

REMINISCENCE OF PETER K. SMITH

Born: August 15, 1926

Died: October 25, 1986

Resident from February 26, 1936 to
December 15, 1969

Employed as Service Worker,
December 15, 1969

80-RPK-PKS

People have often wondered how it was living in a state institution for the mentally retarded which, at the time, was so overcrowded. During the late 1930's to the 1960's, after a tour of the institution, most wondered how we got along with the staff and other residents. Well, it wasn't easy being with those residents twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year; but we managed to the best of our abilities to get along with everyone--residents and staff alike. Those days we had a lot brighter residents compared to the severely retarded and multiply-handicapped people that we have today. Most of those brighter residents are living today in community facilities, nursing homes or in their own apartments.

So I will, to the best of my knowledge, tell you what it was like living in one of the state institutions for the mentally retarded until we are either discharged or pass on.

Living here was just about the same as if you were living with your parents. We had just about everything that a small town would have: wards or dormitory areas where we ate, slept or played, laundry, kitchen, store, recreational areas, church, etc. But one thing that was different than living at home was that you had 25 to 100 boys or girls living in a building. Some of the larger buildings had as many as four wards or "grade" areas, but they had only one dining area where we all ate together. Some of these buildings had private rooms in which one to four residents slept. We were responsible for keeping those areas clean at all times. These small rooms were used to train residents for community placement, while some were used for residents with behavioral problems. One thing that was bad in the old days was that we all had to undress in the bathroom to take a shower or bath. We stood around naked before we bathed, which was really cold, and this was the one thing that we disliked most while living here. Things turned for the better after we kept raising heck about it.

DAILY LIVING:

To start the day we were awakened around 6:00 a.m. or 6:30 a.m. each morning by the attendant. I can remember that, during the war years, we had to get up around 5:00 a.m. due to the shortages of Aides; we had to scrub the dayroom and bathroom floors early before we went to work. First we would get all the chairs over to one side and sweep. Then ten of us would put soap and water on the floors while the others would take old brooms and scrub it; then we would splash fresh water on and sweep off the soapy water. Finally we would go over the floor with old blankets and wring out the soapy water over a drain in the bathroom. After this ordeal we would get ready for breakfast, washing up, shaving, brushing our teeth and combing our hair. We would wait until the Aide called us for our medication (the ones that needed it), then we would head for the dining room (in our building or outside to a larger building that had a dining room). After we finished breakfast we would then

head for our work areas around the campus such as patient care areas, laundry, kitchen, shop areas, dining rooms, etc. Those of us who worked in the main kitchen or dining areas would get up a little earlier, such as 5:00 - 5:30 a.m. Those who worked in the patient care areas had to get the children up and cleaned up for breakfast and after breakfast had to get them ready for school, plus their job of helping the Aides keep control of the hyperactive and behavior problem residents.

Around 11:30 a.m. most of the residents who had jobs returned to their building to get ready for dinner and get their medications. After dinner they would return to their work areas until 4:00 p.m. when once again they would get cleaned up and take their medications before heading for supper. After supper the residents were mostly on their own. Some watched television, or just sat around talking. Others played cards or pool. When the weather was nice most of us would go on hikes out to the woods or just around the campus. We'd go out to Circle Park (which is in front of the Administration Building (on the week-ends) to visit our girlfriends, or go to the ball diamond to either watch or play ball. When our turn came the Recreation Worker would take us to Bell Field (which is a ball diamond in town) to watch the Faribault Lakers play baseball. Sometimes in the fall we would go to watch the Faribault Senior High School play football. Beginning in the 1960's they would take us by bus to watch the Minnesota Twins. Just about every night the Recreation Department had something going on, such as dances on Tuesday nights, ball games on Monday and Wednesday nights, walks or games on Sunday and Friday nights. On Saturday nights we had movies over at the auditorium and in the afternoons they would take a small projector around to the buildings to the residents who could not get over to the auditorium. Most of the residents who didn't care to go to these activities just went to bed due to their heavy workload. Our day usually ended about 9:30 p.m. unless there was a special program on television and the Aide let us stay up to watch.

Some of the residents would even help the houseboys clean up the playroom and the bathrooms so that the houseboys didn't keep everyone awake with their scraping of chairs, tables, etc.

