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*—The Editor*

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## Change and Controversy at Glenwood State School

**by Becky Wilson Hawbaker**

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reform movement already sweeping the United States. Across the country, parents of children with disabilities were joined by progressive professionals in psychology and special education and by investigative journalists, all calling for reform of America's institutions for people with disabilities.

Although many worked quietly behind the scenes—organizing grassroots groups, conducting research, and educating the public—Alfred Sasser was one of the more visible and vocal crusaders, and his showboating style would generate conflict as well as reform. But Sasser was only one agent of change, and the events at Glenwood only one chapter, in a movement steering the nation towards a new understanding of the needs, capabilities, and rights of people with disabilities.

**R**eform had never come easily. In the early 19th century, care for those with mental retardation varied enormously. Those with wealth sometimes cared for family members with disabilities within their own homes, as did some families with less means. But the public solution was for local governments to "bid out" or contract with individuals to care for those with mental retardation (especially severe retardation), or to operate local almshouses, poor farms, and county homes.

By mid-century, however, reformer Samuel Howe argued that those with mental retardation could be "trained for industry, order, and self-respect," and crusader Dorothea Dix exposed the horrific conditions of poor houses and demanded that states shoulder their share of the responsibility by building specialized institutions. By the 1870s and 1880s, according to psychologist R. C. Scheerenberger, these reforms had ironically translated into much larger residential facilities that "were located in isolated rural areas, and [had] established admission policies of accepting mildly retarded and normal epileptic persons."

Meanwhile, the medical world was broadly implicating heredity as the cause for much mental retardation. Again, Scheerenberger writes, "Mentally retarded persons were no longer viewed as 'unfortunate' or 'innocents' . . . [but] as undesirable, . . . the social parasite, criminal, prostitute, pauper. Anyone remotely connected with the possibility of transmitting mental retardation was viciously attacked, including the immigrant."

By the early 20th century, this stereotype of the "feeble-minded" as amoral and dangerous menaces to society had profound consequences. It fueled immi-

gration restrictions and quotas targeting the "defective" and the "less desirable" nationalities—meaning, southern and eastern European immigrants. And it justified eugenic measures such as institutional sterilizations and marriage restrictions—especially for women of childbearing age.

By World War I, Scheerenberger says, "large isolated facilities offering minimum programming . . . were consistent with society's decision to remove the retarded and epileptic from within their midst; place them in a remote area beyond sight, thought and conscience; and treat them as indentured servants in order to reduce operational costs."

Simply put, "protecting the deviant from society" had shifted to "protecting society from the deviant." With this emphasis on protecting society and the gene pool, coupled with a pervasive belief in the psychology community that mental retardation was incurable and unchangeable, the prevailing approach became one of storing or warehousing people, rather than rehabilitating or educating them.

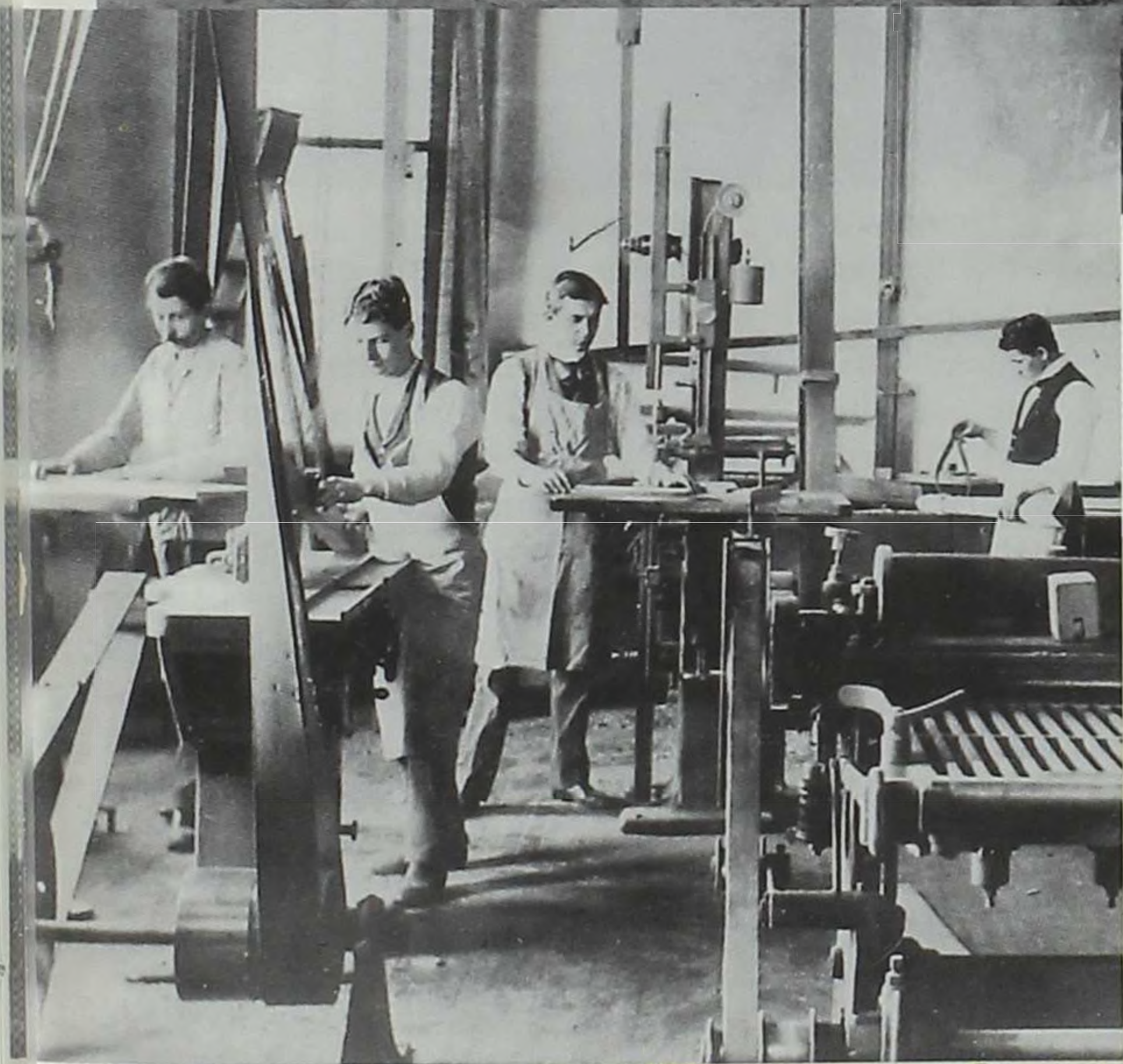
This long slide into neglect and "custodialism" reached its low point by mid-century. Between 1934 and 1943—while American resources were prioritized for ending the depression and winning the war—the number of people with mental retardation in institutions rose by 40 percent, compared to only a 20 percent increase in the U.S. population. Scheerenberger paints a grim picture: "Rows of beds, end to end, in colorless, drab wards typified most institutions."

**T**hus, by the 1950s, Glenwood State School was no different than most American institutions. Unfortunately, being "woefully overcrowded" was nothing new for the Iowa institution; already in 1877 its first biennial report had complained of crowded conditions.

Located on a rise just beyond the small town of Glenwood in southwest Iowa, the "Asylum [later, "Institution"] for Feeble-minded Children" had been founded in 1876 to provide care, support, training, and instruction for children with epilepsy and "feeble-mindedness." Occupying the earlier site of the Western Branch of the Iowa Soldier's Orphans Home, it admitted both children and adults who were labeled as "feeble-minded" and thus considered (often without any formal assessment) unable to function in society.

Renamed "Glenwood State School" in 1941, the institution typified U.S. institutions in other ways as well. Like many institutions, Glenwood was embarking on several positive reforms; it unlocked a ward of





Large institutions such as Glenwood (shown here, circa 1905) relied heavily on the productivity of their trained residents in farming, gardening, woodworking, and other work at the institution. In 1903/05, the total value of agricultural and manufactured goods produced at Glenwood was equal to one-seventh of its total expenditures.

Institution, Glenwood, Iowa.





"custodial patients" in Mogridge Hall in 1957, following the lead of Iowa's mental health institutions earlier that year. And, as at many institutions, the custodial approach prevailed at Glenwood, thus meeting the essentials of survival—food, shelter, clothing—and functioning to warehouse people with disabilities for most of their lives.

Carrie Merritt, an employee of Glenwood State School from 1945 to 1988, believes the custodial label was fair for Glenwood during the 1940s and 1950s because of the high ratio of residents to employees. In 1954, for example, Glenwood had a total residential population of 1,797, and total personnel of 342 (counting employees such as clerical staff who did not work directly with the residents). And of the 342 personnel, only 37 were professional staff (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and therapists).

Liz Stimmel, who was a resident at Glenwood from 1953 to 1959, recalls that overcrowding made sleeping difficult and allowed "no privacy whatsoever." "Their beds were so close together," Carrie Merritt remembers about the residents. "They [the staff] had to put the residents to bed one after the other, they had them all lined against the wall, and they'd pull one bed out to make it, then put it back, then pull another one out into the aisle and make it, put it back. . . . There just was no room and the odor was terrible. . . . With that many people living in one room, the odor just—you just can't get rid of it."

Again, the problem was not unique to Glenwood State School. Scheerenberger reminds us that pervasive overcrowding and understaffing meant that those with more severe disabilities in U.S. institutions often "were not dressed beyond diapers (at best, in some facilities) and simply lay in bed all day."

Photographs survive of Glenwood residents wearing only diapers and in bed restraints, and a 1966 *Psychiatric Reporter* article states: "When the Glenwood State Hospital School in Iowa began its conversion eight years ago from a custodial institution for the mentally retarded to a training center, chains and restraints were still in use there."

James Purkhiser, who worked at Glenwood from 1957 to 1965, remembers that when he first arrived, "they had all kinds of restraints. . . . They tied them in beds and tied them to places. Lord, God, yes . . . big long rags, they would tie and make loops in them and tie their hands to the bed where they couldn't get up. But at that time, understand . . . they knew nothing else, I guess, except 'we'll hold them or we'll restrain them' instead of trying to educate or train or do something with them."

