

That Fateful Ride: An Investigation into the Life and Times of Children and Adults  
Who Became the First 153 Residents of the Newly Created Western Institution for  
the Feeble-minded in Polk Pennsylvania

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## **Background:**

The Pennsylvania system for people with intellectual disability began in 1897 with the opening of the Western Institution for Feeble-minded, at Polk, Venango County Pennsylvania. Before that, the only long term facility in the state for this population was Elwyn, located in the suburbs of Philadelphia and established in 1852.

The 153 children and adults that left on the passenger train from Elwyn on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1897 became the first official residents at the Western Institution that became known as Polk. These new residents entered the facility at Polk on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1897.

After their admission, the institution expanded to house a population of three thousand five hundred people for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Polk continues to operate as a certified Intermediate Care Facility for People with Intellectual Disability and Elwyn is a multistate human services provider for people with a broad range of disability.

This research proposal will focus on the lives of the 153 people on that 1897 train and situate their transfer to Polk within social and political contexts of the era. The research will relay what transpired with and to these individuals to create the beginning of Pennsylvania's statewide system of care for people with intellectual disability.

The names of all 153 people have been obtained from Polk Center. Initial research in the Elwyn archives has found records for 120 of these individuals, with additional research being conducted to locate others.

The research is subtitled *That Fateful Ride* to highlight the significance of their train trip from one part of the state to another, not only for the 153 individuals and their families, but also for the tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians placed in institutions that would follow. From the day the human cargo of that April 1897 train arrived at Polk, the institutional world they pioneered would grow into a deeply influential form of treatment lasting for generations to come, not only in Pennsylvania but across the nation.

Until institutional services at Polk and other public and private facilities were exposed for systematic abuse and inhumane conditions in the 1960s, virtually all Americans took for granted that that people with intellectual disability belonged in places that were remote and distance, receiving special forms of training and care. These assumptions reinforced the establishment of a statewide network of publically operated facilities across the Commonwealth, beginning with Polk and these 153 children and adults.

To understand who these children and adults were, research will focus on the assessments and records located at the archives of Elwyn and Polk Centers. It will query why families decided to place their children in the institute, the routines and rhythms of daily life people in institutions experienced, and indicators of their quality of life.

The research will also explore how medical and widely accepted social beliefs of the time, like Eugenics, contributed to the character of institutional controls and to barriers in accessing community resources, rights, and relationships. Specific lines of inquiry are expected to consist of:

1. Etiology on why the people were said to be admitted to Elwyn, including information provided by families on why their children were placed and developed a disability
2. The life conditions of Elwyn, including information on the types of education, work and training opportunities people participated in
3. The reasons why the people were chosen to move, and the key decision makers in this process
4. Demographic features of the people including their age, gender, type or degree of impairment/diagnosis, race or cultural identity, and other pertinent information
5. Other pertinent information including popular opinion about the establishment of the Western Institution in the press, and disability history information from noted experts.

Preliminary research regarding the relationship of Elwyn and the Western Institution at Polk has confirmed that for at least ten years prior to the opening of Polk, Elwyn leadership lobbied to build a facility similar to Elwyn in the Western half of the state. This was due to numerous factors including: overcrowding concerns at Elwyn, a determination by professionals that additional institutional services deserved to be expanded, and social fear that people with disability posed a menace to the health of family and community life.

While the Western Institution was ultimately given over to the state Board of Charities instead of Elwyn to operate, Dr. Barr, the superintendent during the time of the train ride, continued to play a significant role in the development of Polk and other institutional programs across the state and nation. This continuity was reinforced when state authorities directed Dr. Barr to transfer 153 individuals whose families lived in a Western Pennsylvania County to the new facility at Polk.

### **Supervision and Support:**

At Elwyn, Dr. Elliott W. Simon will supervise the graduate student intern conducting this work, Andrea Kuhn. Ms. Kuhn is currently completing her Master's degree and expects to graduate with a degree in History this year. Dr. Hardy from West Chester University will supervise the internship.

The Pennsylvania Coalition Honoring People with Disability is funding portions of this research through a grant from the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council. Dana Olsen is the project director for this grant representing the Pennsylvania Coalition Honoring People with Disability and the Commonwealth Institute, a qualified 501c3. Mr. Olsen will be providing support to Ms. Kuhn in completion of this work and authorizing grant funding to Ms. Kuhn in the form of stipend for expenses and work time.

Supervision will also be provided by Shirley Pickens, the director of Polk Center or her designee in terms of work done with the archival collection at Polk.

## **Procedure:**

### **1. Records Index:**

Using the list of the 153 Elwyn residents that transferred to Polk provided by Dr. Simon, the graduate intern will locate records in the archives for which an index exists. Records will include progress reports related to their activities and life at Elwyn, and for some etiological records, correspondence, physical examinations, and photographs. Work will include assemblage of an index for work supervisors and the graduate intern to use for locating references and these files in the future.

All information from these records will be handled in a confidential manner. No student records, photo, image, reports or indexes will contain the name of actual individuals receiving care at Elwyn or the Western Institution, or their family members. Access to reference material will comply with any other guidelines established by Elwyn and Polk, respectively along with requirements from Federal and State agencies.

