

SEVEN DAYS IN THE MADHOUSE

Crazy Rhythm! Dance at Kankakee

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

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A dance at the madhouse! The show of a lifetime. Perhaps a chance to see Mme. Pompadour twist and twirl with King Arthur or Hercules to the taunting strains of La Cucaracha!

My enthusiasm rose when Mr. Houdini told me they had semi-weekly dances for the inmates. I could not afford to miss this event at any cost.

I cast about inquiring how I might get permission to attend. True enough, I had been in the bughouse only a couple of days. I had come in a violent alcoholic. But since my 16-hour "sedative" bath in dirty Kankakee river water, I had tried to be a model patient.

Johnny N—, the clothesroom man, was fast becoming a friendly source of institutional information. Possessed of a ground parole, he was my one contact with the outside world. He bought my cigarets, took my clothes to a quick-service laundry, slipped in a savory hamburger sandwich when the "house" meals became unbearable. Johnny should be able to tell me how to get a view of the dance.

'Some Honeys Amongst Nurses'

I asked him. "Ford," he replied, "don't miss the dances while you're here if you possibly can make them. They're a riot. And there are some honeys amongst the nurses. Ask Denny, he might fix it up for you."

Denny, one of the attendants, wasn't so sure.

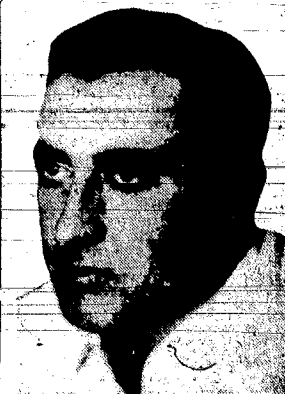
"You see, Ford, they don't let new patients out like that until they're here or a week or two. I'd take a chance on you, but it's up to Mrs. Ray. She's the boss."

Before seeing Mrs. Ray, I sought out the kitchen boys. These, too, I was beginning to number among my friends. Gene and Walter and Bill, alcoholics like myself, waited on tables in the dining room and counted the knives, forks and spoons after every meal lest some nut gain possession of a potential dagger. This trio of stalwarts also washed the dishes and kept the scullery in order.

There seemed an invisible bond of kinship binding all alcoholics. To begin with, we felt we didn't belong in an ordinary nut house, even though we had suffered a little from the D. T.'s. Some of them, like myself, claimed they had been sent down the river by concerned parents or wives or "loving brothers," merely to effect a cure. Listening to their plaints, I concluded that many people believe the state hospitals are putting out a gratuitous Keesley cure. That is, people who haven't been there may believe so.

At present there are 222 alcoholics at Kankakee committed from Cook county. These unfortunates are mixed in with every type of insane patients, mentally ill.

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Frank Smith

7 DAYS IN THE MADHOUSE

CRAZY RHYTHM! INMATES DANCE AT KANKAKEE

(Continued from page 3)

them are working patients, many in kitchens. There's a reason for this. Kitchen help must be reliable. They handle the steaming food as it comes from the central kitchen. They cut bread and sausage with sharp-edged knives entrusted only to the trustworthy. Deprived of liquor, they seem a decent, rational gang.

That Extra 'Spud' Meant Friendship

Walter slept next to me in the five-bed room to which I had been transferred. All the patients in this room were alcoholics. Long after the lights went out at nine o'clock, we'd talk in low tones and listen for the two toots of the steam whistle which signalled the escape of a man. Three toots meant a woman had broke out and a single blast signified the capture of a fugitive.

One evening when we entered the dining room two unpeeled potatoes on each plate, and a bowl of alleged chocolate pudding on each table along with tea and bread greeted us for supper. Walter furtively edged over to my place and slid an extra "spud" on to my dish. That's what I called friendship!

The kitchen boys were not so sure about the propriety of my asking to attend the dance. As a new inmate, I was still under suspicion. Oh yes, I had been behaving pretty well. But was I out of the fog yet? How would Mrs. Ray know whether I would dry something funny, attempt to escape, or break out with the D. T.'s?

I decided to ask her nevertheless, and at my first opportunity I begged her for permission.

"I just want to be a spectator on the sidelines. I'll sit beside the attendant all the time."

She agreed to think it over. Meanwhile, I was to get a haircut and be shaved. My beard was getting pretty wiry. I looked a little disreputable without a daily shave.

Nervous Barber Wields the Razor

When it came time for the shaving, I felt a little shaky. Not for years had I allowed a barber to touch razor to my face. And now they wouldn't even permit a real barber to do the beard scraping. It was all right for him to clip hair, but only the attendants could handle the razor department.

My face was lathered by an inmate with "State" soap, manufactured at Jopet penitentiary. The attendant stopped the blade before my eyes, tried it on his finger nail, attempted some well-meant pleasantry about being nervous. His hands were lost completely to me as I from the inmate who had charge of the shaving.

The barber's hand and the blade wavered nervously above my chin before he decided on the proper stroke. The razor was none too

KANKAKEE WOMEN INMATES ON GROUND LIBERTY



Women inmates of state hospital for insane at Kankakee while away the hours on the lawn before their ward, sitting either in the sun or under the shady trees.

slick. Mentally the process was painful, but I escaped with a minimum of stinging nicks.

Dance time rolled around and Johnny Ford felt a thrill that echoed high school days, when he heard his name included in ward A-1's contribution to the happiness of lonesome nouthouse girls.

