

A Lifetime Thrown Away by a Mistake 59 Years Ago



STARK HEADSTONES, WITH NAME AND DATE OF DEATH, MARK GLENWOOD'S CEMETERY—FOR YEARS ONLY ROUTE BY WHICH MOST INMATES LEFT THE PLACE

MENTAL HOMES WRONGLY HOLD THOUSANDS LIKE MAYO BUCKNER

by ROBERT WALLACE

THE little old man sits alone in a small room in a brick building on a hilltop in Iowa. His name is Mayo Buckner, the place an institution for the mentally retarded called Glenwood State School. His mind does differ from the normal, it is true, but he is far from retarded. He is an avid and thoughtful reader, a skilled printer and can play eight musical instruments. Yet he has been confined to the institution for 59 of his 67 years.

The story of Mayo Buckner began years ago in the town of Lenox, Iowa—then a collection of wooden buildings huddled on the oceanlike prairie like boxes tossed overboard from some great passing ship. There in 1890 lived William Buckner, a carpenter, and his wife Darthula. They were an average couple, normal in every respect, who had a normal 2-year-old boy named Osro. In September 1890 their second son was born and was named Mayo.

From the first Mayo's mother regarded him with narrowed eyes. During pregnancy she had had a mildly frightening experience and she was a strong believer in prenatal influence. The experience was not much. She had gone to a public entertainment and had seen Blind Boone, a traveling piano player who rolled his dead eyes in a grotesque way. This upset her. Later it seemed to her that Mayo rolled his eyes oddly too.

Mayo was a frail boy of gentle disposition. He could sing before he could talk. He would sit with his parents and his brother Osro in church and sing "la, la, la" in perfect tune with the hymns. After he learned to talk and understood the hymns he found he did not like some of them. He was frightened at the thought of the blood of the Lamb. Once when he was about 4 years old the congregation sang a hymn he particularly disliked. Loudly Mayo sang *Little Brown Jug* to drown it out. His mother winced and hurried him from the church.

Before he was 5 Mayo could play the reed organ in the parlor at home. If someone sang or whistled a song to him, Mayo would, within a few days, go to the organ and pick it out on the keys with one hand.

Of his childhood at home Mayo remembers the whine of the organ and the difficulty in church and one other thing. There was a dog in the house named Lion. One day Mayo playfully pushed Lion off the low

front porch and Lion landed on a bee in the grass. It hurt Mayo to see that he had caused the dog pain but he was unable to keep from laughing.

On the 15th of October, 1898, not long after his eighth birthday, Mayo's mother told him that they were going to take a trip. In the evening she took him to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroad station in Lenox. It was snowing. She did not say where they were going. They rode in the dark across the white land 20 miles to the town of Creston, where they spent the night with friends. Very early on the morning of the second day they arose and took another train at 4 a.m. for the town of Glenwood, Iowa, 72 miles away. Mayo recalls the journey quite well. The switchmen in the yards used open torches for signaling and there were coal-oil lamps in the coaches. He was not frightened because he was with his mother, but she seemed strange. Also he remembers that she had a return ticket for herself but none for him.

In Glenwood they walked from the depot to the top of a large hill nearby where there were some big brick buildings. Mayo asked what the place was and was told that it had been a home for the orphans of Iowa soldiers but was an orphanage no longer. It was a sort of school.

In an office in the school Darthula Buckner filled out a four-page printed form. She had a graceful, explicit hand.

Question. Is the child truthful?

Answer. Perfectly.

Q. Is it inclined to run away?

A. Not now. Used to at 4 and 5 years of age. Would now, I suppose, if not well controlled.

Q. Does it realize the difference between right and wrong?

A. In some ways. I think he will almost invariably say he has done anything, whether he has or not.

Q. Does it behave properly at the table?

A. Eats too fast and takes too much at one mouthful; about as other children do.

Q. What is its general health?

A. Good. Still he is delicate. Excitement will make him pale and out of sorts.

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Q. What does it like to do?

A. Lies on the floor in and outdoors. Is rather prying and likes to know what is here and there, especially at a new place.

