

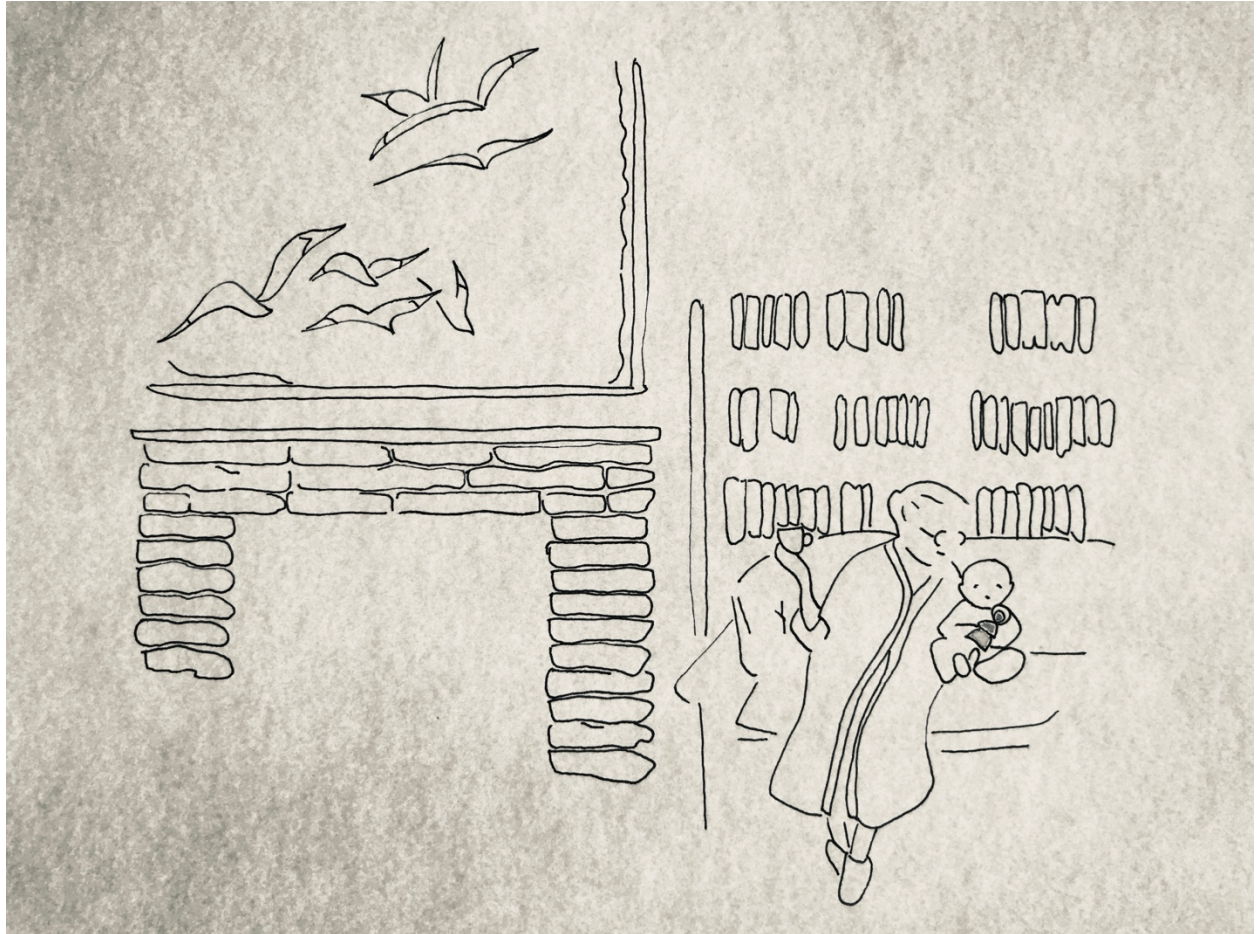
Rose Ellen Skeen

a story of family secrets, disability, and love



by Elizabeth Bullard

Claire Gallagher



For all my PlayGardeners and those who love and care for them.



Myself and 8 siblings, me at 3 years old on a slide, my mother, Lou Ann, a hand embroidered pillow, likely made by Rose Ellen or another child, my grandparents, Earl Donovan and Ethel Hanes Skeen

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the nice letter. Yet, Mother Dear did I get my pillowcase to embroider but not my thermos bottle. I don't know why? I will write this every week until I do get it.

*Daughter
Rose Ellen*

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Families have secrets and mine is no exception. Our family secret's name is Rose Ellen Skeen. For many years, my brothers and sisters and I were raised to believe that our mother was an only child. We had just one aunt, on my father's side of the family. No aunts, uncles or cousins on my Mom's side. The concept of an only child was very strange and something that felt exotic and interesting. Enmeshed in six older siblings and two younger, my child's mind pondered how odd it must be to be an only child. I often thought that my mother must have been a lonely child, but she didn't have to wear hand-me-downs and share everything – even our underwear was shared. But who did she play with? Did she get loads of attention or too much?

When I was a bit older, I wondered if she had lots and lots of kids of her own because she felt such a huge loss in not having a brother or sister. There are nine of us. Six girls and three boys

easily divided into the three big kids, three middle, and three little. If I braved the question, “Why do we have so many kids?” Mom would snappily reply, “Which one do you think we could do without?!” That would quiet me down immediately, but I hear the retort differently now. She had “done without” her only sister. She could have told me the truth, but she didn’t. She had a sister, a big sister who we didn’t know existed. She was not an only child after all and it seems, her sister was taken from her. I was so curious about how she felt about this but could not find the courage or the words to ask and the message was clear. Don’t ask.

My aunt, Rose Ellen Skeen, was born on December 10, 1913 to my grandfather, Earl Donovan Skeen, “Papa Don” and my Grandmama, Ethel Frazier Haynes Skeen. Fourteen years later, in March 1928, my mother, Lou Ann Skeen was born. Lou Ann grew up and married Joel Bullard and they grew their family quickly to include the nine of us- nine babies in twelve years. My oldest brother arrived soon after they were married and another baby arrived most years after that until my youngest brother, James was born in January 1965. I was number seven or “the oldest of the three little kids.”

Papa Don and Grandmama came to live with us in 1968 when we bought a much larger house. It was just a few months later that my Papa Don died. Grandmama continued to live with us until her death in 1975. Our household was busy, as you would expect, but we sat down to dinner together every night, and most nights, Grandmama would join us. She was a lovely grandmother, always up for a game of cards, always dressed in beautiful clothing, hair done, matching jewelry and shoes. I loved being with her very much. She was always kind and talkative. She played Bridge with her friends, went to the senior center and wrote poetry. But she never let on what she must have had on her mind at all times. We didn’t know all that she was keeping to herself.



My siblings all have brief and incomplete memories of when we first learned of Rose Ellen and the circumstances of her life. My first awareness of my aunt came when my sister, Rosie, (the youngest of the three middle kids) questioned my father about mail coming to the house addressed to Rose Ellen Skeen. I remember this happening when we lived on Jefferson Boulevard, but Rosie says it was when we lived on Riverside Drive, a few years later. In any case, I was about twelve years old. When Rosie asked my Dad, he told her matter-of-factly that Rose Ellen was our mother’s sister and that she lived in a nursing home and was well taken care of. She recalls that he told her that her birth was difficult. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck, and she suffered brain damage. There was no family meeting called to announce this revelation and, as far as I can remember, no one spoke about it much at all. I learned about her the way I learned most things, by overhearing comments by my sister, by gleaning that something “ominous” was going on, something scary and shameful. We didn’t talk about it, not with each other and definitely not around the dinner table.

I don't know what language my Dad would have used to describe Rose Ellen or how he explained why she was a secret. I was familiar with kids with disabilities even then. The family that lived next door to us had eight kids, who all went to private school, except for their brother, Kevin, who went to public school with us. We walked to school and home together and he came to play at our house often. We never really knew the other kids, but we knew Kevin. Kevin was a "special ed" kid, and I really enjoyed him.

Once, I asked my Mom why she didn't tell us about her sister and she replied, "It's not my story to tell." How could her sister not be her story? My sisters were all over my story. She didn't come close to suggesting I ask my Grandmama. Another time, I asked my mom why Rose Ellen couldn't come and live with us, like my grandparents did, and she said, "She's happy living where she is. She has a home, and it would only upset her. She wouldn't want to live with us." Mom explained that she, herself, had never lived with Rose Ellen. When she was born, Rose Ellen was fourteen years old and living in a "home." The message to me was clear: Do not ask about Rose Ellen and I didn't. I thought it was strange that the neighbor boy, Kevin, was treated so differently than his siblings but at least he got to live at home with them. Decades went by, my grandparents died, my parents passed away, and still we never talked about Rose Ellen.