PARENTS' VISITATION:

The best things that ever happened around Faribault State Hospital was when the telephone rang and the Aide told one of us that our parents are here to visit and take us out for lunch and shopping. The first thing we would do is jump for joy and then we would get our best Sunday clothes and take a bath, shave, etc. Even the lower functioning residents knew what the word 'company' or 'visitor' meant, as they really got carried away shaking, jumping, yelling and just going through

every kind of motion you can think of. You can see that even if they are not very smart they know one thing and that's 'company.' Whenever these lower functioning residents received a package or something from their parents while here, just about every resident they lived with was their friend. When their candy, cigarettes or anything eatable were gone they were just another resident. About the saddest part of every resident's life was when they had to return to the Faribault State Hospital after having a vacation with their parents.

SELF ACTIVITIES:

What kind of activities did the higher functioning residents have to entertain themselves before television or when there were no Recreation Workers during the early 1930's? When there was no softball around, we would take a little rubber ball and we would have one of the residents wrap very heavy string around it until he knew that the ball was big enough to fit the hands of the thrower. To hold the string together so it wouldn't unravel he would make paste out of flour and would put it on the ball, wrap cloth around it, and put it on a hot radiator to dry. Another thing we did was to get some tape out of the medicine chest to prevent the ball from unraveling, or we would get black electric tape from the electric shop. We even helped ourselves to it when no one was around the shops. For bats we would get some good wood which was rounded or some dowels from the cabinet shop that were discarded or we would get one of the residents to steal it for us. For the bases we would get some white cloths, such as T-shirts, shorts or any light colored shirts and we were ready to play ball with anybody who thought that they could beat us. During the early years we used to have some real battles with the employees that ended up in fights during and after the games. Sometimes the residents even fought among themselves. Sometimes these balls were used for our football games, as neither the state nor the residents at that time had enough money to purchase any kind of baseballs, bats, gloves or footballs. The kids would even wrap cloths around their hands lightly to be used as gloves.

After 1950 things here started getting a lot better as the State of Minnesota had started providing funds to purchase more and better sporting equipment. The Recreation Department was also started then. You would be very surprised to know that, throughout the years, we had some of the lower functioning residents play on some of the teams and really played well when they had been given the chance. Just about every Sunday afternoon a bunch of 11-19 year old kids from downtown would come here to play ball with us and we used to have some battle royals with them. These kids really enjoyed playing the residents as it gave them a better knowledge about mental retardation. The Faribault State Hospital even had a Residents-Employees softball team which played in the league in town. The girls also had an Employees-Residents softball team in the downtown league for a few years. They would always have one or two residents umpire on the bases and behind the plate. The residents

felt more confidence knowing that they could count on their own umpire to help them win. If you were the resident umpire you had better be extra sharp in knowing what you are saying or doing or the next day you'd really hear it from the employees and even from the residents. No matter who won, you were the loser.

In school we were taught the regular reading, writing and arithmetic as normal students years ago. We had a physical education class and a cooking class, which was held in the officer's dining room on the north end of the main building. Some of the low functioning residents that could not be taught basic reading and writing were placed in handicraft classes where they were taught to make rugs, cane chairs, sew, make brooms and all kinds of brushes, pillow cases, sheets and towels for this institution. Some were sold and the money put in their storeroom account for those who had made them. Most of these classes were on the third floor above the School Department; other classes were held in Skinner Hall and Sunnyside because the Main building didn't have enough classrooms for all the residents at one time.

We had our own band here which took tours throughout the state and sometimes out of state. Every Friday night, weather permitting, they played a concert out in front of Skinner Hall on the lawn. We also had our own orchestra which played for the dances in the auditorium and in the grade areas; it sometimes was invited around the state for concerts. Just about every Halloween night we would have a big dance and party in Sunnyside Annex 2 (Dakota) and they would invite us children from Grades 3 and 4.

During the summer months, the school children would put on a big lawn play which was an institution-wide program. We would invite people from miles around to see our program. The old Model A's and T's would be packed in like sardines. During the holiday season, we would put on a big operetta; Christmas was a very special season and many of the residents had somehand in our Christmas play, to which the public was invited.

KITCHEN:

During the earlier years, they used to bring our food through the tunnel system to each building. For the buildings that didn't have a tunnel system, the food was brought by a horse-drawn wagon in which one or two of the residents drove. When the weather was too bad, they would bring the food on sleds. The residents used to call the food 'slop' due to the fact that, while hauling food through the tunnels, some of the residents pushing these carts would pick up cockroaches and other things and put them in the containers. It was very hard to eat some of those foods.