Q. Is it cruel?

A. No, tender-hearted.

Q. Is the memory good?

A. Yes, very, to learn verses or something others are learning, letters, spelling, etc.

Q. How does it amuse itself?

A. Trying to imitate something, carpentering, playing soldier, sewing, rolling marbles.

Q. Is it given to self-abuse?

A. Would I fear if I had not always watched him.

In reply to a general question about "it," Mrs. Buckner wrote, "He rolls his eyes and makes a peculiar noise in exact imitation of Blind Boone. I do not wish to send him to public school for he will not protect himself but will take any amount of ill usage and never mention it. I think he needs special management and I am unable to undertake it. Have talked to our doctor, A. W. Fees, and he thinks so too."

When the form had been completed, an official of the institution glanced at Mayo and decided into what category the boy should be placed. The official had no training for that and had not bothered to give Mayo any test. He graded human beings by eye, as a farmer grades potatoes. He decided "medium-grade imbecile" was about right for Mayo. He then filled out an admitting card, assigning Mayo a number, 822, that was to identify him during his stay in the institution, which at that time was called the Iowa Home for Feeble-Minded Children. On the card, was entered that the cause of Mayo's imbecility was "prenatal influence—seeing Blind Boone."

Mayo's mother went away and Mayo wept. "I tried to look forward as best I could," he remembers. But he was 8 years old and he could not help crying.

Today Mayo is 67 years old and still in the institution. He still looks forward as best he can and thinks he would like to be released some day. Of course he has wanted to be released since 1898 but only recently has he had any hope. Nine months ago the institution got a new superintendent, a vigorous 33-year-old man named Alfred Sasser, who came into office with some firm and simple ideas. The first of these was that the 1,846 men, women and children confined in Glenwood were, after all, human beings. Another was that although these human beings had in the past been classified as morons, imbeciles and idiots, it was possible that the classifications might not all be correct.

Mayo gets an I.Q. test

SUPERINTENDENT Sasser began a re-evaluation program and soon got around to Mayo Buckner. Mayo is well known in the institution and is referred to in official correspondence as "one of our older boys." Having seen the result of a standard "I.Q. test" which had just been given to Mayo, Sasser called him to his office.

"Mr. Buckner," he said, "have you heard the term 'feeble-minded'?"

"I have heard it," said Mayo.

"Do you know that you are not feeble-minded?"

"Yes," said Mayo. "I have always thought I was normal."

"That is correct," said Sasser.

"Thank you," said Mayo.

The I.Q. test had shown that Mayo is not merely normal but above average in intelligence. The borderline is considered to be the figure 70; the U.S. Army accepts draftees with I.Q.s of 70 and above, and rejects those below. A "normal" I.Q. may be in the 90-to-109 range. Mayo's I.Q. is 120.

Yet Mayo might not even now be released from the institution. The question is no longer how intelligent he may be but whether he is equipped to cope with the "normal" world or can be so equipped. During his 59 years in Glenwood he has saved \$125, which he thinks might start him on a career in music, about which he knows a good deal. But he must first buy a clarinet, and the purchase may put quite a dent in his life savings. Also he has bad eyesight, wears a hearing aid and has arthritis and diabetes. In addition he is naive and very



MOTHER, Darthula Bvickner, had Mayo committed to Glenwood through ignorance. Mayo has never blamed her.



NEW SUPERINTENDENT Alfred Sasser, who came to Glenwood last year, talks with Buckner. He was first to tell Buckner he was not retarded.

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gentle, the sort of person who is prone to get into humiliating situations and to be shouted at. The little complexities of life—dial telephones, restaurant menus, automobiles and getting laundry done—are bewildering to one who has never been faced with them before.

The story of Mayo's life in the institution has a dreamlike quality without much connective thread. Many men, looking backward on their lives, see continuous roads or paths along which they have walked, or slopes or mountains they have ascended. They see landmarks there: births, deaths, possessions and years in clumps—high school, the Army, Marie, Chicago. But a man who has passed his life in one place where days and decades are all alike has no such view. Mayo looks backward not along any road but into a mist wherein some lights glow and a few voices call. His memory is not clear. If he is asked what he was doing in 1925 he cannot quite remember, although he knows it must have been the same as what he did in 1915 or 1935.