Another mark of custodialism is an absence of educational opportunities and treatment for all residents—often the consequence of inadequate funding, a lack of trained teachers, a need for residents' labor, and the assumption that most residents couldn't learn. Although the Glenwood institution had built a modern school building in 1954, Superintendent Meyer reported to the Board of Control in 1956 that "the educational program is based on the philosophy that many of our children will never master the elementary school fundamentals sufficiently well to be of practical value." Instead, he explained, they were taught, mostly through their work assignments, "basic behavior patterns," including "1. Obedience. 2. Ability to follow directions. 3. Acceptable social conduct. 4. Good work habits. 5. Personal cleanliness. 6. Fundamentals as ability permits." Actually, this was a big step forward, for it at least acknowledged that the goal was to teach the six patterns to all residents, in order to prepare them, as Meyer explained in the school newsletter, for "contented and happy lives . . . at home, at self-supporting work, or in our institution."

In general, there were just too few teachers, and too much work required to maintain the institution, for any but a small percentage of residents to receive much schooling. Although Liz Stimmel had been taught to read and write at the Iowa Annie Wittenmyer Home, she says her formal education was suspended when she was transferred from the Davenport orphanage to Glenwood at the age of nine. "I learnt one skill at Glenwood," Stimmel says. "I had to work in the laundry, and they taught me how to run a great big old mangle. . . . It's like, well, it's a machine, it's just like a pressing cycle. You put sheets [in] and then they would go all the way through the machines and down the other end and you got to grab and fold them. . . . I picked it up real good."

Art Mencl was among the small percentage of residents who did attend classes. Mencl had been court-committed to Glenwood in 1934 after his father was killed and his mother was no longer able to care for him. The staff felt that his disability was mild enough that he would benefit from an education. He went to school half-days and was sent back to the ward for the other half.

Mencl explains that not everyone at the institution got to attend school because "it was too hard for them." He recalls one day when school seemed particularly difficult for him and his friends on the ward: "We all gathered around on our beds and we talked about that and said, 'Now all of you that wants to go





PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE DES MOINES REGISTER

**Ward G** in the girls custodial building at Glenwood was so crowded in 1938 that the girls got in and out of bed by climbing over the end. That year, the state institution housed 1,828 residents (178 beyond capacity), with 274 more on the waiting list.

through with this, well, you stay here, but all of you that don't want to go through with it, if you figure you don't want to make it, then drop out.' We stuck together and then as the years went on, we took and we just went right on through school and that, and then after our schooling was done, that was when they put us to work outside."

Because labor and funds were invariably scarce, many U.S. institutions relied on their residents with milder disabilities as workers. Again, Glenwood was no exception. As Carrie Merritt put it, "The only way you could have 2,000 residents and . . . [far fewer] employees is that the residents did *a lot* of the work." Certainly, the labor required to run Glenwood's 1,185-acre farm, including an 85-acre garden and 65-acre orchard, a dairy and a cannery, taught residents valuable work skills, and also provided the institution with food. But unfortunately, this also meant that the residents most likely to adapt successfully to life outside of the institution seldom received that chance. Because they made good workers inside the institution and because their labor was close to free, institutions had a strong incentive to keep them as "patients" rather than helping them find work and living arrangements outside the institution.

Art Mencl worked a variety of jobs at Glenwood after he completed his schooling there. (He estimates

that he was schooled for three or four years, from age seven to ten or eleven.) He washed tables and cooked in the kitchen. He clerked in the canteen, where residents bought candy and gum with the nickels and dimes they earned in their jobs. He loaded laundry onto a truck and then rode in the back even on the coldest of Iowa's winter days. (One day he passed out from the cold and had to be hospitalized for several days; thereafter, he rode in the cab.) His last job was as an aide at State School, caring for some of the children with most severe retardation. Although Mencl enjoyed most of his jobs, he still bristles when he remembers that he received little or no pay for much of his work: "That was the punishment, working for nothing. So, there was a lot of them up there that didn't like that, but well, I guess there wasn't nothing that they could do about it."

**B**ecause most State School residents needed 24-hour supervision, the institution required a large staff of ward attendants, despite its small budget. The fact that ward attendants were paid low wages and worked in overcrowded conditions, often with very little training, sometimes led to frustration and abuse. Mencl remembers instances when a rule was broken and the ward attendants would "wait 'til



you got back to the ward, and then they'd punish you. . . . They'd take you out in the middle of the floor and they'd beat you up. . . . They would kick you, and knock you down on the floor, or either shout [at] you until you was blue in the face. And that was the rules. It wouldn't do no good to tell anybody about it because they wouldn't do anything about it, and if you told somebody, you'd get a worsen punishment . . . when you got back to the ward." Nevertheless, Mencl insists, "I couldn't hate the people that raised and educated me because if it wasn't for them cracking down on us . . . we would have never learned how to do anything."

Of course, not all attendants were abusive. Liz Stimmel remembers one particular attendant very favorably: "She would do extra things for you that she wasn't supposed to but she did. . . . She just felt like you need[ed] the love and care. She'd bring us in, like, candy and maybe some pop we wasn't supposed to have. . . . She'd go out of her way to help us."

Yet Stimmel also remembers that "when you got punished . . . they stuck you in, like, a room, no lights and . . . they made you take the mattress off your bed and your sheets to cover it up with. And then they gave you, like, a tin can to use as a bathroom. . . . I got in trouble all the time . . . and I got stuck in that room."

The long tradition of custodial care in institutions was a reflection of society's attitudes towards people with disabilities, as William Campbell, Glenwood's current administrator, explains. "Institutions have an evil reputation, as though they were orchestrating all that was happening, when really they are only the responder to what society wants. In the early days, everybody was committed to these places. . . . It wasn't these institutions saying, . . . 'We sure wish you'd come here.' We had to deal with what we had. [The

state gives] you so much money and we take all comers, and . . . these places swelled to unreasonable proportions and size."

"Institutions," Campbell emphasizes, "are a product of society."

That "product" would begin to change, as would American society in the 1950s, prodded by research on the learning capacity of people with disabilities, the organization of parent advocacy groups, and the impact of media exposés. In Iowa, these forces soon converged at Glenwood State School.

**F**or most parents in the 1940s and early 1950s, finding out that one's child had a disability like Down syndrome was tantamount to learning that the child was dead. Parents were told by their doctors that there was no hope for the child to ever

lead a normal life, and that the kindest thing to do was to send such children (even infants) to institutions to be with "others of their own kind."

Although public and private institutions were the only options for many families, parents were not always happy with what they found. Helen Henderson recalls that she decided to send her daughter to Woodward

State Hospital and School, in Woodward, Iowa, because there was "no place else. . . . I wasn't happy with them, but where were we to go?"

In many institutions, parents found abuse and neglect. And in almost every institution, for a variety of reasons including underfunding and overcrowding, they found a philosophy of custodialism. John and Erma Cheyney (whose child was a Glenwood State School resident in the 1950s), described the agony and hard choices that parents faced: "For too many years we have put our children in the State institution for one reason or another—and they are good reasons, re-



**An early view of Mogridge Hall at Glenwood State School. Parents of a child with mental disabilities had few choices but to send the child to a large institution, often far from home, family, and community.**



ardless of what outsiders might think—and have spent sleepless nights and long days wondering and worrying about the care, happiness and contentment of our youngsters. But because of our bewilderment, ignorance, and lack of strength, we didn't know what to do about the things that distressed us."

Finally, for some parents, having a child with mental retardation was a source of shame and bewilderment. Should it be kept secret? Were they somehow to blame? What was best for the entire family?

Then, in the early 1950s, a new genre of books and articles, which historian James Trent calls "parent confessionals," began to change those perceptions of shame. Author Pearl Buck wrote one of the earliest parent confessionals—first as an article in *Ladies' Home Journal* and then as a book, *The Child Who Never Grew*. Both were published in 1950. Describing her 25-year struggle to raise her daughter, Buck recommended that children with disabilities should be allowed to live at home as long as possible. In 1952, John P. Frank, a prominent professor of constitutional law and the parent of a son with a mental disability, wrote *My Son's Story*; excerpts appeared in *Reader's Digest*.

In 1953, Dale Evans Rogers, wife and show business partner of Roy Rogers, wrote *Angel Unaware*, the story of the short life of their daughter Robin. Evans, writing in the voice of Robin, declared that all "special children" should be raised at home, and that Evans and Rogers "weren't ashamed of their little 'borderline Mongoloid' [although] a lot of parents are, you know." *Angel Unaware* was the third best-seller for the year, behind the Bible and *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

As these parent confessionals reached mainstream audiences, the concept took hold that mental retardation occurred among both the wealthy and the poor, in obscure and prominent families alike. It was neither a mark of shame nor a result of social class.

Bolstered by the growing acceptability of admitting to disabilities in one's family, parents began to form networks and organizations, first to support each other, and later to advocate for more choices for their children. One such group was NARC, the National Association for Retarded Children. Formed in Minneapolis in 1950, it joined together 88 local ARC groups.

Comprising mainly middle- and upper-class parents, local ARC chapters sprang up across the United States. In Cedar Falls, Iowa, parent advocate Helen Henderson devoted years to speaking to the public

and organizing local ARCs in 94 of Iowa's 99 counties; she eventually served as president of the Iowa Association for Retarded Children.

Many professionals, such as William Campbell, who worked at the Cherokee Mental Health Institute in the 1950s and would later become superintendent at Glenwood State School in 1969, also joined local ARCs (Campbell was a charter member of the Cherokee ARC) and supported their advocacy efforts.

NARC would become one of the most powerful parent groups in the country, forcing changes in the law by lobbying legislators and filing lawsuits, and providing local services like special education classes when school districts would not. Although NARC's motto—"Retarded Children Can Be Helped!"—now seems so obvious as to sound condescending, it was a truly revolutionary concept in its time, even to the professional community. For years, psychologists and educators had believed that children with mental retardation could not learn, that IQ was unchangeable, and that mental retardation (by its 1941 definition) was "incurable."

