

'Life threatening' conditions cited

Boarding house probe sought

By ROBERT MIRALDI

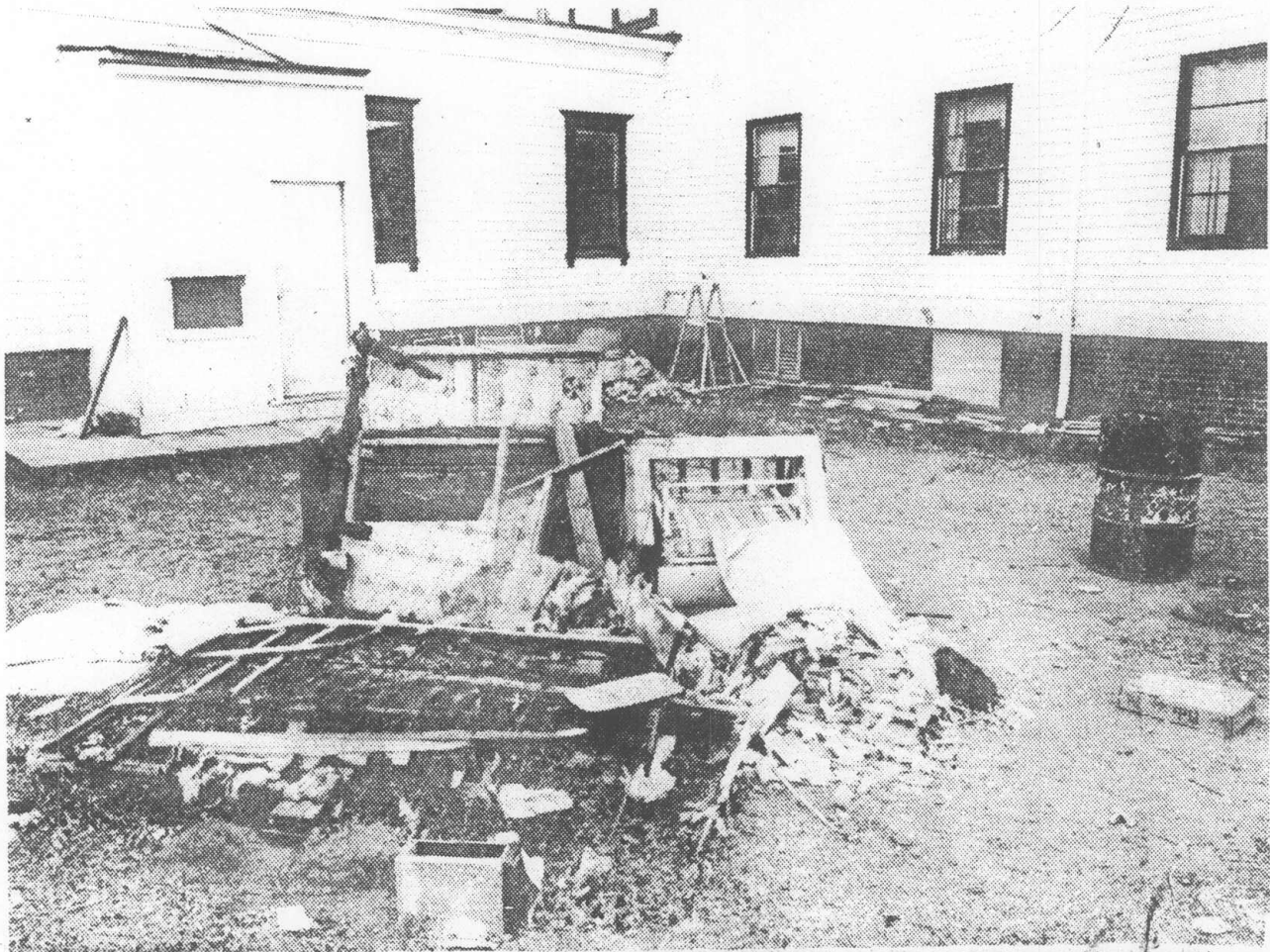
A boarding house on Staten Island's South Shore, the former Christmas Tree Inn in Princes Bay, the scene of a scandal eight years ago, continues to house welfare recipients and former psychiatric patients in what one Island legisla-

tor has charged are "life threatening" conditions.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, a Democrat from West Brighton, has sent telegrams to the commissioners of the state's health, social services and mental health agencies and the city's Health Department, demanding an im-

mediate investigation of the 51 Wilber St. structure.

