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Laconia State School

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"The history of the Laconia State School is a cautionary tale," said Gordon DuBois, who worked at the institution from 1977 until it closed in 1991. DuBois, who has taken it upon himself to tell the tale addressed the Laconia Historical and Museum Society earlier this month, drawing on records rescued from cabinets, attics, closets and dumpsters during the waning days of the school.

Many consider the history of the Laconia State School best forgotten, but DuBois, who continued to serve the developmentally disabled until retiring from the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, said "I'm interested in trying to keep the story alive so that we can continually learn from our mistakes." No mistake, he believes, was greater than the school itself. "Recalling the history helps to ensure against ever slipping back to institutional care," DuBois said. "We are not an inclusive society as long as there are such institutions."

DuBois finds the essence of the Laconia State School in its origins as an institution intended to serve two antagonistic purposes — caring for those branded "feebleminded" while protecting society from them. During the 19th century, almshouses, the "poorhouses" that grew into the county farms, filled, one observer reported, with "all the wreckage of humanity — the diseased, the insane, the imbecile, the epileptic and the criminal." When the press reported the death of "41 of 44 crazy people" in a fire at the Strafford County Farm in 1895 and 420 children were found living in almshouses, pressure for reform began to mount.

In 1901 the New Hampshire Federation of Women's Clubs petitioned the New Hampshire House of Representatives to establish a "school and home for the feebleminded." In their petition, they asked two questions: "As a simple act of justice, is it right for the State, the guardian and protector of all its citizens — its children — to discriminate wholly in favor of those who are well endowed, and cast off those, who through no fault of theirs, are lacking in mental equipment? Furthermore, as an act of self protection, is it not the part of wisdom to guard society from the crimes, the vice, and the immorality of this degenerate class, who with their weak willpower and deficient judgment are easily influenced by evil?"

Dubois emphasized that the Laconia State School was founded on the principle that "feeblemindedness" represented not only a cognitive shortcoming but also a moral flaw.

The Legislature accepted the recommendation to establish the school and Laconia was chosen from among the municipalities who were actually lobbying to host it. The New Hampshire School for Feebleminded Children opened in 1903 with 82 "inmates" in three buildings on 250 acres overlooking both Lake Winnisquam and Lake Opechee. Originally the school housed those between the ages of 3 and 21, but in 1905 was opened to women over 21.

By 1910 the school had added a farm, dining hall women's dormitory and hospital. But, DuBois said that the overcrowding that plagued the institution throughout its history had set in by 1916 when there were nearly 300 residents.

Dubois emphasized that almost from its beginnings the Laconia State School, like similar institutions in other states, was guided by the principles of "eugenics," which held that "feeblemindedness" was hereditary and impaired both cognitive functions and moral conduct to cause crime and immorality. Consequently, the "feebleminded" should not only be segregated from society but also forbidden to reproduce.

In 1915, New Hampshire marriage was forbidden all men deemed "mental defectives, epileptic, imbecile, feebleminded, idiotic and insane" — and to all women under the age of 45 who fit into the same categories — and two years later authorized the sterilization of those found "feebleminded" by the trustees of the school on the advice of three physicians. Sterilization was a condition of discharge from the school. "It was an easy place to get into," DuBois remarked, "but a hard place to get out of."

Lillian Streeter, a founder and trustee of the school, declared "in feeblemindedness lies the taproot of most of our social problems: the only effective radical way to deal with these problems is to strike at the taproot with the strong axe of prevention."

During the 1920s and 1930s, Dubois said, conditions at the school, which was renamed the Laconia State School in 1924, steadily deteriorated. During the Great Depression, more and more families with fewer and fewer resources sought to place family members at the school while the Legislature, faced with plummeting revenues, refused to increase its budget. He said that the superintendents' reports brim with requests for funds to undertake repairs and expand facilities that were repeated year after year.

