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TRACES of INDIANA and MIDWESTERN HISTORY

"The Sweetest Little Boy"

“The Sweetest Little Boy I Ever Knew”

A Handmade History for an Institutional Life

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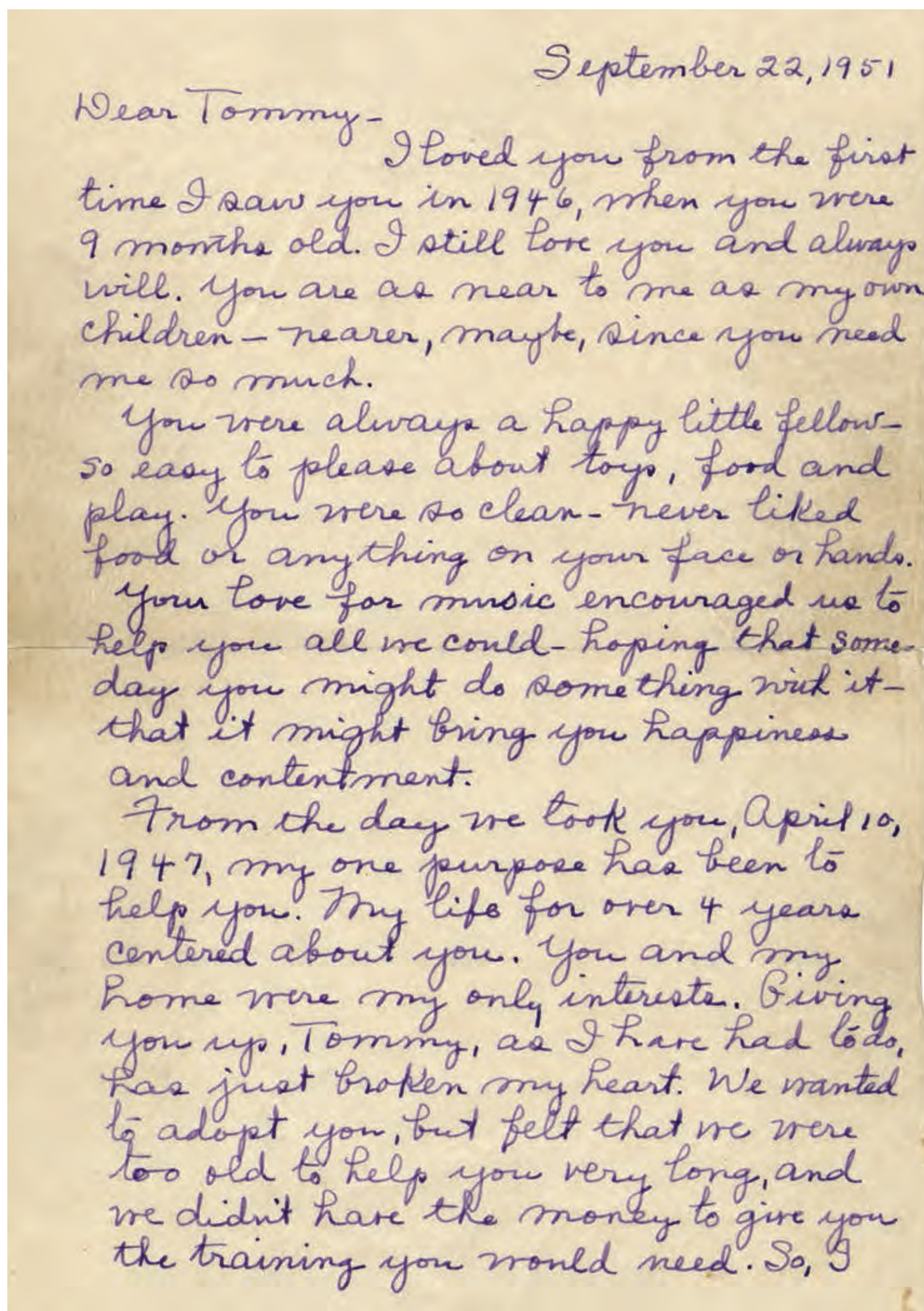
Since 2005 major earthquakes, urban warfare, devastating floods and fires, subway and rail catastrophes, severe tornadoes, and numerous terrorist attacks have occurred in Jennings County, Indiana. At the disasters' epicenter, abandoned buildings set the stage for domestic emergencies and international strife. Imitation market storefronts are scrawled with Afghani graffiti. Over a pretend town square, a tower rises. The four faces of its clock are always set at 9:11.