Mayo is not indignant or angry. He is truly meek. Looking at him, one cannot help but think of the vacant men who come out of Communist prisons to stand blinking and apologetic in court. But Mayo's individuality has not been beaten out of him. Unlike most of the long-term inhabitants of Glenwood, who in the past were whipped, clubbed and imprisoned for infractions of the rules, Mayo has been roughly handled only once or twice. He has lost his individuality by a kind of leaching process, as the rains of many years slowly leach the minerals out of a bare hillside. Twenty thousand gray days accomplish more than violence. To understand what happened to Mayo one must look first at the institution itself, at the negative philosophy which so long governed it, and at the people who are confined there.

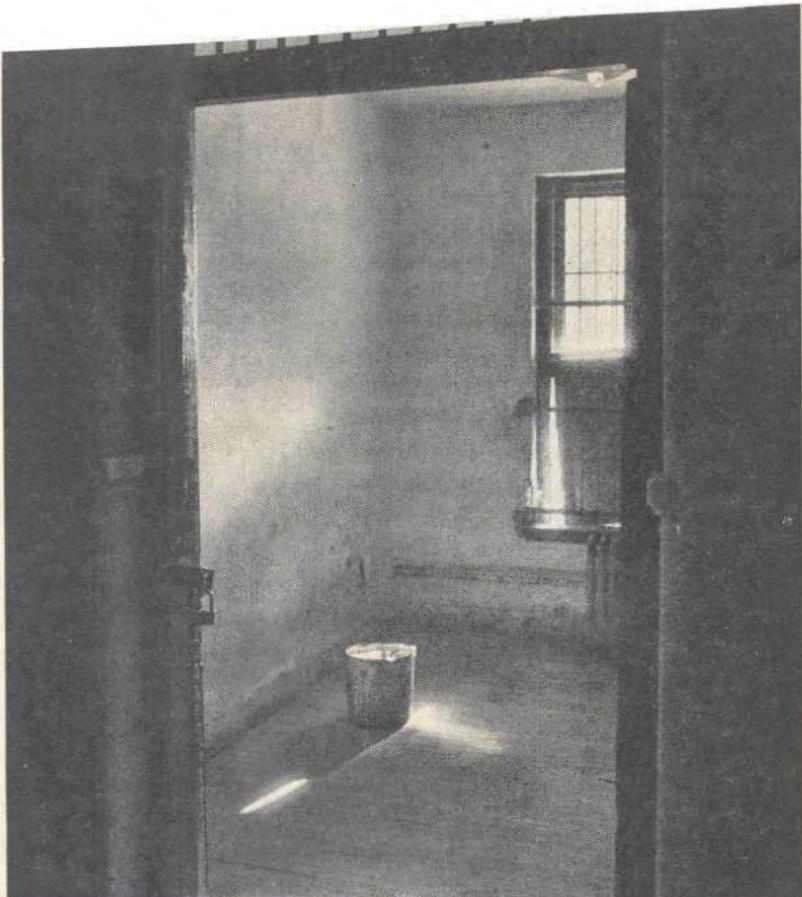
The Glenwood State School stands on a hilltop about 18 miles south and east of Omaha near Iowa's western border. Many of the dull and heavy buildings date from the late 19th Century. Although the sun shines on Glenwood as much as it does elsewhere, one has the impression that it is always cloudy there and about to rain.

Inside the buildings there is a faint sour smell. The walls of the corridors and public rooms are mainly bare, with here and there a colored picture cut from a magazine. The inmates, who are segregated as to sex, age and degree of retardation, range in age from 3 to 85. In their dwelling rooms, where they may keep their few personal possessions, there are family photographs, toys and crucifixes.

During the day there are classes for children who are able to attend them, and recreational activities in season. There are vocational classes for older inmates, many of whom work in the mess halls, laundry, print shop and cobbler. There is a library and a canteen; movies are shown once a week; and there are bands and choirs. The inmates are allowed a few hours of free time each day, during which they walk about the grounds or merely stand smiling and staring.