In her telegram and in interviews with the Advance, Mrs. Connelly said she has been told the three-story, wood-frame building did not have adequate heat and hot water and violated city building code regulations.



The rubble from a Dec. 8 fire remains outside the Princes Bay building. The fire started in a storeroom filled with soiled mattresses. The mattresses are used by new residents

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"With the onset of winter and cold weather, life threatening circumstances exist," Mrs. Connelly said.

After interviewing many of the building's 20 residents and persons familiar with its operation, the Advance found that:

¶ Food was being served illegally — prepared by the building's owner at his home and in the building without necessary city and state licenses.

¶ Residents are often paying for food and not receiving it.

¶ Only one shower-toilet facility operates at times and sometimes no toilets work.

¶ Often no clean linens are available and residents sleep on filthy sheets and soiled mattresses.

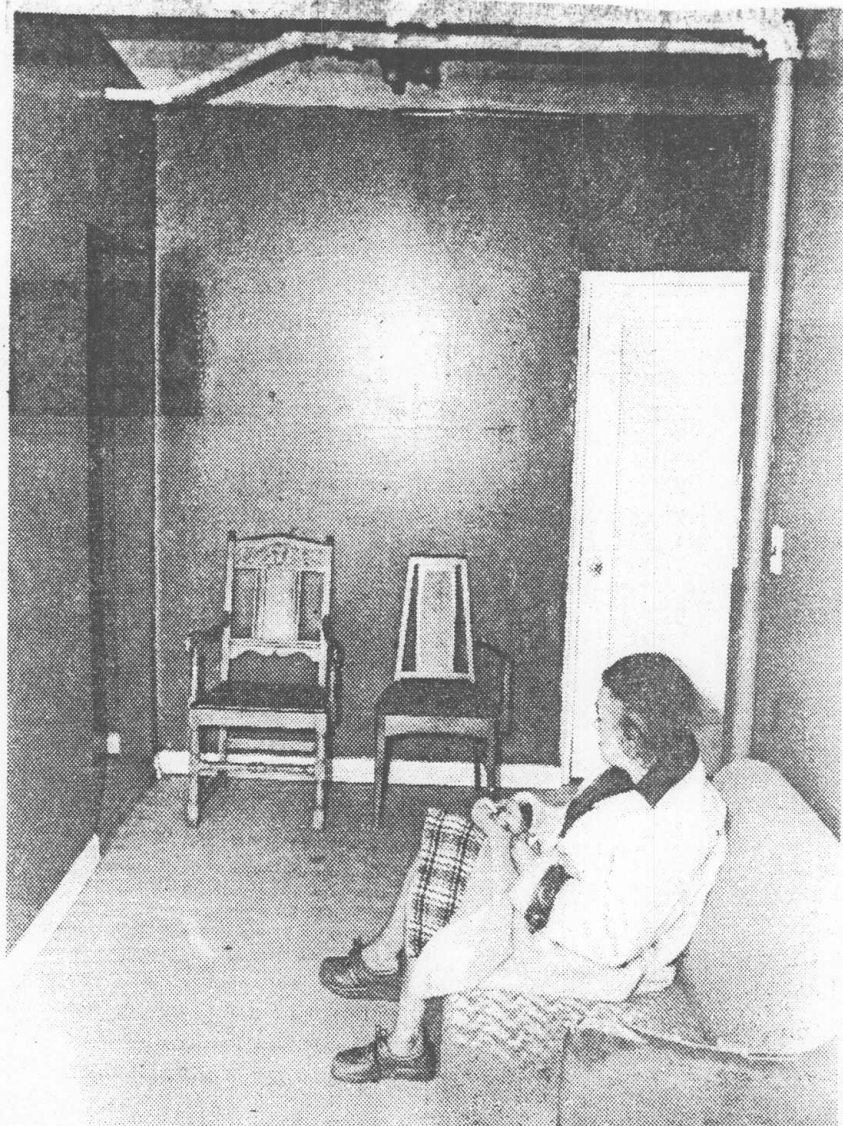
¶ The discharged psychiatric patients living in the building continue to need medical and social services they do not receive.

"From what I've been told," Mrs. Connelly said, echoing sentiments expressed by other city and state officials, "there is no way people should be living under those conditions." She particularly criticized the South Beach Psychiatric Center for placing former patients in the building.

