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MENNONITES HELP TO SOLVE INSTITUTION LABOR PROBLEM

Conscientious Objectors Staff State Hospital. Tribute Paid to Workers

By Selig Greenberg

Mennonite conscientious objectors may be a headache to their draft boards, but they have certainly proved to be a boon for the State of Rhode Island.

The 50 Mennonites who have been working at the State Hospital for Mental Diseases since last February under assignment from the Selective Service System, "have practically saved this institution," Dr. John R. Ross, superintendent, declared today.

"I don't know," Dr. Ross said, "what we would have done without them. I only wish we could get a lot more of them."

Besides the 50 Mennonites who are working as attendants and cooks, as well as on the hospital farm and in other capacities, 11 wives of the 13 married men among them are also employed at the institution as attendants or clerical workers. Twenty-five additional Mennonites were assigned recently to Rhode Island by Selective Service officials in Washington and are expected here shortly. The hospital will get 10 additional men, while 15 will be sent to Exeter School.

But to remedy the critical employment situation at the hospital and bring it up anywhere near the normal personnel requirements, about 100 more attendants would be needed, according to Dr. Ross.

The hospital, with a population of 2801 patients, many of them disturbed cases requiring extra care, is not forced to get along with 26 nurses and 134 attendants working 12-hour shifts. Existing needs listed by Dr. Ross are for 65 women attendants, 32 men attendants, 19 student nurses, nine registered nurses and three supervisors.

Typical of what Dr. Ross describes as "tough a situation as I've ever run into in the 35 years I've been in this field" are conditions in the building for disturbed women patients. "Here are 300 patients in the six wards in this building, which in pre-war times had a complement of from 25 to 30 attendants.

"We've had as low as six attendants in this building and never more than eight in recent months," Dr. Ross said. "It's a very dangerous situation in view of the disturbed condition of these patients. I tried to send down somebody from the quieter wards but found that we had no one to spare. The women working in this building--some of them are wives of Mennonites--are real heroines."

Has Never Been So Uneasy

"I doubt if anybody on the outside realizes what we're up against," the superintendent remarked. "In all my years in this kind of work I've never been as uneasy as I am now. If we've had few serious accidents or escapes here it's due to luck rather than anything else."

For the benefit of an Evening Bulletin reporter, Dr. Ross called in Earl Heisey, who acts as leader of the Mennonite group at the hospital under appointment by the Mennonite Central Committee at Akron, Penna., so that he could make any statement he desired on behalf of the men.

A tall, solemn young man who was a feed salesman before the war, Heisey explained his group's religious scruples against war and said the men at Howard were mostly farmers or mechanics but also included two school teachers. Most of the men find the work at the hospital so satisfactory, he declared, that some of them may continue in it after the war.

"Our religious beliefs forbid us to take life," Heisey said. "We believe in the teaching of the spirit of non-retaliation, not only when it comes to defense of our country but even so far as self-defense goes." He added that the men might have stayed in agricultural camps supervised by Selective Service but chose to come here voluntarily and "are mighty glad to contribute something constructive in the cause of the community."

120,000 in U. S. and Canada

Heisey estimated that there are about 120,000 Mennonites in the United States and Canada. Most of those in this country are concentrated in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Ohio.

While they wear no uniforms, the Mennonite conscientious objectors live, in effect, under the equivalent of military regulations, Dr. Ross has been officially designated by Selective Service as the head of the conscientious objector camp established at the hospital, and Heisey is his second in command and keeps records and conducts the group's social and religious activities.

The Mennonites receive an allowance of \$15 a month out of which they have to buy their own work clothes. They are entitled to eight days leave every six months and would be rated as AWOL if they failed to come back on time, but no such case has arisen so far, and Dr. Ross was high in praise of their conscientious work. The men have to sigh out like soldiers every time they leave the hospital grounds.

Have own Glee Club

The conscientious objectors have their own glee club of 20 singers and have given a number of entertainments for the patients. The previous experience of one of them as a meat cutter is coming in extremely handy in the kitchen these days, and so is the experience of another man who has taken charge of the turkey raising program at the institution. A third man drives a tractor on the farm, and still another is greatly helpful as an experienced carpenter. Three Mennonites have been trained to work as barbers and are now filling a need of long standing. When the new group of Mennonites arrives, Dr. Ross plans to train five of them as cooks.

Selective Service has approved plans by the Mennonite Central Committee for the establishment of a training program in hospital and social work for 10 selected conscientious objectors at the hospital at Howard with a view to preparing them for postwar rehabilitation work overseas which the committee expects to conduct at its own expense. The men will attend lectures and practical demonstrations which will be supplemented by courses to be given by instructors who will be specially assigned by the Mennonite Committee.

When Dr. Ross, who has had extensive experience in mental hospital administration in New York State, assumed the superintendency of the Hospital for Mental Diseases, early in August, he had a number of plans for improvements and innovations, but he admitted today he was largely "marking time" because of the serious help situation.

Several new activities have nevertheless been introduced. A motion picture machine has been bought and is being taken around the wards for the showing of films for the benefit of shut-ins unable to attend the weekly showing of movies in the auditorium on Tuesday nights. The machine is operated by a Mennonite who had previous experience along that line.

Community Singing Program

A community singing program for the patients has been inaugurated in the auditorium on Sunday afternoons. A Providence minister is in charge and brings along with him a group of young people who act as attendants in taking the patients to and from the auditorium. The leader of the Mennonite glee club leads community singing in some of the wards for shut-in patients, and this has been found helpful in quieting many of them. The library for the patients has been improved and it is planned to establish a reading room.

Dr. Ross hopes to establish soon a psychiatric research and training centre for the study and treatment of difficult cases and for the testing of new diagnostic and therapeutic procedures. Such a centre would also serve as a clinic for problem children. He also would like to develop further the family care program under which some patients not in need of active medical care are placed out in foster homes. There are 52 such patients placed out now, but extension of the program would require a far larger social work staff than the hospital has at present.

The population of the mental hospital has increased at the rate of about 60 patients annually for the last 20 years, and Dr. Ross feels that anything that could be done by way of keeping down the population would be of great help.

"We're looking ahead and making all sorts of plans for the future," he said, "but the way things are these days, we're lucky if we hold our own."

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