Hiawatha Insane Asylum

Canton, South Dakota

From the announcement for the Tenth Annual Memorial Prayer Ceremony in Canton in 1998:

"In 1898, Congress passed a bill creating the first and only Institution for insane Indians in the United States. The doors of the asylum, located just over the Nebraska border in Canton, South Dakota, were first opened for the reception of patients in January 1903. Department of Interior investigators revealed that during the time the asylum housed patients, many died because they were denied medical care. According to Harold Iron Shield, founder of the Native American Reburial Restoration Committee, patients were "traditional spiritual people or teenagers who misbehaved or people the Indian Agent didn't like." A 1933 investigation conducted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs determined that "a large number" of patients showed no signs of mental illness.

Land was set aside for a cemetery, but the Indian Office decided that stone markers for graves would be an unwarranted expense. Today, the cemetery (121 names) is located in the middle of a golf course in Canton. No one knows the cause of death of the incarcerated or why they were even at the asylum. The National Park Service has recently added the cemetery to the National Register of Historic Places."

-courtesy Historic Asylums

A Haunting Legacy

Canton Insane Asylum for American Indians
By Elizabeth Stawicki
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A page is missing from most history books - the story of the federal government's Canton Insane Asylum for American Indians. Located in the tiny town of Canton, South Dakota, it was the first and only federal asylum created solely for American Indians. During its 32 years, it would house more than 350 Indians from tribes throughout North America.

The Indian affairs commissioner under President Roosevelt called reports of the asylum "reminiscent of the terrible indictments Charles Dickens leveled against English poorhouses and schools."

Documents show some who were confined at Canton had no mental illness at all but were confined there because they fought with a white man or an agency.

CLOUDS LOOM LARGE LIKE PHANTOMS over South Dakota's flatland. In the state's southeastern corner: the town of Canton, population 2800.

On the town's east end golfers play the city's Hiawatha course. This course contains 121 graves clustered between the fourth and fifth fairways. These graves hold the remains of Indians who died in the federal government's Canton insane asylum.

Just how these men, women, and children buried here lived and died at Canton remains a mystery. What does remain of their lives is listed on a beige stone on the burial ground's west side. That stone holds a dark plaque which lists their names and dates of death.

Clara Christopher worked at the asylum since its inception. In 1979 when she was 91, a graduate student recorded Christopher's memories of the asylum.

Christopher: The first patient in...what was that? what month was that? the first patient that arrived, I remember, was on the first of December in 19-2.

Christopher worked at the Canton asylum for 25 years in a variety of jobs ranging from cook to head of supplies. She remembered new patients:

Christopher: Some would see that sign "asylum" and it hurt 'em; some were heartbroken. I always felt for em. I felt for them as I would anyone. I could never stand to see them someplace and hold my ears so I couldn't hear 'em. Sometimes you know out on the reservation they had something against an Indian, and he was vicious or something like that, and they'd scribe "insane."

The bulk of information about the asylum's operation, patients, and staff comes from the writings of Dr. Samuel Silk - Clinical Director at then the country's premier psychiatric hospital, St. Elizabeth's in Washington, DC. Silk inspected the Canton asylum in 1929 and filed a report:

Silk report: Three patients were found padlocked in rooms. One was sick in bed, supposed
to be suffering from a brain tumor, being bedridden and helpless...a boy about 10 years of age was in a strait jacket lying in his bed...one patient who had been in the hospital six years was padlocked in a room and, according to the attendant, had been secluded in this room for nearly three years.

32-year-old Frank Hart is a living link to the asylum's history. While researching his family tree he discovered his great grandfather had been held at the Canton asylum. Hart, an Ojibwe who lives in Calgary, Alberta sifts through a small file he's collected about his family; all that remains of his great-grandfather's life are a few government documents. Hart says his great grandfather Marcus served on the Red Lake Tribal Council of the Minnesota Ojibwe:

Hart : His Indian name was (Missee-way-guh-noo) which means "like a war eagle flying all over the place in the sky." He was a leader, he was a warrior and he was a good man. He'd tell you just how it is right to your face and doesn't care how it's going to affect you but he wouldn't lie to you.

