TENT LIFE FOR THE INSANE.¹

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Under date of October 1, 1885, in the Seventh Annual Report of the Binghamton State Hospital, then the Binghamton Asylum for the Chronic Insane, the superintendent, the late Dr. T. S. Armstrong, reported the first experience I can find recorded of caring for the insane in tents. He says in part:

"In May last a meeting was held of the State Board of Charities and the trustees of this asylum, to take into consideration the crowded condition of the institution. . . . It was suggested by some member of the State Board of Charities, that we put up tents to meet the emergency. The suggestion was adopted, and the trustees ordered the steward to purchase two tents, one to be 20 feet wide and 120 feet long, the other twenty feet wide by fifty feet long. The work was commenced at once by putting down long stringers and joists, covered with matched flooring. The sides and ends were ceiled three and one-half feet high from the floor, and over this the tent was erected. In this long tent we put fifty male patients, using the smaller one for dining room purposes. . . . After an experience of about two weeks, it was deemed advisable to purchase another tent of the same dimensions as the first, and nine smaller ones to be used for the attendants and noisy patients. In this last long tent we put most of our feeble male patients, and we were happily surprised with the results, many of those who were bed-ridden and unable to help themselves, improved and seemed to enjoy the change exceedingly. We had also less acute sickness at the tents than in any wards about the building. The large tents were located a little to the east of a small grove, and the small ones were in the grove, making in hot weather, a very pleasant place for out-door exercise and recreation. . . .

¹ Read before the Brooklyn Neurological Society, Feb. 26, 1903.

"We are entirely satisfied with the experiment, as it has exceeded our most sanguine expectations, and it is the unanimous opinion of the officers of this institution, that the tents should be maintained and used in summer for a certain class of patients.

"In case of an epidemic, there could be nothing more suitable for the purpose. We would not advocate the use of tents the whole year, but we do believe they are a great auxiliary in the treatment of the chronic insane during the warm weather. We believe in them, and shall use them when indicated in particular cases."

The following case was reported by me in a paper read before the Medical Society of Broome County under the caption of "A Case of Melancholia, with Stupor of Five Years' Duration," and published in the *Alienist and Neurologist* for April, 1886:

Mr. H. was admitted to the Binghamton Asylum for the Chronic Insane, November 10, 1882, with the following brief history:

Aged, 45; married; United States; editor; second attack. First commenced in 1879; was of two months' duration; second commenced in October, 1880, and has been continuous; stationary demented; caused by ill health and overwork during a political campaign.

When admitted he would not speak or in any way give expression to his thoughts and feelings. He sat in one position with his hands folded; head forward and eyes cast on the floor, from morning till night, and moved only when led from place to place by the attendants.

His physical health was very good; he ate a moderate quantity and was very well nourished. The night watch always reported him quiet and sleeping well. He remained in about this condition until July 6, 1883, when, for the day, he seemed brighter and appeared to notice those about him. Several times he was visited by his wife and friends, but he never seemed to take any notice of their presence or the time of their departure.

During the month of February, 1884, he refused solid food, but took a moderate quantity of liquid. He lost strength and flesh very fast, until he resumed the regular diet, which was in about four weeks; he at once commenced to improve physically and in time became as strong and hearty as before.

During the month of September he had a severe attack of *herpes zoster*, but made a good recovery and was very comfortable till the last of October, when he was taken with pleurisy. The effusion was so great that it interfered very much with his respiration. It was not absorbed until late in December; he was then very feeble and had a bad cough.

During this illness he refused all extra food, but took the regular diet as furnished for other patients. He still refused to speak, but occasionally showed, by the expression of his face, that he was in severe pain.

He was visited by his wife June 23, 1885. At this time he had a bad cough, was very feeble and could just walk across his room with assistance. We could see but one way out of his suffering, and that but a little way off.

His wife was anxious to try something new, and when informed of our having recently erected a tent 20 x 112 feet, located on the edge of a grove, she was anxious to give him a trial there. He was accordingly transferred early the next morning, and it was in his chair, under an evergreen tree, that he first felt that he was safely landed on terra firma, as he relates in his experience as you will see further on. He at once commenced to improve physically, so that by August 15 he was quite strong. He now answered our questions, when it could be done by a nod of the head. About this time he was attacked with dysentery, which was prevailing in and about the asylum. He was at once given an appropriate diet and was doing very well, when the regular nurse was called away during the dinner hour. A supply took the regular food to his bed and insisted on his taking it, but he protested and said the doctor had ordered so and so. It was then that he found he could talk. He commenced to answer questions by yes and no, and from this on to tell his feelings and how he had been since visited. He continued to talk more and more every day, until he was taken on parole by his brother, with whom he remained until he was discharged in October, 1885.