There are no bars on the windows of the buildings at Glenwood, no wall or fence around the place. The retarded are harmless and are not, theoretically, being punished for anything and so do not require guarding. Occasionally inmates do wander away but they are soon caught, being readily recognizable in the neighborhood because of their gentle confusion. They are called Feeblies. During the 81 years of

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A "SIDE ROOM," where inmates in old days were put for punishment, was unadorned except for light bulb and bucket, which served as a toilet.

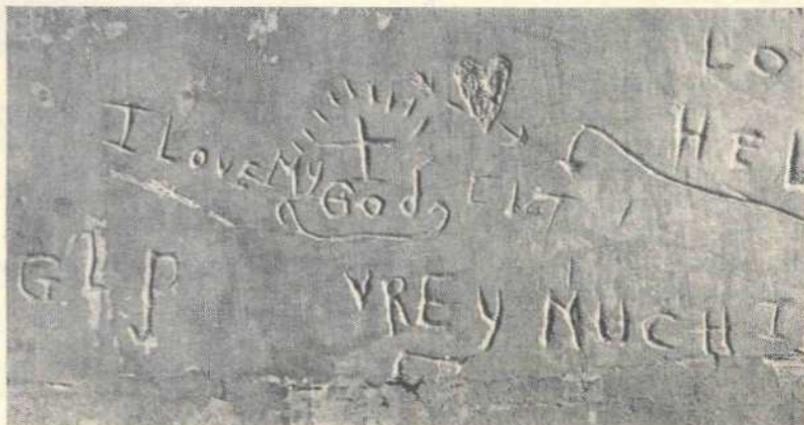
MAYO BUCKNER CONTINUED

the institution's existence relatively few have escaped permanently or have been released. The general rule has been to preserve them and hold them permanently, not to habilitate them and return them to society. This philosophy, called "custodianism," has had its effect. The inmates knew that there was really only one means of escape or release. The big institutional cemetery stands close by the dormitories.

A standard punishment for those who did try to escape, before Sasser's time, was confinement to one of the "side rooms," makeshift cells in the dormitories. The side rooms were small, about 9 feet by 12, and had one strong door and one heavily screened window. Overhead a powerful light bulb glowed 24 hours a day. In addition to the bulb the only object in the room was a bucket. Men were confined to these rooms, naked, three at a time, for periods of days or weeks. They would scratch at the plaster walls with their fingernails until they worked through to the lath. Sometimes, finding a metal nail in the lath, they would write on the walls. Over many years the walls and even the ceilings became covered with inscriptions. In one side room, for example, there are more than 500 inscriptions, only two of which are obscene. In contrast the word "love" appears dozens of times, as does the Christian cross, together with many phrases such as "Mom and Dad" and "I love my God very much."

There is a little more context in which to view Mayo's history and his present state of mind. Part of it concerns the personnel of the institution. It is easy to condemn people who work in institutions: one says they lack initiative and are a poor lot generally. But this is not altogether true. Many who worked in Glenwood during Mayo's

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WALL SCRATCHINGS in "side room" were made by confined inmates. They include religious symbols, sentences like "I love my God very much."

time were sensitive and informed human beings. Unhappily many others were not, but there were reasons. The pay of attendants and teachers in state institutions is low and the work is hard; to some it is depressing as well. A good percentage of those who work in such places cannot find jobs elsewhere, and others are aging civil servants filling but a final few years before retiring on their pensions. Few have any training for handling the retarded, and most are too old, too determined in their ways or too uninterested to learn.

When Superintendent Alfred Sasser came to Glenwood he found that no more than a dozen of the 460 employes were properly educated for the jobs they were holding. Their reaction to "difficulty was either to turn their backs on it or resort to violence because they knew no better. The fact that Mayo was not given an I.Q. test for more than half a century did not stem from any clerical error. Mayo does remember that at some time in the past he did have "psychological" examinations, perhaps two or three brief ones. He recalls one recurrent question: "What would you do if you missed a train?". Mayo would think about that and then he would reply. "It depends, on the circumstances." The examiner never told him whether this was a good or a bad answer and Mayo still thinks about it sometimes wondering whether he said the wrong thing.

A last piece of the picture concerns the mentally retarded themselves, the people among whom Mayo has spent his life. Who and what are they?