During the brief period when we "found out" about her, she was living in a nursing home just a few miles from our house and my Grandmama was quietly taking my mother to visit her regularly. None of my siblings went on those visits. We were not included in her life in any way.

My Mom was truly a close-to-perfect mother and role model for me. My older siblings remember her with long painted nails while the mom of my childhood was covered in poison ivy and bee stings, long hair down to her waist that she wore up in a bun, always reading mysteries and collecting things off the ground. She was principled about a lot of things and could get pretty exasperated with all of us at times. But she listened to me and I loved making her smile. She was kind and always looking for ways to help others. Yet she refused to talk about her "feeble-minded" sister Rose Ellen. When I was in high school, my mother went back to school to renew her teaching certificate. She took a job as a middle school special education teacher. During her training, I went along with her as she volunteered at Logan Center, a school for children with disabilities. In the car on the way home one day, she explained to me that the little boy I had played with had been very ill with a virus and suffered brain damage. I wanted to ask her about Rose Ellen then, but I didn't. Years later, I studied Speech and Hearing Sciences and began my career as a Speech-Language Pathologist, working with children with disabilities and their parents. Still there was no mention of Rose Ellen. I didn't ask and apparently neither did any of my siblings. I stored Rose Ellen deep, deep down and only thought about her now and then.

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I have worked in the field of disability since 1983, in clinics, hospitals, public schools and now as the founder of the Seattle PlayGarden where thousands of kids have attended summer camp and preschool. I have grown close to many families and their children over the past forty years who, like my grandparents, have a child with disabilities. To say that I love my work is an understatement. I can't imagine life without the kids and young adults that I am so very fond of. I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones whose life's work is her greatest pleasure, lucky to have so many loving and delightful disabled people in my daily life. The challenges are real, but the rewards are deep. My mom and I talked about my work often. We had long telephone calls, and she was always very interested to hear about my own kids, her grandchildren, and my "work kids." We talked "kids", a lot. But, sadly, my mother, who gave me eight siblings, could not talk about her only sister, and, even worse, I never asked again.



A Reawakening

On August 10, 2023, I put my headphones in, put leashes on the dogs, and pressed play on an episode of the podcast, Fresh Air. That day's show featured an interview with the Pulitzer Prize winner, Jennifer Senior and her cover story in *The Atlantic Magazine*: "The Ones We Sent Away: I thought my mother was an only child. I was wrong." Senior tells the story of her Aunt Adele, who was institutionalized at the tender age of 21 months because of an intellectual and developmental disability. Senior found out about her aunt when she was twelve, believing until then that her mother was an only child.

Thoughts of Rose Ellen, my mom and my grandparents came in a rush. This was my mother's story. My family's story. My story. How did I ever forget about Rose Ellen? It had been decades since I gave her a thought. I was about the same age as Senior when I found out about my aunt. Her account is riveting. Reading her story compelled me to find out as much as I could about my lost and institutionalized aunt.

As I listened, questions swirled in my head. Who was Rose Ellen? What did she like to do? Did she look like my Mom? Where exactly did she live and with who? At what age was she removed from her home? How was she treated? What exactly were her disabilities? Why was she kept a secret from us?

Why did we all silently agree to erase her from our lives? Why has she been totally left out of our family lore and history? What were the circumstances of her life? What was her daily life like? Was she, as my mother said, "happy where she was"? What was institutional life like for her and for my grandparents? I needed to know what it was like for my grandparents to raise a child with a disability and how they coped with giving her up.

Rose Ellen was deprived of her family even after my grandparents died and even after the stigma of disability had lessened in America. She is not buried alongside her parents and sister and there is no mention of her in my mother's obituary. She is not listed on the Family Address List along with our departed family members. Not one of us made note of her absence. Her erasure was total and complete.



Unraveling the story

Many thousands of children deemed feeble-minded, idiots, morons and imbeciles were institutionalized from the 1920s right up to the 1970s. There were no services or support for parents and their children with disabilities in the community, no schools or therapy clinics. The prevailing belief was that it was best for everyone to segregate the disabled. Children with disabilities were thought to be better off with "their own kind." Doctors routinely recommended that parents give their child up to the state and get on with their lives. Senior's aunt was institutionalized in 1953 at 21 months of age. Rose Ellen, as I found out, was enrolled in a "special school" in 1920, at six years old. "Without any malevolent intent we'd all colluded in one woman's erasure. And our entire family had been the poorer for it." (Senior, 2023). Me too, Jennifer. My family, too.

Now, when I played alongside and chatted with my PlayGarden friends and parents, thoughts of Rose Ellen intruded. I couldn't help imagining what her life would have been like if she could have come to summer camp or preschool or had any kind of a life outside an institution. Needing to know more and with very little to go on, I turned to my oldest brother, Don. He has kept the family history and, being nine years older than I am, I was curious about what he remembered about Rose Ellen.

Hi Liz - 15 years ago I wrote a history about the Skeen /Haynes side of the family. Gave me goosebumps to look at it again. That is the source of most of this information. Quotes from Grandmama are from a short handwritten reflection on her life that she wrote; I might have it somewhere.

You might know that Mom had two sisters. The first was Virginia, born May 21, 1911 in Gunn or Rock Springs, Wyoming. Gunn was a coal mining town (very small) a few miles outside of Rock Springs. In 1908/09 Papa Don took a job there as town doctor.

Grandmama described Virginia as a "tiny mite." Sadly, Virginia died a few days after her birth, on June 4, 1911. She was buried in Lot 1, Block 228, in Mountain View Cemetery,

Rock Springs, on June 6, 1911. The cause of death was "colitis and possibly an imperfect closure of the foramen ovale." I remember seeing three photos of the grave taken shortly after internment - don't know for sure where those photos are now. Also, think that I have Virginia's death certificate.

Mom's second sister was Rose Ellen, who you asked about. She was born in Gary on December 10, 1913. Evidently, she was named after Grandmama's sister, Rose Haynes Keller. Don't know about the "Ellen" part.

I know very little about Rose, not the cause of her problem or much of anything else. I don't even know if anyone has a photo of Rose. I remember seeing her just one time. That was when Grandmama and Papa Don lived on Koontz Lake and some of us kids spent the day at their house. I was about 7 or 8. I remember not understanding who Rose was but liked that she was a grownup who acted like a child. I also remember Papa Don reprimanding her in a stern voice I was startled to hear. Evidently, Grandmama and Papa Don brought Rose to their home on occasion, but mostly when we kids weren't there.

Grandmama's mention of "special school" was a nice way of saying what we'd now call an institution. Evidently, she was institutionalized from age 6 until her death.

I was 31 when Rose died. I don't remember anyone ever talking about either daughter, not even a mention when Rose died. Isn't that strange?

At one time, I'm sure there was a file of papers pertaining to Rose, Papa Don was meticulous that way. My guess is that Mom destroyed it - I know she did that with other papers that embodied uncomfortable memories. It's also possible that I have a birth or death certificate buried in a box upstairs - just don't remember.

That's all I have, wish it was more. Brings back many memories!

Don

The "note" that my Grandmama wrote, referred to by Don, reads:

"Such a long wait for the second daughter. So fair and perfect she seemed. My father saying, 'Why she has a nose, not a dot'. When she was six, I had finally accepted the fact she must be in a special school. This heavy burden has made the years drag. I am

relieved because people, through the long, long years, have grown tolerant and accepting of the handicapped." June 1973

My grandparents carried a heavy burden, but one they took on with incredible love and fortitude. In my investigation I learned that they did all they could to place Rose Ellen in a progressive private school at great expense, requiring significant travel. Once she was moved to a state institution, they visited her nearly weekly. This is my attempt to know Rose Ellen. To consider her, to imagine what her life was like and to share her life so that others may know that she lived and was loved. She was kept a secret from us and for that, I feel great sorrow. Our lives could only have been enriched by knowing her.



My Grandmama and Papa Don, Rose Ellen's Parents

“Earl Donovan Skeen, known as E.D. Skeen, began his medical practice in Gunn, Wyoming in a soft coal camp, eight miles from Rock Springs, Wyoming, which one could reach either in the caboose of a freight train carrying coal there or on horseback over a three mile trail on which rattlesnakes seemed to have “right of way”. He and his wife, Ethel, moved to Gary, Indiana. in 1912 where he remained for 44 years.”

- Skeen and Haynes Family History, written by Don Bullard (2009).

My Grandmama wrote this about her life with E.D.