Opposite: *A nurse at the General Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, holds ten-month-old Tommy Hancock, October 1946.*

The buildings, repurposed for military and civilian training, were once home to institutionalized adults and children. Known almost a century ago as feeble-minded inmates, then as patients, clients, and consumers, they were consigned to a state-run establishment bearing the name of the nearby, winding Muscatatuck River. As terms for its inhabitants evolved over eighty-five years, so did names for the place itself, from a farm colony, to a state school, to a state hospital and training center. In 2005, when the Muscatatuck State Developmental Center closed its doors, 8,117 people had passed through them, spending a few years or a lifetime within the institution's walls.

The Indiana National Guard quickly took possession of the 800-acre property near the town of Butlerville, as well as the complex of sixty-eight buildings. Today, the inmates, patients, clients, and consumers are gone. The river flows on, its name having survived the latest institutional transformation. Muscatatuck Urban Training Range is known nationally and beyond as a venue for large-scale homeland security and disaster preparedness exercises of theatrical realism.



September 22, 1951

Dear Tommy—

I loved you from the first time I saw you in 1946, when you were 9 months old. I still love you and always will. You are as near to me as my own children—nearer, maybe, since you need me so much.

You were always a happy little fellow—so easy to please about toys, food and play. You were so clean—never liked food or anything on your face or hands.

Your love for music encouraged us to help you all we could—hoping that someday you might do something with it—that it might bring you happiness and contentment.

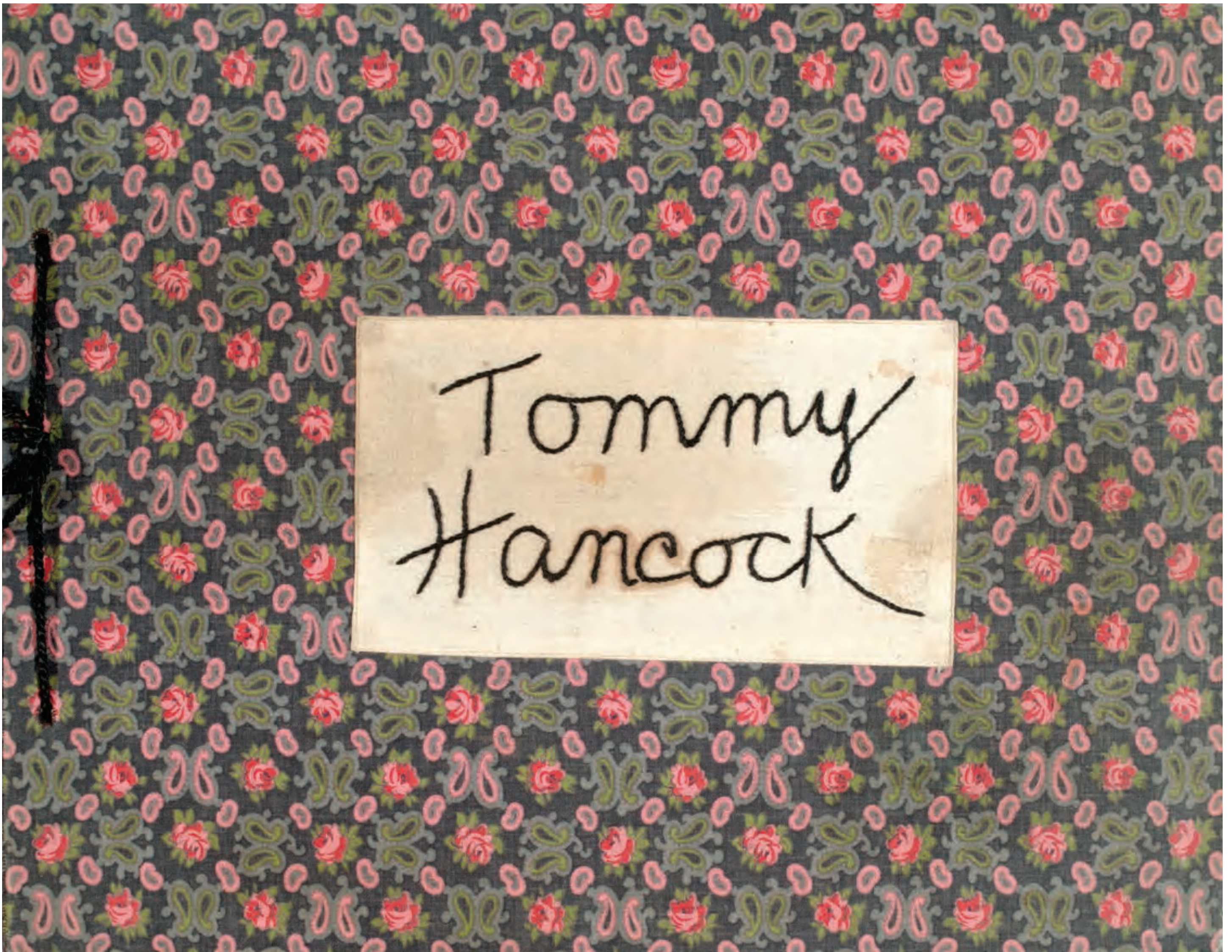
From the day we took you, April 10, 1947, my one purpose has been to help you. My life for over 4 years centered about you. You and my home were my only interests. Giving you up, Tommy, as I have had to do, has just broken my heart. We wanted to adopt you, but felt that we were too old to help you very long, and we didn't have the money to give you the training you would need. So, I