***Medical Records:*** These are located in a drawer below the lofted archive. These are listed with the Reg. No., school progress report volume and page numbers, and sometimes etiological and physical examination volume with page numbers. These resources list the name, date of birth, date of admission, and dispatch to Polk which helps confirm an individual's identity. Elwyn archival records also provide information on the history of the family, the physical and mental condition of individuals in care, and intake.

Below the etiological history is a summary, with dates, of any illnesses or medical attention given to a student. Below these records are Dr. Barr's assessments of the student before dispatching them to Polk. Usually a short sentence, Barr included his assessment of improvement, his grading of "idiocy", and occasionally positive or negative commentary about the student's capabilities.

It is noteworthy that not all Elwyn residents who left for Polk have been located using this method. About 15-25 names are illegible, have misplaced records, or more commonly, lacked any commentary.

***Physical Examinations:*** Located in the back of the archive behind the glass cabinets. For a very small number of these individuals, the institute performed physical exams. These are paraphrased in the medical records.

***Etiological Records:*** These are located in the back cabinets behind the glass. For some individuals, their records are located there. Almost exact replications of these records are written in the medical records of these people.

***School Progress Reports:*** Immediately next to the medical records are the school progress reports. Most of these are highly detailed accounts of the student's progress, an evaluation of their temperament and personality, and usually also commentary by the report writer about the student. The writing in these files is sometimes hardly legible and some of the volumes are missing. These are significant towards illuminating the human factor of the people's experiences at Elwyn.

***Photos:*** Several books and plates containing student portraits and photos of activities around the campus have been found in various places. Using the regulation numbers, some of the student portraits appear in the archive. Additionally, Elwyn published annual reports with plates demonstrating student activities from the 1870s to 1900s that will be useful for documenting activities and routines of that era.

***Confidentiality:*** No full names, dates of birth, or identifying portraits will be included in any final product without permission and will only be available for the archive and Elwyn. Any publication or conference presentation of this information will de-identify the names, and street addresses in counties of origin.

## **2. Statistical Analysis:**

After assembling the archive's resources, Ms. Kuhn will build a statistical analysis of the profiles in order to identify patterns within the group. This data will be used to make an assessment of characteristics for the people Elwyn chose to transfer to Polk. Incomplete data will skew results, but this will be accounted for in the analysis and report.

The analysis will then compare this data to population trends at Elwyn, in Pennsylvania, and across the country several years before and after 1897. The Board of Charities published transfers and enrollment numbers every year which will be used for this purpose.

### **3. Elwyn □ Polk Student Transfer:**

Correspondence between Dr. Barr from Elwyn and Dr. Murdoch at Polk will be examined. Additionally, letters to relevant participants, like the railroad company and to the family members of the individuals, will be reviewed. These letters are expected to illuminate more about Dr. Barr's character and help flesh out the historical narrative of the people transferred to Polk.

### **4. Social Conditions and Perceptions:**

Social research will review 1890s cultural and social conditions relating to population, institutional changes, shifting American attitudes towards institutions, and other relevant information. Research on the lives of Dr. Kerlin who preceded Dr. Murdoch and Dr. Barr will help illuminate the personalities of the writers and assessments of the individuals sent to Polk.

As noted by the historian James Trent Jr., the descriptions of life in institutions by 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century professionals have tended to reveal more about their perceptions than the reality lived by institutionalized residents. For the most part, all of the information about these 153 children and adults has consistently reflected the point of view of caretakers and families.

Research and reporting will note the extent to which information is reflective of different points view and ensure that contemporary accounts by residents are duly noted. A few personal logs, letters, and accounts of individuals have been identified.

### **5. Polk:**

Ms. Kuhn will visit Polk to examine their resources about the first individuals traveling to the institution. Depending upon what information is available in their archives, she will endeavor to compare how Elwyn and Polk applied assessments of disability, instituted education and training programs, and exerted controls on how people lived.

We expect that a considerable amount of demographic, facility, and related information has been preserved at Polk Center. We expect to determine from this information:

- Where the people were placed in the institution
- What work or responsibilities they were assigned at the institution
- What family ties they were able to maintain
- Their adjustment to the new institution
- Whether they continued to reside at the Western Institution or moved back to the homes and communities or to other places.

## **6. Public Perceptions:**

Public perceptions about institutional care, the establishment of Polk, and the 153 children and adults transferred to Polk will be examined via letters from officials, newspaper accounts, and correspondence. Books, research papers, and films about the history of Polk and Elwyn will also be accessed, when available.

## **7. Final Report**

A final report will summarize the findings of the research and suggest conclusions about the life and times of the 153 people. It will also suggest areas for further research and study.

Due to time and resource constraints placed on this research, Ms. Kuhn will be expected to complete a report based mainly on information obtained at the Elwyn and the Polk Archives during the Spring Semester of 2016. Areas of inquiry that cannot be finished in this time and context will be noted in the report.

Ms. Kuhn's report is expected to be completed over the Summer of 2016, and serve as a foundation for further research and study. The objective is to have this report submitted to a professional journal by the end of the calendar year 2016 for publication by June, 2017.