nine at a time in the morgue. Often there are 11 bodies crowded in there."

One of the old-timers of our group spoke up. "Did you ever hear of the state coffin they have here? When a guy dies and they have to 'wake' him, they dress him up in the state coffin. When it's time to bury him they put him in another box, and put the swell coffin away for the next wake."

We passed the bakery, the laundry, the powerhouse. Stopped for a glance into the barber shop where seven barbers are kept busy giving semi-weekly shaves to the thousands of inmates.

Free-for-Alls in Violent Ward

A well set-up man attracted our attention. Standing in the shade of a spreading elm, his neatly folded coat hung from his left arm. With

his right hand he gesticulated to the tree, protesting volubly. "Certainly I can lick him," he told the tree.

"No, I ain't scared of him. I can lick him with my little finger. But what the hell you want me to fight him for? What's it gonna prove?"

The attendant pointed out the various ward buildings as we passed. "That's Ward 3. They're all idiots there. Over here's Ward 8. That's a work ward. Everybody there works somewhere on the grounds."

We came close to the untidy wards—16 and 17. Hundreds of inmates being given their daily airing ranging in a wide circle on the lawn. I was sorry we had passed that way. I don't like to remember what I saw.

"There's Ward 12," exclaimed the attendant. "The violent ward. One helluva place to work. When those boys start fighting, Ford, there's only one thing the attendants can do—back out and wait until it's over. Then they go in and haul the casualties off to the hospital ward. Last week they had a fight in there and broke 24 chairs."

"They're treacherous. Gotta watch your step all the time, or they'll slip off their shoes and hammer your brains out."

Inmates Work 160-Acre Farm

At the western end of the grounds the farm begins—160 acres of garden tended by patients. Here we found a worker inmate shouting to a motor tractor which stood untended about 200 feet away.

"Come in here, damn you," he screamed. "Come in here to me. Don't think I'm going out and get you this time. Come here now."

We left him swinging his arms madly at the unheeding tractor. Mahomet trying to coax the mountain to come to him.

"What do you do in case of a fire?" I asked my attendant guide. "Do you have standpipes on all the buildings?"

"We got a pretty nice little department here, Ford. I belong to the fire squad. But about the water, by heck, I'm darned if I know where we get it. We must have hydrants somewhere around."

A moment later we passed a fire hydrant. The attendant spied it. "By

George, Ford, there's one now. I knew we must have them somewhere."

Following my week in the madhouse, I talked to veterans of the Kankakee city fire department. John J. Berg, ex-chief, who is leading his ousted fire department in its court fight to regain jobs appropriated by the new administration, recounted difficulties encountered at a hospital fire a few years ago.

Pyromaniac Fires Two Buildings

"They had a pyromaniac out there," said Berg. "He got loose one day and fired a couple of farm buildings. Luckily they were not near the big ward buildings. When we arrived with our engines, the attendants were fighting the fire with their equipment. They'd have got more water out of a garden hose. We had a tough battle and the water supply was pretty low."

Roy Marquart, incumbent chief, disclaimed knowledge of fire conditions at the asylum. "I'm only back on the job since May," he said. "The hospital is outside the city. It's up to the state fire marshal to inspect it and enforce regulations. Some of my boys, though, tell me things aren't so hot out there."

Returning from our 25 minute walk, I was greeted by disappointing news. Mr. Houdini, who was to get me a master key, had returned he was to be returned to the ward from which he had escaped the last time. He said:

Dance in Asylum Weir Experience

"I'll get that key for you, Ford, don't worry." After while, when the paper boy comes, we'll get in a corner and I'll give you the lowdown on getting out of this hell hole. In the meantime, why don't you ask them to let you go to the dance."

You've been behaving pretty well. "Go to the dance?" I inquired incredulously. "What dance?" "Sure. They have a dance here twice a week, for patients. Don't miss it, if you can go."

A dance in the madhouse! Cleopatra tripping the light fantastic with Napoleon Bonaparte! Svengali twisting Queen Bee around in a wild rhumba! Frank Smith tells about one of his strangest experiences in the TIMES tomorrow.

LIVE WIRE KILLS WORKER AT STEEL

Cesare Burralli, 60, 1632 S. 51st ave., Cicero, was electrocuted at the National Malleable and Steel Castings Co., 1400 S. 52nd ave., when he grasped an electric light extension cord with his wet hands.

What an Offer!

Low Price \$19.50

Easy Terms

75¢ DOWN

75¢ A WEEK

75¢ DOWN

ONLY 75¢ A WEEK

CLEARANCE

SUITS \$19.50

We've taken them all, men—our very finest suits—and cut the price way down. New single and double breasted—new sport styles with pleated and shirred backs—all in long wearing, hard finished worsteds for year round wear.

75¢ DOWN-75¢ A WEEK

Open Tues., Thurs., Sat. Till 9 P.M.

Levy-Sang

162 N. State St.

Second Floor, Butler Building Between Lake and Randolph Sts.

KRYPTOK Tuesday & Wednesday

Open to 8 P.M.

State Registered Optician in Chicago

Glasses Fitted By Examination Only

Seamless lenses with both far and near vision ground in the same lens, fitted to your eyes—complete with rimless mountings and other styles to choose from.

\$4.75 Daily \$12.50

Complete with Eye Examination and Correction for Astigmatism

Lisalett's OPTICAL SERVICE

128 So. Wabash Ave.

BRAND NEW Piano Accordion and Private Lessons

ALL FOR ONLY \$21

TERMS 50c A WEEK

Don't pay more elsewhere. **BRAND NEW** better piano accordions here for only \$21.

Including **FREE** Private Lessons

30 DAYS TRIAL With Exchange Privilege

Brent Music Co.

128 So. Wabash Ave.

Open Mon. Tues. & Wed. 11 A.M. to 8 P.M.