Since his recovery he has given us an interesting sketch of his asylum experience, from which we have compiled the following:

He entered the Hancock and Garfield political campaign of 1880, very much debilitated in physical strength, but stimulated with the hope of success for General Hancock, he put forth his best efforts both through the

columns of his paper and also upon the stump, and when the end of the campaign came and Hancock was defeated, he felt at once that there was no more work for him in this world, that he had no future; and that the sooner it was ended with him the better for all concerned. He first sought relief in an electropathic institute, but he only remained a short time, as his condition was rapidly growing worse. He returned home, where he remained while arrangements were being made for his removal to an insane asylum.

While staying at home he fancied his whole worldly effects were advertised by the sheriff for sale, and on his return from a ride one day, he fancied he saw the notice posted upon his house announcing the fact; his family had become beggars and he saw his youngest boy, a lad of six years, ragged and barefooted in the snow begging for a penny with which to buy bread. He thought he must be taken to an asylum or place of confinement and there eke out his existence, and the sooner it was over the better he would be satisfied. He next fancied he saw his whole family slaughtered, and then surely he felt life had no place for him.

During his trip to an insane asylum he thought some half-animal and half-human beings had a sort of balloon arrangement, and that they had so arranged the house that they could generate gas in the cellar and conduct it through the roof, and thus inflate their machine; and that one morning these animals hitched on to the top of his house and started with them all for the asylum, with a stream of burning gas following them from the rear of the building. He seemed the only one cognizant of the fact that they were being taken. They had only gone a short distance when his brother concluded to open the door and walk out, and in so doing, he fell to the earth, a great distance, and was dashed to pieces. As they passed along the river he saw a stream of burning gas flowing down, all of which had been caused by the machine by which he was being conveyed.

The first night in the asylum he was aroused by the cry of "fire," and the roll of the steam engines on the pavement and a bright light shone in his window, which was interpreted by him to mean that the stream of burning gas he had caused to flow down the river had reached the city and all was to be destroyed by fire. All noises had a language and conveyed some idea to him. The tick of the clock called out the stations as they rolled along, all the while above them, except when they came down to make a stop.

The asylum seemed to be a place of human slaughter, brought about in every conceivable manner. The servants rattled the dishes to attract people to the table when no meal was to be served. These were slaughtered by dead-falls, burning, drowning, and by every form of horrible machinery. The building was in the air some distance above the earth, so that no human being could reach them.

One of his brothers and his family physician were put in a machine like an old-fashioned apple-paring machine, and with a knife cut up in small bits, after which they were put in trunks and sent home. This was to be

his fate as soon as they got hold of him, so he kept clear of the dining table and stayed in his room, and thus escaped.

All over the building he could hear the screams of children that were being eaten by these half-animal and half-human beings. It seemed to him at this time that some unknown lady was visiting him in his room and claiming to be his wife (which was true), whom he was sure was dead. He would occasionally go out to walk with the expectation of stepping off the building into mid-air to fall through space to the earth, but when the door was opened, he always found they had been lowered to the earth.

Dray carts and 'buses cursed him in their peculiar language and threatened him with immediate death.

After a time he was confined in Solomon's temple or some other historic edifice. He fancied he made a trip in his balloon all over the world, in which he visited all the countries taught him in early days. This was a free ride on a through train with no stops save one. He fancied they were frozen up in the Arctic regions once, but finally went off in a terrible flood. He made a trip to the other world and a very pleasant trip, except the drawback that he could not remain. In this he saw all he retained of his early religious teachings: the golden streets, the great white throne, celestial harps, paradise birds, etc. He thought his stomach was simply a barrel, and that his food remained there till it decayed and then passed off, hence he refused food; so he required feeding nearly four months with a stomach tube. He well remembered how ghastly he looked when he saw himself in a large mirror. One day they took him out to the bathroom, and after the bath he was dressed in his usual clothing and for the first time, for nearly four months, he took a little solid food.

At one time he fancied his clothing was not his and he would take it off and go to bed. The attendants remonstrated with him, and finally threatened him with a cold bath if he would not keep them on; this they carried into effect one cold winter day. After this he was always willing to take any clothing offered and no questions asked.