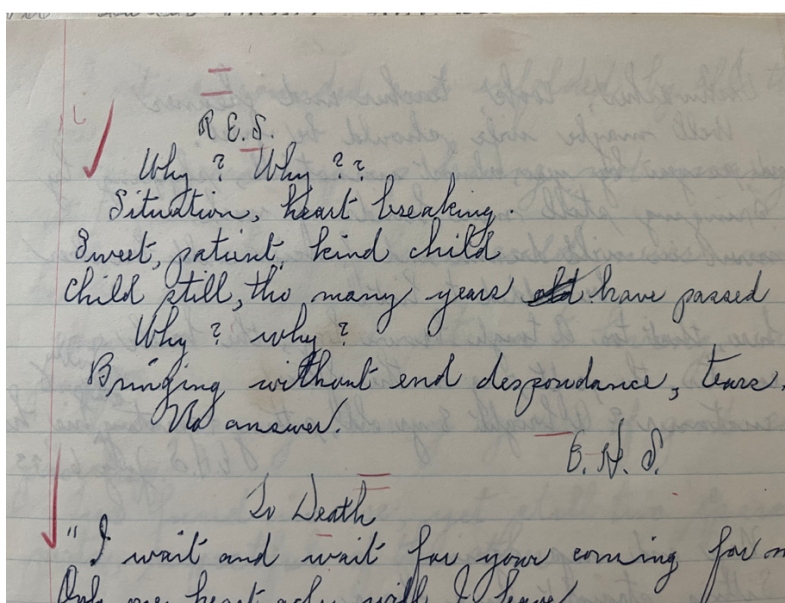
“In final thinking, it is the personality that counts. Quiet, persistent, patient, non-assuming, steadfast, generous, kind, correct. Dr. Earl Donovan Skeen, a Christian gentleman. He married Ethel Haynes, A.B. 1906, U. of Nebr, Dec 24 in Decatur, Ill. First Christian Church. They moved to South Bend, IN in 1963 to be near a hospital. Death came for him at St. Joseph Hospital, South Bend May 30, 1968.

During college Ethel and Don earned good grades (we have some of their report cards) and were active in many organizations. Ethel was active with Alpha Omicron Pi, the YWCA Club, and the Dramatic Club. Don was active with the Medical Club, Iron Sphinx, and Phi Rho Sigma. He was Captain of Company B, President of Pershing Rifles, and Captain of the State University Cadets. He got a gold medal in competitive drill and got medals for sharpshooting. Don was the leading contender for Senior class president but bowed out of contention when a female student, supported by many of the other women students, sought the office.

On June 14, 1906, Ethel received a Bachelor of Arts degree and state teachers certificate. She was, “especially fitted to teach English literature, elocution and rhetoric”. Don received a

Bachelor of Science degree and was commissioned as a Captain in the Nebraska Militia. There were 177 total graduates, which included 91 women. Grandmama spent the next year or so teaching - here are her words "...a job offer. I grabbed it because my father had warned me he was washing his hands; of me after I had my A.B. There I was green as a gourd & scared, no observing, no practice teaching, no nothing, just a piece of paper saying I could. And here into my first grade room filed Sixty children. No kindergarten either. Bless their hearts, they were wonderful and in them I found my second love. I would never have left them but, you see, they were second. There had to be a first" (Bullard, 2009).

Grandmama and Papa Don, were married Christmas Eve, 1907 in Decatur, Illinois (Bullard, 2009). I have one piece that shows the inner thoughts my Grandmama had: a short statement given to my oldest brother and a poem written in a notebook that my oldest sister, Candace gave her in 1973 to record her thoughts. She named that notebook of poetry, "My Thoughts."



R.E.S. Why? Why?

Situation, heart breaking.

Sweet, patient, kind child. Child still tho' many years have passed.

Why? Why?

Bringing without end despondence, tears.

No Answer.

E.H.S. June 1973

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Rose Ellen: Birth to Age 6 (1913-1919)

My grandparents had more than their fair share of difficulties starting a family. Their first daughter, Virginia, was born on May 21, 1911, and died just a few days later, on June 4, 1911. My Mother, Lou Ann was born 17 years later, when her mother was 43 years old. But before my mother, there was Rose Ellen.

Rose Ellen's infancy was not a smooth and healthy one. Baby Rose Ellen, it is noted on the Record Of Inquest As To The Feeble-Mindedness of Rose Ellen, suffered "a birth injury" and "severe illness at 1 year" -Typhoid Encephalitis. She was born full-term and had a normal delivery. No instruments were used at birth, and she had spontaneous breathing and no signs of cyanosis. But it was difficult to get her to eat. Her teeth came in at the "usual" age, but she walked late, talked late, and was also "late" to sit up and take notice of things." (Fort Wayne Hospital, 2023)

Rose Ellen: Age 6-19 (1920-1932)- Mollie Woods Hare School

Rose Ellen survived and lived at home with her parents until she was six years old, but she did not develop as expected. Grandmama and Papa Don made the heartbreaking decision that their daughter needed more than they could give her. In Grandmama's words, "*she needed a special school.*" They chose a school in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, Mollie Woods Hare School which was 739 miles from their home in Gary, IN. According to The Handbook of Private Schools from 1926 the tuition was \$1,500 a year (\$33,984 in today's dollars. (Sargent, 1926) The drive from Gary to Langhorne, today, would take eleven hours. There is no record of how they found this school but given that they were a doctor and an educator, it seems likely that they did their research. Rose Ellen lived there for several years, "until the first depression" when my Grandmama notes decades later, that they did not have enough money for school fees. Rose Ellen spent her elementary, middle and halfway into what would have been her high school years, at Mollie Woods Hare. Mollie Woods Hare School, now called Woods Services, does not have records of former residents so no specific information about Rose Ellen could be gathered, but learning about the founding of the institution gives some understanding of Rose Ellen's childhood.

I contacted Woods Services and heard back from Cheryl Kauffman, the VP of Communications and Development. She replied to an email inquiry and we talked by phone. I told her the little I knew of Rose Ellen and she told me the history of the school and described a warm, loving environment. When I shared with her that Rose Ellen was six when she was admitted she replied, "*Oh, so she would have been in the little girls' cottage.*"

Learning about Mollie Woods and her pioneering approach to the education of children with learning differences was gratifying and a beacon of light in what looked to be a very sad childhood. Ms. Kauffman spoke with admiration for Mollie Woods and her progressive view of children who learn differently. According to Ms. Kauffman, all of the children went to school, were taught manners and taught to do chores and have hobbies. Rose Ellen liked to do needlework, sewing and embroidery. Ms. Kauffman also shared that photos from that era do exist and show children being tucked into bed, playing outdoors and gathered around a staff member while she read to them. Mollie Woods Hare was clearly an exceptional woman as written in this history.

Mollie Woods Hare School History:



Mollie Wood, Founder Mollie Woods Hare School

“Our history dates back to 1913, when Mollie Woods, a Philadelphia school teacher, sought to establish a new type of educational and residential center, specifically to support children with exceptional needs.

Mollie’s vision was to provide care for the exceptional child in a home-like environment that would foster the ability “to meet the problems of everyday life, to make normal adjustments, to acquire sources of satisfaction for the present as well as for later years, and to know the joy of achievement.”

Mollie’s determination, pioneering leadership, and innovative approach that was centered on creating an individualized program of supports for each person was well-received resulting in growth that necessitated a move from her farmhouse in Roselyn, PA to Langhorne in 1921.

The move to Langhorne signaled an incredible period of growth and international recognition. In 1934, Mollie opened The Research Center, which introduced a scientific basis to the methods of supporting and advancing the capabilities of the exceptional child. Woods became an international leader in the field, sponsoring yearly conferences and publishing journals that featured the best minds in the field.”



The Mollie Woods Hare Farmhouse School

Over the past century, we have grown from a 25-student farmhouse school to a world-renowned private non-profit organization serving more than 600 children, adolescents, adults and seniors. Mollie worked tirelessly, as we will, toward the realization of her original mission: to advance the quality of life and standard of care for individuals with disabilities.” (Woods Services, 2024)

Rose Ellen age 18 (1932-1933): Home with her Parents

Following 12 years at two different residential schools, Rose Ellen was brought home to live with her parents.

In a letter from the archives to the Fort Wayne Social worker, dated Jan. 24, 1971, my Grandmama explains,

“When 6 years old, we put her in Mollie Woods Hare school, Langhorne, Pa. where she learned, Including third grade and perfect needlework. During the first depression we had not enough money for there, so put her in Dr. Sylvester School, Des Moines, Iowa. Again, no money caused us to bring her home at 18 years. For a year we tried to help her “fit in.” Week after week we watched her get...” The second page of this letter is missing.

