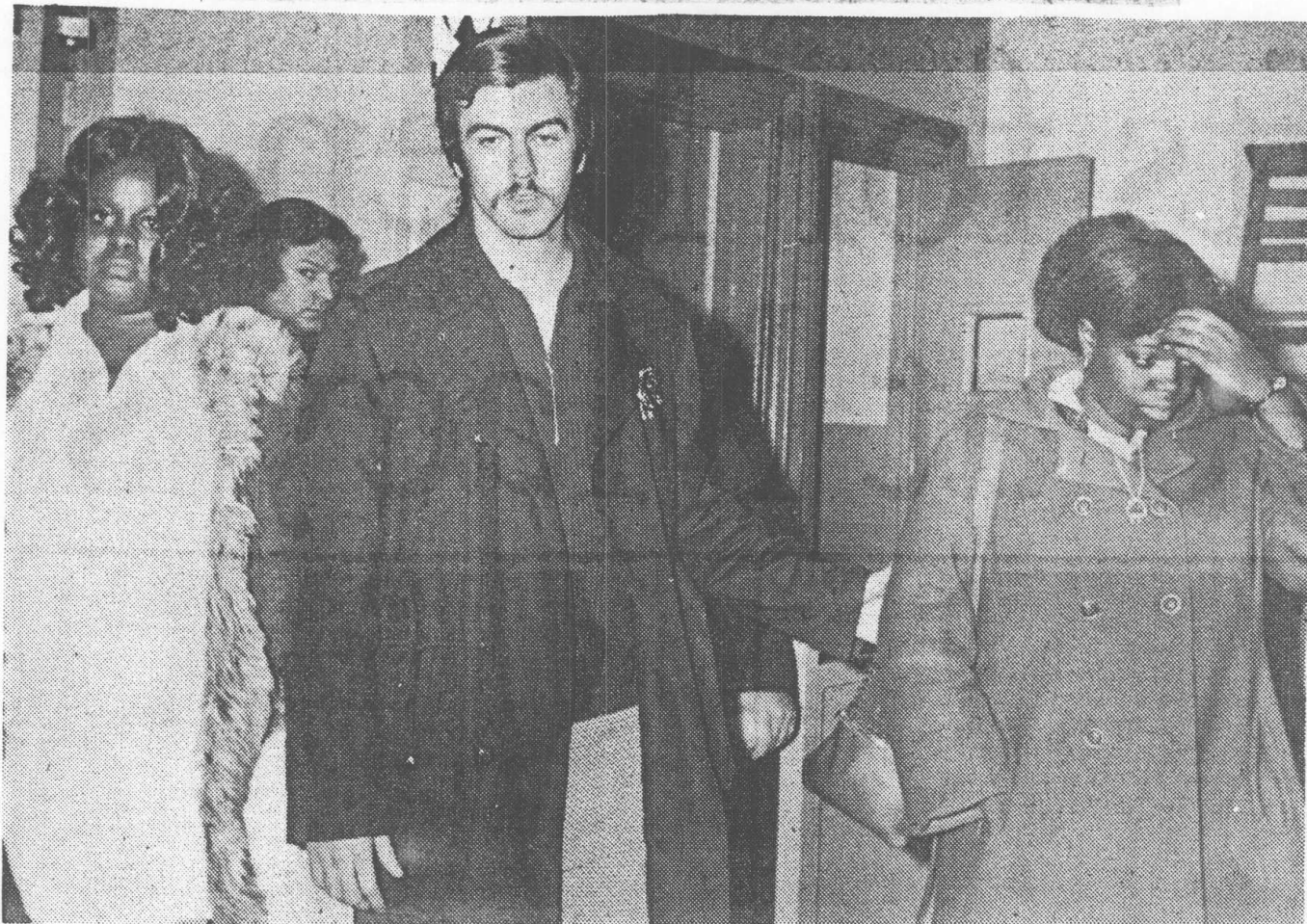


2 accused of beating boys at Willowbrook



Nicholas Jacobellis of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children escorts Barbara Slayton, left, and Rita Garner out of the St. George stationhouse, where they were booked on charges of assault in connection with allegedly beating two children patients at Willowbrook.

S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Carannante

By ARTHUR M. SMITH and WILLIAM REYCRAFT

In an effort to crack a wall of silence and fear surrounding reported acts of brutality at Willowbrook State School, witnesses to the alleged beating Sunday of three severely retarded boys were given 24-hour protection yesterday following the arrest of two women attendants in the case.

The ward attendants, one of whom is 17 years old, were arrested by officers of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which has been conducting an eight-month investigation into alleged child abuse at the institution.

Society officials are peace officers with power of arrest.

Charged with misdemeanor assault and impairing the welfare of an incompetent were Barbara Slayton, 21, of 163 York Ave., New Brighton, and Rita Garner, 17, of 177 Continental Pl., Mariners Harbor.

Employees and attendants at Building 6 who claim to have witnessed the beating, in which the children were allegedly struck with a broom handle, received round-the-clock protection at an undisclosed location.

Sources close to the case said the action was ordered by the Department of Mental Hygiene to shield potential witnesses from possible acts of intimidation or reprisal.

The three boys, ranging in age from 10 to 12, were reported to have suffered bruises and cuts. A bloodstained broomstick was reportedly recovered as evidence.

William Katz, director of the society who made the arrests yesterday at Willowbrook, declined comment on the number of witnesses under guard, the condition of the children or the incident itself.

He would say only that the society's investigation, begun quietly after the conclusion of public hearings on Willowbrook last January, indicated that cases of child abuse at the institution were "not uncommon" and that "a climate of fear" had prevented their exposure.

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"I hope that we have made a breakthrough in this case,"

Katz said. "There is a fear that permeates the working people at Willowbrook, and this produces silence. I hope this case will show that responsible people at Willowbrook can come forward in safety and fulfill their obligations to the patients."

The society's investigation was conducted in cooperation with state Department of Mental Hygiene, the state attorney general's office and District Attorney John M. Braisted's office.

The strict security measures taken to protect potential witnesses in the assault case came in the wake of two incidents involving Willowbrook employes which are still under police investigation.

In one case last month, an employe's car parked on the grounds was firebombed, and in another incident several months ago, seven shots were fired into a supervisor's car parked outside his home.

Dr. Miodrag Ristig, director of the institution, said he felt the incidents did not involve reports of child abuse but were motivated by personal grudges.

Referring to the earlier incident, Ristig said: "You cannot tie what happens at a man's home with what happens at Willowbrook. But if the man believes there is a connection,

that is intimidation."

Dr. Ristig also said he had visited one of the boys alleged to have been beaten Sunday, and said it was "very difficult to tell whether the marks I saw were the result of a beating or an accidental injury."

Misses Garner and Slayton were booked at the St. George stationhouse after they were arrested at work and later arraigned before Criminal Court Judge Royal S. Radin. They were released for a hearing

Tuesday.

Miss Garner, who said she is 17, is employed as full-time ward attendant, although the minimum age requirement under child labor laws for the job is 18 years old, according to James Thurston, director of personnel at Willowbrook.

He said applicants for the position are not required to submit birth certificates or other proof of age, but a fingerprint check is performed on each application.

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