

6 of 6 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2003 Madison Newspapers, Inc.
Capital Times (Madison, WI)

February 8, 2003 Saturday, ALL Editions

SECTION: FRONT; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 1734 words

HEADLINE: CRUEL CHOICE;

UNTIL THE 1960S, MANY CHOSE STERILIZATION TO BE RELEASED FROM WISCONSIN'S
NORTHERN COLONY

BYLINE: Anita Weier The Capital Times

BODY:

Pretend you're a person of limited mental ability, and you've been placed
in
an isolated state institution in Chippewa Falls, far from home.

You don't know what they're about to do to you, but the medical
instruments
don't look promising.

Or you do know what they're going to do - but the only way you can get out
of
this place is to let them use the instruments.

To sterilize you.

That's how it worked for 50 years at what was first called the Wisconsin
Home
for the Feebleminded and then the Northern Colony and Training School. It's
now
known as the Northern Wisconsin Center for the Developmentally Disabled, and
they no longer do sterilizations.

But from 1913 to 1963, the progressive state of Wisconsin sterilized 1,889
"mental defectives" - nine of every 10 of them women. Men were given
vasectomies
and women's fallopian tubes were removed.

The law allowing sterilization was enacted despite opposition from
Catholic
Archbishop S.G. Messmer. He wrote in a letter to a legislator:

"I am opposed to it in principle, as an interference with personal
independence and individual liberty. That state has no right over my body, as
given me by my creator. The state can protect itself against defective
procreation by forbidding such parties to marry at all, or only under certain
safeguards."

The law was criticized by the Springfield Republican newspaper in
Massachusetts, which said on July 31, 1913:

"In its closing hours the Wisconsin Legislature has hastily passed what from the brief abstracts appears to be the most extreme and reckless eugenics law yet voted." That newspaper advised officials to "clean up the slums where degeneracy breeds, and heredity will most magically improve."

On the other hand, perhaps the "defective" were lucky to escape with sterilization. An article in the Milwaukee Journal in December 1912 quoted William Spindler, superintendent of the poor in Milwaukee County, as stating after a visit to the Home for the Feebleminded in Chippewa Falls: "The charitable and most humane thing to do is to find some way to put the hopeless idiots now confined in Wisconsin institutions to death."

A book titled "Island of Refuge," a 100-year history of the Northern Wisconsin Center published in 1997 by New Past Press, covers the subject in some detail. It is a topic current now because four states - Oregon, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina - have recently issued official apologies for similar practices. To date, there has been no movement to apologize in Wisconsin.

"In the 1930s and '40s, when sterilization was usually a requirement for release from the colony, a refusal to consent to the operation all but eliminated the possibility of leaving the institution," the book says.

No one working there now was on the staff when the sterilizations occurred, Betty Blessinger, current administrator of the Northern Wisconsin Center, said in an interview with The Capital Times.

But Dave Jankoski, the mayor of Stanley, Wis., worked at the institution in the 1960s and remembers some people who had been sterilized.

"I was a social worker. That practice had ended before I started there in 1964. It wasn't something that was talked about. We still had families who did contact the institution looking for that kind of service. There were families in the mid to late '60s who said, 'Can you admit somebody for sterilization?' If there was a request, it was from someone who had a fear that their daughter might get pregnant, but we weren't allowed to do that," Jankoski recalled.

"There were still people there in the late '60s who had been sterilized, not a lot of them. They had been sterilized as a condition for release but came back. Some were very insecure. The institution had created such a dependency. They had been in so long and everything was provided for them. Or they would go out and get in trouble."

Jankoski particularly remembers a man in his late 40s who had been in and out of the institution over time.

"He had been sterilized. They had told him that was the only way he could get out. He was one of our more capable people. He ran away with his girlfriend and ended up working on a farm in Richland County. They had gotten married and the farmer bought a trailer house for them. The county Social Services Department took over as supervisor," Jankoski said.

So the man did well in the outside world, though he and his wife could not have children.

* The "eugenics" law allowing sterilization of "feeble-minded" people was on Wisconsin's books from 1913 to 1978, but a records review shows that the procedure was halted in 1963. The law also applied to epileptics until 1955.

The Prevention of Procreation Act of 1913, signed into law by Wisconsin's cutting-edge Progressive governor, Francis McGovern, did place limitations on the procedure. It could be performed only on inmates of state or local institutions for the criminal, insane, "feeble-minded" or epileptic. A surgeon and a psychologist, as well as the superintendent of an institution, would examine candidates to decide if "procreation was inadvisable." The state Board of Control had to authorize the procedure, and information on the condition of the inmate after sterilization had to be reported to the board.

