



EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART

EDUCATOR PACKET

***The Lives They Left Behind:  
Suitcases  
from a State Hospital Attic***

March 3 – May 27, 2007

## **Introduction**

1995, during the closure of Willard Psychiatric Center in New York's Finger Lakes region, several hundred suitcases filled with the personal belongings of former patients were discovered. The Lives They Left Behind presents excerpts of personal and hospital history surrounding Willard by displaying 5 original suitcases and a selection of their contents. These groupings of artifacts that may read much like a portrait of still life. These suitcases and their contents illuminate the rich complex lives the individual patients led before they were committed to Willard and speak to their aspirations, accomplishments, and community connections as well as their loss and isolation.

The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic was developed by The Community Consortium and is circulated by The Exhibition Alliance, Inc., Hamilton, NY.

Willard Asylum admitted its first patients in 1869. Overlooking Seneca Lake, this mental institution was the one designated for patients from throughout New York State who were not expected to recover. Many of the early residents arrived in this idyllic environment after years of incarceration in dismal almshouses. Before long, a largely self-sustaining community was created at Willard, relying on unpaid patient labor as much as on workers from the surrounding areas.

In 1890, the Asylum was renamed Willard State Hospital, and its mission changed. Instead of serving only as a place of last resort for the entire state, Willard was given a more prominent role in the treatment of patients from the adjacent counties. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, patients from beyond those counties were again sent to Willard when they seemed to require a longer-term stay. The daily census rose steadily, with overcrowded wards and

deteriorating conditions for all. The hospital's original purpose as a bucolic rural retreat was lost in the grim realities of institutional life.

By 1950, New York operated 30 state hospitals with more than 120,000 patients, and Willard's census reached an all-time high of 4,076. The mental health system was seriously overburdened, and conditions within the institutions were often harsh. Starting in the late 1950s, state hospitals began to rely on newly developed drugs to control

patients crammed into ever-tighter living quarters. In 1974, state hospitals were renamed "psychiatric centers," to reflect the fact that they provided services to patients in the community as well as in the hospital. Political and economic factors resulted in a shift away from long-term institutional -ization and, in the same year, Willard's patient census had declined to less than one thousand, which was the population until the facility closed in 1995

## Teacher Background on the Exhibit:

This exhibition examines the enigmatic lives of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century patients at the Willard Psychiatric Center. When the hospital closed in 1995, hundreds of trunks and suitcases belonging to deceased patients, admitted to Willard between 1898 and 1965, were discovered. The contents of the suitcases, now in the New York State Museum's history collections, reveal much about the lives of those affected by long-term institutionalization.

Many suitcases were empty, some contained items not permitted on the wards, and a few held personal belongings. With rare exceptions, the owners never saw their suitcases again. The contents show connections to family, friends and communities prior to a mental illness diagnosis and offer evidence of the owners' varied lives, in striking contrast to the institutional life imposed upon them.

Through primary documents and the observation of objects, the students will have a unique opportunity to imagine life in a mental institution during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Exhibit Goals:

- The exhibit aims to tell the story of the lives and the treatment of persons deemed mentally ill during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- The exhibit aims to familiarize the public with the important issues such as mental health care and

the particular ways in which these issues manifest themselves within New York State, past and present.

## Exhibit Contents:

- Background information into how the suitcases were acquired
- Photos of Willard's grounds, architecture and interiors.
- Artifacts from the institution (grave markers, banners, window)
- Selected suitcases and trunks with contents displayed
- Biographies of the people who owned each suitcase or trunk

Further information on Willard Psychiatric center:

Dwyer, Ellen. *Homes for the Mad: Life Inside two nineteenth-century Asylums*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Watrous, Hilda. *The County Between the Lakes; A Public History of Seneca County, New York, 1876-1082*. Waterloo, New York: Seneca County Board of Supervisors. C1982

Website: [suitcaseexhibit.org](http://suitcaseexhibit.org)

## Lesson: Honors Humanity

Through sharing their life stories and personal belongings, this exhibit honors the lives of some of the patients from Willard and others like them who were removed from their communities and whose existence was invisible to society.

- Name some specific groups of people who have been honored by memorials?
- How were they memorialized? (statues, songs, museums, books, holidays)
- Brainstorm and research the variety of reasons someone might seek out help for mental issues (Extension: research through interviews, including an investigation of their lives – interests, careers, family, etc.)
- Create a sculptural memorial that honors the dignity of the suffering of those dealing with mental problems.
- Identify an appropriate place to display these objects and write wall text communicating the process.

Suggested Optional Materials:

- Found objects
- Magazine, newspapers (text)
- Papier-mâché
- Paint
- Photographs
- Video

## Public Service Announcements (PSA)

Background: PSAs in the United States:

The most common topics of PSAs are health and safety, although any message considered to be "helpful" to the public can be a PSA. A typical PSA will be part of a public awareness campaign to inform or educate the public against smoking or compulsive gambling, for example. Often, a celebrity may promote a foundation and ask for support from viewers or listeners, an example being Michael J. Fox's PSAs in the U.S. supporting research into Parkinson's Disease, or featuring "scaring straight" Crips street gang leader Stanley "Tookie" Williams from prison, urging the young not to join gangs. Also, the military produces PSAs to recruit enlistees, alongside paid advertising and sponsorship efforts.

**Group Activity** – PSA for mental health awareness and encouragement for school peers to seek help

- Research contemporary PSAs and discuss the messages they communicate
- What are the techniques used to communicate the message?

- Brainstorm ideas for creating a one to two minute PSA that will be presented to your class or other audience
- Think about using elements, such as music, setting (props – background construction to communicate location PSA is being presented in (outside, specific type of indoor space, etc.)
- Develop script, use story board to plan PSA
- Assign tasks for each group member – who will speak and how – (examples: acted-out testimonials from point of view of someone with depression, listing statistics, inform people where to seek help, etc.)
- Extension: video tape PSAs and display in school lobby

## **The Meaning of Belongings**

As in this exhibition, personal belongings can communicate many things about a person, including life experiences, family, interests and things that are important to them.

- After viewing the exhibition and researching the accompanying web site – [suitcaseexhibit.org](http://suitcaseexhibit.org), identify what the patients' belongings communicate about their lives.
- If you were going to move away to a new place and could only take one big suitcase with you, what would take?
- Bring in some of these selected objects and create a still life drawing that integrates text through out the composition describing why the belonging would be included.