Rose Ellen: Age 19-57 (1933-1971) Fort Wayne, Indiana

Following the one unsuccessful year with Rose Ellen at home with Grandmama and Papa Don, they began the process to enroll her at the Indiana State Institution. Evaluations were completed and financial arrangements made. She would be classified as feeble-minded and deemed a menace to society.

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Once I learned from the 1940 census that Rose Ellen had moved from Gary, IN to Fort Wayne, IN, it did not take long to find extensive information on where she lived. A Google search of Fort Wayne, Indiana + Institution broke the story right open. A full-length documentary came up on my screen titled *The Forgotten: A History of the State Developmental Institutions in Fort Wayne*.



The Indiana School for the Feeble-Minded Youth

The film was made by the AWS Foundation and the History Center to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was originally aired on September 26, 2022, on PBS.

I watched the film right then and there, transfixed by the knowledge that this was Rose Ellen's home for many years. The film tells the story of the state institution from its creation in 1887 through its closure in the 1970s. The institution's history follows the same trajectory of many state institutions: (mostly) good intentions, idealistic beginnings, expansion, overcrowding, understaffing, under-funding, crumbling buildings and ultimately closure in the 1970s. A grim story emerges in the film, but I couldn't take my eyes off it.

The film opens, *"This is the story of that forgotten place from the archaic days of the past, through the medical and behavioral progress that was gained through the building of a new complex to the eventual closure"* (PBS, 2022).

The Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth was established in 1887 with 50 staff for 300 residents. By 1904 the population had swelled to 1,035. The purpose of the institution, according to the film was to "support, train and instruct feeble-minded children.

By June of 1931, the population at the school was at 1,721, with 200 people on the waiting list. The school's official capacity at that point was 1,130. By now, the campus encompassed almost 55 acres. The industrial building housed woodworking, shoemaking and a mattress shop with a warehouse to store the surplus mattresses next door. There were several support buildings close by: the power plant, with its towering smokestack, the root cellar and the laundry. Just west of the administration building was the school, one of the first separate buildings constructed.

The facility included a boy's cottage, a gym with a basketball court and an auditorium, a greenhouse, a lumber and paint storage building and horse stalls and a hospital. Next to the hospital was Carroll Cottage, which housed girls. What started out as the custodial cottage became the wing that joined the two buildings, which together were called Harper Lodge. Many of the cottages had exterior slides as fire escapes. These were easier and faster than a ladder for those with mental and physical disabilities (PBS, 2022).

In the beginning, the residents were cared for and kept busy with academic classes; basket weaving, cabinet making, sewing shoe making and mattress making. There was a large music program with both a boy's band and a girl's band and boy's and girls' choir. Young men worked on a farm that provided food for the residents. But by the 1930s, it had become seriously overcrowded and staff were not well trained.

"In 1936 alone, residents working in the industrial department made over 2,000 pairs of shoes, with close to 2,000 residents. The Fort Wayne State School was a very crowded and busy place." (PBS, 2022)

The population of residents were divided by gender, there were the "boys' cottages" and the "girl's cottages", but they were also segregated by ability level: Educable, Trainable and Non-trainable.

"Those with debilitating physical handicaps were confined to their beds for the majority of the day. Others struggled with behavioral problems and often had to be restrained using shackles and straitjackets due to violent outbursts and fits" (PBS, 2022).

Minimal funding was given to state institutions, and building supplies were scarce. Some residents with sleep difficulties had crib-like beds with sides, but due to overcrowding in some cases, two residents shared a bed at night. Day rooms where residents were to enjoy leisure time, had chairs lined up tightly in rows to accommodate 50 or more people in a space designed for 20.

One staff member shares her experience:

"When I got here, they were overcapacity. I mean, when you looked at the dormitories, they were bed to bed. I think that most of the people just sat in those day rooms and I don't know, I don't know, it was not enriching I can tell you that. People frequently referred to them as warehouses, and I think that's the best description where you put the inventory and it sits there till it expires. You have no rights. You're locked away. Yes, you're fed and clothed, but you don't get your basic needs met.

You know, you're housed, it's deplorable. Who would want this? I mean, some people were here, what, 40, 50 years? It's like this is not a way to live. Individuals didn't have anything meaningful to do for themselves. They were just part of a large mass of people usually in a building. it was a crowded place that was not at all a place we should have put people.

Additionally, the institution was greatly understaffed. They were operating at a constant shortage of nearly 50 employees, especially for direct care attendants. At one time, there was one nurse for the entire campus on State Street, and then later they had two. And then they went to four. So, you know, the staffing was awful really in terms of ratios. 1 to 30, uh, not much training. You just literally got them together and hoped that you could keep them under control” (PBS, 2022).

There was a time when people would work straight through 24 hours a day and Indianapolis picked up on that and said, there's no way somebody can provide services and not sleep.

“Extreme overcrowding, a serious shortage of help of all kinds, buildings which are fire hazards. That is the situation at the state-maintained institution for the feeble-minded here” said the News Sentinel on July 19, 1944.

The 1950s

Overall, the fifties were a period of mixed messages. On one hand, a visitor to the institution would see residents in overcrowded infirmaries, dormitories and day rooms, sitting and lying in a hopeless manner. Some crippled, an idiot appearing, leaning over carts or lying doubled up in bed, wrote Kenneth Weaver in a March 12, 1956, News Sentinel article (PBS, 2022).

On the other hand, a growing philosophical change in how to care for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities was taking place. Instead of simply warehousing these individuals and providing the most basic custodial care, it was now being recognized that with the right training, this population, although limited, could be taught to perform simple tasks.

In 1956, Bernard Dolnick became the superintendent of the Fort Wayne State School. He inherited dilapidated buildings, a less than adequate staff that were too few in numbers and too low in wages. A transition in care and treatments, and an ever-growing number of residents with disabilities. One of the first things Dolnick did was remove last remnants of a bygone era, meaning jail cells, whipping straps, leg and arm irons and straitjackets, the doors and bars on basement cells were removed and shackles were unbolted from the walls and floors. At the time, the Fort Wayne State School was the most overcrowded of all state-operated facilities at 71% overcapacity.

They had four psychiatrists on staff but needed 15 to meet minimum standards. Due to noncompetitive salaries, they continued to have a high turnover rate and staff shortages. We didn't have people that were advocating for the population that we had. People were embarrassed that they had somebody living there or that they had a child that was in need of special help. (PBS, 2022)

1960s-1970s

“A natural consensus was building that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities be given the opportunity, skills and financial support to live in the least restrictive environment. The first big step was the transferring of residents with only medical needs to nursing homes. The idea was that the institution should be a training center, not a medical facility. We had people well up into retirement age. That was the first group that was moved largely to nursing facilities in the seventies because it was age-appropriate. Many residents had been institutionalized since they were children and these changes could seem very overwhelming. Residents age 55 and older had preparatory classes before they moved that show them what to expect in their new surroundings. By the fall of 1971, 215 residents had been placed in 83 facilities within 37 counties.” (PBS, 2022)

Rose Ellen was one of those 215 residents. In 1971 she was moved to Carlyle Nursing home in South Bend, IN. She was 57. As described, the move did not go over well with my Grandmama. She was frightfully terrified that Rose Ellen would become depressed, lonely and without friends. That story unfolds later in this narrative.



After watching the film, I began an online search for more information. I first discovered the census data from 1920 and 1930 listed her as living in Gary, Indiana but in years 1940 and 1950 her residence changed to Fort Wayne, Indiana. That led me to the Indiana State Archives. Between the film and the records, I was able to obtain, I began to understand much more about who Rose Ellen was, how my grandparents took care of her, and what her life might have been like,

It has been a sad journey, learning about institutional life for Rose Ellen and so many others, but it was also a heartwarming story of my grandparent's dogged attempt to parent their child from afar, to support her and love her as best they could.

The story itself, though, is a tragedy. Not because Rose Ellen had disabilities, but because she was misunderstood, mistreated and denied a loving home and relationship with her family. And we were denied a life with her. All of us lost so much.

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The Indiana State Archives:

Rose Ellen was admitted to The Indiana State School for Feeble-Minded Children in Fort Wayne, IN, in January of 1933 at 19 years of age. She spent 38 years there.

To receive the documents from the Indiana State Archives required a simple form. I filled out the information I knew about Rose Ellen: her name, birth date, parent's names, and my relation to her and included a copy of my birth certificate and driver's license as proof that I was a living relative. On the line asking why I wanted the records; I checked the box for "family history." I dropped the request in the mail and in less than a week, I received a confirmation that my request was received.