September 22, 1951, letter from Edith Mumpower to Tommy Hancock explaining why she had to give him up and have him live at the Muscatatuck State School.

By the time of its closure, residents remaining at the Muscatatuck State Developmental Center had been relocated to group homes and other community-based environments. As state officials sorted through the years' accumulations of documents and artifacts, they found an album of black-and-white snapshots. Someone had embellished its colorful fabric covers with embroidery. On crumbling, black pages, dozens of mounted photos of a growing boy are surrounded by neat, handwritten text in white ink. The title page is inscribed as follows:

History
Of
Tommy Hancock
In Words And Pictures
By Mrs. Edith B Mumpower
Nashville, Tennessee.
This Book Is
Tommy's Personal Property
To Stay With Him
Wherever He Might Be.
It Has Also Been Prepared
To Help Any
Who Work With Him.

A loose envelope was tucked within the pages. Inside is a letter dated September 22, 1951, and signed by Edith Mumpower. The letter reads: "Dear Tommy—I loved you from the first time I saw you in 1946, when you were nine months old. I still love you and always will. You are as near to me



Cover to photograph album with the twenty-five pages detailing Tommy's life.

as my own children—nearer, maybe, since you need me so much." Edith describes to Tommy her joy and sense of purpose in caring for him during the four years he was in her home. The letter's tone then turns to anguish: "Giving you up, Tommy, as I have had to do, has just broken my heart." She assures Tommy of her continuing affection and her intention to remain a part of his life. "When someone reads this to you—when you can understand—several years will have gone by and you will be a big boy," she wrote. "I hope to see you many times before then." Yet, her closing remarks expresses the finality of their separation: "Goodbye, Tommy, and remember I love you."

The twenty-five-page album begins with snapshots of Thomas Hancock that Edith took soon after she met him at General Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. "A product of the war," she recounted, he was born there in November 1945. At birth he weighed two pounds, was blind, and initially thought to be deaf. The birth mother is identified only as a woman from Evansville, Indiana. She did not wish to keep her son. "I wanted to help him," said Edith. That fall and winter she "went to see him, fed him, took him out doors, rolled him around the halls."

