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Abolishing a Dumping Ground

THE WILLOWBROOK WARS

By David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman.
405 pp. New York: Harper & Row. \$27.95.

By James H. Jones

DAVID J. ROTHMAN, a social historian, and Sheila M. Rothman, a former social worker, have written a powerful, timely and altogether exasperating book. They have plunged into two important controversies in public health policy: First, should severely retarded citizens be removed from large institutions and returned to the community to live under proper supervision and care in small group houses; and, second, should the Federal courts be used as instruments of social change by those who advocate such deinstitutionalization? "The Willowbrook Wars" is an urgent plea for deinstitutionalization and a carefully crafted blueprint to use the courts for social reform. Yet readers who expect scholars to present both sides of any dispute, rather than constantly disparage one side, will be troubled by it.

The book traces in rich detail and vivid prose the legal battles to shut down the Willowbrook State School, a huge facility built on Staten Island during the 1930's as a model school for mentally

retarded children. From the early 50's Willowbrook became a dumping ground, the place where other state facilities sent their most severely retarded, most seriously handicapped and most violent cases. By design or by accident, it rapidly became the home of the largest concentration of blacks and Puerto Ricans of any state institution for the mentally retarded.

Willowbrook routinely housed about a third more people than its stated capacity, and operated with a third less staff than its budget allowed. The ratio between residents and staff in some of the back wards approached 60 to 1. The results were predictable — Willowbrook failed, and failed miserably, to offer its clients adequate education or even decent care. The Rothmans argue persuasively that, had it not been for a small group of young Turks on the staff, Willowbrook would be unchanged today. They say that the bureaucrats in charge were complacent and self-serving, that the State Legislature had historically ignored pleas for necessary budget increases, and successive governors were equally disinterested.

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In January 1972, a television exposé, engineered by dissident staff members and filmed by Geraldo Rivera, an ABC television reporter, caught the public's attention and made conditions at Willowbrook a news story. In March 1972, a coalition of civil libertarians, associations representing the mentally retarded and angry relatives filed a class action suit, New York Association for Retarded Children



A patient at Willowbrook — more like "a prison than a school"?

(ARC) v. Rockefeller, in the Federal District Court on behalf of Willowbrook's residents, hoping either to force the State to make dramatic improvements or to shut the school down. In post-World War II American history, lawyers have replaced the politicians and social workers of earlier reform cycles as the most important agents of social reform. In the Willowbrook case, when the plaintiffs could not agree about their goals, the lawyers, fierce advocates of deinstitutionalization, prevailed.

The Rothmans do an excellent job of mapping out the legal strategy in New York ARC v. Rockefeller. The case was built on the charge that Willowbrook resembled a prison more than a school, a key point to Mr. Rothman, a noted historian of penal institutions. Bruce Ennis, chief counsel, argued that a pattern of abuse and neglect existed in Willowbrook that violated the residents' right to habilitation, from which it followed that the State had violated rights guaranteed to