Federal records show a Red Lake Reservation superintendent committed Hart to the Canton asylum after he showed symptoms of senile psychosis during a hospital stay. The records indicate Hart was a heavy drinker who one night lay down in a fire and suffered second- and third-degree burns. Frank Hart says his relatives have never talked to him about alcoholism and his great-grandfather.

Records show Indians such as Marcus Hart were stripped of their Indian identities upon arrival at the Canton asylum, authorities would have spoken to him in a language he would've struggled to understand. Hart would've gone from the open woods of northern Minnesota to being locked in a ward where sealed windows held in the stench of un-emptied chamberpots filled with human waste.

At night, the only light flickered from an attendant's lantern passing occasionally on rounds.

Golfer Arne Lunder is one of the asylum's last living witnesses. He's lived in Canton for 84 years. Today he plays the course's sixth hole. To his left is the Indian burial ground. He remembers accompanying his mother on visits there.

Lunder: The women were all in the front laying around on the grass out in front there. One of the head nurses came out and said "Bring her back in." She was laying on a blanket so they took one on each corner (he laughs) and drug her up the steps. It really impressed me; I thought it was kinda cruel.

Even for its time, the asylum did not meet minimum standards required of an institution treating the mentally ill. Gerald Grob, a professor of history and medicine at Rutgers University is a leading authority on the history of US mental health policy.

Grob: What you had here was an institution you could only define as deviant. It wasn't doing what a lot of other hospitals if you go through state's records, the person running it had no contact with psychiatry.

During a subsequent investigation, St. Elizabeth's Dr. Silk concluded many of the Indians confined at Canton were locked up because they had clashed with white men, a school or an agency - not because they were mentally ill.
Silk's report: Would not the United States, if it could be held liable at all, be liable in these cases for enormous damages? The records of the asylum itself show them to be perfectly sane. They are known to be perfectly sane, to the director of the asylum Dr. Hummer. But he assumed the position that these people were below normal - mentally deficient - and they should only be discharged after they were sterilized, and as he did not have any means of doing this, there was nothing left but to keep them there.

Canton staff restrained many asylum patients in metal wristlets, camisoles, and shackles with iron chains. Silk noted that one girl who suffered from epilepsy miraculously escaped severe burns even though she was chained near a hot water pipe during her seizures.

University of South Dakota history professor Herbert Hoover says the creation of the asylum most likely grew out of an ignorance of Indian culture; not an organized plot designed to confine sane Indians.

Hoover: The great fault was not in investigating how native Americans dealt with insanity prior to the arrival of whites. So we took western European strategies of dealing with insanity. It really was a well intentioned desire to accomplish cultural imperialism without killing Indian people. And this was a part of it.

The Canton asylum was created in 1902, a time when the United States' official Indian policy was assimilation. Hoover's University of South Dakota colleague Leonard Bruguier says whatever the intent behind the asylum, it was a convenient tool for reservation agents. Bruguier is a member of the Yankton Sioux and director of the Institute of American Indian studies at the University of South Dakota.

Bruguier: So in order for the agent to feel more comfortable being surrounded by yes-people, it would be very easy for him to say "This person's insane," and have him shipped to Canton to be administered by a whole different set of rules. Basically you'd just be able to get rid of 'em.

John Collier, the commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Roosevelt administration ordered the Canton asylum closed and the patients sent to St. Elizabeth's in Washington DC. In response, the residents of Canton waged a federal court battle to keep the asylum open. The asylum was a major contributor to Canton's economy in 1933; a time when the country was plunged deep into economic depression. Members of the nearby Rosebud Sioux also opposed Canton's closing. They didn't want their friends and relatives in the asylum sent thousands of miles east.

The fight generated national news coverage from New York to Montana.

Collier prevailed in court and closed the Canton insane asylum in December, 1933. Dr. Samuel Silk immediately sent 17 Indians home. Some who were freed had been confined at the Canton asylum as long as 16 years. Another 69 including Frank Hart's great grandfather required hospitalization and were sent by train to St. Elizabeth's hospital. Most of them would spend the rest of their lives institutionalized.

A decade after the asylum closed, the federal government sold the property to the city of Canton for one dollar. The county attorney at the time was Craig Brown. Brown says none of the local officials at
the time thought it unusual to build a golf course on the land, even if 121 bodies were buried there.