After spending the first fourteen months of his life in the hospital, in January 1947 Tommy was moved from Tennessee to an unspecified location in Evansville. Edith traveled there to visit

him in March. "I knew he was to be my care—I loved him and wanted to share my home with him," she said. Evansville's welfare department agreed to release Tommy to live in Nashville on a "temporary visit" basis. "April 10 my husband and I drove to Evansville and brought him home with us," Edith recalled.

The album pages following are an affectionate journal, in pictures and words, of a growing, learning child, with one account noting: "Just as soon as Tommy had plenty of space to move about, he was walking and running." We see Tommy at play and interacting with "Dee" and "Pie," Tommy's names for Edith and her husband, D. L. Mumpower, a Nashville physician. In 1948 she wrote, "This was a wonderful year in Tommy's life. He liked to do the things a normal little boy would like to do. The two year-old "got acquainted with rocks, grass, leaves, trees, flowers" and "played with water, got out in the rain." He even responded to the sounds of the outdoors; D. L. had been putting drops in Tommy's ears and the child's hearing was improving.

The Mumpowers shared their love of music with Tommy, and he responded. "From the day we took Tommy until he left, we sang to him—rocked him at night and sang to him," the album recounts. Or they listened to the radio until bedtime, playing the "hillbilly music" that he so loved. At the age of four "we taught Tommy to play C-scale—one octave—with his forefinger." The album goes on to note that soon Tommy "was picking out songs all by himself" on the Mumpowers' piano. "The Farmer in the Dell," "Swanee River"—Tommy found notes for the melodies the Mumpowers sang to him.

Edith was in her late fifties at the time she brought Tommy to Nashville; D. L. seven years her elder. In an earlier chapter

Above: At the age of two years and eight months, Tommy enjoys a cooling spray from a hose at the Mumpowers' home in Nashville, Tennessee, summer 1948. ***Opposite:*** *Tommy poses on an outdoor brick fireplace, summer 1950.*

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of their lives, the Mumpowers had served as Methodist missionaries in Africa. Bringing their infant daughter with them, they were among the first white missionaries sent to the village of Wembo-Nyama in the central part of the Belgian Congo (today Zaire). The Mumpowers spent a total of six

years there between 1914 and 1922. The family, augmented by a son born in Africa, returned to live in Nashville. There is no reference to the Mumpowers' lives prior to 1946 in the album dedicated to Tommy. Information in the album, however, makes it possible to identify them as the missionaries whose papers describing work in the Congo are housed at the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Photographs played a part in Edith's experience as a missionary, as they did later, in the years of Tommy's youth. She had been the mission's photographer in Africa, developing her own film. Originally trained as a nurse, she provides, in the photo album, a detailed log of the child's physical development and his progress with mobility. She describes his burgeoning language skills, making an extensive list of his unique vocabulary, spelled out phonetically. The same linguistic curiosity and painstaking documentation are evident in her earlier activities in Africa, where she engaged in writing a grammar of the Otetela tribal language.

Pride in her charge's progress suffuses Edith's photo captions and narrative. She is also aware of his challenges. "Tommy's development has been slow," she noted. "Yet we think he has done remarkably well considering his bad start and his handicaps." Abruptly, the images of playful times in the Nashville backyard disappear. Edith writes: "August 3, 1951 I took Tommy by plane to Indianapolis to Riley Hospital—the hardest thing I ever did in my life. He was sent from there to where he is now—a State School for Retarded Children." In the letter she wrote that September, intended to be read to an older Tommy, she explains, "Your good friend 'Pie' [D. L.] had a bad heart attack and since there was no one to help me, I had to give you up. We wanted to adopt you, but felt that we were too old to help you very long, and we didn't have the money to give you the training you would need. . . . I'll never

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Left: *Tommy and Edith relax in a Radio Flyer wagon in September 1951 during her first visit to see Tommy at Muscatatuck.* ***Above:*** *Tommy at Muscatatuck, age six and a half, July 1952.*

forgive myself—I'll never get over it."

