

# What Is the Willowbrook State School Like? Here's Story of Visit behind Guarded Gates

By ERWIN ENDRESS

Eleven years ago, New York State took the first step towards placing a \$12,000,000 mental institution on Staten Island. Today, such an institution is in operation here.

The state move, in 1938, touched off one of the hottest and most delicate civic battles in the borough's history. Today, its acceptance is a matter for civic consciousness.

Red brick buildings set on long, green lawns under the springtime sun—this is Willowbrook State School, an institution for the mentally retarded, as it appears to the passing citizen outside.

It is still the center of some controversy. The passing citizen casts a puzzled or suspicious glance in its direction.

He sees children in the sunlight. An unsmiling child peeks through an eight-foot high wire fence that surrounds the area, and the passing citizen comes to wonder on the lives that are here lived.

### Tract Divided With VA

This Department of Mental Hygiene facility takes in about 40 per cent of the Halloran VA Hospital tract. More accurately, the federal facility for veterans takes in 60 per cent of the state institution's area.

It was for use as a school for mental defectives that the entire place was originally built. It is owned by the state, and the Veterans Administration is a tenant there.

One day, officials of the state school hope, the entire area will revert to its original purpose.

Behind this fence, marking it off from the outside world, and inside these walls, more than 400 mentally-retarded persons, most of them infants and children, live their lives in the quiet or turmoil of feeble, or inert minds.

To this place come the mongoloid child, the strange one from the Park avenue home, or from the shack on the waterfront.

He is Catholic, Protestant, or Jew. His parents are rich. They live in the house on the hill, a luxurious heritage this child has been denied by fate.

Or his parents live in a smaller house, on an avenue lined with elms, or in a slum, where the wash flaps on the rusted fire escape.

### Accident of Birth

He's your child, maybe. You rarely speak of him. But you think much of him. He is an accident of birth, an empty vessel with its cover hewn on tight.

To this place come the macrocephalic and the microcephalic, the children with wounds in their brains and whose skulls are malformed. For these, life is misshapen, a labyrinth with no way out. Here are the retarded, the backward, the wayward, happy minds of those who will never think.

You walk into a dayroom. It is a large bare room with benches lining the walls. Children sit in various postures along the wall. They see you enter.

Four of them dash towards you. They laugh and smile, touching you. Their need for affection is a craving, gnawing thing. This, they understand. Love is within their capabilities.

"What's your name?" they say.

"Why are you here?" they say.

You smile back. You hold out stretched hands. You see broad, flat faces; small noses and cheekbones; eyes, narrow and slant, due to a peculiar formation of the lids



In the sunshine in the courtyard of a ward building at the Willowbrook State School, mentally retarded children get a bit of the outdoors under supervision of attendants and nurses.

These are the mongoloids. You are swept with their need.

### Boy And A Book

Here is a boy with a book. He appears about 16.

"Look at my book. I have a book!" he says, smiling into your face.

He holds it out to you. It is a notepad. Inside, in a surprisingly regular handwriting, he has written:

"I'm in the mood for love, simply because you're near me;

"Funny, but when you're near me, I'm in the mood for love.

"Heaven was in your eyes, bright as the stars we're under..."

He is a great admirer of Bing Crosby, you find. He raves about Bing Crosby, and wishes he had more records of Bing Crosby's songs for one of the school's record players.

The words he has written seem symbolic, somehow, symbolic of these lives...

Another boy comes up. He goes to the psychiatrist who is with you.

"See, doctor. See what I have done. Look at this doctor," his voice says.

You pause again with the doctor as the boy holds out cards. You find they are religious cards. Pictures of Christ at Gethsemane, praying. A picture of the Blessed Mother of Christ.

Around these, the boy has pasted frames of strips of paper, red and brown. He has spent hours, carefully pasting strips of paper around the edges of this picture of Christ, praying in the garden.

You praise him and go on.

A physician says these children are awaiting haircuts. There is a

barber in a white coat in the corner. You hadn't noticed him. He is giving a boy a haircut, while others watch.

This is a hospital ward. It is filled with infants. They crawl, laugh, cry, stand up in white cribs beneath nets that keep them from falling out. Prim, neat nurses walk about, catering to infant needs.

A girl stands up in her crib, pushes a little hand through the crib to touch you. She laughs with a bright, musical laugh as you touch her. She is six years old, but appears about a year old.

### Room For Development For All

Here is a spastic child. He lies with his legs and arms taut and rigid. He lies with his head thrown back, and appears to perpetually contemplate the wall. A queer, trick of birth has marked his life forever.

This is Tom. He's a little boy sitting in the center of a crisp, white crib. He smiles continually. You are told he is blind. He laughs as you go by.

Here is a macrocephalic child. He is older than the rest. He can say words.

"Take it easy; take it easy," he says in a sweet voice. He heard a nurse say this once. You hear it as you walk away.

"Take it easy, take it easy."

This is your first look at Willowbrook State School. Officials here say they strive to reach a level of adjustment for these children.

There is room for development for all. Time is not of the essence. They learn words, trust, play. They learn little things slowly. Most are happy, or seem so.

They play on the long, green lawns on bright days, or their cribs

are pushed outdoors into the daylight.

This is Willowbrook State School, a growing institution. One day, there will be 3,000 patients there. They will come from Park avenue and the slums, and the places in between.