

National news

Ex-cop recalls horror day at Willowbrook

BY ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

A cop called to remove potentially explosive chemicals from the former Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook in 1985 says that when he walked into one of the abandoned buildings there, he found "human body parts strewn all over the floor."

Emergency Services cop-turned-author Paul Ragonese relates this tale of horror in a book "The Soul of a Cop," St. Martin's Press (with Berry Stainback),

\$19.95.

He writes that he saw "rats...eating the decayed flesh off body parts, many belonging to children. There was human feces, rat feces, pigeon feces, and mouse feces everywhere."

Ragonese says in his book that his day began on Dec. 6, 1985 with a call to remove picric acid from the College of Staten Island in Sunnyside. Picric acid can explode if it has been sitting for a long period of time, when it crys-

talizes.

While at the college, Ragonese says he was told by a chemist there, who also had worked at Willowbrook, that picric acid was housed there.

According to a Page 1 story in the Advance the next day, 40 cops and firemen cleaned the acid from the College of Staten Island, and then went to Willowbrook, where the chemicals were found in Building 2.

At the time, the developmental

center's evening administrator told cops that the building had been used "as a medical treatment building and morgue, besides a laboratory," according to the Advance story.

Ragonese says in his book that he was told the Willowbrook building had been closed for 17 years. But he writes that there was evidence that someone was living in the building that day.

He spotted a mattress on the floor, and next to it a partially

eaten can of beans, along with "the bodies of a dozen pigeons. The heads had been torn or bitten off and were nowhere in sight, as if they had been eaten."

Later, Ragonese writes that a "retarded man in his 40s" tried to get back into the building, where he apparently was living.

Ragonese says that it took more than an hour to remove the picric acid and other chemicals found.

"I still get the shakes thinking

about it," Ragonese was quoted as saying this morning in a Manhattan tabloid.

A spokesman for the Office of Mental Retardation was also quoted as saying that Ragonese probably discovered human organs in jars.

"Walking into a pathology department can be a shock," he was quoted as saying, but found "it difficult to believe" that body parts were found all over.