

Robert McDonough

History of Camarillo State Mental Hospital “HOTEL CALIFORNIA”

Plates clatter in the kitchen, smell of bacon sizzling, a 78 year old woman wakes and doesn't know where she is. Her walls are white, she is confused, “where is my baby?” A foul stench of urine fills the hallways. Nurses hustle down the corridors, with no time to spare, patients need to be showered, medicated, and fed. Sounds of moans and groans fill the air, sadness floods the rooms, and screams of terror chill the bone; a new day has begun at Camarillo State Hospital, it is 1962.

The present California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) was once a psychiatric hospital, which was established in 1936. It was known as Camarillo State Mental Hospital and treated patients with developmental disabilities and mental illness.

The California Department of Institutions built the hospital as refuge for local hospitals because there was limited federal funding, poor living conditions, overcrowdedness, institutions and prisons were weak and failing. Why Camarillo? Farmland was ample and fertile, land was cheap, easy access to large mental hospitals, and institutions in Los Angeles County.

In 1929, \$1,000,000 was offered to buy the land and buildings by the California Legislature to build a state hospital in Camarillo. Joseph P. Lewis and Adolfo Camarillo, both Agriculturists, owned 8600 acres called Lewis Ranch and sold 1500 acres of this for \$415,000.

Once news broke out in Camarillo that an “asylum” was going to be built, protesters spoke out. They were worried about their houses depreciating and the proximity of insane people near their wives and children. Supporters of the institution argued the hospital had the potential to create a large and consistent payroll for members in the city of Camarillo. Over 1,000 people would be given employment as a result of the hospital.

The groundbreaking ceremony took place on August 15, 1933, with Mr. and Mrs, Adolfo Camarillo, Josephine Lewis, Governor Rolph, and Dr. Toner in attendance. The new hospital project was a result of an agreement between the Public Works Administration and the State of California.

The task of constructing the building was given by state architect, George McDougall. The hospital was expected to house 7,000 patients and 700 staff, homes for superintendent and officials. The main focus was designing the hospital

with dormitories, administration buildings, a dairy, treatment facilities, shops, roads and landscaped gardens. McDougall wanted a cottage-style setting whereby the proposed children's unit held over 150 adolescent youths in four separate duplex cottages, with each cottage holding over 36 children. They constructed a receiving and isolation unit adjoining the administration building and the central dining room. The school, domestic space, chapel, gym, and therapy center, would each be housed in separate buildings.

McDougall wanted the design to blend in with the historical architecture of Ventura County, and chose the structure of San Buenaventura Mission showing red tile roofs and white pueblo walls. It was important to McDougall that the hospital setting would be surrounded by the natural beauty of rolling hills, flowers, and greenery and would result in a more tranquil resort rather than a stale-looking hospital with no life. This eliminated a dark cloud over the hospital.

On October 12, 1936 the Camarillo State Hospital administration hosted the opening ceremony. Members of the community sat in chairs on the beautiful lawns that faced the Spanish-style building to celebrate this wonderful moment. Doctors, therapy workers, nurses, and volunteers all clapped at the announcement of the opening. The total amount of hospital cost was approximately \$10,000,000 and, at completion, was the largest mental hospital in the world.

The first patients were adult men and in 1937, 300 women patients were transferred to Camarillo from other hospitals. In 1947, the hospital opened a ward for children with developmental disabilities. Later, a Children's Treatment Center was constructed and occupied in 1955.

The hospital closed down in 1997 for two reasons. In 1967, Governor Ronald Reagan, signed the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act, which impacted state hospital populations. In 1996, Governor Peter Wilson cited the facility and found that in 1954 there were 7,266 patients, but it only had 871 patients in 1996. The hospital costs had also increased and these factors closed one-quarter of the facility and on June 30th, 1996, the hospital was closed.

Cheers of joy, squeals of delight, it's Friday, school is out. A new day has passed at California State University Channel Islands, but moans and groans of the past still remain.....