

TRUE LIFE STORIES

A HOME OF THEIR OWN

This year, Christmas Eve at 48 AB Executive Way will be much the same as Christmas Eve anywhere else. A pile of gifts tied with colored ribbons and bows will be placed beneath a seven-foot tree trimmed with powder-blue doves, twinkling lights and yards of silver garland. Stockings will be hung above a brick fireplace in the living room, and upstairs, household members will rest fitfully, awaiting the moment when they can rush down and tear the wrapping from their holiday prizes.

But this is no ordinary household. The six women who live here are all mentally retarded. And four of them once lived in the Willowbrook State School, an institution for the retarded in Staten Island, New York, that was known as "America's concentration camp."

Jean,* now 47, came to Willowbrook in 1955. Her mother had died, and as is the case with many of Willowbrook's residents, her

Once considered ineducable, five happy women make preparations for holiday fun with the help of manager Marie Ortiz (second from right).

The nightmare of Willowbrook is over. Today these mentally retarded adults live in homes filled with love
by Joseph L. McCarthy

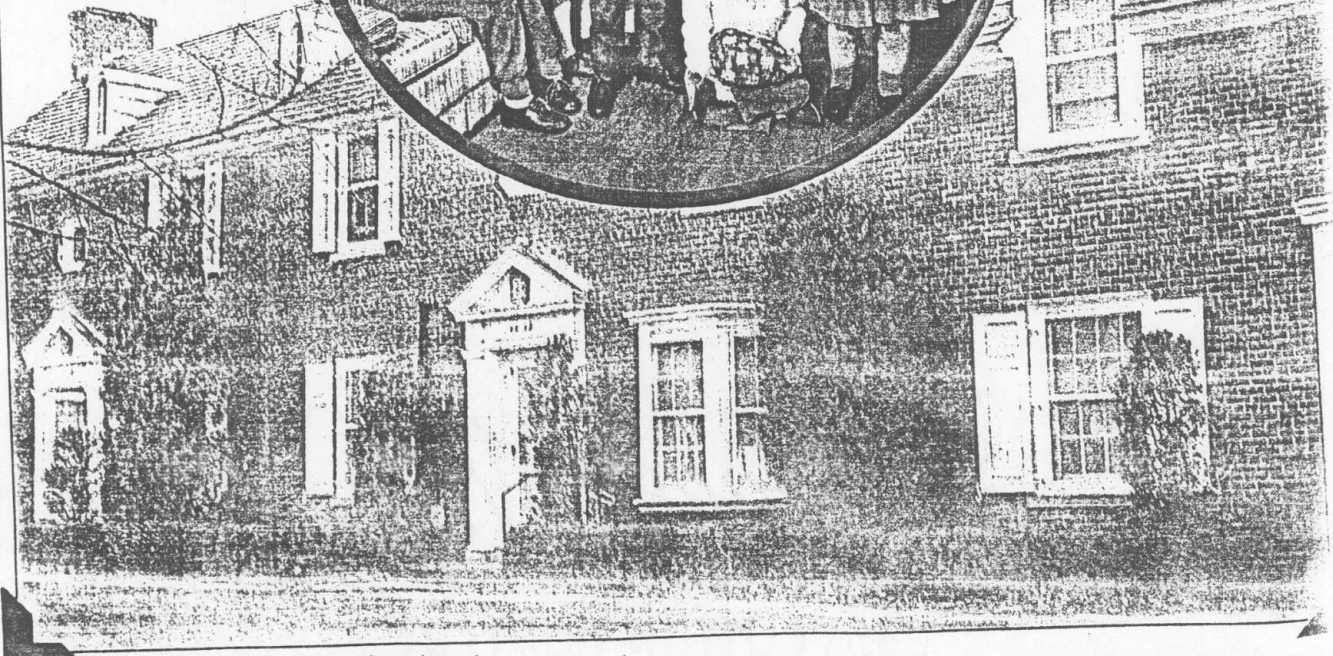
surviving family was no longer able to care for her. Often, in anger, she would attack those around her or violently smash her head against the wall. After several years at the school, she was moved to building number two, where heavy sedation, straitjackets and solitary confinement were commonplace.

Mary entered Willowbrook in 1960 at the age of seven. She was diagnosed as severely retarded, hyperactive and epileptic. One day, after ripping an attendant's uniform, she was transferred to a ward that housed 60 other highly disturbed, violent patients. "My little girl came out of that building blind in one eye, with a broken nose and scars all over her body," says Mary's mother.

Jean and Mary still live at Willowbrook, but now that once-dreaded name stands only for a (please turn to page 68)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MYRON MILLER



*The names of the residents have been changed.