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Hidden from Society: If Your Ancestor Was Mentally Ill

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In today's society, we are more knowledgeable about mental illness and its treatment than in the past. We now treat people who are mentally ill with dignity and help them to obtain the treatment they need, with the goal that they will become successful, productive citizens. That was not always the case.

Treatment of the mentally ill in history was a combination of misunderstanding and cruelty. Mental illness carried a negative stigma; it was believed to be hereditary and a disabling condition of the bloodline. Mental illness threatened the family's standing as being honorable. A family with a mentally ill member would hide that person from society, keeping them locked away from contact with others. They may be hidden in an attic, a closet, an outbuilding, or sent to an insane asylum.


In 1887, Nellie Bly, a young reporter, took an outrageous step to capture a story. Nellie had herself locked into the Blackwell Island Lunatic Asylum, located in New York. She then wrote about her experience in her book *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. Nellie stated that residing in the asylum could have driven her to insanity. The treatment and conditions inside the asylum were horrid. Those who were mentally ill were considered below human. They lived in filth, disease, were given poor quality food, were physically mistreated or beaten, and underwent "treatments" that were, by today's standards, torture. Nellie Bly's investigative journalism helped change the way the world looked at treatment and housing of the insane.

Medical practices thought to help "cure" the mentally ill included electro-shock, skull drills, exorcisms, "shocking" with either boiling or ice-cold water, bloodletting, and lobotomies. The living conditions for those in asylums was deplorable. Residents were housed with three or four people in small 8'x10' rooms. Often patients were restrained with shackles, iron collars, or straightjackets. Padded cells, confinement cribs, or having a patient stripped and naked in an empty cell were used to control behavior.

In the eighteenth century, the hospital movement was started as a way to protect society and the insane from harm. It was considered the humanitarian way of caring for those with mental illness. As society became more knowledgeable about mental illness, the U.S. government funded the building of 32 state psychiatric hospitals and organized asylum reform. The Mental Health America and U.S. Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963 were created to improve the lives of the mentally ill in the United States.

As understanding of mental disorders grew, the treatment of those patients became more successful and less abusive. It was Sigmund Freud, "the father of psychology," who believed that by allowing a patient to focus on their thoughts and feelings, that person could be cured of their disorder. Chlorpromazine was the

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Smile Awhile:[Things to Think About](#)

first non-sedative drug used in treating mentally ill patients, which resulted in many becoming free of symptoms and able to return to a normal lifestyle.

Events:[Bad Axe Celebrates May Events](#)

In addition to treatment of mentally ill persons, asylums were often used as a place to house the elderly when they needed care. Women who would not conform to society's ideals were also frequently locked up by their husbands or other male family members.

A Great Lakes Sailor:[Gerald Geiger - Part 3](#)

The combination of family members trying not to reveal that they had a family member with a mental illness, the fact that many of these institutions have been closed, and the protection of medical records make finding information out about an ancestor, who may have been institutionalized, challenging.

The Way it Was:[...At Tiger Stadium & Its Sportscasters](#)

If you know where your ancestor was housed, start by searching for information on that particular asylum, or as they were frequently called, State Hospital. To find out what life was like inside the state hospital, check to see if there is a museum that relates to that organization. Here in Michigan you can take a guided tour of the Michigan State Hospital in Traverse City, and inside its gift shops, you will find books that tell you what life was like for patients that resided there.

Dollars & Sense:[Don't Just Think About Retirement â€” Make a Plan for It](#)

Another source of information is the newspaper archive, where the institution was located. You may find articles about the facility during the time your ancestor was housed there. There are a variety of things you may learn, such as the organizations opening or closing date, issues of overcrowding, any "new" treatments being conducted, conditions of the building that could cause safety hazards, any disasters that occurred such as fire, illness or injury, or any crimes or assaults committed by staff against patients.

Events:[Celebrate at the Deckerville Heritage Festival!](#)**Legally Speaking:**[Defense Types](#)

Lack of understanding, mistreatment, and institutionalizing those with mental illness was a worldwide problem. In recognition of this, the Asylum Projects, <http://www.asylumprojects.org>, has a mission to archive both historical and current information on asylums across the United States and around the world. They are gathering information on all types of asylums, including mental hospitals, sanitoriums, state training schools, reform schools, almshouses, and orphanages. This is a wonderful source to add to your list of genealogy websites, as you never know when someone housed in one of those institutions may surface in your research.

The May meeting of the St. Clair County Family History Group will be on Thursday, May 23, 2019, at 6 p.m. in the Marysville Library, 1175 Delaware Ave., Marysville. Our program is "Bootlegging and The Purple Gang." Our meetings are open to the general public. Light refreshments will be served. For more information, please contact granryfran21@sbglobal.net, or leave a message at 810-984-3322 and your call will be promptly returned.