In the 1930s and increasingly in the 1950s, however, psychological and educational research was starting to show something different, and by 1959 the thinking had shifted enough that the American Association on Mental Deficiency redefined "mental retardation," dropping the earlier reference to incurability.

One of the earliest studies to find evidence that mental stimulation could increase IQ was actually conducted at the Glenwood institution in 1939. Harold Dye, its superintendent from 1935 to 1939, was involved with the research of psychologist Harold Skeels of the State University of Iowa's Child Welfare Research Station.

The two-year study, coauthored by Skeels and Dye, found that a group of young orphans with mental retardation who received individual love and attention from adults on a Glenwood ward increased their IQs into the normal range, whereas a control group of orphans with normal IQs who remained in a deprived environment with limited adult contact declined significantly in IQ scores.

The findings regarding IQ sparked a major debate in the professional community, and although most of Skeels and Dye's contemporaries did not accept their findings, the study is now considered a landmark. And despite seemingly clear implications for treatment for all Glenwood residents, there is no evidence that Dye or Skeels used the study's findings to argue



for increased state appropriations for teaching staff, rehabilitative programming, or any other meaningful reform at Glenwood.

While researchers pondered IQ, the nation was seeing another side of the disabilities issue. During World War II, Americans with disabilities had contributed mightily to the war effort. "Tens of thousands" served in the military, Scheerenberger notes. "A mental age of 8 was found adequate for the Army, 10 for the Navy."

Others worked in defense plants and factories, helped with salvage drives, harvested crops, and canned foodstuffs. According to historian Joan Gittens, advocates for those with disabilities "lost no opportunity to contrast the democracies' emphasis on individual rights and protection of the vulnerable with the fascists countries' ruthless state dominance and determination to create a master race by . . . [exterminating] those they deemed unfit."

For thousands of veterans after the war, reentry into the work force and community life was complicated by disabilities acquired during the war. Public demands spurred federal and state governments to create vocational rehabilitation programs and to fund training and research. Professional associations raised inspection standards for institutions for those with physical and mental disabilities.

Thus, "by the 1950s, the need for institutional reform was righteously proclaimed from both within and without," Scheerenberger chronicles. "Administrators, practitioners, and parents were uniformly decrying current conditions."

Reformers were aided by journalists who found that exposing deplorable conditions in institutions produced dramatic human-interest stories. As historian James Trent points out, "Some of America's leading reporters (Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, Mike Gorman then of the *Tulsa Daily Oklahoman*, and Al Ostrow of the *San Francisco News*, for example) gained recognition by exposing conditions in institutions around the nation."

This rising tide of reform swept into Iowa in the late 1950s, leading to many changes in its institutions, especially at Glenwood State School. Searching for a new Glenwood superintendent to replace retiring V. J. Meyer, the Iowa Board of Control of State Institutions apparently wanted an individual uniquely qualified to provide rehabilitation services

and to carry through with changes that had just begun to remedy the overcrowding.

The Board of Control had found that individual—Alfred Sasser, superintendent of Muscatatuck State School in Indiana—but an exception would have to be made. By tradition and by state law, the superintendent of a state institution was supposed to be a medical doctor. Sasser told the Board of Control that although he held master's degrees in hospital administration and psychology and a Ph.D. in education, he was not a medical doctor.

Sasser's credentials did include the 1955 American Psychiatric Association Mental Hospital Achievement Award, and because of his reforms at Muscatatuck State School, he had been featured in a chapter titled "How to Reform an Institution" in *Retarded Children Can Be Helped*, a book authored by *Life* magazine staffers. During his first two years at Muscatatuck, according to the book, Sasser had discharged 500 adults (a quarter of the institution's population), and out of 700 school-aged children he had increased the number attending school from 100 to 400. He had expanded the professional staff from 15 to 105, brought in \$25,000 in private donations, and launched a successful volunteer recruiting and training program.

Sasser clearly had a reputation as a reformer, and if that's what the Board of Control wanted—someone who could earn Glenwood a national reputation for quality—they had found their candidate. So, the Iowa General Assembly repealed the requirement that the superintendent be a medical doctor.

What the Board of Control may or may not have known is that Sasser's reforms at Muscatatuck—or his methods for making reforms—had caused vehement controversy. Perhaps the changes had been too big, too fast. Perhaps Sasser's hiring policies, which did not coincide with longtime county patronage traditions, were what incited a very vocal opposition, as James Purkhiser (Sasser's colleague at Muscatatuck) believes. Sasser called it "character assassination." "I was the victim of a political frame," he would comment later. "Indiana politicians were out to get me because I wouldn't play ball with them."

Purkhiser recounts how the opposition had "drummed up a thing against one of our staff members" and demanded an investigation. A grand jury was called to hear charges of sodomy against the assistant superintendent and a speech therapist, and claims of communistic leanings among the staff. The grand jury returned indictments against the two employees.

The experience proved to be the last straw for



Sasser, who had been considering the Glenwood job. Sasser had said, "The heck with it. I'm not going to put up with this. I'm going to Iowa," Purkhiser remembers, "and he asked me if I would come."

**A**lfred Sasser arrived in Glenwood in May 1957. The *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune* published several upbeat stories about him that spring, citing his credentials and awards, his book proposals, his speaking engagements for the University of Nebraska Medical College, the Iowa ARC convention in Marshalltown, and the National ARC in Chicago. Reporting that the Board of Control had given Sasser free rein and full cooperation "in a program to speed the correction and release of patients," the newspaper commented, "Mr. Sasser is vitally interested in a rehabilitation therapeutic service."

Basically, Sasser believed that an institution existed to serve the individual needs of its clients. He was explicit that his approach was not "custodial" but rather "rehabilitational," and focused on teaching skills, encouraging normalcy, and working towards independent living outside of the school. Most institutions were still custodial, Sasser had explained in "How to Reform an Institution," and this meant "the kiss of death—all they did with the children was keep 'em, feed 'em, and when they died, put 'em six feet in the ground." Instead, Sasser envisioned an institution that "is not a hospital, not a school, but a rehabilitation center. Any movement forward is rehabilitation. We try to find out what the needs are, then provide [for] them." He was passionate and committed: "I don't believe there are human 'vegetables' and I don't think anyone on the face of the earth knows what the ceiling of a child is."

The public would soon hear more details of Sasser's philosophy, because he spoke to nearly every group that would host him. Sasser was an effective and charismatic speaker, remembers James Purkhiser. "He would give a talk to a group of parents or a group of sorority. He was like a banty rooster. He would come to me and say, 'Purk, I'll have people crying here within ten minutes.' And he would. Now don't get me wrong. What he did was to give examples of . . . what was going on and why the retarded was being de-



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE DES MOINES REGISTER

**P**assionate and persuasive, Alfred Sasser fought for change at Glenwood State School. "That the mentally retarded cannot be helped but must remain dredges of our society," he declared, "is an outmoded and obsolete philosophy, with which Glenwood does not concur."

prived of this and that, what was needed and how they could do things and then give some human interest story. . . . It was always, why, why don't we have more facilities . . . more money and more equipment and materials and supplies when these children need this, this, and this. . . . He would even have the person that voted against giving anything, he would have them handing their hand out ready to give." Purkhiser adds, "He didn't care who he stepped on . . . [if] it was for the benefit of the kids."

Carrie Merritt recalls that Sasser "could convince you that black was white . . . and convince you that he was right. Not [by using] especially big words, but it was just the way he said things." But she also described her former employer at State School as an abrasive person who didn't care what other people



thought. "He was going to do what was right for these residents."

What Sasser thought was right, the townspeople of Glenwood soon discovered, was for State School residents to visit local stores and restaurants. Merritt says, "The people downtown didn't feel that the residents should go downtown at all." She remembers their reaction—"Into MY store?!"—and Sasser's response—"They WILL go down."

"He didn't care whether anybody liked him," Merritt says. "He needed to stir things up. I didn't personally like him, but he did a lot of good things in getting these residents out so they could look after themselves and have a place in the community."

Sasser also believed that reform required a larger and professionally trained staff of psychologists, teachers, social workers, and occupational therapists. Along with Purkhiser, whom he appointed as Glenwood's director of special education, Sasser brought with him a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a social worker, and several other professionals whom he had first hired at Muscatatuck. Eventually six more professional staff members were hired with money from a special legislative appropriation for professional staff. Understanding that he would never have sufficient funds to hire all of the professionals he needed, Sasser also launched a new training initiative for attendants and nurses already on staff, expanding the required classes from 10 hours of general orientation to 55 hours in rehabilitation, mental retardation, and practical nursing.

The expansion of the professional staff coincided with a 4 percent reduction in State School's appropriation from the Iowa legislature. Sasser chose where to cut 4 percent based on his philosophy of "putting the patient first," but these first few decisions would spark resentment and set off the opening skirmish of a two-year war, chronicled in the local newspaper.

**W**hat's going on at the hill?" asked the *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune* in a front-page story about State School on June 20, 1957. "That's what a lot of Mills County residents have been wondering since Dr. Alfred Sasser, Jr., took over . . . at Glenwood a few weeks ago, and in an interview this week he attempted to give some of the answers."

The article detailed several of Sasser's changes and plans: staff training to improve screening and evaluation of the residents; a community-wide Fourth of July celebration on the grounds; and activities to build school spirit (reviving the school newspaper,

launching resident-staff softball games, showing movies weekly rather than monthly). But a few changes had "caused some controversy in the community." Sasser had discontinued the school's daily whistle—by which townspeople had set their watches for years. Sasser said the loud whistle disturbed the residents, cost \$100 a year, and should be reserved to signal emergencies.

The *Opinion-Tribune* reported that "another controversial change" involved State School's sewing department, which made uniforms for all employees and dresses for the female residents. Carrie Merritt remembers the dresses as "just a sack dress with a belt around it" and "very unattractive." Because Sasser believed that residents should dress like the community members that they were, because he believed that he could buy ready-made clothing more cheaply, and because he didn't care whether employees wore uniforms or not, he closed the sewing department and laid off the four women who had worked in it for many years.