About 3% of the U.S. population is mentally retarded, some five million souls. They have I.Q.s below the arbitrary borderline of 70. They are not mentally ill, not insane. They are not hurtful to others.. They are merely people whose mental age, for one reason or another, is considerably less than their chronological age. They are childlike, simple and gentle. Some are so afflicted that they cannot speak, feed or dress themselves. Others are so nearly "normal" that they lead complete, productive lives in society without anyone ever suspecting that they are retarded. Mayo, for almost his whole life, has been surrounded by individuals from all parts of the retarded spectrum. Mingled with them have been a fair number of normal people wrongfully confined in Glenwood. Although Director Sasser's re-evaluation program is still far from complete, he has already discovered more than 50 inmates at Glenwood whose I.Q.s are higher than those of some of the institutional personnel. This is not an unusual circumstance but typical of what may be found in the 90 state institutions which today contain more than 130,000 "retarded" individuals. There are at least 5,000 normal people in confinement whose lives have been, and are, like Mayo's.

Ten years to get through arithmetic

MAYO remembers that he wept for two weeks after his mother left, then began to take an interest in the world around him. One blessed official took the trouble to inquire as to his interests and then handed him a violin. Mayo soon learned to play. He also attended classes in elementary subjects, which he describes as follows: "There would be about 15 of us in a class, and we would all-start out on a problem in arithmetic, like two and two equal four. When everybody had got that, we would move on to three and three equal six. The trouble was, every time they put a new student in the class, which was all the time, the whole class would have to start over and go back to two and two equal four. It took me 10 years to get through arithmetic, and the way I did it was I saved up and bought a book."

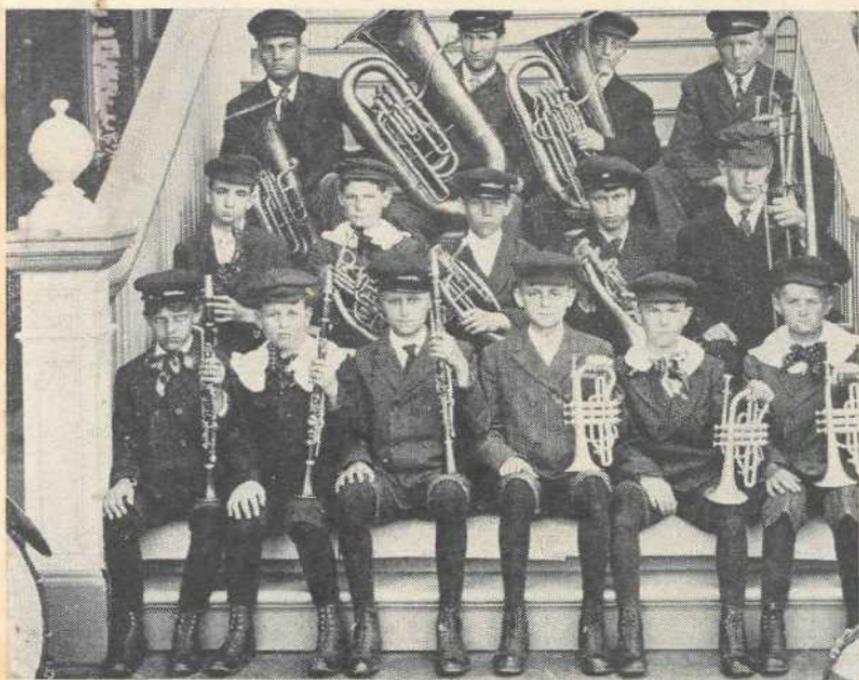
Despite such handicaps Mayo managed to secure a fair education. In his lifetime he has read hundreds of books—"but not about killing.

don't like that kind of book." He likes books about music and composers. He is moderately well informed about the affairs of the world, reads newspapers and listens to the radio. He knows about the atomic bomb and often sees the beautiful and fearful bombers of the Strategic Air Command, based in Omaha, circling low over the institution. He regards them without much enthusiasm.

During the years of Mayo's schooling his teachers made infrequent reports on him. A typical entry in his record, for the year 1913, says: "Is in excellent health. Has continued to improve and is much interested in music. Is a good boy. Reliable and industrious and gives no trouble. Likes to walk with the blind boy, Wesley Vert."

