

# The Lives They Left Behind

## SUITCASES FROM A STATE HOSPITAL ATTIC

When Willard Psychiatric Center in New York's Finger Lakes region closed in 1995 after 126 years of operation, hundreds of suitcases were discovered in the attic of an abandoned building; this luggage belonged to men and women who were involuntarily admitted to the facility from the late 19<sup>th</sup> – mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

From the steamer-trunks, cardboard boxes, duffle-bags, and suitcases, essential details surfaced about these people's lives. Their asylum years, as traced in the medical records, contrast dramatically with the richness and poignancy of their belongings: letters, photographs, diaries, and religious items; evidence of careers, like nurses' collars, an army uniform, needlework, and photography equipment; and everyday items like clothing, housewares, books and personal papers. The suitcases speak to aspirations, accomplishments, community connections, and also to loss and isolation; they depict their owners' lives in all their variety and complexity.

These stories shed light on the history of mental health care in America through a series of very personal lenses. Each portrait provides an opening to consider some of the issues that affected these people: poverty, displacement, physical illness, loss of loved ones, the experience of hearing disembodied voices, religiously driven guilt and rare acts of redemption, and the many ways in which the psychiatric system failed them.



The suffering illustrated by the lives of the suitcase owners continues today, often differing more in form than in substance from the lives of mental patients 75 or 100 years ago. If hospital stays are now considerably shorter, they are no more marked by recovery than in the days of the large state hospitals like Willard. While many fewer people now spend decades in hospitals, tens of thousands live in group homes, nursing homes, board-and-care facilities, or the street, largely isolated from their communities. Thousands more languish in jails and prisons. For many, the drugs intended to help them cause secondary disabilities, and, with increasing frequency, early death from ailments like heart disease and diabetes.

As long as there have been asylums and mental hospitals, there have been patients who find their confinement an injustice. The modern ex-patients' movement began in the 1970s, taking its inspiration from the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the disability movement. Like these groups, ex-patients and their allies are concerned with human and civil rights, with prejudice and discrimination, and they work toward a future in which the larger society will recognize the full humanity of people with psychiatric disabilities.

To learn more about the suitcase owners, the history of mental health policy and treatment from the perspectives of patients, and the movement for human rights in psychiatry, visit [www.SuitcaseExhibit.org](http://www.SuitcaseExhibit.org)



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