Sasser also laid off more employees, mainly attendants, because of the 4 percent budget cuts. This, coupled with the simultaneous hiring of several professionals, stirred up more resentment. In an open letter distributed to all staff, Sasser tried to allay the "gossip" and "feelings of consternation on the part of some personnel." He clarified the budget situation and the separate special appropriation for hiring professionals, and promised to "diligently and consistently fight for restoration of our cut funds as well as additional funds." But discontent continued to simmer.

In early September, Sasser tried to win people over and generate positive publicity by declaring "State School Day." He invited local officials from the Lions and Rotary clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, the fire department, the school board, the State Board of Control, and the general public to a dinner and special program at the institution's new school building. Completed in 1954, the school was now officially dedicated as "Meyer School" after the locally popular previous superintendent, V. J. Meyer, under whose tenure it had been built.

Three hundred people attended, and an *Opinion-Tribune* columnist commented, "In the future, the event will be held annually, and will serve the purpose of acquainting the public with more of the fascinating things that go on at the State School. Strange as it may seem with the State School right here at home, most of us know very little about it." The townspeople were about to find out more than they may have wanted to know.



What really blew the lid off this simmering pot of local discontent was national publicity about a State School resident who had never belonged there. Although staff and the Board of Control had been aware of several such cases for years, these “patients” had remained at Glenwood and the public had remained in the dark—until *Des Moines Register* reporter George Mills came to town.

Mills, who was also an “antique bug,” according to Purkhiser, had come to Glenwood State School to cover a November auction of outdated furnishings and other items from the institution’s attics for the *Register*.

In a 1997 interview, Mills recalled his conversation with Sasser: “I had read an article . . . about a woman

who had given about twenty people with mental retardation very intense training . . . and it boosted their IQs. . . . So I said to him, . . . ‘Do you have any folks up there who could use that?’ and he said, ‘We already have people who have normal IQs,’ and I said, ‘What the hell, what are you talking about?’ ”

Mills then asked to meet one of them and was introduced to 67-year-old Mayo Buckner. Sasser told Mills that although Buckner had an IQ of 120 (which would be 20 points above average), he had been institutionalized for the past 59 years, and that he wasn’t the only one wrongly placed at Glenwood.

“Well, don’t ever think that I didn’t go to town on that. We put that story all over the paper,” Mills relates. “I was so shocked, so angry, that human beings

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE DES MOINES REGISTER



**M**ayo Buckner was about 12 when he posed (far left, second row from bottom) with the institution’s band, about 1902. The institution was aware of his talents: in 1915 a teacher had noted, “Music—perfect rhythm; excellent ear; plays trombone, baritone, violin, cornet, clarinet and cello with equal facility.” By age 67, Buckner had scored music for a 25-member orchestra, taught clarinet to a staff member, and was still living at Glenwood State School.





OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

**As Sasser looks on, Mayo Buckner (in cap) talks with Herschel and Amelia Loveless, on the governor's surprise visit in April 1958. Governor Loveless had been deluged with mail when Buckner became state and national news in November 1957.**

had been incarcerated for no reason at all when they could have had a wife, a family. . . . I [became] emotionally involved."

On November 17, the *Des Moines Sunday Register* headline blasted: "IN HOSPITAL 59 YRS. BY ERROR." George Mills's story detailed Buckner's life: how he was brought to Glenwood in 1898 at the age of eight by his mother, who believed that Buckner needed "special management." She had reported that Buckner had a birthmark and rolled his eyes "and makes a peculiar noise in exact imitation of Blind Boone." Boone was a piano player she had seen perform while she was pregnant with Buckner, and this was surmised as the cause of Buckner's disability classification of "medium-grade imbecile."

Although the admitting official did not administer any sort of formal assessment, Buckner's mother did have to answer questions posed to her on the admissions papers, such as, "Is it good-tempered?" and "Is it inclined to run away?" The *Register* story also quoted from Glenwood's records of Buckner's classwork at the institution ("reads well and understands. . . . Doing long division and fractions") and noted his extraordinary musical abilities—which should have triggered someone to ask: Why is this child here?

Sasser knew part of the answer. For most of Glenwood's history, admissions requirements had been idiosyncratic, to say the least. And because Glenwood had never had the staff to systematically

test its residents, there were a number of "patients," in fact, who did not have mental retardation.

Sasser had already initiated testing of all residents, but he understood the obstacles faced by administrators. "The institutions have had to struggle along with little staff and low appropriations," he told Mills. Glenwood "has a lot of patients who do not belong here," and "a lot of these people can be restored to society."

Sasser was not claiming that there were hundreds of State School residents with above average IQs who were unjustly placed there (although he was correct that Buckner was not alone in this distinction), but rather that hundreds of residents with mild to moderate levels of disabilities could hold jobs and live in their own communities—if prepared for the transition by the necessary psychologists, teachers, social workers, and vocational rehabilitation and occupational therapists. Of course, this approach cost far more than the traditional custodial "warehousing" approach.

**T**he Mayo Buckner story in the *Register* created an instant sensation, and George Mills followed up with profiles on more Glenwood residents with normal IQs. Governor Herschel Loveless, who received thousands of letters about the story, called the situation "a shame on humanity" and ordered an investigation. A *Register* editorial linked "wasted



lives" to "Iowa's backwardness" in mental health care service. "Mentally retarded children who get into the state schools are not brought up to their full potential because of overcrowding and short staffing . . . [and] are not properly diagnosed." Local television and radio stations in Iowa repeated George Mills's story on Mayo Buckner, and it was soon picked up by *Time* magazine.

The *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune* took little note of the flurry of national publicity. A brief story appeared on page four on November 21 ("State School Story Making Headlines"), and a few other articles reported gifts sent to Buckner as a result of the national publicity. Townspeople were talking, however, and many were unhappy that the publicity had cast a bad light on State School before Sasser's administration, and on their town itself—especially since the Chamber of Commerce was in the middle of a big campaign to lure new businesses and industry to town. Just three months earlier, an *Opinion-Tribune* columnist had warned readers, "Do a little less complaining about our shortcomings and a little more bragging about our good points. You can never tell when the stranger at the coffee counter may be an industrial surveyor."

The columnist apparently applied the principle of playing up the good points in commenting on the Buckner story: "It's almost unbelievably tragic for those whole lives to be wasted. But, even so, we don't think that's the most important part of the story, even though it does produce the biggest headlines. . . . The way we see it, . . . the most important part of the story [is] a new testing program . . . [so] future patients will not be admitted if they do not belong there."

Sasser took advantage of the school's new visibility to launch a holiday campaign. Through statewide publicity, he alerted Iowans to the many "forgotten children" at State School who never received letters or visitors and who would benefit immensely from knowing that someone in the world cared about them and their progress. He solicited presents, letters, and

cards, and the public responded with some 10,000 pieces of mail for State School's 1,800 residents.

The *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune* apparently didn't join the "forgotten children" campaign or cover it until December 26, choosing to emphasize the considerable efforts of State School staff and volunteers "from all over the area" to sort gifts and choose recipients. Comparing the scant local coverage to the broadcast and print coverage in Des Moines, Council Bluffs, and Omaha, one senses that the locals were not happy.

Indeed, on January 9 of the new year, the banner headline of the *Opinion-Tribune* admitted: "City Group Seeks Harmony with Sasser." "Criticism of the school has simmered in Glenwood and [the] surrounding area almost from the day Mr. Sasser took over," the paper acknowledged in a detailed report of a meeting of Sasser, the mayor, two Chamber of Commerce representatives, and the president of the local Rotary.

The front-page story began: "Dr. Alfred Sasser, Jr., said Monday he is not a publicity-seeker, does not feel he has had 'outright resistance' from the people of Glenwood, would not dismiss any employee for criticizing his policies, and had no intention of resigning as superintendent of the Glenwood State School."

The issues were now surfacing. One persistent concern was that Sasser was an overactive publicity hound. The paper reported, "Mayor Harper said people had told him they do not mind the adverse publicity if it is a means of helping the patients and not just Mr. Sasser personally."

"I am not out to make a name for myself. I feel I already have," Sasser had replied. "I don't try to sell myself. I do try to sell mental retardation work."

"Publicity about the school is not his design," the story continued, "but comes about because reporters ask him questions and he answers them." (This certainly jibes with the recollection of George Mills, whose *Register* exposé of the Mayo Buckner story had