In 1915 the report said: "Music—perfect rhythm; excellent ear; plays trombone, baritone, violin, cornet, clarinet and cello with equal facility; excellent reader, works independently: interest and attention exceedingly good. Has very fair ideas of composition: taste is for better class of music, very fond of difficulties."

Many years later, when Mayo was past 50, the report said: "An unusually capable boy, always gives his best." By that time Mayo could play eight instruments and could score a musical composition for a 25-piece orchestra. He was also qualified as a music teacher.



MEMBER OF THE BAND in 1905, when he was 15, Mayo (*far left, second row*) holds saxophone, one of many instruments he has learned to play.

MAYO BUCKNER CONTINUED

Indeed, he taught one of the officials of the institution to play the clarinet, a relationship in which the official may have seen some irony.

Out of music have arisen the three most dramatic experiences of Mayo's life, strokes of color in the mist. The first occurred in 1902, when he was 12 and played in the junior band at Glenwood. In Omaha there was a parade of the Ak-Sar-Ben (a civic and social organization whose name is Nebraska spelled backwards), in which the institutional band was invited to march. It was at night and there were electric lights in the streets, the first Mayo had ever seen. He was too dazzled to keep step. Up ahead boomed the big bass drum bearing the bold letters I.F.M.C., for Institute for Feeble-Minded Children. The crowd gaped and marveled. People nudged each other and grinned, impressed, so Mayo thought, by the fine uniforms and the brave playing of the band. *Boom, boom, boom*, while Mayo blinked and lagged, so grateful and so proud.

Another of Mayo's musical experiences involved a band from the town of Glenwood itself, not the institution. Like most small towns Glenwood had its quota of friendly citizens who enjoyed playing, even if not with professional skill. In search of strength, the bandmaster borrowed Mayo from the institution and installed him among the woodwinds. During a Saturday-night concert in the town square the electric lights in the bandstand suddenly failed, and one by one the musicians stopped playing. After a few bars all save one were silent; Mayo knew the music by heart and on he played, the notes of his solitary clarinet curling sweetly through the summer night. Years later the local newspaper printed a story about Mayo, mentioning this incident, and adding that Mayo was "a shining example of what a handicapped person, with great determination, can accomplish."

In 1919, again because of music, Mayo made his only attempt to gain his freedom. A traveling carnival gave a performance at the institution and the Glenwood band reciprocated with a small concert. The manager of the carnival, no doubt with eyebrows raised in curiosity, took Mayo aside and offered him a job. The next day, taking his savings—he was then 29 and had \$5—Mayo crept away from the institution and headed for the town of Pacific Junction four miles away, where he was to meet the carnival. Somehow he failed to make contact and as he wandered forlornly about he was caught by attendants who had set out in pursuit of him. He was punished—in his words, "they sort of whipped me"—and never again tried to escape.

Perhaps it seems odd that Mayo should have made only one attempt to get out of Glenwood. He did of course sometimes ask the officials if he might not go, but this was useless. In order to get out he needed help from the outside, a relative who would take his part, and although he had relatives, he had none who wished to help him. Moreover, although he did tell Superintendent Sasser that, he had always thought of himself as normal, he was not always sure of this. Having been treated as subnormal for so long, he half believed he was. During those interminable gray days he was always surrounded by the retarded. He ate the same meals (budget: 15 cents a meal per inmate) from the same battered tin plates, slept in the same dormitories, endured the same abuse. It is not remarkable that he has lost his in-



IN THE PRINT SHOP, where he has worked for almost 50 years, Mayo has acquired a thoroughgoing skill as a compositor and hand-setter of type.

MAYO BUCKNER CONTINUED

The opposition to Mayo's release on the part of the Glenwood officials was not merely passive. It was active. In state institutions such as Glenwood a paradoxical situation arises when an inmate shows signs of ability. One might suppose that this would tend to encourage his release, but the opposite often occurs. The institutions are always in desperate need of money. When the officials discover that an inmate has talent for carpentry or maintenance work of some sort, or in clerical work or entertainment, they tighten their grasp on him. The inmate may be made to work within the institution for nothing or, as in Mayo's case, for a token payment of \$1 a month.

