

The History of the Camarillo State Mental Hospital

By Melissa Moore, ACHS
2021 Stan Daily Scholarship Awardee

A relic of the past stands tall, overlooking vast swaths of native grasses. Over the years, its boldly arched frame has succumbed to the years of harsh weather. Its complement, an unassuming white stucco building in the shape of an “L”, resides nearby. Scraggly brush winds around its side; a lizard scampers through a crack in its foundation. These two buildings are the untouched remnants of the Camarillo State Mental Hospital. The hospital radicalized the care of mentally ill patients and resides on land that offers a glimpse into the history of the greater Pleasant Valley.

The land ceded to the United States after the Mexican-American war in 1848. It fell into the hands of Joseph P. Lewis, known for establishing walnuts and Lima beans in California. Lewis and Adolfo Camarillo were close friends and had a business partnership. They sold the Lewis ranch house and surrounding land to the State of California in 1932. Designated for a state mental hospital, the area encompassed 1,648 acres. By 1933, the former ranch housed fifty male patients. Later that year, construction on the land finally began.

State architect George McDougall drew the plans for the institute. The hospital was to be a self-contained community covering 200 acres. Included in the plans were a dairy barn and farm, gas station, and even a credit union. The completed hospital expected to house up to 7000 patients and 700 staff. Construction finished in 1936 and cost \$10,000,000. The mental hospital was the biggest in the world upon completion. The opening drew local celebrities like Adolfo Camarillo and Joseph McGrath. Governor Frank Merriam made the dedicatory address.

The first patients were all adult males who resided in the Bell Tower. A year later, 300 women from other state hospitals arrived. There were so many transfers from other state hospitals that the North Complex had to open. The North and South Complex (Bell Tower) were then divided by female and male departments. In 1947, a ward for mentally disabled children opened. As demand grew, a Children's Treatment Hospital was established. A new Receiving and Treatment Center and Administration Building accommodated the needs of the adult wards. By 1957, the hospital had reached its peak population, tending to more than 7,000 patients. Adolescent patients were separated from adult patients in 1959. They relocated to a new Adolescent Division, complete with four care centers and a school. In the late 60's, the hospital expanded its care to those with developmental disorders.

In 1983, the hospital began experimenting with new treatment methods. Activity centers allowed patients to experience a new setting during the day. They were also allowed to attend

therapy sessions, educational programs, and group activities. Patients were organized into groups based on their needs. The latest biopsychosocial treatments factored into these new methods. The program saw great success. Patients with mental and developmental disabilities reintegrated into society, while mentally ill patients unable to return to society received top-notch personalized care.

In 1967, Governor Ronald Reagan signed the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act into effect. It brought an end to involuntary and indefinite confinement of mentally disabled citizens. The bill also encouraged the release of mentally handicapped citizens from state hospitals into care facilities like nursing homes and board-and-care homes. The LPS Act made it harder for patients to be readmitted to hospitals. It became easier to imprison the mentally ill than to treat them. In 1976, discoveries about the chemical barrier of the brain led to new treatments. These drugs allowed mentally ill patients to live a normal life and led to the hospital's decline. Additionally, in 1996, Governor Pete Wilson sent a task force to evaluate the hospital. The team weighed the pros and cons of keeping the institution open. They decided that the high cost and low efficiency of the state hospital was not worth it. All these factors led to the closure of Camarillo State Mental Hospital on June 30, 1997. It was transformed into the campus of California State University Channel Islands in 2002.

While teenagers like to circulate ghost stories about the mental hospital, it really is anything but scary. The grounds cultivated rich crops of citrus, lima beans, and walnuts for early farmers of the Pleasant Valley. They harbored the hospital where addicts, the mentally ill, and developmentally disabled were treated with respect and dignity. Today, the university preserves and celebrates the natural beauty of the chaparral region. It brings new life to the site of the former mental hospital and is home to thousands of students.