Brown: We didn't think a whole lot of it; it was the Indians who found out about the cemetery and they started their religious exercises out there and of course it became a topic of discussion before we did something about it.

Harold Iron Shield, a member of the Lakota nation's Yankton tribe, holds ceremonies at the grave site each May remembering those who lived and died at the asylum. Iron Shield believes the federal government used the Canton asylum to jail Indians who wouldn't conform:

Iron Shield: These people were victims of the fed government as usual because of their involvement with spiritual ceremonies, because kids didn't really understand the kind of conformity they were to abide by. They didn't understand why they couldn't speak their tribal languages. They didn't understand why they had to go to church. They didn't understand why they had to change.

Some representatives of tribes contacted by MPR said privately they didn't want to talk about the Canton asylum because doing so might create more conflict with the federal government. But Leonard Bruguier of the University of South Dakota has another theory why many native people won't talk about the Canton asylum: shame. Bruguier says the Canton asylum attacked a core Indian value that those who were considered different - mentally ill or otherwise - contributed to Indian society:

Bruguier: We took care of them, and then all of a sudden we have this insane asylum, and they say this Indian's insane and we're going to move him to Canton, and he's going to be with people like him. A lot of Indian people are ashamed they let this happen to their relatives. That they let someone come in and take 'em away, basically, and in many cases they were never heard from again.

The legacy of the Canton asylum exists today, here at the Hiawatha golf course where the graveyard of 121 Canton patients exists between the fourth and fifth fairways.

Moving the graves isn't an option. Doing so would be costly and some Indian elders say moving the graves would disrupt the spiritual journeys of those buried here. Meanwhile, the course has moved the fifth hole's teebox 20 yards further away from the graves.

On this day, 10 American Indian men including Harold Iron Shield crouch at the base of the stone. They burn sage, smoke tobacco, and pray for the spirits here.

Iron Shield has petitioned the state of South Dakota to declare the land a historic site.

In the past, Hiawatha golfers sometimes hit balls off the graves. But now they've adopted a rule that if a ball lands on a grave, the player will take a free drop and play the shot outside the cemetery.
Hiawatha Insane Asylum - an American Gulag

The perverse history of governmental-Lakota/Dakota relations took a more sinister turn when in 1900 (ten years after Wounded Knee), the Hiawatha Insane Asylum was built. It operated for over thirty years, then was torn down. The bodies of those native people who died there are buried under what is now a golf course in Canton, South Dakota.

After the wars against native people, the battle for their hearts and minds moved relentlessly forward. Even in death, the 121 buried on the former grounds are mocked as golf balls whiz over their heads and the president of the Canton Area Historical Society Don Pottranz refers to their bizarre grave as, “It’s something that people are aware of but it’s ancient history now.”

With no knowledge whatsoever of native cultures, languages, customs, and spiritual life, South Dakota Senator R. F. Pettigrew introduced Congressional legislation in 1899 to create the nation’s first native insane asylum. Congress appropriated $45,000.

In 1900 construction began after U.S. Representative Oscar Gifford (former Canton mayor) arranged for the purchase of 100 acres of land two miles east of Canton.

In 1902 the first patient was received and in 1908 Gifford was forced out when a physician charged that the superintendent refused to allow him to remove gallstones from a patient, who later died. Gifford was replaced by Harry Hummel, a psychiatrist. That same year, Hummel was charged by thirteen employees with mistreating patients.

In 1926, the matrons who had staffed the asylum were replaced by professional nurses. In 1929 Hummer was finally ordered to be removed. U. S. Representative Louis Cramton intervened and
Hummel stayed. In 1933, patients were transferred to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., and in April 1934, Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier closed the asylum. In the interim, Canton and South Dakota congressional delegates fought to keep it open. Hummel had been charged with malfeasance and misfeasance in 1933. He was subsequently dismissed.

Averaging four deaths a month over the thirty some years of its existence, the asylum did not seem able to maintain the patients’ physical health very well. Dr. Hummel, famed for his hair-trigger temper, ruled the institution for 25 years.