Mayo has worked in the band, orchestra and choir for more than 50 years and in the institutional print shop for nearly as long. He is a compositor and hand-setter of type and is good at the jobs. During these years he was allowed to have annual two-week vacations during which he visited his mother and other relatives. At these times he tried to convince his mother that he was normal. But she remembered Blind Boone and the decision she had made when Mayo was 8. Nothing would change it. Some correspondence concerning these vacations is on file at Glenwood. In 1910, when Mayo was 19, the then-superintendent of the institution wrote to Mayo's mother: "I am glad to know that Mayo is enjoying his vacation. I note especially what you say in regard to his remaining at home a little while longer. I have no objection whatever, leaving it entirely to you. I might say, however, as a result of my observations, that long visits by boys of Mayo's age are sometimes not in the best interests of the child. . . . I have found that the many things they see in the outside world whet their appetite for such things, and they are often discontented when they return to me. Geo. Mogridge, Supt."



FORMER HEAD of Glenwood, George Mogridge was against Mayo vacationing when needed in print shop.

In 1912 the superintendent wrote: "Your letter received. We will send Mayo on the 6th as requested by you. . . . Mayo has for some little time been working with our printer and seems to enjoy this work quite well. It seems to me, in view of this fact, that a short visit would be preferable to an extended one. There are quite a good many little jobs of printing to be done. . . . Geo. Mogridge, Supt."

In 1917 the superintendent wrote: "In reply to your letter of the 23rd inst. relative to your son, Mayo Buckner, spending Thanksgiving with you, we can only say that we have made arrangements for a

special Thanksgiving operetta. . . . Mayo is taking a prominent part in this affair and it would entirely disarrange all our plans. We are therefore unable to comply with your request. Geo. Mogridge, Supt."

It seems likely that even if Mayo had made strong efforts, something he was not psychologically equipped to do, he would not have got out of Glenwood. Mr. Mogridge has been dead many years. One of the buildings at Glenwood is named in his honor, Mogridge Hall.

Recently, when he was asked whether he felt any resentment toward his late mother for having placed him in Glenwood, Mayo gave this answer: "No, no, I wouldn't say that. I was very fond of my mother. When she died in 1914 that was the saddest time of my life. And look at it this way. I've had an awful good musical education in here. I'll bet it would have cost \$1,000 on the outside. That's pretty good, isn't it? Isn't it?"

Mayo has had two small triumphs over the institution, one in the intellectual field and one in love. His intellectual triumph occurred years ago in the printing shop when he set the type for some publication and came upon the word "acknowledge," which had to be hyphenated because it fell at the end of a line. Mayo hyphenated it as ac-knowledge and was upbraided by his supervisor, who felt that it should be "ack-nnowledge." "Ah, well," said Mayo, "let us go to the dictionary and look it up." It was a delicious moment for him.

As for love:

During the decade 1910-1920, when Mayo was in his 20s, there was in the institution a young woman named Valencia who Mayo thought was as normal as himself. They loved each other but marriage in the institution was unthinkable. Neither of them even dared to ask the officials about it. After 1920 the love dissolved into the mist of their own lives. They both lived on in that place, meeting and passing, looking at each other with empty eyes. At length Valencia died, Mayo is not sure just when. He thinks she had something the matter with her throat. It was a long time ago.

"Was I ever alone with her? Yes," Mayo says. Then he adds, "I was alone with her, and sometimes I held her hand."

There is little more to be said about Mayo. There are no other flashes of color that he recalls. But last week Mayo did have some hope. A man who runs a printing shop in Omaha has offered to hire him to do job-printing. It would not be the hectic, big-machine sort of work that might confuse Mayo but the small hand-setting and hand-feeding operation that he understands and likes.

Superintendent Sasser inclines to let Mayo go. Mayo himself would like to go and may be helped in the hard times by his religion. He likes the Bible, except for the parts about killing, and is encouraged by the Beatitudes where it is written: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."



DISCUSSING MUSIC at band rehearsal, Mayo talks with 23-year-old Carol Jean Nielsen, an inmate since 1950, who plays drums. Under new regime Carol is being transferred to a rehabilitation center in Des Moines.