

Thursday, February 10, 1972

Willowbrook: Keepers and Kept, a Single Cage

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*These fought, in any case,
and some believing. . .
. . . then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.*

--Ezra Pound

There are university campuses that are physically uglier than the Willowbrook State School for the Retarded. Kent State is one. Its grim, pollution eaten buildings and blasted greenery make Willowbrook seem almost pleasant. But the killings at Kent State lasted only a few seconds. At Willowbrook, it goes on all the time. The weapons are budget cuts and lies, slower than bullets but just as effective.

A *New York Times* reporter asked Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook's director, if it was true that patients were dying because there weren't enough nurses or ward attendants to care for them. Dr. Hammond said, "We do have a rare death because of a patient having a convulsion and then aspirating his own vomit."

How rare? asked the reporter. "Three of four times a month," said Hammond.

Willowbrook is everybody's problem, including Co-op City's. There are at least 15 families in the community with children at Willowbrook and others with children at Letchworth and other state euphemisms for the retarded.

Three months ago, Willowbrook was the skeleton in New York's budgetary closet. But now that the bones are rattling in the fresh air, it's a different story. The politicians who approved the 1972-73 state budget, like relatives at the reading of a will, have suddenly found in Willowbrook a shortchanged second cousin and a new subject for press releases.

Last Saturday there was a rally at Willowbrook. It was a bitter cold Alpine bright day. The rally was supposed to be indoors. The State Department of Mental Hygiene said it would be outdoors and about

200 people and several speakers fought a Co-op City style wind beside a placid iced over lake.

"Congressman Murphy would like to say a few words. I hope he doesn't have anything good to say about the institution."

He didn't and neither did anyone else. If rhetoric could warm bodies, it would have been a beach day. Congresswoman Bella Abzug was the loudest speaker.

"We all know that Willowbrook is an obscenity. Rockefeller simply restored a cut he had made in an already reduced budget. It's an old political game. You let conditions deteriorate from the unbearable to the unspeakable and then bring it back up to the merely miserable.

"We must insist that our money be spent on human needs. A society is judged on how well it cares for those who are the least able. We must guarantee that those who can learn are taught. We must begin to phase out huge impersonal institutions like Willowbrook and replace them with small home