Now, freelance investigative reporter Harold Ironshield has been researching the former asylum and the inmates whose known names are listed as buried at the site. Ironshield is requesting native publications to list the names in the hopes that living family members will recognize them and come forward. He would like to know what the families might want to do about the grave and whether the remains should be moved. He also wants more information on the history of the asylum published, particularly the explanations of what was supposed to constitute insanity and why the individuals were selected for incarceration. From the reports of those who remember the asylum, according to Ironshield, the reasons had to do with not following government rules, and not behaving in school. He suggests that the asylum was more gulag than governmental response to the mental health of natives.

The names of those buried in the Hiawatha Asylum Cemetery are:

1. Long Time Owl Woman
2. Juanita Castillo
3. Mary Fairchild
4. Lucy Reed
5. Minnie La Count
6. Sylvia Ridley
7. Edith Standing Bear
8. Chur Ah Tah E Kah
9. Ollie House
10. Asal Tcher
11. Alice Short
12. Enos Pah
13. Baby Ruth Enas Pah
14. Agnes Sloan
15. E We Jar
16. Kaygwaydahsegaik
17. Chee
18. Emma Gregory
19. Magwon
20. Kay Ge Gah Aush Eak
21. Kaz Zhe Ah Bow
22. Blue Sky
23. Louise McIntosh
24. Jane Burch
25. Dupue
26. Maggie Snow
27. Lupe Maria
28. Lizzie Vipont
29. Mary Peirre
30. Nancy Chewie
31. Ruth Chief on Top
32. Mary G. Buck
33. Cecile Comes at Night
34. Maud Magpie
35. Poke Ah Dab Ab
36. Sits in it
37. Josephine Wells
38. A.B. Blair
39. Josephine Pajihatakana
40. Baby Caldwell
41. Sallie Seabott
42. Selina Pilon
43. Mrs. Twoteeth
44. Kayso
45. Josephine De Couteau
46. Jessie Hallock
47. Marie Pancho
48. Ede Siroboz
49. Kiger
50. Mary Bah
51. Cynia Houle
52. Drag Toes
53. Charlie Brown
54. Jacob Hayes
55. Toby
56. Tracha
57. Hon Sah Sah Kah
58. Big Day
59. Fred Takesup
60. Peter Greenwood
61. Robert Brings Plenty
62. Nadesooda
63. Taistoto
64. James Chief Crow
65. Yells at Night
66. John Woodruff
67. George Beautiste
68. Baptiste Gingras
69. Lowe War
70. Silas Hawk
71. Red Cloud
72. Howling Wolf
73. Antone
74. Arch Wolf
75. Frank Starr
76. Joseph Taylor
77. Amos Brown
78. James Crow Lightening
79. John Martin
80. Red Crow
81. James Blackeye
82. Abraham Meachern
83. Aloysious Moore
84. Tom Floodwood
85. James Black Bull
86. Benito Juan
87. Seymour Wauketch
88. Anselmo Lucas
89. Chico Francisco
90. Roy Wolfe
91. Matt Smith
92. Two Teeth
93. Pugay Beel
94. Merbert Conley
95. Jack Root
96. Charlie Clafflin
97. John Hall
98. Amos Deer
99. Ne Bow O Sah
100. Thomas Chasing Bear
101. Dan Ach Onginiwa
102. Joseph Bigname
103. Falkkas
104. Steve Simons
105. James Two Crows
106. F.C. Eagle
107. Andrew Dancer
108. Apolorio Moranda
109. Harry Miller
110. Herbert Iron
111. Fred Collins
112. John Coal on Fire
114. Willie George
115. James Hathorn
116. Ira Girstean
117. Edward Hedges
118. Omudis
119. Guy Crow Neck
120. John Big
121. A. Kennedy

Native people from all over the country were placed in the asylum. The records show that the physical conditions were horrific. Besides being shackled to beds and pipes, the patients were made to wallow in their own body wastes and clean sheets were not a regular issue. In Dr. Hummel’s opinion, insanity was increasing among natives, and he was perhaps right in the sense that the well documented starvation on reservations during that historical period was causing pain and suffering, and people torn from their cultures were being pushed down narrower and narrower corridors of forced “civilization” and “assimilation.”

The full truth about this chamber of horrors may never be fully known, but it was clearly a case of medicine and politics making a most poisonous mix.