

"Work in Pandamonium Hall"

Ralph S. Wolfe

On the grounds of a New England Training School for the feebleminded stands a building known locally as boys' dorm #3. To the hundred boys who live within this building, it is home, for some just a temporary home, for others-- home indefinitely.

The daily activity of this group of boys follows this pattern: Each morning these hundred boys get up and dress or are dressed by someone and form the traditional "line". Day men arrive, count the boys, and the night men glad to be off duty, retire. The morning routine of making beds, scrubbing floors, sweeping rooms, and mopping then begins. Promptly at 6:30 they form a line and go to breakfast. Each morning during the week upon returning from breakfast the boys get themselves or are helped by an attendant to get ready for school. Some of these boys remain at school only an hour or so, for their attention span is very short; others remain for the whole morning. Returning from school about 11:15, brings the whole group together again. Several brighter boys are chosen to help serve dinner in the dining hall and presently everybody is on his way to satisfy his appetite. By twelve, dinner is over and by twelve-thirty the majority are on their way to school again. At 3:15 P.M. school is out and they find some amusement in the building's day halls until supper. After supper they play games or find something to do until bed time. Night men arrive at 7:00 P.M.; count is taken again, and the day attendants leave. Promptly at 8:00 P.M. the boys are put to bed, where they slumber until five-thirty the next morning.

The above in a simple way is the daily schedule through which these boys of low mentality pass daily except Saturday

and Sunday, when play and church enter the routine in place of school. To the casual observer of these boys as they go about their activities, things appear as though work with them would be ideal. However, these boys though mentally retarded have just as much energy as normal kids, and make no mistake about it! They can out swear, out steal, out fight, out destroy, and even out-wit along their line any similar normal group of boys I have ever seen. And on top of that, they too, can yell just as loud or louder.

One who works in this building can figure on the necessity of breaking up a fight or squabble every five or ten minutes. It is a continual struggle to keep them reasonably quiet; the noise is terrific and the attendant finds himself in a daze trying to keep up with their stealing and destruction of property. This urge, to destroy, has impressed itself again and again; it seems to be a characteristic of feebleminded boys. Exploitation of those fellow patients who haven't the mentality to know "what the score is" is also common. Thus, in reality the work becomes one continuous struggle for several attendants to keep up with a hundred abnormal kids.

Unfortunately, ideal pacifistic methods are not adequate to meet the situation immediately for such a large number. These patients over a period of time have been accustomed to discipline through force. Consequently, fear must still play an important part in dealing with them. They respond to kindness when it is shown, but soon forget what happened yesterday and would just as soon, figuratively speaking, "knife you in the back" tomorrow. I have found it impossible

to reason with them, and to my sorrow that to make friends is disastrous. One must in my opinion assume the role of a rather stern imparital parent and proceed accordingly.

The one fundamental draw-back is their incredible slowness in learning certain things. Infinite patience is required, for it is far easier to do a thing yourself than to explain how you want it done to a feebleminded boy.

Of course there are humorous occasions too, but physical labor is absent from the attendant's routine, which is regrettable, and this leaves the "work" a mental endurance test, which at times is degrading and discouraging.

Work of this kind is closely related with juvenile delinquency and as such is educational. It has opened to me the whole world of institutions, their purpose and service to society--a whole world within a world that I never realized existed.