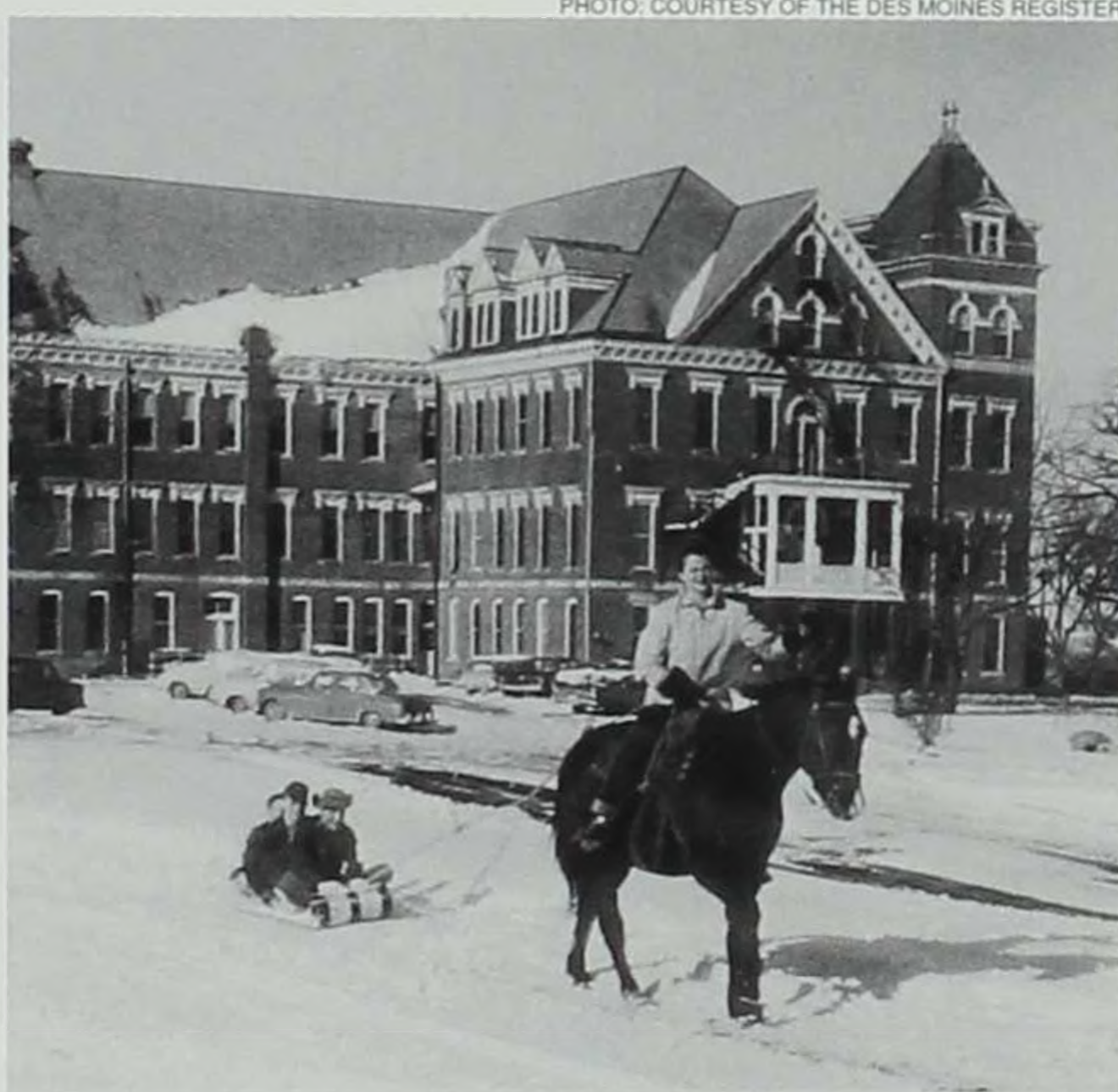


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE DES MOINES REGISTER

**Astride a horse loaned by a Glenwood citizen, State School recreation director Mara Jean Davis takes three residents on a toboggan ride in November 1957. State School appeared often in Iowa newspapers during the 1957 holiday season. Building on its high profile after the Buckner story, Sasser launched a statewide "forgotten children" campaign for Christmas gifts and cards.**



launched national publicity. Interviewed in 1997, Mills was emphatic that Sasser had not come to him with the Buckner story seeking publicity, but that instead Mills himself had found the story, was personally upset about it, recognized its human-interest appeal, and ran with it.)

Item by item at the January meeting, Sasser responded to criticism and rumor: No, he did not think he was "moving too fast" in making "sweeping changes," although he saw that tendency in himself. No, he did not feel the community was hostile. No, he did not discharge "regular employees" so professional staff could be hired, nor did he discharge those who disagreed with him as long as they did their work properly.

On the same day, the local columnist commented on the "simmering State School feud" and encouraged compromise to restore "the old spirit of co-operation and understanding" between State School and southwestern Iowa. Sasser was young and energetic but should slow down, the columnist advised, "because the public is not willing to accept everything he does all at once." In turn, the public should "withhold our too-quick criticism of things we do not understand."

The gist of the front-page story and the column seems to be that the publicity—which had been good for Sasser and his plans for more education and rehabilitation—had in effect indicted all previous administrations and reform efforts as insignificant or non-existent. "Everything done at the school during the nearly 100 years before Dr. Alfred Sasser took over . . . could not have been all wrong," the columnist wrote. "All good things at the school did not originate within the past six months. . . . Many [people in this area] have the impression they are being told that everything they ever did was wrong."

Given human nature, it's not hard to fathom how one might have felt slighted or maligned. For example, hadn't the former superintendent, V. J. Meyer, overseen construction of the new school building, extended classes to more residents, and unlocked at least one ward? And weren't current staff helping implement the new rehabilitation programs? What about the ward attendants, who were coping with personnel cuts, low wages, changes in the work culture, higher job expectations, and evening training sessions after a full workday? Or the local merchants and other townspeople, who were struggling to broaden their understanding of mental retardation and State School's new approach? Many thought that the news coverage only reported "outright resistance" to Sasser

and thus implied that the town was backward, negative, and petty.

Coeducational activities also came up at the January 9 meeting. As part of Sasser's campaign to provide "normalcy" to the lives of State School residents, he had loosened the strict sex segregation rules and provided opportunities for monitored coeducational activities. As he had explained in his training materials for ward attendants, "the separation (and police-like methods for maintaining this separation) can only be conducive to . . . bad sexual behavioral actions. What can you expect when you try to contain basic drives in this manner—a behavioral explosion to be sure. . . . Dances, parties, classes, and other activities with both boys and girls present encourage [them] to find their own identity and discourage homosexual behavior."

His stance was a controversial one, treading on the volatile and historically complex issues of sexuality, reproduction, restricted marriage, and institutional sterilization. The *Opinion-Tribune* didn't dodge the issue. "Instituting more activities at night where boy and girl patients can intermingle so they can learn and grow socially," the paper reported, "has not resulted in pregnancies."

Sasser also dispelled rumors that he planned to send some State School residents to the local public schools. Glenwood was certainly not Iowa's only public school district that did not provide public education classes for students with mental retardation (especially moderate to severe retardation). No wonder: The disability classification then in use nationally—"educable, trainable, and custodial"—essentially reinforced the notion that there were some children with disabilities who could not learn and could not benefit from a public school education.

Granted, some of Iowa's larger and more progressive school districts did provide special education classes by this time. The Des Moines school district had since 1914, and by 1957 was offering special classes and work study to 900 students with mild disabilities—although the local ARC had to offer its own classes for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The much smaller school district of Audubon also provided special education classes. This was after intense lobbying by the local ARC in the mid-1950s, according to Mary Barton, a parent and social worker who later moved to Glenwood. But in most Iowa schools, special education classes would not become a reality until passage of the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, which guaranteed





**B**ernice Chaffin teaches a class at State School, January 1959. Eight students from nearby Malvern and Hastings traveled daily by bus to special education classes at State School. Set up by Alfred Sasser and the Malvern Board of Education, the arrangement was the first such venture in the state, and was seen as a stop-gap measure until Malvern could provide its own special education classes for local students.

a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for all children regardless of disability.

**S**asser's point-by-point defense on January 9 did not keep State School off the front page. Positive and negative publicity continued. In March, the *Opinion-Tribune* reported that the Iowa Jaycees would fund a late-spring trip to Disneyland for 24 Glenwood residents. Purkhiser, as director of special education, remembers the trip as "a tremendous educational tool" for reinforcing functional reading and writing skills, hygiene, and daily living skills.

But on the same page, the paper reported: "Two Physicians Blast New Policies At State School." The two doctors (one had just been dismissed), were "publicly stating some of the allegations . . . that have been circulating locally for months"—including the "mingling of male and female patients [that] . . . may result in serious repercussions"; a reduction in attendants to allow for more administrative staff; the unnecessary relocation of the hospital; "wasted" Christmas presents given to patients "who couldn't appreciate them"; and a disproportionate focus of resources on residents with milder disabilities.

There was probably some truth behind the last





OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

**Sasser points out critical needs at State School to (from left) Monsignor Timothy Gannon (head of psychology at Loras College in Dubuque), Helen Henderson (president of the Iowa ARC), and Mrs. Russell Skelton (of Dickens, Iowa) in February 1958. All three were part of a larger committee, appointed by Governor Loveless in December 1957, to inspect institutions and report their findings to a professional advisory group. Pleading for more funds, Sasser told his visitors: "It's ridiculous to ask someone to work for 120 dollars a month. But that's the starting salary for attendants."**

charge. Sasser and his staff had publicly pledged to release residents who didn't belong at State School—"to quit using institutions as dumping grounds," as Purkhiser puts it. But this required intense training and rehabilitation, far more costly than simply feeding and clothing them. The staff understood the demands. They had given up free evenings to teach classes in social skills besides the daytime job training. Purkhiser remembers the effort required: "We found homes and farms and some factories or places that these kids could [work]. . . and then we kind of doubled our hours to make sure we could check on them . . . make sure they were not being taken advantage of."

The community placement of State School residents was complicated by the relative dearth of com-

munity-based resources; it would take President John F. Kennedy's focus on mental retardation, and considerable funding, before communities responded with local social service agencies, job training, group homes, and other local services. However, one resource already in place was the State Vocational Rehabilitation Program in Des Moines.

When they were ready to be placed out, Glenwood residents were sent to Des Moines for an intense evaluation by Vocational Rehabilitation staff, who would then help them find jobs in the Des Moines area. A number of Glenwood residents featured in George Mills's exposés were sent to Des Moines in this way, and Mills maintained a relationship with them for years. "Mr. George Mills takes me out nearly every



Sunday afternoon," one wrote to Sasser from Des Moines. "Mr. Mills is planning to take us Glenwood boys out for a Sunday ride over to the airport."

Considering the time, money, and human resources available to Sasser, his placement efforts were fairly successful: between March 1, 1958, and March 1, 1959, a total of 41 State School residents were placed out of the institution and into jobs ranging from nursing home attendant to auto body technician. More compelling than numbers are the comments sent to the school's director of vocational rehabilitation by former residents. One wrote, "I never thought outside life could be so wonderful. I want to be free. May God Bless You Always." And another: "I like living in Des Moines very much as it gives me a chance to be independent to myself."

