

**Ward of the state:**

**Willie Summers--  
a tough scene to make**

by Anne Fanciullo

Brought to Bronx Children's Court as a "disruptive and immature" boy, Willie Summers never had a chance.

In the years before the recent expose of conditions at Willowbrook, it was common practice for courts to send normally intelligent juvenile offenders and "hard to handle" adolescents to state schools theoretically set aside for the mentally retarded.

Willie, then age 11, was sent to Willowbrook State School.

He is 20 now, his memory gutted with deprivation, insecurity and a lack of acceptance as an intelligent, capable person. Branded a troublemaker, a thief and an ex-con, Willie's past is dotted with beatings, isolation and constant doses of tranquilizers.

Yet despite all this, Willie has not lost his pride.

"I want to be something," he says, almost pleading. "I want a trade and a job. I want my own apartment and maybe in a few years, my own business. I'm tired of being in and out of jail."

Dubbed a moron by psychologists, Willie at Willowbrook was looked up to by the younger patients, respected by his peers, and regarded as an "amiable child" by his former teachers. Nonetheless, he has been a thorn in the side of ward attendants, security guards and administrators who both fear and hate his rebelliousness.

So burdensome was Willie Summers that in 1970, after 7 years of residence at Willowbrook, he was suddenly dumped on the street without money, a job, or a place to live.

Since then he has taken up "residence" at Riker's Island for a total of 14 months for crimes related to his presence on the grounds of Willowbrook, "the only place I know." Unable to obtain employment because of his criminal history, Willie Summers has remained "on the street" where Willowbrook left him two years ago -- wearing borrowed clothing, eating stolen food and using a bench in the ferry terminal as

a bed.

One of six children of a derelict father and an alcoholic mother, Willie was referred from Bellevue to Willowbrook after psychiatric examination revealed that the boy was suffering from possible brain damage and emotional deprivation.

Suspended from school in the Bronx for disruptive behavior and allegedly stealing school supplies, Willie was recommended for placement on the basis of his "defective" intelligence and poor home situation.

"They took me and my brother Sammy (who was also a Willowbrook resident) away from my parents because they used to fight a lot," says Willie, in a subdued voice. "I stayed at Bellevue for six months. Then I went straight to building 5, and my brother went to building 19.

"On my record they said I was immature, and they thought that because I was slow in catching on, I was retarded. They could have put me in a home or a shelter where I could have tried to elevate myself to a higher state ... but they put me here (Willowbrook) instead."

At Willowbrook, Willie was at the head of his class, and aside from some occasional slumps in interest and cooperation, his teachers agree that Willie has great potential. "Willie is fun - loving and outgoing," said one.

His popularity in class seesaws with his behavior toward the group ... it's hard to stay angry at Willie."

In reading and math, his work was usually above normal, while in the classroom, some teachers thought him to be hyperactive, "a show-off" and an attention-getter. "I liked school okay," says Willie. "I got into trouble with some of the teachers because they thought they were big shots."

Williamay Thompson, a recreation therapist at Willowbrook, explains that "Willie is a leader. The group follows him, and when he comes back to Willowbrook he has to look big in their eyes. Willie's a strong, tall boy, who looks older than his age. He is intelligent -- and he knows it, and he wants to let you know it."

Willie's pride and his identification with the "tough guy" image gained for him both friends and enemies at Willowbrook.

"The one thing I couldn't stand was when an employee would beat on a patient, or try to steal his money," recalls Willie. "The employees didn't like it when somebody showed the patients understanding and sat down and talked with them. They think that because that kid is a little 'off' they can hurt him."

"The employees knew that I didn't like to see anybody get beat with a stick. So I took beatings for the patients -- I fought for the patients. When I was smaller here I got beaten with a stick. But now, they wouldn't come near me with a stick because they know I can fight back."

While he was at Willowbrook, Willie and some other boys formed a gang called the "Marvelettes." "It was just a way of making sure that the patients had clothes on," explains Willie. "Sometimes when it was snowing they would go to the dining room without coats or shoes ... they weren't getting proper medical attention either, and they came to me more than anybody else when they had trouble."

Willie's temper sometimes gets the best of him, but he maintains that he does not fight unless he is provoked. "I fight back because they [the attendants] come to your face and say 'I'm going to take this bat and break your head if you don't stay in line.' If they

would come and approach me in a mannerly way -- that's fine. But they always approached me like a savage."

"I know I have a bad temper," says Willie, "and I'm trying to control it. But if I know something isn't right, that's when I blow."

Having come to Willowbrook with a reputation for theft and misconduct, Willie's usurping of the attendant's authority and his leadership among the other patients hurt his standing at the institution.

Staff members at Willowbrook recount numerous episodes involving money and valuables supposedly stolen from employees by Willie. Whether these charges are true -- or whether Willie was used as a scapegoat, by vengeful attendants, for acts of

theft committed by others -- can never be fully proven.

When accused of such acts, Willie's denial of them furthered his reputation as a "good liar," so that his truthfulness in any situation was always doubted.

Willie continued to fight, and admittedly came to rely a bit too frequently on physical violence to solve his problems. His fighting and rabble-raising did not go unpunished.

"To punish me, they would put me into seclusion -- in a little room all alone -- for two weeks at a time," he recalls. "Other times they put a gown on me or took my privileges away."

One source notes that Willie was so resistant to the seclusion room, that he actually broke the door down and had to be subdued with drugs.

"They gave me 250 milligrams of thiorazine four times a day," recalls Willie. "Then they raised the dosage so that I was getting 350 milligrams four times a day. But I still watched over the patients -- I still kept on fighting."

When Willie reached age 17, people within Willowbrook opted for his discharge on "community status" a whole year before most other patients are released from the institution. Because of his poor conduct record and con-

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