One high-ranking city Department of Social Services official, who asked not to be identified, said: "We hate the damn place." He said the city was aware of some of Mrs. Connelly's allegations.

On numerous occasions during an Advance investigation, a reporter found there was no heat in the building during sub-freezing temperatures. Many sinks had no hot water and inoperable faucets. In the kitchen area, where some residents claim to cook, stoves, countertops and sinks were greasy and grimy.

Cat feces were seen in a kitchen sink;



This is the lobby of the former Christmas Tree Inn where a woman sat, huddled up in her coat, on a recent cold morning.

food cabinets were filled with paint cans and refrigerators were out of order.

According to Building Department records the former bar and grill has 32 existing violations, some dating back two years. The owner, Thomas Guddemi of 455 Seguire Ave., also Princes Bay, has never been fined for the violations which inspectors consider minor.

The violations include broken lights, windows, railings, and shutters; an inoperable boiler resulting from a fire; no fire exit signs; broken plasterboard on walls and ceilings; accumulated gar-

bage and trash in and around the building and water in the building's cellar.

Guddemi admits the building has had violations for a number of years but he maintains that city inspectors never explain to him what the violations are. "I'm cleaning the place up," Guddemi said in an interview. Asked if he would live in the building, Guddemi said: "The mental patients need a place to live. It's not bad."

In her telegram Mrs. Connelly also

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asked state agencies to investigate how the residents' finances were being handled. "Presumably," she said, "checks are going directly to landlord."

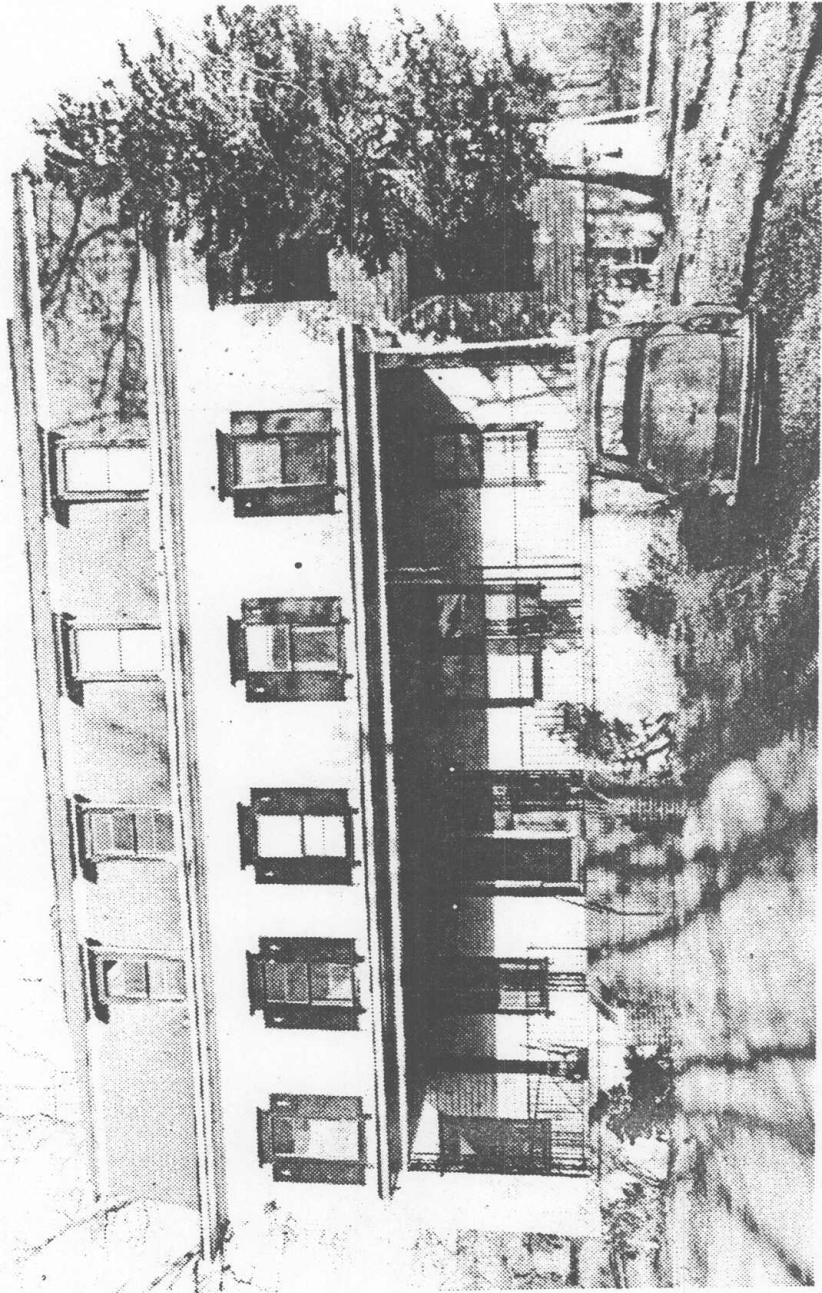
Guddemi denied that allegation. He said he charged \$152 a month for a room - the maximum city welfare reimbursement allowed to one person. Persons receiving food pay \$250, also the maximum for shelter and food allowed by welfare.