By 1942 the school housed more than 600 residents, served by staff working 51 hours a week in two shifts, leaving one staff member responsible for 30 or 35 residents. Photographs of the institution from the early 1950s show large, drafty rooms, walled in brick and tile with drains in the floor. Dormitories were filled with beds, with no space for personal possessions. Residents had no privacy. There were no stalls in the bathrooms or seats on the toilets. One building that housed 80 residents had one toilet and one shower. Visitors, DuBois said, remarked on the "overwhelming stench."

However, DuBois said that the appointment of Richard Hungerford, a teacher, as superintendent in 1952 marked a turning point in the history of the school. Recognizing that parents represented agents of change, Hungerford invited them to visit the school, film the conditions and organize for reform. When "Help Wanted," a film documenting conditions at the school was shown to civic and charitable groups around the state, the Portsmouth Herald likened conditions at the Laconia State School to those in concentration camps of Nazi Germany, which were much in the news at the time.

Hungerford increased the time devoted to education and training took steps to provide more personal privacy, built a geriatrics unit and introduced co-educational activities. In 1953, with encouragement and tutelage from Hungerford, parents formed the New Hampshire Council for Retarded Children, drawing together regional groups, which began advocating for improved conditions.

Soon Hungerford began running afoul of the trustees, bureaucracy and lawmakers. DuBois referred to Edna St. John, who in her history of the New Hampshire Council for Retarded Children, wrote "as his total professional and moral commitment to the retarded came to be understood, he was looked

upon with wariness, and finally and tragically with hostility. The accolades had turned to venomous criticism." Despite the overwhelming support of parents of residents, Hungerford was forced to resign in 1960.

Hungerford was replaced by Arthur Toll, a teacher from Berlin, but DuBois said that his authority was curbed as the Board of Trustees was dismantled and authority concentrated in the Department of Health and Welfare. Although the emphasis on schooling introduced by Hungerford continued, therapies, including medication, remained the prevalent regimen for residents.

Numbers continued to climb, topping 1,000 with a waiting list of 400 by 1974. "There were never enough staff to support the population the way they needed to be supported," DuBois said. The next year Michael Dillon, superintendent of a similar facility in Connecticut, described the conditions in Laconia as "desolate" and asked the Legislature, "will it tolerate its citizens to live in a barren, sterile environment, devoid of stimulation?" DuBois said that by this time the question was no longer what needed to be done, but who would take the initiative to change the direction of the school.

As before, in 1978 the parents took the initiative by filing suit, charging that the state failed to comply with its own law requiring "the Division of Mental Health to establish, maintain, implement and coordinate a comprehensive service delivery system for developmentally disabled persons." Garrity v. Gallen led to a court order to reduce the numbers at the Laconia State School by immediately placing 235 residents in group homes in the community, but stopped short of ordering the institution to close.

The litigation also led to improvements at the school. Buildings were renovated. Staffing levels were increased. And education, training and treatment changed to prepare residents to return to the community. Meanwhile, efforts began to establish a community-based mental health care system.

When Richard Crocker become the last superintendent in 1986, numbers at the school were gradually reduced by stemming admissions and community placements until it was no longer economic to operate. On January 31, 1991 the Laconia State School closed its doors.

DuBois said that he has been speaking to professional and charitable groups about the school since 1994 and this year began addressing civic groups like local historical societies. "There were so many people for so many years that could have lived full lives," he said. "We must never allow it to happen again."

Perhaps the most poignant image DuBois presented was of the cemetery on Chemung Road in Meredith where deceased residents of the school were buried. He recalled that over the years residents were buried in unmarked graves at random locations near the school before the cemetery was opened in 1941. But, again the bodies were laid to rest in unmarked graves. After the parents organized, they asked that the deceased be identified and the graves marked. DuBois said that Ramsey Willett, the business manager of the school, found a map of the burial plots and was able to identify the deceased. In 1976, marked gravestones, purchased by the parents, were laid on each of the graves.

Like the marked gravestones, DuBois is ensuring that the developmentally disabled are never cast to oblivion again.

Today, the old school is used as a prison by the state Department of Corrections.