

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN MINNESOTA

After the 1947 Legislative
Session

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Script -- Mr. Val Bjornson's interview with Mr. Carl Swanson, Director of the Division of Public Institutions, before KSTP microphones at Radio City, Minneapolis, 9:15-9:30 P.M., Wednesday, May 21, 1947.

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BJORNSON: Tonight we come to an especially interesting interview in this series with administrators of Minnesota's governmental agencies. Our guest is Mr. Carl Swanson. Mr. Swanson is the Director of the Division of Public Institutions, under whose jurisdiction there are 18 establishments--ranging from the State Prison at Stillwater to the Women's Reformatory at Shakopee. Those 18 institutions are divided into several groups. One such group is the mental hospitals, of which the institution at St. Peter is the largest. Included are the institutions for the feeble-minded and epileptics at Faribault and Cambridge. Then, there are the schools for the deaf, blind, and crippled. And, of course, the correctional schools for boys at Red Wing, and for girls at Sauk Centre.

These institutions, in a manner of speaking, represent Minnesota's responsibility with respect to caring for those who are either unwilling or unable to care for themselves.

Mr. Swanson is here for tonight's interview, to discuss the action taken by the recent session of the Legislature with respect to those social problems which the state institutions face. Before going into those details, Mr. Swanson, would it not be well for you to review the broad problems with which you and your associates deal?

SWANSON: It is, of course, impossible to review here the work of all the eighteen institutions. There is, however, one very important and, to some extent, general statement that I would like to make. Down through the years, the penal institutions that is, prisons and houses of correction have received the most attention from government. As a result, these establishments, and particularly here in Minnesota, have been brought to very high levels. By that I mean, the whole idea of prison reform is well developed and is generally understood and approved. Our institutions at Stillwater, St. Cloud, and Shakopee, all of them outstanding, mark the leadership that Minnesota has shown in this field.

Paralleling the problem of what to do with law violators has been the question of adequate care for those who are mentally ill. It is well to point out here that it wasn't so very long ago that insanity was--well, a stigma ... and it was thought the only thing to do was to put the insane away, in some institution where they wouldn't harm anybody. That sort of thinking belongs to the past a past we would all like to forget. Growing out of studies and research that have been

SWANSON: made by the medical profession, it is now pretty well recognized that mental illness is a disease, expresses itself in many variations, and should be treated as a sickness, rather than looked upon as a curse of some sort.

BJORNSON: You know, Mr. Swanson, I found that thinking prevalent in the Legislature.

SWANSON: I'm not surprised at that, Val. And your observation brings me to the No. 1 thought that I want to present this evening. The thinking of the Legislature, as you mentioned, is very much a result of the studies by its committees which were summarized by the findings of an interim group. The net result is that during the session just closed, the Legislature provided the means with which to carry out plans developed in recent years. We are now headed for more adequate care and, we hope, more frequent care of the state's mentally ill.

BJORNSON: I notice you use that expression "mentally ill," Mr. Swanson.

SWANSON: Yes, I use that expression thoughtfully because it is much more modern, accurate, and descriptive than the term "insane." It is interesting to note that the Legislature this year officially defined people who are mentally ill as persons of unsound mind and in need of treatment, control, or care. It also defined a senile person as one who is mentally ill, as a result of age. Mentally deficient persons are defined as those who are so mentally ill as to require supervision and control for their own or the public's protection. You will notice that the law no longer makes reference to the insane or to insanity.

BJORNSON: With those definitions in mind, what steps were authorized by the Legislature?

SWANSON: Two years ago, Val, the Legislature set aside \$5,000,000 to be used for a postwar building program, which included reconstruction of inadequate and obsolete buildings, as well as new buildings at our state institutions and hospitals. The Interim Committee named by the 1945 session was empowered to investigate and to recommend a program to the 1947 Legislature. That report was accepted in its entirety and, thereafter, the Legislature approved the details of a program to construct those necessary buildings, as quickly as possible.

BJORNSON: Can you say at this time what those new buildings will be and where they will be located?

SWANSON: Yes, Val! There will be eight especially designed dormitory buildings, for aged patients in our state hospitals. Each will accommodate 150 patients. Two will be built at the Rochester State Hospital, two at St. Peter, two at Fergus Falls, and two at Moose Lake. These eight new dormitories will accommodate 1,200 patients. The buildings will be of latest design one-story high.