Some residents said they gave their checks directly to Guddemi and that he, in turn, gave them back what he said was left over from the rent and food payment. Guddemi said most of the residents were unable to take care of their money, a statement echoed by other officials familiar with the residents.

Mrs. Connelly, who is chairman of the state Assembly's mental health committee, said it was her opinion that people living in the building "were not ready to live on their own in the community" even though they had been discharged from the South Beach Psychiatric Center and the North Richmond Community Mental Health center.

She referred to a new psychiatric referral unit the state Department of Mental Hygiene is establishing at the St. Vincent's Medical Center in West Brighton and said: "They set up a new unit to refer people to a place like this?"

She said if this "is the best the state can do, then we are just not doing our job."



A burned-out car sits in front of the former Christmas Tree Inn at 51 Wilber St. in Princes Bay.

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A source in the city Department of Social Services, which also refers persons there, said "the people who are referred there have worn out their welcome everywhere else. There is just no place else for them to live."

A spokesman for South Beach, Rosemary Ahearn, said the center had "no alternative" to placement there. "They would be on the streets otherwise," she said.

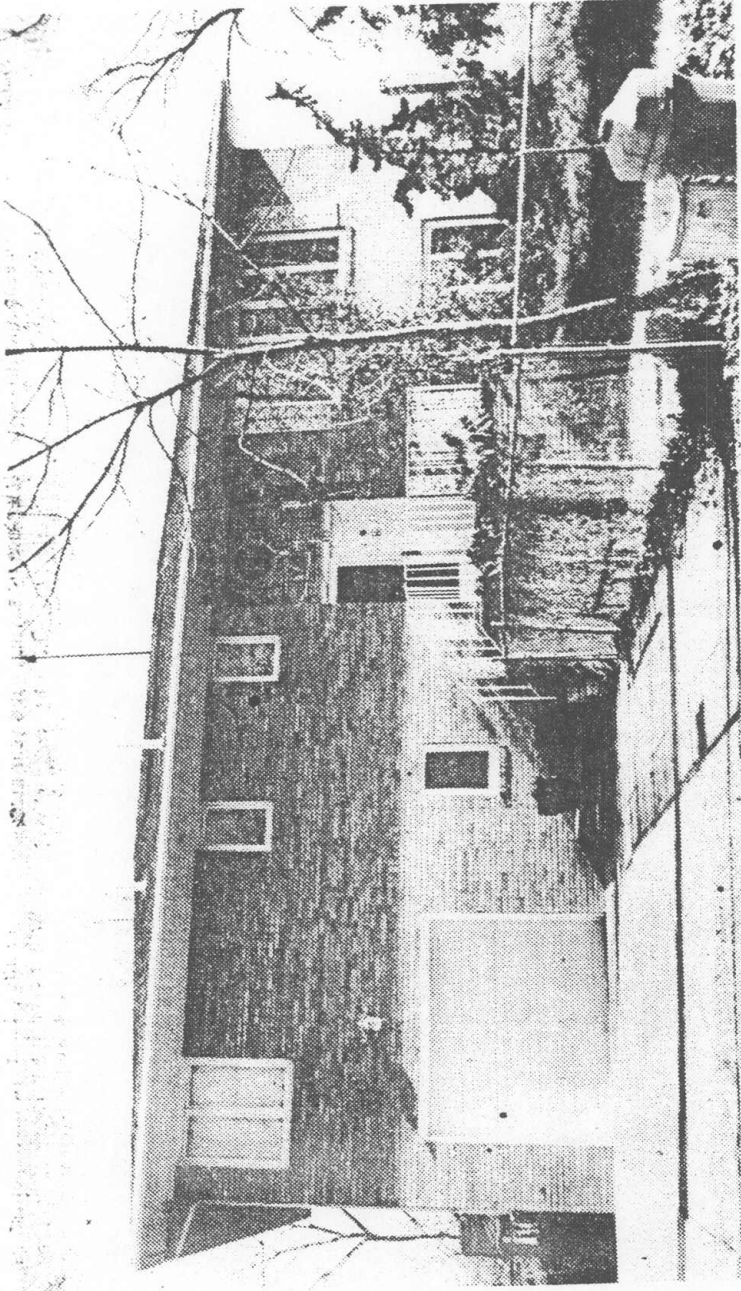
One resident interviewed, who was in her 60s, said that before she moved to the former Christmas Tree Inn three years ago "she lived in the park." She said the building was "better than the street."