For about four years he refused to talk, fearing something awful would happen him if he did, and in addition to that he thought everybody knew, as well as he, what he was thinking about and that there was no necessity of his talking; he was annoyed to have people ask him questions, for he thought they did it simply to annoy him or catch him in a quibble. His first impression at Binghamton was that he was confined in some prison (all the while in the air) for some wrong, fancied or otherwise, and that the authorities were only holding him for execution. When taken to a bath he fancied he was to be drowned, but some circumstance always intervened to save him and he would find himself back to his seat where he was taken from. He was repeatedly taken to be hanged and he could hear the mob around him crying for blood, and he has seen the gibbet erected for his execution, but from this he seemed to escape by some unknown means and again he would find himself at his old place behind what seemed to him the prison bars. He does not have as minute a recollection

of what transpired around him at Binghamton as he does while at the first asylum.

He has a very distinct recollection of his severe illness during the long winter of 1884. He had a pleasant room by himself which looked out upon the city, and it was from this room he first beheld the electric lights, which had come into use since he had been confined. The lights to his mind were some supernatural engine of destruction that he could not interpret.

The first and only idea he ever had of self-destruction came to him while he lay in his room suffering. One bright night he lay thinking of himself and his condition, and in the full belief that he had no family or friends in this world, he felt it would be as well for him to be out of it. He planned how he could fasten one end of his sheet to a lock that fastened the inside guards of his window and the other end around his neck, and then to put an end to all further trouble. About this time the night watch came along and gave him some medicine, and attracted his attention in another direction, and thus it passed off. To show how the delusions that everybody knew what he was thinking about gained strength in his mind, he referred to one circumstance which is only one among hundreds. The next morning after his contemplated self-destruction his attendant came into his room and the first thing he did was to remove the lock from the guard and open it, leading him to believe that he knew what he had been thinking about and that he did this to prevent a recurrence.

Early in the summer he was removed from the main asylum building to the tents, at which time he could scarcely walk and would not talk. He says when he arrived at the tent very early one morning a new idea came into his mind. Instead of thinking himself sailing about in the air in a sort of a prison house, he actually found himself on terra firma again, the sun shining, the birds singing, the winds blowing and evergreen surrounding him. This gave him new thoughts and together "with kind care placed him on the road to complete recovery."

After a time he was attacked with dysentery, and when upon his cot sick, he first attempted to speak. He tells of a strange attendant bringing him for dinner two slices of bread thickly buttered, a dish of oatmeal and sugar and a bowl of egg and milk; he says he knew it would not do for him to eat it and that the attendant intended to kill him, hence he cast about in his mind to see how he could make it known to him. No way opened except to try to talk, so he made the attempt and in a small squeaky voice, which frightened him and nearly frightened the attendant, he told him he could not eat that, and that he wanted what the doctor ordered. His friends were informed of the change and came to visit him, and when he saw and conversed with them he gave up the delusion that they were dead, and he felt a desire to have their visit repeated.

The delusion in regard to the knowledge of his thoughts and being a prisoner, etc., did not leave him until after he went to visit his brother, and as he found he could be out among people without detriment to them or himself he felt so relieved, that in a day or two sleep came "nights to

his eyelids," and these all departed at once more suddenly than any other during his recovery.

His absence from the hospital on parole made it impossible to give a complete record of his recovery.

Mr. H. died March 29, 1886, of apoplexy, but had continued in good health, and had resumed his editorial work and was about to resume the practice of law at the time of his demise.

After these years it is most gratifying to have our observations verified by Dr. A. E. Macdonald, Superintendent of the Manhattan State Hospital, East.

Doctors Wright and Haviland, of his staff, have given us a very interesting and instructive report in the *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF INSANITY* for October of their successful use of tents during the summer of 1902. Their reports deal in detail with the life of and improvement in the patients thus cared for. While giving full credit to ventilation, fresh air and sunshine—the hospital has them all—I wish to emphasize the point, that it was, in my opinion, the complete change in the whole existence of the patient that was the important curative agent. The listless monotony was broken—and, too, we must not forget that we may make our means of diversion monotonous—the mind was aroused and the patient started, as it were, on a new life.

The physicians who are best equipped by aptitude and facilities to furnish the mental diversion for their patients will meet with the greatest success.

Amityville, N. Y., January 31, 1903.