But was "a chance to be independent"—secured by only a small percentage of State School residents, and requiring significant resources—paid for by neglecting residents with more severe disabilities? Some evidence suggests yes. It was, in fact, true that there were fewer ward attendants than in previous years and that more were needed to care for the residents. A nurse would later charge that there was a "marked increase in the number of ward patients referred to the hospital with fecal compactions, impetigo and even body lice." It is also true, however, that Glenwood attendants were better prepared than before, with training in positive discipline, practical nursing, and understanding of mental retardation, and with ongoing job evaluations and feedback.

Certainly Sasser had no intention of slighting residents with moderate or severe retardation. His rehabilitation program included every resident of State School, not just those with mild disabilities. "Helping the individual with . . . [a] disability to attain his fullest potential is the prime motive of the Glenwood program," Sasser wrote in his 1958 biennial report. "Primary consideration is given to: 1. Equipping the individual to live a life that is as nearly normal as possible in the community; 2. Equipping the individual who cannot reach the capacity of normal living in society to live more fully within the environs of the institution."

Purkhiser recalls the perspective: "Maybe they [the children] can only learn to zip their zipper or maybe they can just turn over to smile. And we used to look at these kids . . . and say, 'hey, this is what they're going to be if we don't provide an education for them.' And from that, regardless of what their progress [was] . . . whatever they could do, whatever

they were capable [of], whatever they could achieve . . . we felt was important. And that is the way we taught our staff. . . . If they progress farther, that was great." The whole idea, says Purkhiser, was "to let those kids have an opportunity, to educate them, to have programs for them. But then also to take these people who have been misplaced in the institution and move them out."

A letter from a ward attendant also attested to expanded opportunities for residents with severe disabilities. Her letter appeared in the September 1959 State School newsletter. She wrote: "A little more than two years ago the 'Rehabilitation Program' was introduced to the Glenwood State School. By this we mean teaching every child to his or her highest capability. The Glenwood State School was formerly under a custodial administration . . . three fourths of these children [on my ward] were in restraints, not allowed to run and play as they desired." But since "the rehabilitation program came into effect . . . our children can walk to their meals. . . . [go] to entertainments, a playground has been set up . . . and sandboxes which every one of them enjoy. . . . Also included in our building is a school room taught by Mrs. Ralph Mayberry. It is a happy moment for our children when they see Mrs. Mayberry arrive. . . . There is a birthday party held once a month so every child has a birthday party. It is my pleasure to see these little girls made happy with doing the things they are capable of doing."

Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Collins of Danbury saw things differently. Every three weeks they visited their 12-year-old at State School, the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* reported, and each time "conditions seem to be getting worse." The Collinses said, "It is like putting a bunch of rat terriers and bloodhounds together to fight it out as there are 35 to 40 girls in the ward, from 8 to 16 years of age. The doors are locked and they are left alone much of the time without supervision. It is no wonder that we sometimes find our girl with a black eye or cut lips. . . . It seems like the severely retarded children are being neglected the most at this school."

State School again became the center of national attention. *Life* magazine published a long story on Mayo Buckner and Sasser's reforms in its March 24, 1958 issue. Most of the information had appeared earlier in the *Des Moines Register* and *Time*, but new material in *Life* was particularly damning to previous administrations.

"A standard punishment for those who did try to escape before Sasser's time was confinement to one of





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the 'side rooms,' makeshift cells in the dormitories," the article described. "The side rooms were small . . . and had one strong door and one heavily screened window. Overhead a powerful light bulb glowed 24 hours a day. In addition to the bulb the only object in the room was a bucket. Men were confined to these rooms, naked, three at a time, for periods of days or weeks. They would scratch at the plaster walls with their fingernails until they worked through to the lath. Sometimes, finding a metal nail in the lath, they would write on the walls. Over many years the walls and even the ceilings became covered with inscriptions. In one side room, for example, there are more than 500 inscriptions, only two of which are obscene. In contrast the word 'love' appears dozens of times as does the Christian cross, together with many phrases such as 'Mom and Dad' and 'I love my God very much.'"

*Life's* article also added new details to Mayo Buckner's story, including excerpts of letters from George Mogridge (an earlier Glenwood superintendent) to Buckner's family, asking that Buckner's visits home be kept short because he was needed in the print shop.

*Life* charged: "The opposition to Mayo's release on the part of the Glenwood officials was not merely passive. It was active. In state institutions such as Glenwood a paradoxical situation arises when an in-

**A** crude calendar and words carved in the woodwork give voice to State School residents in this late-1950s photo. A *Life* magazine article on Mayo Buckner explored the obstacles faced by institutions: "Many who worked in Glenwood during Mayo's time were sensitive and informed human beings. Unhappily many others were not, but there were reasons. The pay of attendants and teachers . . . is low and the work is hard."



mate shows signs of ability. . . . The institutions are always in desperate need of money. When the officials discover that an inmate has talent . . . they tighten their grasp on him. The inmate may be made to work within the institution for nothing or, in Mayo's case, for a token payment of \$1 a month." Again, the pre-Sasser administrators and employees were cast in a negative light, and again Alfred Sasser was portrayed as the hero.

Controversy continued. Local physician Ward DeYoung, who had been dismissed from State School by medical director Dr. Frank Jacobson, claimed he was fired because he had publicly opposed Sasser's policies. He clamored for an impartial investigation. J. O. Cromwell, the state mental health director, traveled to Glenwood to hear DeYoung and anyone else who had complaints. Governor Loveless directed that DeYoung's allegations be investigated by a Professional Committee on Mental Health (comprising representatives of the Iowa Psychological Association, Iowa State Bar Association, Iowa State Medical Society, Iowa Neuropsychiatric Society, and State School workers). At the committee's hearing, Jacobson resigned and DeYoung was reinstated.

Local critics were not appeased. They began to organize an official group—the Glenwood Citizens' Committee—to publicly oppose Sasser and "to combat adverse publicity they feel the city of Glenwood has received as a result of the State School situation," the *Opinion-Tribune* reported. Out of the committee's first meeting in April, attended by about 20 people, came a request for an open meeting with Sasser and a statement to the press: "The Citizen's Committee wishes to go on record that it does not care to pass judgment on technical and mechanical aspects of any publicity released from the State School, but requests that the Superintendent shall stick to factual and full information, avoiding such misrepresentations and misleading statements as have appeared heretofore."

Throughout April, conversations once confined to dinner tables or downtown lunch counters began to occur in public sources, most notably as letters to the editor of the *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune*. In one, a Mt. Pleasant parent of a State School resident asked, "What does the average citizen of Glenwood know about running an institution for the mentally handicapped? Dr. Sasser came to Glenwood with years of training, . . . experience, and high recommendations from professional authority." Having observed the kindness of Glenwood merchants and

clerks, the writer ended: "I can't help but feel this dispute is just a misunderstanding and can and will be worked out." Enclosed was a clipping about a Parsons, Kansas, institution and that community's strong support of new reforms.

John and Erma Cheyney were also parents of a State School resident and no strangers to the institution; they participated in the annual fall horse show and other State School activities. Their letter began: "We are certainly aware of the stories, rumors, gossip, and talk coming from and about the School and have been quite awhile—long before Dr. Sasser even came to Glenwood."

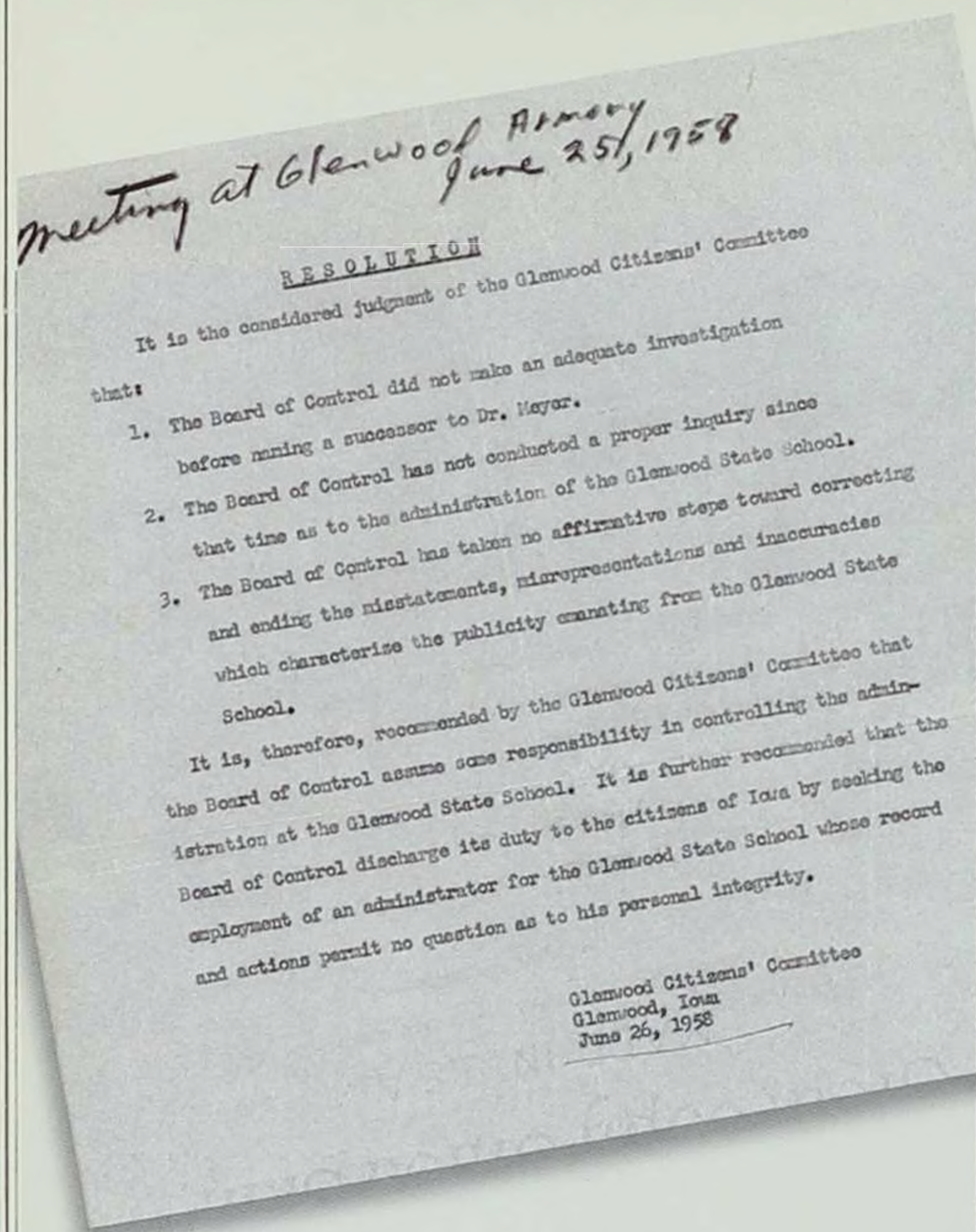
The Cheyneys had "listened to complaints from workers at the School, who asked to be nameless for fear of losing their jobs; and have worried about the stories of abuse and neglect of the children by the attendants who didn't care . . . long before Dr. Sasser was hired. But the public didn't know about it. Our complaints and investigations were carefully kept quiet. Glenwood didn't know about these things and went along in its nice little rut, knowing the School was on the Hill and knowing the kids were up there in their own little world and content to keep them there."