Edith went to see Tommy at Muscatatuck State School a month after delivering him to Indianapolis. Snapshots of the first visit show Tommy sitting in a Radio Flyer wagon brought from Nashville for his use that day. In the background is a broad expanse of grass in front of an imposing brick building of three stories. There exists no account of Tommy's transition to institutional life. (Access to all his medical records is protected under privacy rules enacted in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.) Upon his arrival, or previously at Riley Hospital, he was likely administered an evaluation to place him in a category of "educable," "trainable," or "custodial." He would have been assigned one of the numerous beds lining the large dormitory-style rooms that comprised accommodations for patients at the state school. He would sleep, eat, bathe, and use the toilet with other residents. He would not have been allowed personal possessions such as toys.

For Edith the transition was wrenching. "Tommy has been gone seven weeks today," she wrote. "I miss him more every day—there is an ache in my heart, an awful heaviness." She also noted that the days had become long for her, writing, "My life for over four years centered about you. You and my home were my only interests." Here begins the greater portion of the album—Edith's chronicle of her semiannual visits to the institution through the years of Tommy's boyhood and adolescence.

In its first report to the governor of Indiana in 1920, the Board of Trustees of the Indiana Farm Colony for the Feeble-Minded described the fertile acres and abundant natural resources allocated to the Muscatatuck Colony: "It presents a most pleasing vista of woodland, vale and stream with beautiful rolling pastures and flat table lands hungry for improvement, and the plow." Building materials such as timber and gravel deposits are there for the taking. The celebratory tone of manifest destiny is tempered by budgetary considerations. "As it is the policy of the Board to use inmate labor for construction of the buildings," the trustees fully expected that "the Colony will operate with small or no expense to the state." Potential savings of taxpayer monies, the trustees argued, are among several benefits of removing this "community nuisance" from society. The report continued, "For the economic reasons that the feeble-minded may not 'multiply and replenish the earth' it is necessary that they be segregated." The ominous subtext of this statement is soon made explicit. The trustees recommended that the state consider taking advantage of a law passed in March 1907 that authorized "the sterilization of defectives."

Edith with Tommy in the backyard of her home, October 1946.

The Indiana legislation invoked by the trustees was the first eugenic sterilization law passed in the nation, "an Act entitled to prevent procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists." It was repealed by the Indiana Supreme Court in the year following the board's 1920 report,

Tommy with D. L. Mumpower, Christmas, 1949.

and then reworked and reinstated in 1927. The later statute, revised "to provide for the sexual sterilization of inmates of state institutions in certain cases," was to remain on the books for nearly five decades. Dozens of such sterilizations were performed at Muscatatuck, at very minimum the 144 cases actually reported. These comprised sterilization orders approved by its trustees from 1937 to 1953.

The promise of natural abundance and free labor envisioned by the founding trustees was realized as the colony became virtually self-sufficient. It generated the required heat and steam and had a separate water supply. Well into the 1960s, the institution proudly reported that it provided its own milk, eggs, pork, animal feeds, garden produce, and orchard fruit. In a 1966 amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act, minimum-wage protections were extended to residents of public institutions, although the act's provisions were not initially enforced. During the decade following, there were multiple lawsuits in the United States regarding institutional peonage, leading to permanent abolishment of a widespread practice. Muscatatuck's farming operations ceased, as did the unpaid jobs of residents assigned to the dietary kitchens, nursing units, storeroom, and grounds keeping.

Muscatatuck was entering the era of its highest population census when Tommy was admitted in 1951. In the two decades following World War II, there was a building boom in state institutions nationwide. The number of individuals in U.S. institutions for people labeled with mental retardation increased at twice the rate of the general population. Growth occurred despite reports published in *Life* magazine and other media of patient abuses in understaffed and underfunded postwar institutions.

Criteria for admission could be as arbitrary as the confluence of poverty, delinquency, or undesirable behaviors. Dorothy Stewart, eighteen years old, was admitted to Muscatatuck from the Gibson County Jail in 1950. She remained for more than half a century. A runaway from a troubled childhood in Princeton, Indiana, Stewart actually preferred the institution to other fates that might befall her. As to mental capability, Stewart was deemed competent to perform many tasks later done by paid employees, including caring for the institution's babies when a nursery opened in 1952.

