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How They Worked With Their Hands / A trove of old photos portrays life for the mentally ill in LI's state hospitals of the past century: [ISLIP Edition]

Theresa Vargas. STAFF WRITER; Staff writer Erik Holm contributed to this story.. Newsday, Combined editions; Long Island, N.Y. [Long Island, N.Y]19 Jan 2003: G29.

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1) Pilgrim Psychiatric Center Photo - At the Pilgrim state hospital in Brentwood in 1943, patients sort rivets; it was occupational therapy for them and part of the effort to supply American troops in World War II when Grumman needed the precious tiny pieces sorted quickly. In other times, patients worked in the fields, raised livestock, tended the grounds, did weaving and other chores. Suffolk mental hospital communities are the subject of a book the Kings Park Heritage Museum is publishing. 2) Below, Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in 2001.

When Pilgrim first opened, 70 percent of the patients worked outside when

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Amid wooden washing machines, rusty toolboxes and threadbare christening gowns, Leo Polaski found the old photographs for his soon-to-be-published pictorial history of the Island's psychiatric centers, including Central Islip Hospital.

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"The Farm Colonies: Caring for New York City's Mentally Ill in Long Island's State Hospitals" also details Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Brentwood and Kings Park Psychiatric Center.

The idea for the book - which will be published by the Kings Park Heritage Museum, where Polaski is a trustee - grew out of its collection. Its exhibits trace a past hamlet life that, like that of some other west Suffolk communities, centered on the operation of a psychiatric hospital.

In an interview earlier this month, Polaski cited several examples of how the design of the hospitals showed a "pride in doing something well" and a "grand vision."

"It was the era of big buildings," he said. Still, even though many of the buildings were gigantic, there were minor flourishes everywhere. "Every doorway was different."

At Pilgrim, the employee cafeteria was built with a belfry, and the railroad spur ended at a power plant with two gigantic brick arches. Neither flourish was necessary, Polaski said, but showed a pride in the work that was to be done there.

When Pilgrim first opened, 70 percent of the patients worked outside when the weather allowed - in the fields, raising livestock or tending to the grounds. Those who were deemed to be "detached from reality" were assigned jobs weaving or otherwise using their hands, Polaski said, because these jobs helped them focus. Photographs of patients at work - along with those taken during their ample recreation time - fill Polaski's pictorial history.

However, one only need tour the museum to see that its stories extend beyond the hospital walls. For example, the Miles Borden room is reminiscent of a one-room schoolhouse, complete with 12, pre-1950s student desks and slate boards.

A Model A is parked in a garage, and in another room a player piano surprises visitors who wander in. The museum also has a computer-based archive from Ellis Island that allows visitors to try to trace their family's history. Founded in 1994, it is now maintained by volunteers in a school district building at 101 Church St. "There are a hundred little stories," museum director Leo Ostebo said.

"And a thousand little things," trustee Virginia Schmidt added. "We started out with a box of junk and a small room. Now, we have blossomed into a real museum."

Staff writer Erik Holm contributed to this story.

Illustration

Caption: 1) Pilgrim Psychiatric Center Photo - At the Pilgrim state hospital in Brentwood in 1943, patients sort rivets; it was occupational therapy for



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