In addition, receiving units are to be built at the Hastings, Anoka, and Willmar institutions, which are now exclusively custodial hospitals. With this construction completed, 1,360 additional beds will

SWANSON: become available. Although the Committee's investigation determined that on the basis of present conditions, the state hospitals are caring for at least 2,000 more patients than was originally intended, the facilities to be added, to a very considerable degree, will lessen the present very serious over-crowded conditions.

BJORNSON: Your outline, Mr. Swanson, indicates that eleven new buildings are to be erected. How much money is available for that work?

SWANSON: The buildings I have enumerated, plus an additional auditorium and recreational building for the Moose Lake State Hospital, are estimated to cost \$5,000,000.

BJORNSON: Does that constitute your building program as authorized by the Legislature?

SWANSON: No, Val. Not entirely. In addition, the Legislature authorized an eight-year building program in which is included the completion, remodeling, and replacement of the main buildings of the Rochester State Hospital, which it is estimated will cost approximately \$5,000,000 more.

BJORNSON: And it's your opinion, then, that the 1947 Legislature actually launched a program of modernization of the state's institutional equipment and set the pattern for the treatment of those wards that gives promise of meeting a very real need, especially among those who are mentally ill?

SWANSON: Yes, Val. I believe the Legislature made a good start. However, this is only the beginning. We still have the need for further improvement in the replacement of old and inadequate buildings which in many instances present a serious fire hazard, and in which the maintenance and upkeep are excessive. Also, in order to provide more adequately, additional buildings should be built to reduce the over-crowding which will still be the case even after the completion of the buildings which were provided for by this Legislature.

BJORNSON: Now, Mr. Swanson, you've outlined in some detail your plans for improving the physical equipment. How about the better care of patients?

SWANSON: In that respect, Mr. Bjornson, I think our institutions will profit very much by adjustments that have been made by the Legislature in the wages of state employees. One of our greatest handicaps, especially the last two years, has been our inability to hold the kind of staff workers we needed, particularly professional people--doctors and nurses--and supervisors and attendants. The new wage schedule, which goes into effect July 1 and grants liberal increases, is going to help us considerably in interesting and obtaining competent employees.

BJORNSON: Is there any other legislation, Mr. Swanson, that is important to the institutions?

SWANSON: There is the general appropriation for all institutions. Where for the past two years we have had \$15,000,000, for the next two years we will have \$21,000,000--almost \$22,000,000. That's for current

SWANSON: expenses. It does not include the building program. For operating our mental hospitals alone, in the next two years, we will have \$10,000,000, whereas the last two years we had but \$7,000,000. A little more understandable statement is that where we have had a little less than \$390.00 per mental patient per year, now we have about \$520.00 per patient, per year.

BJORNSON: As a result of this planning, increased appropriations, and new buildings, Mr. Swanson, is there any overall change that will be made in the handling of those patients?

SWANSON: Yes, indeed, Mr. Bjornson. In the past, our seven state hospitals have been divided into two classifications--that of the receiving hospital and those that are custodial. The hospitals at Rochester, St. Peter, Fergus Falls, and Moose Lake have been the receiving hospitals to which patients are committed directly from the court.

The hospitals at Willmar, Anoka, and Hastings have been custodial hospitals, to which patients are transferred from the receiving hospitals, as conditions and circumstances require.

The Legislature this year authorized our Division to designate the present custodial hospitals as receiving hospitals and provided, in the construction program, for the erection of a receiving unit at each one of those three hospitals.

When completed, the new program will qualify all the state hospitals as receiving hospitals, thereby making it possible to provide more facilities nearer to the communities from which the patients are committed.

I consider this a long step forward. This will also provide for the giving of the same medical services at all the state hospitals, which have not been provided for up to this time.

BJORNSON: That means then, speaking generally, the state institutions will function more as a composite organization rather than as individual units?

SWANSON: That's right.

BJORNSON: This, ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, concludes an interview with Mr. Carl Swanson, Director of Minnesota's Division of Public Institutions--fifth in a series of chats with the heads of Minnesota's several departments of state government. Mr. Swanson has outlined a far-reaching program of improvement and expansion, especially in so far as mentally ill people are concerned, as a result of action by the 1947 Legislature. Until next Monday evening at 9:15 then, when we will interview another state official, thank you and good evening.