During the early years they used to bring the food through the tunnels to each building. Other outlying buildings didn't have tunnels; their food was brought to them by horse-drawn wagons which residents drove. When the weather got too bad they would bring the food on sleds. In later years they bought a few vans which were fixed up to handle containers and milk cans so they wouldn't spill or tip when going

over rough roads. For dishes, we had old tin plates, tin bowls and cups, which were unsanitary. About the end of the 40's we were eating out of plastic bowls, plates and cups which were a lot better and also more sanitary. Residents helped in the main kitchen by washing containers, milk cans, etc. They also helped prepare the vegetables, meat, etc. The residents also helped in each of the residential dining rooms by washing tables, chairs and dishes; they also helped the dining room lady to prepare the food for residents, by cutting cakes, dishing out serving bowls for the tables. Each resident helped himself. This was all right for the residents who got more than their share of food, but not for the ones who got little or nothing. Later on they started cafeteria-style serving. Now each resident gets an individual tray which is made up in the kitchen. This, I must say, is a lot more sanitary.

In the old days we were not served ice cream except during the holiday season or maybe on special occasions. We had milk only once a day for breakfast, and sometimes twice on Sunday or holidays. We knew what we were having just about every day as we had the same meal every day except at Thanksgiving and Christmas. On those days we had turkey and all the trimmings. We had our own livestock at the Dairy, from which we had our own milk, cheese, and meat, and we also had a big garden every year. This saved the cost of buying and the cost of feeding and made us more dependent on ourselves. We had a few root cellars to store our food in during the winter months. In the summer most of us would go out to the gardens and pull weeds and we would go out to pick the vegetables that were to be sent to the main kitchen. During the hot months, the kitchen would send out cold water, lemonade and cookies, and sometimes would even make us Kool Aid.

Sometimes residents would get hungry during the late evening hours and would get one or two of the kitchen helpers to steal coffee, canned goods, cookies, cakes, flour, meat, butter and bread from the main kitchen. We would pay them with money or cigarettes or whatever they wanted. Most of the stealing was done in the early morning hours or after it would get dark out, and sometimes during the tunnel run when there were no supervisors along with them.

The ones who wanted food would put another resident in the tunnel and wait for them to bring it. He would give it to them through the gate. Sometimes they would put it in the garbage can during the later hours and sometimes they would break into the kitchen by having the kitchen helpers leave the window unlocked. This never could be controlled because the higher functioning residents put others up to do their dirty work. It didn't matter how good the locks were, they just kept stealing.

CLOTHING:

Most of the clothing worn here was either bought by us or was made by employees in our tailor shop with the assistance of female residents. Most of the clothing made was special clothing for the handicapped: suits, jackets, shirts, pants, overalls, coveralls, slips and rompers. The coverall and rompers were worn by the lower functioning residents and residents that were being punished. These rompers were blue and buttoned down the back; they had a seat flap to unbutton if they had to use the toilet. Most of the clothing worn in the good old days were knickers and shirts. When our parents sent us new clothing and they were too large, the tailor shop would take them in. Some of us who didn't have any shoes had to wear pacs furnished by the institution. Our clothing was not too bad, but we hated to dress up for dances, movies and church.

PUNISHMENT:

It has been stated throughout the years that this institution had a very bad name due to the fact of patient abuse, etc. As one resident's opinion, 100% of these bruises and black eyes came from other residents fighting with them, and about 100% the employees have other residents do the dirty work for them and some falling after a seizure. Most of us were either slapped in the face by an employee, spanked on the butt with a hand or stick, lying with their nose on the floor, kneeling on a broom or on the floor and standing in a corner for one hour which I did as a kid.

If we did anything very bad, like running away more than once or stealing from the kitchen, other residents or employees, we were made to clean the big tanks (which we had in the bathrooms instead of individual toilets) from one half day to a full day, wearing those blue or gray rompers. Or we were put in Skinner Annex (the girls) or Sunnyside Annex 2 (Dakota, the boys). These buildings had untidy boys and girls; we had to clean them up when they soiled, plus feed them, then spend our time cleaning up their bathrooms and had to sleep with these residents. One or more weeks with that unpleasant smell, all day and night, and a guy was really happy to get back.