The dance contingent lined up two by two, faces shining, shoes neatly brushed. Most of the dozen or more were alcoholics. The others were not to be trusted, or had serious problems of state, finance or invention to figure out during their few remaining hours before bed time.

The dance hall occupies the first floor of the assembly building. On the second floor is a theater, where church services are also held by various denominations.

Anxious Dancers Heavily Guarded

Marching into the dance hall, we were counted by our guard, Max Savoy, and directed to a section of chairs. We seemed to be one of the last wards to arrive. Already there were more than 200 men patients and approximately as many women ranged on opposite sides of the floor, seated in ward sections, closely supervised by their respective attendants. The main entrance and side exits were completely guarded.

"Johnny Ford" was all eyes as he took his seat. Across the hall a few subdued "yoo hoos" were directed by primed ladies to their favorite dancing partners. In the men's sections anxious necks were craning for glimpses of Lulu and Mamie.

At the distant end of the hall, a five or six piece band composed of patients and employes, began tuning instruments on the raised orchestra shell. Then a lively fox trot set the dancers in motion.

The first note was the signal for the sprint. Like doughboys scrambling over the parapet at zero hour, impatient males hurried their seats and raced across the slippery floor to claim their partners.

As the first wave subsided, lucky winners led their prizes into the

intricacies of every imaginable dance style. Disappointed swains glumly returned to their seats or cast about for second choice, coy damsels who waited smiling and expectant. For all the joy of a festive occasion, there was yet the tragedy of the unnoticed wall flower.

Johnny N. leaned back to make a comment. "Listen, Ford. Some of these guys and gals will panic you, but if you think they're any worse or any goofier looking than a Saturday night gang at the Blank dance hall you're plenty nuts."

Circling the crowded floor came a lanky youth with an old woman clasped in his arms.

They might have been mother and son by their looks, but not by the expression of rap joy they displayed. Sonny Boy showed his teeth in an imbecilic grin—yellow protruding teeth. The muscles of his face seemed frozen, for his grin never faded during the dance. He was in seventh heaven. So was Mama. But she veiled her joy with a studied look of unconcern.

A Motley Crowd in Reeling Rhythm

A spare gentleman in dark attire, his neck imprisoned in a tall, stiff collar of grandpa's day, piloted a boxom-lass clad in a cotton house dress. His efforts to pep up his faltering waltz step to the pace of the music were tolerably successful. At least he kept moving along with a minimum of collisions.

Some of the women were garbed attractively. Others wore cotton house dresses that screamed the "State" trademark. Evidently they were permitted unlimited use of their cosmetic kits, for some of the effects were ghastly: A fiery-eyed

brunette comes to mind. Glaring spots of orange rouge tipped her cheek-bones. Cherry-red lips, flamed in contrast. The color combination was poorly chosen. So too, was the heavy application of mascara about her eyes.

Heart-Broken Belle Bears Up Well

Young couples circled the floor in approved dance hall styles. Some showed a rather too-warm enthusiasm for their partners. The "Bunny Hug" may not be in vogue in up-to-the-minute Terpsichorean circles, but it still has its advocates in the madhouse.

One of the old timers from our ward pointed to a thin woman, surely past the mid-century mark. She followed, more or less jerkily, the loping pace set by her courtly Falstaff.

"That's Belle," said my informant. "Belle has been so heartbroken lately, we thought we'd never see her dance again. A couple of weeks ago they transferred her boy friend Bill to Manteno, the new state hospital. Bill is about 80 and over six feet tall. For years they never missed a dance together and they were such an attraction that patients would behave all week just to come and see Belle and Bill."

Belle didn't show her heartbreak very openly. Just another fickle dame, apparently.

The women who spent most of the evening just sitting and watching, hoping to be picked up for a brief twirl by one of the sleek-haired gigolos, finally had their inning. An announcement from the orchestra leader designated one of the dances as "women's choice." The ladies

took full advantage of their privilege and when the music began to throb came streaming over to the men's section.

Heroic "Johnny Ford" hastily copied Sonny Boy's rapid grin when he saw a louse-haired Amazon bear down in his direction. The fuse worked. She turned away in disgust to seek a more alluring partner.

Order Rates Night of Gayety

The dancing, on the whole, was as well conducted as one can find in our public halls. Of course an occasional outburst of fantastic gyrations by some would-be Veloz and Yolanda team, enlivened the evening. But there were no fist fights, no hair pulling, no need for the guards to hustle out "disturbed" patients.

Nurses and attendants, doctors and ward supervisors joined in the festivity. A line was drawn as to distinguish the patients from their keepers. Every effort is made to make the patient feel as normal as possible. Nurses and male attendants, both must accept a patient's invitation to dance. It doesn't happen often, but the rule covers the contingency.

After almost two hours of dancing, "Home, Sweet Home" was played as a signal that nine o'clock was drawing near. Sections were lined up and counted. Then to the strains of a lively march, each ward group filed out of the hall, home-ward bound.

On the way back to A-1, I asked our attendant if he didn't worry about somebody escaping under cover of darkness.

You'd be surprised, Ford. We watch them pretty close; count 'em going in and coming out. Not much chance of anybody getting away."

We were trooping through the kitchen entrance to our quarters when we heard the escape whistle tooting. "Toot, toot, toot, toot." Two male dancers had waltzed off the reservation.

A madman's weird desire to enter eternity by means of a jaded piece of window pane! Frank Smith relates this nightmarish experience in the TIMES tomorrow.

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