During the interview, the woman was dressed in a man's raincoat, she wore slippers with soiled white socks, and a nightgown with stains. She had purplish polish from her nails down to her knuckles. She was missing most of her front teeth and hair sprouted on her chin. She was carrying a small, thin piece of fruitcake which she said she had just purchased for \$1 from the landlord's wife.

While the woman talked with a reporter on Wilber Street, hundreds of birds landed on the water at nearby Wolfe's Pond Park and other residents grouped at the building's front door. "I love trees," she said. "That's why I liked living in the park before this."

Mrs. Connelly said she learned of the residence from a constituent whose daughter, a former patient at both South Beach and North Richmond, had been referred there. The woman is a diabetic and her parents, both elderly and ill, said the building's living conditions threatened their daughter's life.

Although most of the residents are



The owner of the building, Anthony Guddemi, lives in this new brick house at 455 Segulne Ave., less than a block away from his boarding house.

considered mentally disabled there are no psychiatric, medical or social services at the boarding house. Richmond Memorial Hospital is less than a block away and a hospital spokesman said residents sometimes come to the hospital clinic.

A source at the hospital said, however, that many of the residents are treated, told to return, but don't and when they eventually do come back they are in much worse condition than when first

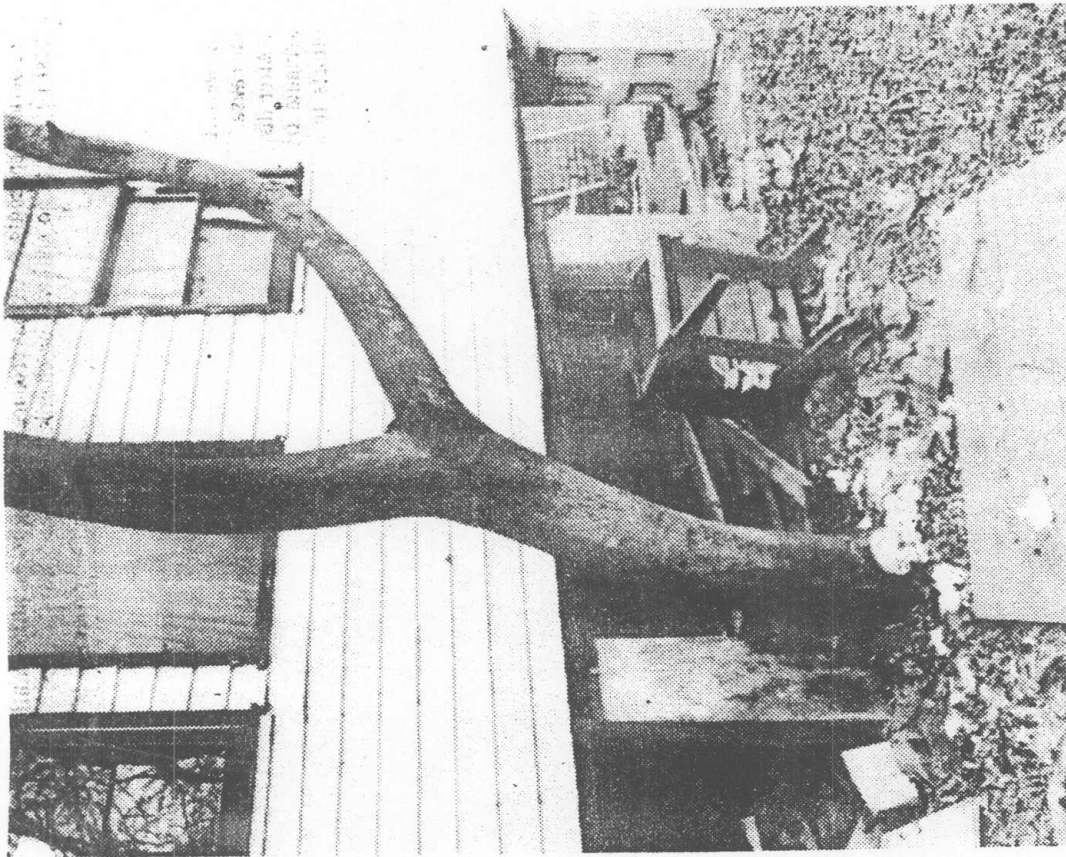
treated.