Ms. Bullard,

Thursday Sep 7 8:49AM

Your request has been received by the Indiana State Archives. I have located records for Rose Skeen at the Fort Wayne Developmental Center. The file is quite extensive given her long residence, and a full scan would be over two hundred pages and a fee of about \$150. If you prefer, I can prepare a summary file at whatever price point you are comfortable with that includes the most important information and omits items such as clinical tests and physician and nurse's reports. Typically, most of the relevant information can be captured in under 50 pages, for a roughly \$30 fee. We don't have nursing home records here, just those from State facilities.

Let me know how you would like to proceed

Best,

Keenan Salla, archivist

I quickly responded to Keenan, that I wanted the whole file, every page. I made an online payment for \$196.16 at 9:47am then sat down to work. At 10:47 the file was in my inbox, all 256 pages.

The archives contained so much information it was mind-boggling. What I was the most unprepared for was the sight of handwritten letters, written in beautiful cursive from my

Grandmama to the school and to Rose Ellen. There were three of the weekly letters that Rose Ellen wrote to her parents. There were letters written by my Papa Don to the institution, visitor logs, and so much more. Every page led to a new discovery. I have since read each page many times. I tried to sort the pages by the categories listed below. Within most categories there are handwritten letters, lists, logs, evaluations, medical records, and a lot of correspondence between Grandmama and Papa Don and the institution. The existence of these records astounds me. Nearly each page contains some piece of the puzzle of Rose Ellen's life as well as my Papa Don's and Grandmama's. The long-kept silence had been broken. Here was some definitive information about my aunt.

State Archives Document Categories:

- Record Of Inquest 1933
- Testing, Evaluations and Behavior logs, Caretaker Notes
- Visitor Logs: 1933-1966 (few missing years) & Requests to Visit Rose Ellen
- Rose Ellen's Belongings: special notes on the radio & batteries, thermos, and pillowcase
- Rose Ellen's Birthday party and the Adopt-a-Patient program
- Sad episode for Rose Ellen: move from Dunham Hall to Harper Lodge, 1969
- Letters: 1960s-1971
- Consent for surgery, Burial instructions and Eye Exam
- Notifications: illness, social security, Guardianship
- Discharge from Fort Wayne to Carlye Nursing home in South Bend.

My attempt to "organize" the documents was rough. The pages crossed categories and one letter was a response to another and so the pages moved from pile to pile. Each time I moved one page from pile B to pile F, another link was found. Nearly each page held some clue, some piece of information to enlighten me on Rose Ellen's life. I am amazed that these records exist at all and take each added piece of information as a treasure. Through these records, we know something of her personality and we learn of the great devotion my grandparents had to their daughter. I learned that she had a favorite stuffed animal, or "lovey" as they are known at my house, a Judy Monkey doll, that was lost for a while and then found! I learned that she had a best friend that she pined for when they were separated. I learned that my grandparents wrote to her, sent her packages, visited her often and took her to their home for 2 weeks in the summer. But I also learned of the difficulties she and my grandparents faced.

To understand Rose Ellen's life, I needed to understand the prevailing attitudes and beliefs people had about disability and how the institutions being created were built to serve their purpose. Societal attitudes form public policy, which then shapes programs and services. Therefore, what society felt or believed at any given time dictated what types of services people with disabilities received. Rose Ellen was born in a time period when it was believed that people with feeble-mindedness were prolific, that feeble-mindedness was highly hereditary and that

people labeled as feeble-minded were considered a menace and a danger to the community and were responsible for most societal problems.

*“When the form had been completed,
an official of the institution glanced at Mayo
and decided into what category the boy should be placed.
The official had no training for that and had not bothered to give Mayo any test.
He graded human beings by eye, as a farmer grades potatoes.
He decided "medium-grade imbecile" was about right for Mayo.
He then filled out an admitting card,
assigning Mayo a number, 822.”*

Mayo Buckner Story: 1898, 8 years old,
Iowa Home for Feeble-Minded Children, Diagnosing Mayo

In the article *“An Historical Perspective on the Lives of People Labeled with Cognitive Impairments in Western Massachusetts”* by Donald LaBrecque you hear more about social policies of the times.

“The social policies at that time were to identify those with feeble-mindedness and to improve society by the use of eugenics. The development of intelligence testing came at this time and helped to fulfill the need to identify any child who was deemed feeble-minded. Alfred Binet, a French psychologist, developed a screening scale that, by performance, could identify degrees of retardation, measured against a norm. Binet fought against the use of the scale to limit or over-diagnose children. His scale was designed to “help and improve not label and limit.” He believed that intelligence could be increased by good education and that education should adapt to the child’s character and aptitudes and on the necessity for adapting ourselves to their needs and their capabilities (Binet 1909, p.15)

However, the use of Intelligence testing in the United States was popularized by Dr. Henry H. Goddard, the director of research at the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland New Jersey and others, who perfected and applied this new and powerful instrument (President’s Committee on Mental Retardation, 1977, p.10). Godard administered the test on children; both those labeled “mentally deficient” and those of ordinary intelligence. In 1913, he shocked the world with his findings that beyond the well-known cases of “idiots” and “imbeciles” was a much larger class of “feeble-minded, heretofore, unknown, of mild degree but of definite incapacity. He coined the term “moron” to describe this larger class of people. ``

Binet worried about his scale being used to indelibly label people and negatively set expectations “They seem to reason in the following way: “Here is an excellent opportunity for getting rid of all the children who trouble us and without critical spirit, they designate all who are unruly, or disinterested in the school” (Binet, 1090 p.169) (LaBrecque, 2002)

The Indiana Plan

Rose Ellen was institutionalized in the state that was the birth of eugenics. The Indiana History Disability Project tells the dark story of the nation’s first mandate to legalize sterilization.

An Excerpt from the Indiana Disability History Project: Eugenics Exhibit:

“As the 19th century came to a close, attitudes began to change. People labeled “feeble-minded” were increasingly seen as a burden, even a threat, to society. Many politicians, educators, and other Hoosier reformers were adopting the notion of eugenics, a theory of better breeding and human improvement thought to be based on science. In 1907, Indiana became the first state in the U.S. to legislate mandatory sterilization. Although the targets of this and later versions of the legislation also included criminals, the “insane,” and people with epilepsy, its victims over the following six decades were largely institutionalized people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The “Indiana Plan,” as it came to be known, anticipated similar measures in other states long before the eugenic policies of Nazi Germany (Indiana Disability History Project, 2022).

“The public's appetite for social obligations were being influenced by many factors, but one ideological belief soon rose above the others. In 1907, the General Assembly of Indiana passed, among other things, a bill to make Lincoln's birthday a legal holiday and a bill providing for involuntary sterilization of habitual criminals and idiots in state institutions in order to stop the propagation of their kind.

It was the world's first eugenic sterilization law. In 1909 a new governor, Thomas Marshall, soon put a stop to the process by threatening the funding of institutions that use the law. The law was eventually struck down in 1921 by the Indiana Supreme Court, but shortly thereafter, the legislature succeeded in passing a second law in 1927, removing serious criminals and confining it to just the insane, feeble-minded or epileptic as before it applied only to those housed within state institutions. (Indiana Disability History Project, 2022)

A letter to the editor of the News Sentinel on February 13, 1931, put it quite bluntly,

“The feeble minded, as a rule, come from the homes of the poor, and yet they present one of the serious problems of the state. When at large they reproduce and multiply more rapidly than normal individuals. They are found in our children's homes, our county infirmaries in our jails and in our prisons. And unless the public is aroused and some session of the General Assembly has the courage to meet the problem in a scientific and understanding manner. These types of individuals will present an ever-increasing burden on society

While there are a considerable number who will argue that sterilization is the wrong step, there are none who will deny that segregation of the feeble-minded in institutions makes impossible their marriage and reproduction of their own kind. What is the bearing of the laws of heredity upon human affairs? Eugenics provides the answer so far as this is known.

Eugenics seeks to apply the known laws of heredity so as to prevent the degeneration of the race and improve its inborn qualities. In institutions such as this all over the country, mental defectives are cared for. These are children who are helpless in every way and need constant attention. Once they have been born, defectives are happier and more useful in these institutions than when at large. But it would have been better by far for them and for the rest of the community if they had never been born.”

That letter was written by Charles McGonagale, superintendent of the Fort Wayne State School (PBS, 2022).