Applauding Sasser's "the patient comes first" approach, the Cheyneys also voiced their support of the addition of professional staff (though noting the need for more ward attendants); and even the publicity, which "has awakened the public to the fact that mentally retarded people are still human beings entitled to everything a Democracy can offer and an opportunity to develop in life to their highest capacity. . . . [and has] revealed the fact that many things in the Institution needed to be changed."

Scolding those citizens who had objected to the formation of 4-H and Scouting clubs at State School and who never volunteered, they concluded: "Please, please remember this is 1958, and changes everywhere are many and great, and it is time for a change in the status of the mentally retarded, too. Growing pains can hurt, but don't be too quick to jump to the conclusion that everything is all bad and nothing good is being done."

An anonymous letter began: "I'm sure we're all a little tired of hearing so much talk about the Hill." The letter reasoned that Glenwood citizens had always been aware of positive and negative happenings at State School, including the use and abuse of restraints and other "dire, dark happenings on the Hill," and that with "true compassion" they had learned "to accept the inmates as they are." The letter continued: "Are we losing our sense of balance? . . . Why must we





LETTER: COUNCIL BLUFFS NONPAREIL; PHOTO: OMAHA WORLD-HERALD



One of several community leaders invited to meet with Sasser over the firing of Ward DeYoung, William C. Rathke (left) talks here with Glenwood Citizens' Committee members Mildred Wamberg (secretary) and Dennis Collins (co-chair) in late April 1958. By late June, as the above resolution attests, the Citizens' Committee called for the Board of Control to hire a new administrator "whose record and actions permit no question as to his personal integrity."

hear so much about past neglect, antiquated buildings, etc., with complete disregard and gross ingratitude for all the good things that have been done by many fine people for many years past? Why must the kids of the Hill be completely alienated by animosity never known before, from the community that has done its best to make them as happy as possible?"

The opinion of the anonymous letter-writer was shared by the Glenwood Citizens' Committee, but that group, too, was somewhat anonymous. Who exactly were the members of the Citizens' Committee and what exactly were their concerns? The answers are unclear and depend on the source.

A 1958 *Iowan* magazine article charged the committee with "vile and vindictiveness" and "witch hunting tactics." "One member is supposedly bitter because the board cancelled a repair contract he had with the school," the *Iowan* article continued. "The group ranges from some old ladies who are 'just sure there is something evil out there' to well-known businessmen, to some pretty malicious individuals."

James Purkhiser remembers that the Citizens' Committee's main complaints were that they didn't like the "patients" leaving the institution and going out into the public, and that they felt the publicity placed the community of Glenwood in an unfairly negative spotlight.

Only three members of the Citizens' Committee were ever named in the *Opinion-Tribune*. Of the two who could be located in 1995, neither was willing to discuss individual roles or committee missions, except to say that they were legitimately concerned about important issues.

The committee's slant on the issues might be gleaned from an April 1958 *Opinion-Tribune* article that listed several questions the committee planned to forward to the Board of Control: Did Sasser have unlimited control over state allocations, or were the funds earmarked? Did other institutions "discourage inmates or patients" from "productive work such as canning, gardening, and sewing" for the institution? Should socialization classes be "conducted primarily to teach the girls smoking"? How should the committee take unresolved grievances against Sasser to a



higher authority? Did Sasser's duties require frequent out-of-state travel? Was there a policy on "excessive drinking of hard liquors on institutional premises"?

But perhaps what most aggrieved the Citizens' Committee were Sasser's "misrepresentations" in the media, and his failure to share the credit and limelight with others. These sentiments run like an undercurrent through *Opinion-Tribune* articles, with Sasser claiming that the media sometimes misquoted him and ignored his requests for corrections, and with the Citizens' Committee churning out letters to the media to correct "false information" and to prevent future "misrepresentations" in upcoming stories by *Reader's Digest* and *Armstrong Circle Theatre*. Retired superintendent Meyer explained that the committee "has no objection to Dr. Sasser's program—only to the manner in which it is carried on and to the unfavorable publicity the community has received. It is strange so many things were bad, and so many corrected so rapidly."

Tragically, the conflict may have been less about a community not ready to change its philosophy about people with disabilities, and more about hurt feelings.

**T**he Glenwood Citizens' Committee continued as a self-appointed watchdog. While the Professional Committee on Mental Health released its report, backing Sasser's program and criticizing De-Young for "taking his problems to the press and his legislators rather than to his superiors," the *Opinion-Tribune* sent a staff member to North Vernon, Indiana, to inquire about Sasser's performance at Muscatatuck State School.

The *Opinion-Tribune's* report appeared on May 29, headlined as "North Vernon, Ind., State School Story Same As Here." It cited several complaints at Muscatatuck: "too much freedom allowed between the male and female patients, refusal to allow sterilizations to prevent pregnancies, exaggerated publicity regarding the success of the rehabilitation program, and improper conduct on the part of professional members."

"It was the roughest period of my newspaper career," the North Vernon editor had told the Glenwood reporter, who observed that "in the end there was no middle ground—you either were for Mr. Sasser or against him."

Meetings multiplied. The Southwest Iowa Association for Retarded Children convened special meetings "to discuss possible means of promoting positive support of the program set up by Mr. Sasser." ARC sponsored a public meeting in June, and the Citizens' Committee invited the Board of Control and Iowa

mental health director J. O. Cromwell. Some 250 people showed up. With tight control over the format, Southwest Iowa ARC was joined by parents and school employees voicing strong support for the rehabilitation programs. When the three-hour presentation ended, no one asked any questions. As the *Opinion-Tribune* commented, "Those who went expecting 'fireworks' were disappointed."

Several weeks later, the Citizens' Committee called another public meeting with the Board of Control, this one more contentious. Some 300 people packed the armory basement. The format of this meeting was question-answer. The *Opinion-Tribune* summarized the concerns raised: "Mr. Sasser is a 'troublemaker,' having previously been involved in a similar situation in Indiana; he unduly criticizes past administrations and greatly exaggerates his own accomplishments, which creates unfavorable publicity for the town; and tax money is being used unwisely."

The paper reported that after three hours of heated debate, George Callenius of the Board of Control asked bluntly: "How many of you want us to dismiss Mr. Sasser tomorrow?" and then, "How many want us to keep him?"

The show of hands was two to one, to keep Sasser. "That's enough for me," Callenius said. "I'm going home."

**W**hile summer drifted into fall, the feud seemed to quiet down. State School Day was celebrated again in September, and the school entered a float in the town's Homecoming Parade in October. Then on December 10, the national spotlight returned, on network television. In an *Armstrong Circle Theatre* docudrama titled "The Invisible Mark," actors played the roles of Sasser, Purkhiser, vocational rehabilitation director Warren Anthers, and social worker Wilma Bock. *TV Guide* described the plot: "Glenwood State School, Glenwood, Ia., is an institution for mentally retarded people of all ages. . . . [When] Alfred Sasser, Jr., came to the school as its new supervisor, he found conditions deplorable. Tonight's dramatization tells how Sasser and his associates faced this situation and how they dealt with three individual cases: Arthur Marion, 43 [possibly based on Arthur Mencl, who was 43 in 1957], who didn't belong there; Ruth, 21, whose future is uncertain; and Billy Joe . . . , 5, who might never be able to leave. Dr. Sasser speaks at the close of the program."

The show was billed as "the exciting story of one man's discovery that gave a bold new outlook to



people imprisoned in this hospital." Purkhiser recalls that the docudrama, broadcast from New York, "had a lot of things that were very, very real in it."

Back in Iowa, the real Glenwood drama was nearing its climax. Months earlier, the Citizens' Committee had unearthed one particular fact that would prove useful to them: "Dr." Alfred Sasser had not earned a Ph.D.

Sasser did have master's degrees (one in hospital administration and one in educational psychology) and he had started but not completed a Ph.D. from Indiana University while working at Muscatatuck State School. During the interview process, however, he had told the Iowa Board of Control that he had completed the doctorate.

Under other circumstances, this might have been resolved. Iowa law, after all, did not require that its institution superintendents have a Ph.D. But in the supercharged atmosphere of Glenwood, and with Sasser sticking with his claim of a doctorate, it proved to be the last straw.

Purkhiser remembers going to Des Moines with Sasser in early 1959 to meet with John Hansen of the Board of Control. By Purkhiser's recollections, the exchange went something like this:

Hansen: You don't need a doctor's degree. You don't need anything. All you need is just to be Al Sasser. The hell with these people. Do you have this doctor's degree?

Sasser: Yes.

Hansen: Are you sure?

Sasser: Yes.