The source said the residents often attempt to steal items from the hospital's gift shop. He said they often sit in front of the hospital, drinking beer and bothering visitors.

A reporter who visited the building saw one resident with open sores on her legs. She said they "were getting better." Another resident had cuts on her face and arms. Many were thin. Some had glassy eyes, others reddened and

swollen eyes. One man, who sat on his bed rocking, said he never ate. Beer bottles were strewn all over his room. Sources said occasionally persons who attended Richmond Memorial's methadone clinic lived in the former Christmas Tree Inn.

Although none of the residents complained about the building's living conditions, they stated matter of factly that usually there was no food available, but that "Tony," the landlord, gave them



Broken chairs and lumber lie under the former bar and grill which now houses mostly discharged psychiatric patients.

sandwiches. Welfare officials said they, too, had been told that.

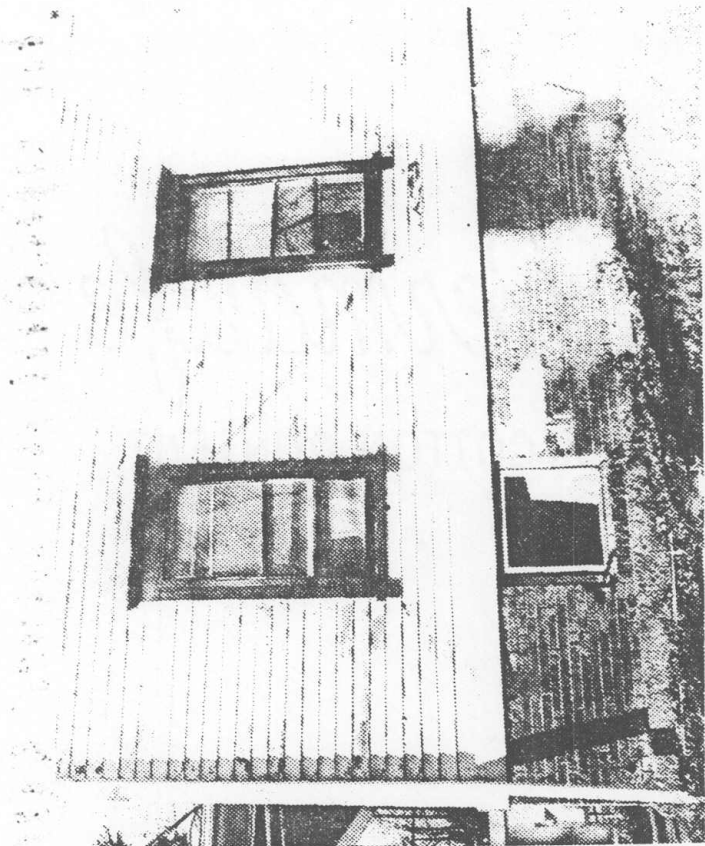
Guddemi said he had "someone" at the Inn to cook for residents. A reporter was there at various meal times and saw no cooking, no cook and no food in the kitchen. One resident said Guddemi often gave them peanut butter and coffee for breakfast.

Guddemi said he indeed did prepare food for residents "because someone has to feed them." He said he was not

aware he needed a license to prepare food or that it was illegal to sell food from his home.

The Christmas Tree Inn was the scene of considerable controversy in 1971 when former Councilman Edward V. Curry of New Dorp attempted to have the building either improved or closed.

Welfare temporarily halted referrals, but recently it has become the repository for persons discharged from psychiatric centers.



The city has been attempting to get the building's owner to clean up violations, some which date back two years. This broken cellar window is one of 32 violations.

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