Sterilization at Fort Wayne:

The overcrowding at state institutions led to a push to rapidly parole older patients to make room for younger ones. The Fort Wayne State School made sterilization a prerequisite for release, a policy that began in 1932. For the next 25 years, an average of 57 patients were sterilized each year at the Fort Wayne State School. It was almost a 50/50 split of men and women. The average age was 24, although the largest single age group was 16-year-olds. (PBS, 2022)

Indiana's 1927 sterilization law, which was amended several times over the years but remained the principal legal foundation for forced sterilization in state institutions, was not repealed until 1974. Over that 47-year time span, over 2,000 sterilizations were performed in Indiana. (Indiana Historical Bureau, 2024)

I don't know if Rose Ellen was sterilized but it is not unlikely. There is one cryptic note in the archival documents stating that *“Rose Ellen continues to complain about her surgery site, even though the surgery was performed years ago.”*

In the 1930s the situation for people with disabilities began to show some marginal positive change. It became understood that people with disabilities were, in fact, people, and should be afforded the rights and privileges enjoyed by all citizens. It became understood that there were many other factors that cause mental retardation other than heredity and that intelligence testing alone is not sufficient to diagnose a child with mental retardation. This gradual change in societal attitudes, however, did not necessarily lead to better treatment of people with disabilities, for several decades.

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1932: Record of Inquest as to the feeble-mindedness of Rose Ellen Skeen and Order of Commitment to Fort Wayne State School,

Fort Wayne, Indiana

I hereby certify that I have examined Rose Ellen Skeen and that she is feeble-minded, a menace to society, and is a proper person for admission to the Custodial Department for Adult Females of Fort Wayne State School at Fort Wayne, IN; that she is not insane, epileptic, helpless or pregnant; that she is not afflicted with any chronic or contagious disease, and that I am not related to her by consanguinity or marriage.

- C.A. De Long, M.D.
Fort Wayne State School

Evaluating Rose Ellen

In my work as a clinician, my first introduction to a child and their family often came from previous evaluations and reports. I too, wrote evaluations not all that different from what I read in the Indiana State archives. Learning about Rose Ellen from this clinical perspective, through reports, forms and evaluations brought out the detective in me. I scrutinized each descriptor, test score, and label for any thread of information I could glean. Putting the language into historical perspective was immediately required. In her records, Rose Ellen is regularly described as a *High Grade Imbecile, institutionally trained, a custodial type, frail, long limbs, short stature, slight muscular build. Personality type: low self-confidence, submissive, clinging behavior, shy, little initiate, often depressed mood. Crippled.*

Rose Ellen was evaluated by the Psychiatric & Psychology departments at the Indiana School for Feeble-minded Youth in January of 1933. She was 17 years old at that time. Here is that Report.

The Summary Sheet

Binet: Basic: 6 years, Total 7 years 2 months, I.Q. 44

Test Interpretations: At time of test patient seemed homesick and no doubt her responses were not commensurate with her abilities, yet for the most part they were consistent. She shows evidence of considerable institutional training yet her performances are inferior to her Binet results. Likewise her scholastic achievements are even higher than her mental age.

School Tests: 2nd grade spelling and reading, 3rd grade language, 4th grade writing. 1st grade arithmetic. Can count to 100 by 1's, 5, s and 10's.

Case summary

Patient's father is a physician in Gary. There is a history of possible birth injury, also probably typhoid encephalitis at one year. Physical examination indicates old paraplegia. Patient's general make up is not good. She presents an asthenic cyclothymic type. *She has been in a very expensive private school for some 10 years, hence her responses are those of intensive training no doubt rather than those of her true ability. She presents a custodial type no doubt yet for proper cooperative aspects a rather complete schedule is important.*

(Cyclothymia: rare mood disorder causing emotional ups and downs

Asthenic:

Body type: frail, long limbs, short stature, slight muscular build

Personality type: low self confidence, submissive, clinging behavior, shy, little initiate, often depressed mood.)

Level:

H.G. (High Grade) Imbecile

Post Inflectional: Typhoid

Egocentric

Neurologic

Cause: Possible birth injury

Encephalitis: Typhoid encephalitis at 1 yr.

Somatic Diseases: Paraplegia Lordosis

Syphilis: negative

Family Hx: let blank

Traits and Tendencies: blank

Sterilization: before admission Acts 1927, 1931 (left blank)

There are several other reports or pieces of reports in the archives that I began to list, trying to pull the pieces of Rose Ellen together. I learned that she was small, measuring 4'8" and weighing as little as 73 lbs. and up to 94 lbs. over the span of 3 decades. She was described as crippled. Her speech was difficult to understand so she communicated by writing notes.

Her category of "High Grade Imbecile" was defined as having a mental age of three to seven years and an IQ of 25-50. This places her just above "idiot" (IQ below 25) and below "moron" (IQ of 51-70).

***"Idiots:** Those so defective that the mental development never exceeds that of a normal child of about two years.*

***Imbeciles:** Those whose development is higher than that of an idiot, but whose intelligence does not exceed that of a normal child of about seven years.*

***Morons:** Those whose mental development is above that of an imbecile but does not exceed that of a normal child of about twelve years." (Huey, 1912)*

Other traits and characteristics used to describe Rose Ellen included:

Staggering gait or unsteady enough to necessitate a self-contained cottage with feeding facilities and without steps.

Homosexual

Her behavior is controllable-often easily disturbed (acting out)

Frail, short and inactive

Cooperative and understanding

There are several staff notes describing Rose Ellen like this one: *"She is no problem in the cottage, as she continually keeps herself busy writing notes or doing her knitting. She is currently making a rug. She likes to watch television"* (Fort Wayne Hospital, 2023).

A letter dated 1957, lists her diagnosis as congenital spastic paraplegia.

Case Number 4854		Name Skeen, Rose Ellen		Sex Female	Consented <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Date 1-6-33	Institution EWCS	DPW Form 181 Patient's Record Card Feb 1934 6-27-38	
Mental Status Post infectious		Marital Condition Single <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Separated <input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed <input type="checkbox"/>		No. of Children Legit. 0 Illeg. 0		No. of Brothers 0 Sisters 1		Patient Ind. Father Ill. Mother Neb.	
Clinical Classification Post infectious M. A. 7-6-0 Chron. Age 12-8 LQ 40		Education Common School Years Attended None <input type="checkbox"/> Reads Only <input type="checkbox"/> Reads and Writes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Environment Urban <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Rural <input type="checkbox"/>		Economic Condition Dependent <input type="checkbox"/> Marginal <input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Religion of Family U Occupation Doctor P. O. Address Cary Actual Residence Indiana County Lake	
Birthdate 12-10-14 Race Cauc. Color White		Time in State At Last Residence Life Total Time		Probable Cause of Mental Deficiency Other Than He Possibly birth injury. Typhoid encephalitis at 1		Name Skeen, Rose Ellen Date 10-12-67 Code and Term #612.2 Encephalopathy due to postnatal cerebral infection, Bacteria (Typhoid)		Measured Intelligence Level..... 0.4 Sev. Genetic Component..... 1 0 Secondary Cranial Anomaly..... 2 0 Impairment of Special Senses..... 3 0 Convulsive Disorders..... 4 0 Psychiatric Impairment..... 5 0 Motor Dysfunction..... 6 0 0 0 Adaptive Behavior Level 3 Severe Supp. Class. of Impairment Interpersonal re-lations, Speech skills	
Family History Of Mental Diseases Nervous Diseases (including epilepsy) Mental Deficiency Infectious (drugs or alcohol) Specity		Reason for Admission Feeble-minded		No. of Does Show If Tends					

Rose Ellen Diagnosis connected to Typhoid

A decade later, in 1967, Rose Ellen's diagnosis was recorded as Encephalopathy due to postnatal cerebral infection, Bacteria (Typhoid).

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A Picture of Rose Ellen Emerges

As I process the description of Rose Ellen in the medical reports my mind spins trying to understand who exactly she was. I found myself trying to diagnose her, a ridiculous idea, given the limited information I had to go on. But, my good friend Abe Bergman, a Pediatrician with decades of experience, sent a description of her to his colleague to see if she brought any type of diagnosis to mind. He told us what we already knew that the information available was too limited. He asked if I could find a photo of her. But I knew that finding photos of her would be very unlikely. Not one photo has been found, even after searching the many boxes of family history in my brother's spare bedroom. I sometimes imagined that she might look like the photos of my mom as a child. But now her own picture is developing. I see her as a small child and then as a young adult, the descriptions of her come into a bit clearer focus. I have a feeling that I know this kind of girl. She's like many I have fallen in love with over the years. As I take in all 200 plus pages of the archives, the first vague picture comes into greater focus. Since there are

no lasting photos of Rose Ellen my mind is free to create. I see her climbing out the window to search for her friend. I see her being proud of her sewing and her attachment to her caretaker. I really see her personality when she states defiantly, in a letter to my grandmama that she will “*write this every week until I do get them*” referring to a thermos she was expecting to get.