The trend in state institutions at the time was longer stays and admission of younger individuals. Physicians frequently advised parents to institutionalize their school-age children who had significant disabilities. This was best for the child, they counseled, as well as for the stability

and well-being of the family. The choice for parents was stark—put their child in the care of the state or keep him or her in a community offering more stigma than support services. Muscatatuck had begun accepting children under six years of age two years before Tommy was admitted.

Edith spent time with Tommy for three days in March during his first year at Muscatatuck. She was accompanied by her adult daughter for the round-trip drive of nearly 500 miles. She took with her a few simple toys he had played with in her home. Along with her camera, Edith brought these familiar items for each visit. Afterward, she recorded his height and weight and mentioned the things Tommy remembered of his former life. She also noted what he had lost. That March "we took Tommy to the piano in the new recreational room. . . . He tried to play something—but his tunes or how he played them were gone. I am sure he could learn them again."

Edith's record of her visits (thirty-two in all) juxtaposes sadness and hope. In July she is reassured that Tommy remembered her. "He knew me, hugged me tight around my neck," she recalled. "He understood everything I said to him." But she was concerned: "I found Tommy very thin—no energy—no expression on his face—so forlorn looking—so different from when he left us almost a year ago." In the spring of the following year, 1953, Edith "found Tommy feeling better and looking better than since he left us almost two years ago. He had more life in him—more energy for play—was more interested in his toys." Yet their parting, like so many she described, was difficult. "At four o'clock I left him crying and beating his fists on the table—crying like his heart would break," she wrote.

Edith took Tommy into her care in the hope that it would be of sufficient duration to prepare him for the Indiana Institute for the Education of the Blind. Established in 1847 by the Indiana General Assembly, the residential school in Indianapolis admitted children "of educable mentality." In 1951 it was equipped with a library of five thousand Braille volumes and praised as "a thoroughly modern, commissioned school in well-equipped, beautifully spacious quarters." Edith's narrative is pervaded by disappointment in Tommy's untapped potential for learning at Muscatatuck. Writing about him at the age of seven she lamented, "it is the same sad story—nothing being done for him. If only he had a friend."

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In July 1953 an ambitious new superintendent, not quite thirty years old, took over at Muscatatuck. There he encountered what he characterized as "a negative, custodial approach" toward patients. Alfred Sasser Jr. made a lengthy progress report to parents twenty months into his tenure, describing numerous unacceptable conditions he intended to correct. Upon his arrival, he asserted, patients had inadequate medical care, insufficient hygiene, poor diet, unsafe living conditions, and were exploited as workers. There was, he added, "no special education program for retarded children and those who were multiply handicapped." Sasser quickly initiated sweeping changes in the institution's operation and personnel. He greatly expanded patient services, appointing administrators who tended to be, as he was, young, educated, and from out of state.

The Sasser administration's challenges to institutional culture, which included tripling the rate of patient discharges and eliminating jobs awarded through political patronage, led to a backlash initiated by area politicians and citizens. A grand jury investigation in 1957 charged that the staff, characterized as having "deteriorated morals," had been infiltrated by Communists, among other accusations. After a directorship of less than four years, Sasser resigned and was hired to head Iowa's Glenwood State School.

Meanwhile, Edith found conditions at Muscatatuck had improved for Tommy. In 1955 she wrote that "a recreation director takes Tommy out every day. During the summer for a while, he attended speech and hearing school. This is what he needs—help and friends." She recorded a particularly satisfying visit in the spring of 1957. She was accompanied by her daughter, who had not seen the eleven-year-old in several years. "We played records, played with toys, had long car rides," Edith remembered. "The car is the one he used to ride in—and he hadn't forgotten it—felt all around inside and just grinned."

As Tommy entered adolescence, Edith noted an increasing detachment. "He doesn't cry now when I leave him. Seems resigned to his fate," she noted. Edith found that his physical maturation was no cause for celebration. "This visit was the hardest one yet. Tommy is growing so fast. With no help, what lies before him?" she wondered. Her record reflected some resig-

nation of her own, as she began to accept a shift in their relationship: "He wouldn't love me—seemed happy with the attendants. He is getting some help now, for which I am most grateful and thankful."