Another punishment that was even more hated by us was when one of the residents had done something, the whole group was punished for a week or two. The resident that did it really had a hard time on their grade as they had no choice but face others in getting teased or beat up by other residents. What really hurt the other residents (especially for those who had boy or girl friends in other buildings) was that they could not go to dances or movies.

CHURCH SERVICES:

Every Sunday morning we had church services in the Old Main auditorium with a Protestant and Catholic minister from the downtown churches conducting these services. In Sunnyside the children from Grades 2, 3 and 4 who couldn't attend church in the Old Main had their services on Grade 2 with one of the residents from Grade 1 conducting the service with the help of a teacher playing the piano. Most of the wheelchair residents from Grade 5 also attended this service. This resident who conducted the service did a very good job. Whenever one of our friends (resident or employee) passed away, we would hold a memorial service.

On Monday nights during the winter months we had Protestant bible classes and on Saturday, Catholic bible classes. Those were held in the Old Main auditorium by volunteer groups from different churches from downtown. At that time we didn't have slides or pictures shown; we mostly had to read from the Bible. We would hold funeral services in the Hospital Chapel; most of those who died were buried in our little cemetery out by the Colony.

STORE ROOM:

Each month each building would have their day to shop in our little Store Room, which was in the Main Building right under the School Department Library. When it was our building's turn (Sunnyside Main) the assistant supervisor took us over. We were allowed to spend just so much of our money then. Those who worked got paid by the state 10¢ to 50¢ a month. We also spent the money that we received from home or that we were paid by employees for things we did for them, like washing their cars. The employees were not allowed to give us the money directly; they had to put it in our account. After we got back to our grade an employee would put our names on the bags and lock them up in the cupboard. In the middle of each morning and afternoon (until our treats were finished) we would be called and take what we wanted from our bags. When we bought jam, jellies or peanut butter we would take it in to the dining room and the employees would help us spread our bread so other residents didn't hog it all on us. This is the same kind of treatment we received at holiday seasons or when we received a package from home. If we received clothing from home the employees would send it to the clothes room (after being fitted) to be marked. If they did not fit the Social Worker would send it back to our parents.

LIBRARY:

Once or twice a month they would have library service for those residents who could read. We had to take out more than one book due to the fact that most residents could read very fast and would finish them before their turn came again. Once in a while some of us would sneak over to get our books renewed; if we were caught we had to miss library for a month.

HOLIDAY SEASONS:

Some of our holiday seasons are just about the same today as yesteryear, but the best holiday season was Christmas, when each of us was on our very best behavior. (We were told just about everyday that Santa would bring us a sack of coal or a whip if we were not good.) We would put on a Christmas operetta for the institution and the public. Each building had a scheduled day for Santa and the choir to come to their building. We would have turkey with all the trimmings. The best part of Christmas was when we got to open our presents from home and the state gave us a toy gift. The older men got a pipe, tobacco or cigarettes. Before we unwrapped our gifts, Santa gave us candy and nuts when he made his rounds.

On Easter morning we would find a colored Easter egg beside our plate in the dining room and we would have Easter services in the Main auditorium after supper. The employees would pass out jelly beans and Easter candies.

The Fourth of July was a big event. The assistant supervisor would start early in the morning preparing the lemonade barrels. Residents from Grades 1 and 2 would have a big softball game in the morning. After lunch we would have a short movie, then we would have a bunch of games conducted by the teachers, with prizes like cracker-jacks, pipes, tobacco, and packs of cigarettes. In the evening we would have a band concert by our own band on the front lawn. After the evening movies the big moment came about 9:00 p.m., when they would set off fireworks.

Halloween was another big event. Just about every building had a party but the biggest party was held in Sunnyside Annex 2 (Dakota) for our division. We had our band play for our dance with the Skinner Hall girls, many games were played, and prizes were given for the best costume. I often wondered why I had to dress as a little girl all the time--maybe it's my shape?

Another big holiday was Thanksgiving. We had turkey with all the trimmings, all went to church, and stayed dressed up for the day.

During these holidays, most of the residents went home for a few days. At Christmas, grades seemed very empty as a lot were on vacation. In the summer time most of the residents spent two to four months at home. The little kids enjoyed a few weeks less because of their schooling.

What bothered the young kids most was that, every place we went we had to be dressed up. That's what we hated the most, plus getting castor oil every time we swore or were sick. We tried our best not to get sick because we knew that castor oil was the employees' favorite medicine to give us.

THE END!!!