In practice, the law was applied only to the "feeble-minded" and epileptic, and operations took place only at the Chippewa Falls facility.

Though the law did not require the consent of the candidate, it did require 30 days' notice to the husband, wife, parent or guardian or the person with whom the inmate last resided. "Island of Refuge" states that, if either the candidate or notified party refused consent, the operation was not performed.

Dr. Alfred Wilmarth, superintendent of the home from its opening in 1897 to 1919, supported sterilization as well as prohibition of marriages to prevent creation of another generation of "unfortunates."

The first sterilization procedure at the Home for the Feeble-minded took place in 1915. "Island of Refuge" says that "the operation has not been seriously opposed, and in fact, has been actually favored by some of the more intelligent parents of our wards, who see in it a simple and harmless method of preventing the birth of offspring to their children, who, they realize, would be unable to

give such offspring proper care."

The book quotes Wilmarth as saying in 1910: "A law to control marriage is in the statute books. It is not always effective as shown in the case of one of our paroled girls who ran away from her family, earned money and sent for a degenerate boy discharged from our custody. ... They claim to have been married by a county judge under a dispensation. ... She died giving birth to a child who would have been an idiot had it lived. He very shortly married again."

Wilmarth concluded that "surgical procedure is the only sure method of curtailment, and would often permit discharge of defectives to the care of their friends where such course would be otherwise disastrous."

As of 1931, 113 adult patients - all sterilized and almost all women - had been placed in domestic employment, with just 12 returning to the colony.

Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society show that 1,266 sterilizations had been performed as of July 1, 1942. A facility record at that time said that three females had been paroled but returned and re-sterilized. A total of 181 had been returned to other institutions after sterilization, and 111 had been transferred to other institutions. Another 303 had been released to relatives. Thirty-five had died, one by accidental drowning and one killed by a train; others died from "natural causes."

* Mary Lou Munts, a Madison resident who as a member of the Assembly pushed for change in the law in the 1970s, recalled that it was part of a trailer bill that accompanied more controversial legislation about a strict standard for mental commitment.

"That particular provision went in because it was no longer operative," Munts recalled. "There were no forced sterilizations going on, but it was still in the books."

Diane Greenley of the Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy worked with the Center for Public Representation at the time the sterilization law was dropped.

"When the trailer bill was done that Mary Lou and I worked on, we looked at Chapter 51 and things that needed to be updated. Someone brought that to our attention and it was quietly repealed," she recalled.

In 1981, the Wisconsin Supreme Court recognized, in *Eberhardy v. Circuit Court*, the right of a citizen to procreate or abstain from it.

"My belief is that we have moved forward in the area of developmental

disabilities so far that this would be seen as something that should not happen," Blessinger said. "It doesn't happen any longer. The law was repealed; that speaks hugely to that issue."

Blessinger noted that the type of person served at the facility has changed drastically through the years. At first, all the clients were children; now they are all adults.

"Today we serve only people who are developmentally disabled. They have to meet certain criteria, such as what age it developed and what level, to make sure they are appropriate for an intermediate care facility for the mentally retarded. In the past, they referred to people as inmates. There were young people who were overflow from other institutions and people committed because they couldn't be handled by their communities or because the home situation was not very good," Blessinger said.

Currently, 172 people stay at the Northern Center. At its peak, there were 2,200.

"Island of Refuge" says after the "home" became a "colony" in the 1920s, it was transformed into a training school rather than a hopeless custodial asylum. The book says of the "successful" girls farm: "It is in this unit that the sterilized girl is oriented to life in a small group. ... She is given an opportunity to demonstrate her ability for domestic service and her fitness for extra-institutional adjustment."

Blessinger said, "It talks about the 1930s and '40s when sterilization was a requirement for release. The chance of someone (from that era) being alive now is slim.

"I found the line that approximately nine woman were sterilized for every man pretty telling about the times. It was certainly representative of the philosophy that birth control is the responsibility of the female."

GRAPHIC: From "Island of Refuge"/New Past Press

Top: Young women work in a domestic training class at the Northern Wisconsin Colony and Training School in the 1920s. Those who did well in the classes and who agreed to be sterilized were more likely to be released. Above: The operating room of the Northern Wisconsin Colony and Training School

Photo of Mary Lou Munts.

LOAD-DATE: February 11, 2003