As she entered her seventies, Edith, unaccompanied by her daughter, made shorter and less frequent visits to the state school. "I am sure I am fading from Tommy's memory," she wrote. She found it physically difficult to cope with him. "I took him outdoors, but couldn't manage him. There was no one to help me. With the help of a patient I got Tommy back inside," Edith said. "I was so crushed and hurt that I left without getting any pictures." She was told that the then seventeen-year-old Tommy had not been outside the building for the past two years.

In the fall of 1964 Edith noted her fatigue, wondering, "Will I ever see him again?" She is comforted to learn, however, that Tommy is being moved to a unit with residents considered to have fewer behavioral problems, something that made her "very, very happy." She returned the following spring to find Tommy in "a nice, old building with a big porch and such a nice room to entertain patients. His tray was brought in for me to feed him—the most beautiful food I have ever seen . . . such generous servings." After dinner, the two of them "went out on the big porch and listened to a big record player—loud and clear. Tommy really listened." Edith expressed her appreciation for the kindness of the staff and her relief that Tommy was being well-cared for. At age nineteen, "Tommy is at last in good hands, and I feel so much better," said Edith. It was May 26, 1965, and it would be their final time together.

As the photo album ends, so does our glimpse into the life of Thomas Hancock. He had reached the age delineating adulthood, yet had not been allowed to learn or to feed himself. He would never enjoy the privileges and responsibilities accorded to young men outside the institution. What might have been Tommy's experience in his two remaining decades?

Muscatatuck's enrollment was declining, in line with national trends of downsizing and deinstitutionalization. Disability activists pressed for equal citizenship, states talked about saving money, and mental-retardation professionals focused on commu-

Edith and Tommy at Muscatatuck, April 1957.

Tommy at age eighteen, September 16, 1964, at Muscatatuck.

nity services. In 1977, when Randy Krieble began several years of employment at the state school, then called the Muscatatuck State Hospital and Training Center, the facility was understaffed and underfunded. Its Works Progress Administration-era buildings were in need of renovation. The air inside, cooled solely by electric fans during hot and muggy southern Indiana summers, could be thick with cigarette smoke of both staff and patients. Krieble described the institutional culture much the same as Sasser had a quarter century earlier. Despite attempts by the "very caring, dedicated staff" to improve services, Krieble said, the care was custodial and "it was about control, as a lot of people did run away from the facilities." Patients had little privacy. For patients with undesirable behaviors, punishment in the basement jail that Sasser found in 1953 had been replaced by "treatment" with physical and chemical restraints and isolation rooms.

In 1992 a hidden television camera documented abuses at New Castle State Developmental Center, eighty miles to the north. Subsequent scrutiny by the U.S. Department of Justice found Muscatatuck in violation of its consumers' civil rights. The resulting loss of certification and federal funding proved to be temporary. By the time Krieble returned as an assistant superintendent in 1999, conditions had "drastically improved." He was there to facilitate the transition of hundreds of residents out of the institution. The prevailing philosophy had shifted; individuals with developmental disabilities should be in community settings where they have a better quality of life. In 2001 Governor Frank O'Bannon announced plans for Muscatatuck's closure.

On the last page of Edith's album is a note:

> Dear Tommy—This is good-bye for now. I wish I could see you one more time. If there is a heaven—and I believe there is—you will be there. And I want to be there, too, and be with you. You can see me and talk with me. I believe there is a heaven because there must be a place where things will be made right for you, where you will be able to see and talk. I'll go first and I'll be looking for you. You were the sweetest little boy I ever knew.
>
> Your best friend,
> Dee

Later that summer in 1965, Edith sent a letter to institutional officials requesting the establishment of a trust fund for Tommy and making advance arrangements for his burial. Tommy, whose cause of death cannot be determined, outlived Edith by only four years. A stone incised "Thomas Hancock 1945 1981" lies in the grass of the Muscatatuck Cemetery. A larger stone marks the entrance. "Come Unto Me and I Will Give You Rest," it invites, just a few hundred yards from the urban warfare training grounds.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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