Purkhiser was frustrated. He knew that what Sasser was saying wasn't true and that Hansen seemed to

be offering him a way out. "I said, 'For God's sakes, the man is trying to tell you something.' He [Sasser] was honked off about this citizen committee and them doing things like this. But why he was telling about this doctor degree, I don't know," Purkhiser recounted. "I've often asked him why. . . . A few things he and I did not agree upon, I'll tell you. . . . We had some big battles from time to time but . . . I would do anything for him and he for me. But this is one area [where] I couldn't touch him. . . . He had this deep-rooted thing. . . . He told them they just lost the records, and that's all there was to it."

Purkhiser recalls that the matter ended with Hansen telling Sasser that he knew Sasser didn't have the degree, and that Sasser had lied to him.

"He fired him on the spot," Purkhiser says. Officially, Sasser resigned.

The *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune* and the *Des Moines Register* gave prominent coverage to Sasser's resignation in mid-March 1959. Both papers reported the Ph.D. controversy as the reason for the resignation, and both reported that Sasser had accepted another job in New Jersey to be closer to his ailing father.

The *Opinion-Tribune* story had a more victorious tone. It cited all the major community complaints in the past and printed a Citizens' Committee statement that the action of the Board of Control "appears to vindicate the position taken by this committee the past year and a half. The numerous unfavorable comparisons to which the Glenwood community and former school administrations have been subjected have been, in the main, apparently ill-advised."

The *Register* story highlighted Sasser's national prominence and the merit of his rehabilitation program, along with diplomatically worded comments

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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Excellent secondary sources include: R. C. Scheerenberger, *A History of Mental Retardation* (Baltimore, 1983); idem, *Deinstitutionalization and Institutional Reform* (Springfield, IL, 1976); James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley, 1994); Leo Kanner, *A History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded* (Springfield, IL, 1964); Joan Gittens, *Poor Relations: The Children of the State in Illinois, 1818-1990* (Urbana, 1994); "Glenwood:

From Custodial Institution to School," *Psychiatric Reporter* (Nov./Dec. 1966), 9-10; and Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start: The Iowa State and America's Children* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

Sources on Glenwood State School include: oral history interviews, conducted by the author with individuals listed in next section and with George Mills; numerous articles from the *Glenwood Opinion-Tribune*, *Des Moines Register*, *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, and *Omaha World Herald*; Biennial Reports to the Iowa Board of Control of State Institutions; the State School newsletter, *The Hill Topic*, 1955-1960; archival materials from Glenwood State Hospital School including Velma Hough's training notebooks and attendant training materials, 1957-1959; Harold Skeels and Harold Dye, "A study on the effects of differential stimulation on mentally retarded children," *Journal of Psycho Asthenics* 44 (1939), 114-36; Robert Wallace, "A Lifetime Thrown

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Complete annotations are held in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

#### ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Seven oral history interviews conducted by the author in 1995 further document the history of institutions for those with mental retardation. Archived in Special Collections at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center), the interviews are available to researchers. Those interviewed and topics discussed are:

Helen Henderson is a parent of a daughter with



from the Board of Control. The article also quoted Helen Henderson, as past president of Iowa ARC, who expressed deep regret at "the loss of Mr. Sasser," questioned the relevance of having a Ph.D., and remarked, "He has a true feeling for retarded children."

As for the *Daily Reporter* (a Davenport news sheet), the editorialist spared few words: "The legislature should make sure the reason that Dr. Alfred Sasser is leaving the Glenwood State School is not that he is so progressive that he has incurred the wrath and jealousy of the 'do nothing' bureaucrats who would rather see that all the T's are crossed and the I's dotted than make progress."

The editorial asserted that the false Ph.D. claim was not important: "That sounds to us like they had to dig real deep for an excuse to let him go. . . . The whole thing stinks. The people of Iowa have a right to know if the man who has done such an outstanding job as to attract national attention has turned out to be a 'stinker' or whether there is another 'stinker' who decided to bust him because he dared to show up some of the lousy things that have been going on under their jurisdiction for the past 40 years."

All in all, the resignation was probably not about a "stinker" embarrassed about "lousy things" Sasser had drawn attention to in the institution's past. More likely, it was about a board's weariness over the constant conflict with the Citizens' Committee, and disappointment that such a charismatic candidate would lie to them and create such controversy.

The Board of Control probably realized that the national publicity Sasser had generated would now help attract a competent, progressive replacement, and that in the meantime J. O. Cromwell, a progressive reformer in his own right, could attempt to put out any local fires that remained.

Although Sasser's tenure had brought conflict to Glenwood, the new philosophy of rehabilitation and

education continued at State School under the following superintendents and with Purkhiser and other Sasser supporters who remained on staff. As Governor Loveless remarked after Sasser had resigned, "The program is greater than any individual. We are determined that it shall move ahead without interruption."

**A**lfred Sasser had helped to spark major reform at State School, but far greater dynamics were also at work. Across the nation, parents' organizations like the ARC continued to gain strength. More trained professionals entered the fields of special education, social work, vocational rehabilitation, and psychology. Community-based alternatives were created to serve people with disabilities in their hometowns. Federal mandates, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, were passed. Most of all, there were changes in American hearts and minds about the worth and potential of people with disabilities.

Reform in Iowa involved far more than one committed, though arrogant, individual, and far more than his two productive, albeit stormy, years at Glenwood. Reform depended on parents and social services advocates like Helen Henderson who worked relentlessly to change Iowa's laws and funding mechanisms and to push for statewide institutional reforms. Reform relied on leadership from subsequent State School superintendents like Peter Pepper and William Campbell. Most importantly, reform relied on Iowans to accept and serve people with disabilities in their home communities.

Such changes meant that many people who had grown up in Glenwood State School now live independently. Liz Stimmel lives in Iowa City and recently was honored at the Iowa City Rehabilitation and Health Care Center, where she has worked the late

a disability, and a crusader for services for people with disabilities. She discusses her feelings about her daughter's years at Woodward, Independence, Glenwood, and in community-based programs. She describes her role in local and state ARCs (as a field representative and state president); involvement on state boards and committees; and lobbying efforts. (Transcribed)

**Carrie Merritt** worked in Glenwood State School's Business Office, 1945-1988. She talks about administrations she worked under and changes in work culture and programming. (Transcribed)

**James Purkhiser** worked with Alfred Sasser at Muscatatuck State School and followed him to Glenwood to become Director of Special Education and later Director of Staff Development, staying eight years. He describes his start in special education; Sasser's rehabilitation approach; and curriculum. (Transcribed)

**Bob Wallace** worked at Glenwood (1960-1990)

in special education teaching and as an Area Administrator. He discusses curriculum; therapeutic teams; Manpower Development Training Act; Foster Grandparents Program; behavior management; etc. (Transcribed)

**Mary Barton** is the parent of a son with a disability and was a social worker and administrator for Mills County (1960-1978). She describes her son; experiences at Glenwood; Hope Haven School in Rock Valley; Mills County ARC; Lake View Manor class-action suit; and more. (Abstract; partially transcribed)

**William Campbell** has been Superintendent at Glenwood State Hospital School since 1969. He discusses his work at Cherokee Mental Health Institute; Alfred Sasser; Helen Henderson, and J.O. Cromwell; his Glenwood reforms (building home-like residences; funding changes with Title 19 and Medicaid; outside advocacy groups; changes in office of superintendent); etc. (Abstract; partially transcribed)

**Paul Brodigan** was Director of Recreational Services at Glenwood for many years and one of the organizers of the first Special Olympics in Iowa. (No transcript or abstract)

Another valuable set of oral history interviews provides additional perspective to the history of Iowa's institutions. In 1992, with funding from the Iowa Humanities Board, the Iowa University Affiliated Program at the University of Iowa conducted interviews with 12 people who had spent all or part of their childhood in one of Iowa's institutions. **Art Mencl** and **Liz Stimmel** were part of this project, and they offered insights and observations available nowhere else. For more information on this second collection, contact: David Leshtz or Barbara Smith, Iowa University Affiliated Program, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242 (319-353-6523).





OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

Leaving the institution—whether for a visit home, for job training and placement, or for an independent life—was Alfred Sasser's vision for many State School residents. Here, a youngster packs her suitcase for a two-week Christmas vacation in December 1957. Before Sasser, the school's own Christmas programs had been considered sufficient holiday observance, and few residents had traveled home at Christmas. "The fact that about eight hundred patients have lost contact with families makes vacations a problem," State School's director of social services said. "They are simply forgotten. Nobody wants them." In 1957 under Sasser's new policy, 350 residents went home for the holidays—five times more than the previous year.



shift in the laundry for 25 years. Calling her "a gem of an employee," the local newspaper commented: "What makes Stimmel so special? She's an ordinary, hard-working person who enjoys her job." Art Mencl lives in Iowa City, too, and has been a guest speaker for university classes, seminars, and the Governor's Commission on Aging.

Such changes meant that many children with disabilities now attend the same schools as their neighbors and live in their own homes with their families.

Finally, the changes meant that people with disabilities who are served by the Glenwood State Hospital School today are fewer in number (about 400 compared to 1,739 in 1956), have individual program plans written in consultation with a multidisciplinary team considering a full range of treatment options, and live as normal lives as are possible, in small houses rather than large institutional wards.

Just as the nationwide struggle for civil rights and racial equality gathered momentum in the 1950s, so did another, less visible struggle—a struggle for the rights of every citizen with a disability to receive hu-

mane and appropriate treatment and education, to participate fully in society in the least restrictive environment possible, and to lead a normal life, like any other American citizen.

And just as the struggle for civil rights and racial equality is not yet over, neither is the struggle for disability rights. The complex issues involved continue to play themselves out in Iowa and across the nation today, as American society now wrestles with full inclusion in public education and critical shortages of certified special education teachers. As in the 1950s, it will take the commitment of parents, professionals, and the public to make a difference. ❖

*The author is a middle school special education/at risk teacher at Malcolm Price Lab School in Cedar Falls. She received a B.A. in history from the University of Northern Iowa and an M.A. in special education from the University of Iowa. She has written about George Gallup, dime novelists, and early children's television for this magazine.*

**A** photo postcard of the Custodial Building at Glenwood bears this message: "July 1st. 1906 Dear Baby I expect they will let me out tomorrow."