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the nice letter. Yet, Mother Dear I did get my pillowcase to embroider but not my thermos bottle. I don't know why? I will write this every week until I do get it.

Daughter

Rose Ellen

As I read through the notes, I came to understand the source of my grandparents' worry and concern for her since birth. My grandparents state in reports about her early years that it was difficult to get her to eat as an infant. How that made my heart ache for them, how worried they must have been. They had another daughter, Virginia, who died in infancy and now they have a tiny little one who has trouble eating. I have tried to help many parents feed their infants and young children in my work. It is always worrisome and painful for the parents and often causes deep anxiety and fear that can affect their relationship with their baby and with the whole family. The thinking goes, mothers should know how to feed their babies. Babies should eat well and grow chubby.

Her gait is described as unsteady, and she is frequently classified as “crippled”. Yet, she climbs out her cottage window to find her friend when she is moved from Harper Cottage to Dunham.

Defiant, strong-willed, diminutive but strong. I know that kid! I love those kids.

The discrepancy between her test scores and her academic skills is very telling. Rose Ellen achieved a lot at her previous residence, At Molly Woods Hare School, she learned “perfect sewing, reading and writing, and arithmetic”, Yet, once she is tested in Fort Wayne, we see the staff dismiss her abilities, saying she shows “*evidence of institutional training*”. They have negative expectations for her, which is never good.

One psychologist said, “*She has been in a very expensive private school for some 10 years; hence her responses are those of intensive training no doubt rather than those of her true ability*” (Fort Wayne Hospital, 2023).

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Losing Ground

Over the years at Fort Wayne, Rose Ellen seems to decline. When she entered the institution she was a young woman who could compose a coherent letter in cursive and knew the multiplication tables, but during testing in 1951 she is described as “*depressed and homesick and called attention to scratches and scars on her body*” The results of her testing that year led the examiner to state: “*The results represent a loss of 1 year 6 months mental age and 7 IQ. points from that secured on the 1916 Binet given in 1935*” (Fort Wayne Hospital, 2023).

The longer she stays in the Fort Wayne institution, the lower her IQ scores become.

In 1933 she was tested and attained a mental age of 7 years, 2 months and an IQ score of 44.

In 1951 using the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, she attained a: mental age: of 6 years and an IQ score of 40.

In 1957 she attained a mental age of 4 years and 7 months

In 1965 she was classified as moderately retarded with her adaptive skills as severe.

In 1967 her behavior classification level was 4 severe and adaptive behavior level three severe.

In a Psychiatric and Psychology summary dated 1957:

Rose “Ann” (misspelled her name) cried when brought to the testing situation, saying she wanted to go home. Calming her was not difficult, however, and she responded well to the test. Because of a speech defect, the Arthur Point Scale was used. On this, her mental age was 4-7, and her IQ. was 29. This represents a decrease in comparison to a Binet Mental age of 6-0, and I/Q. of 40 obtained in 1951 (Fort Wayne Hospital, 2023).

A list of tests administered gives a more detailed picture of her deficits and the very last line of the report states her performance was poor and “*seemed to be partly a function of subnormal vision.*”

Rose Ellen’s poor vision is mentioned in several letters exchanged between her parents and the institution over the decades. My grandparents want her vision tested in the hopes that glasses may help her. Eventually, her vision is tested but the recommendation is that glasses will not help her. Now, with compromised vision and poor speech intelligibility, her communication via written notes is likely to have been affected negatively.

In August 1964, at 50 years old, Rose Ellen had a Speech and Language Evaluation. The notes are minimal;

Test Used: FWSS-PAT, Findings: Mis-articulated almost every sound: stimulability was poor. Delayed Language Receptive skills were poor: expressive skills were poor.

Recommendations: Therapy not recommended due to age.

Examiner: Sandra M. Bieda

Director of Speech and Hearing Center Robert. T. Fulton, PH

Just about a year later, in 1965 there was a Department of Psychology Services checklist that recorded:

“Good” self-help skills including personal hygiene-grooming skills, dressing and toileting. She is also able to care for herself at mealtime, has good sleep habits and her care of property is “respectful”.

Her Sex Activities were left blank.

Motor Development: ambulatory (less than 3 blocks).

She was not attending school and worked less than 2 hours a day, and she did not attend Recreation.

Her Communication Skills were fair (receptive skills) and poor (expressive skills).

In Cottage Behaviour: she is marked as “creates no problems within the cottage” and sometimes easily disturbed.

Measured Intelligence: level 4-Severe

Adaptive Behavior: Level 3-Severe

- Edward M. Sirlin, M.D.

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A Snapshot of Rose Ellen's Correspondence

Correspondence from my Grandmama and Papa Don and the staff included subjects such as notifications and requests to visit her or take her on summer vacation, her personal belongings and wardrobe, her daily activities and occasional mention of a social event she took part in. Rose Ellen spent her days, according to staff notes, reading, writing letters, sewing, tatting and embroidery. She liked to watch television but apparently, did not “*do a lick of work.*” She had a best friend and the staff seemed to mostly find her easy to care for. As she ages and as my grandparent's age the subject matter of the letters becomes more intense.

A resident review was conducted on April 15, 1969, in which she was described like this:

Prior to admission, Rose was enrolled in private school for 10 years; Wood School in Pennsylvania and Stewards School in Des Moines, Iowa.

Her skills are those of intense training rather than true ability. She has a fine memory, She knows her multiplication tables up to seven and can count to 20, 50 and 100. She can read, print and write, knows her colors and knows the months of the year as well as the days of the week.”

Since her admission to Fort Wayne Hospital and Training Center, she has not been enrolled in any educational classes.”

She is severely crippled and not able to do any type of work.

Rose is a 55 year old white female who weighs 79 lbs. She is moderately retarded and partially blind. She can feed and dress herself, however she is not too neat in appearance.

She makes things with string, an activity known as finger knitting. She spells unusually well. The letters she composes are sensible and intelligible.

Rose is not too active. She sits in the dayroom by the television leaving only for meals or to go to the restroom. She doesn't like to leave the cottage. However, immediately after being transferred to Dunham Hall, she ran away. She continually talks of going back to Harper Lodge to be with her diary.

Rose is known to be an active homosexual; however, she is not much of a problem in the cottage.

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E.D. Skeen, Walkerton, IND

7/1/61

State School

Gentleman:

It is our wish to have Rose Ellen home for her vacation Friday, 7/21 and return Friday, 8/4. If this is satisfactory, please confirm it.

Sincerely,

E.D. Skeen

Mrs. E.D. Skeen

March 17, 1969

1329 East Jefferson South Bend, Indiana 46617

Re: Rose Ellen Skeen

Dear Mrs. Skeen:

It will be satisfactory for you to have Rose out for lunch March 26. We have asked the cottage to not tell Rose of your coming and if you are unable to come she will not be disappointed.

Very truly, yours,

(Mrs.) Jane E. Brown

Supervisor Record Office

The records from 1938 are blurry as are many other years, but from the records I was able to see that Rose Ellen was visited nine times in January, February and October, eight times in April, May and July and eleven times in March, in August, just once. There are other years where the visits were less frequent in August which make sense because she was brought home on vacation for 2 weeks each summer. One vacation took place just about six weeks before I was born.

I think of the love and devotion to their Rose Ellen, I think of the time and distance they traveled back and forth across the state. I think about each visit, what did they do, what did they talk about? I imagine Rose Ellen showed them her needlework. My siblings and I played cards with my Grandmama: Kings in the Corner or Spider, Go Fish, and Cribbage. Did she play cards with

Rose Ellen on their visits? And most worrying, how did my grandparents perceive the living conditions of the institution? It's possible that they were not allowed into the living quarters. There are many reports by families who were always "met at the door" or in the entry room. The institutions built at this time period are often described as "*grand and beautiful on the outside and hell on the inside*" (PBS, 2022). The documentary film, *The Forgotten* shows overcrowded dormitories and very poor staffing levels. Did they see this happening? From the letters that go back and forth, it does not appear so. If they did, how could they have left her there? The correspondence is so polite and personal so clearly, some staff were caring and attentive.

E.D. Skeen M.D.

11.27.62

Fort Wayne State School.

Gentleman- We would like to visit Rose Ellen on Friday, Dec. 7th about 11AM and take her to lunch. Please advise whether you are on EST and whether the Moonlight restaurant is open on that day. I believe that is the name of the restaurant on State Blvd in the block just East of the school grounds.

Your favor will be appreciated.

