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[At A Glance](#)

[Upcoming Events](#)

[Performances](#)

[Organizations](#)

[Back Issues](#)

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History Note

Making waves

Waving at women was forbidden at state facility

by Luther Granquist

At a regular meeting of the directors of therapy at the Minnesota School and Colony at Faribault on May 25, 1954 the assistant superintendent reported "instances where objections have been stated to male patients waving to female patients and others." The superintendent and other senior administrators assigned the head nurse and the director of the rehabilitation department to check on the situation. Three weeks later they reported that the issue had been "taken up with the division supervisors and the necessary consideration had been given this." The situation with one patient, who apparently had a "letter carrier" job, was left to be addressed by his supervisor.

Nothing in the cryptic entries in minutes from half a century ago suggests that the men involved made threatening or obscene gestures or did anything other than wave at a person or persons who happened to be of the opposite sex. Perhaps the division supervisors saw no need for any concern, except to address whatever the letter carrier might have done. Perhaps not, for permanent separation by sex to prevent propagation of "defective" persons had been a fundamental purpose of the state institutions for decades. Indeed, only a month before, in April 1954, the Committee on Patient Privileges, considering "grounds privilege" for "patients," defined separate large campus areas for males and females.

It was not until 10 years later, in September 1965, that a revised campus privileges policy identified one area in the center of the campus "available to both males and females having campus privileges during the daylight hours until 8 p.m.," although there were still large male and female campus areas. The institution's October 1966 Social Dance Rules also reflected some changes in attitude. Those rules permitted limited "mixed seating" and allowed men to escort a dance partner from their seats to the dance floor and back "by holding hands." But the rules specifically prohibited "embracing." Finally, in November 1968, a new Faribault administration eliminated the all-male and all-female areas and stated that "any resident of Faribault State Hospital shall have the privilege of going about unattended, unless poor judgment and physical conditions restrict him." ■

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com

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Waving a friendly hello was a no-no at the Minnesota School and Colony at Fairbault.

Access Press
(651) 644 - 2133
...
Tim Benjamin
Publisher &
Editor-in-Chief