Sincerely,

E.D. Skeen

Dear Dr. Skeen:

We will have Rose Ellen ready to go out for the day with you on December 7 as you requested. The school operates on Eastern Standard Time. The restaurant you referred to is closed each Saturday.

Very Truly Yours,

(Mrs.). Jane E. Brown

Supervisor Patient's Records

E.D. Skeen

11/25/63

*Gentleman- It is our desire to visit Rose Ellen on 12/4 and take her out for lunch.
I see no reason that an answer is needed unless this is not permitted.*

Sincerely,

E.D. Skeen

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A Birthday Party for Rose Ellen

We celebrated a lot of birthdays at our house with nine kids, two parents and four grandparents. There were often more than one per month. My mother went all in on our birthdays. One year she took my whole Bluebird troop to the circus! Her rule for parties was inclusive. If you invited one classmate you had to invite all of them, one bluebird? Then the whole troop was invited. It felt so special to be allowed to choose what was for dinner that night and there was always a crowd that sang to you and plenty of cake and ice cream and a very special birthday table runner. Institutional life has been described as one gray day after the next, with very few lifetime events noted, the years turning into decades. To read that my Mom arranged a birthday party for her sister touches me so deeply.

December 19, 1967

Mrs. Joel Bullard

1132 North St. Joseph Ave.

South Bend, Indiana 46617

Re: Rose Ellen Skeen

Dear Mrs. Bullard:

Rose and the residents in Dunham Hall were very pleased with her birthday party.

We purchased a large sheet cake decorated with holly, birthday napkins and candles, which cost \$6.00. We placed the remaining \$2.00 in Rose's canteen fund. We trust this meets with your approval and thank you for your interest in Rose and the other residents.

Sincerely yours,

Miss McComas, R.N.

Dunham Hall

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Personal Belongings

Included in the archives are clothing logs dated from 1959-1970 and several letters of correspondence between my Grandmama and the Fort Wayne hospital staff about Rose Ellen's belongings, specifically, a pillowcase for her to embroider, a thermos, ("not allowed") and a request to send her a folding card table, approved.

10.29.60 State School Gentleman-

We understand that Rose Ellen needs a new folding card table. Please determine whether that is the case and whether it will be permissible to get one for her for Christmas. Also do it in a manner that will not inform her of the plan.

Sincerely, E.D. Skeen

In 1961 Rose Ellen was to go on her summer vacation to Grandmama and Papa Don's house. A detailed letter written by my Grandmama lists the dresses she would like her to bring home to be dry cleaned, to also make sure to send her slippers and "*if she has a natural color canvas jacket, please let her bring it*".

6.29.64 State School Gentleman-

Please ask Harper to include Rose Ellen's things and to bring home the pink and the tan sweaters.

Thank you, E. Skeen

Clothing Received in 1960:

April 28, 1960

Anklets: 3 pair

Pajamas: 4 pair

Vests: 4 white knit

Hankies: 6

Shoes: 1 pair black velvet, used

July 22, 1960

Dress: one green percale wrap around, used

One yellow percale with orange trim

Slips: 2 white cotton

Shoes: 2 pair, 1 pair tan rubber sole tie slipper, 1 pair black oxford

Stoles: 1 old rose wool

September 29, 1960

Winter coat: 1 tan tweed with fur collar, used

A radio (1965)

In 1963, Dr. Skeen typed up a short notice asking if it would be permitted to send Rose Ellen a pocket-sized transistor radio. The radio is the subject of 5 letters from the first request in 1963 to 1965.

Rose Ellen's Judy Monkey doll

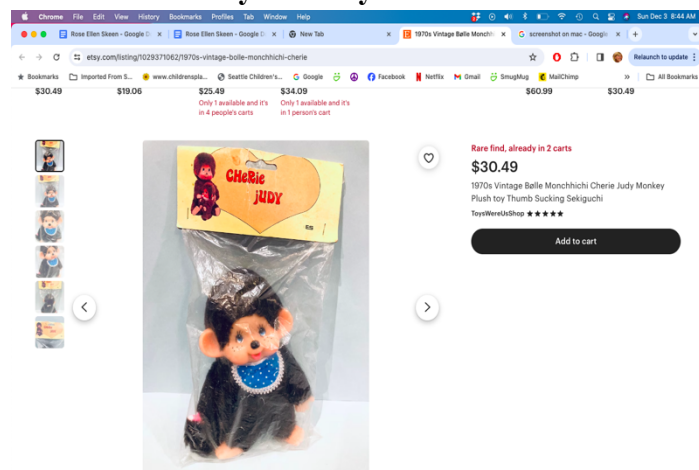


Figure 1 Vintage Judy Monkey Doll

My oldest daughter loved dolls, my middle child, stuffed animals, especially a panda and my youngest, carried a cheetah over his back to and from preschool every day. My grandson has a fox. Rose Ellen had a Judy Monkey doll. The doll was lost for a while which my Papa Don thought might be the cause for Rose Ellen's sadness. On a personal level, to know that Rose Ellen had a lovey; a monkey to add to our family of lovelies, made me so happy. It was like she became a real person to learn such a

tender and "normal" fact about her. Every parent knows the emergency that is a "lost" lovey. I feel closer to my grandparents for sharing this act of parenting. I am so touched by the image of my Papa Don and Grandmama writing to the staff urging them to pay attention to Rose Ellen, to help her feel better and find her lost Judy Monkey doll.

The correspondence is heavy with worry and concern for Rose Ellen and for good reason. Far darker things come along. This exchange of letters feels oddly heartwarming and ominous. It is so hard to reconcile the sensitivity in the staff's letters with the conditions of the institution at the time. By the late sixties, the institution was falling into extreme disrepair, inadequate staffing, and overcrowding. But, still the staff responded to my grandparents with a genuine concern for Rose Ellen.



Rose Ellen's weekly letters home stop coming

By the Fall of 1967 Papa Don and Grandmama had begun to seriously worry about Rose Ellen. In a letter from Papa Don to Mrs. Keren Young in the social work department, he expresses their worry.

Dear Mr. Young,

When we visited Dr. (too illegible to transcribe) in his office he said to write to you if it seemed necessary.

Rose Ellen entered the Fort Wayne School when she was 19 and in Dec., she will be 54. She had been in Molly Wood Hare school, Langhorne, Pa many years from age 6. There she was taught hard work, reading, writing, and almost from the first she has written to us regularly, weekly. This continued through all the years at Fort Wayne until two years ago when she became irregular in writing, perhaps because she has been required to use school paper and needed someone to give it to her, but she was always writing the letters herself. Now we have had none for six weeks written by her and we are very anxious to get her letters. Letters from attendants did not show her extreme mental worry but gave us the idea she was well and adjusting herself to the change. Now this may be the case and her condition when we saw her may just have been an explosion and we sincerely hope she is adjusting.

She has always been a busy person at something and has kept herself contented in this manner and perhaps because her work did not go with her when she changed may be some of the cause of her worry. At Harper she went to classes most of the years and no doubt she misses them now.

Also, she brought home a membership card from a church and it seems worthwhile to try and continue this for her.

We take the liberty of writing to you because Dr. Ackerman said you could perhaps work out some plan with the nurse and Mrs. Curry, to make her more contented, for we are very much concerned about her. It seems her friends at Harper stayed there.

In all these years we have never seen her so depressed.

Another reason we are trying so hard to help her is that we are past eighty and time is running out for us, so take this into account when considering this problem and help her to get us letters.

We know that she is not your only problem but she is our main problem so you are helping all three of us.

Sincerely,

E.D. Skeen

Just a few days later, Oct. 6th, Mrs. Carole Jacquay, Social Worker, wrote back acknowledging that she had received his letter but not to worry. Rose Ellen was having a “fun” time!

Dear Dr Skeen:

I received your letter today concerning your daughter's adjustment and welfare. I am sorry that she has not written to you. However, I am sure that the attendants have written to you about Rose Ellen's current adjustment.

She has been busy with her sewing and has received new supplies. The cottage is always planning suitable activities for Rose Ellen and her friends who live with her. They get to see movies, play games and even have parties. Now, everyone is looking forward to the Halloween party. There is a parade and a big celebration. It is a “Fun” time for all.

Be assured that the whole staff is interested in Rose Ellen's adjustment and that everything is being done to make her happy and content.

Sincerely,

*Mrs. Carole Jacquay
Social Worker*

But the letter writing continued to be a problem, with a new twist. Rose Ellen had been telling her mother that she is not receiving letters from her. The social worker attempts to clear things up in this letter, dated February 13, 1968

Dear Mrs. Skeen:

Thank you for your inquiry about Rose Ellen's letters. I have checked with the attendant in Rose Ellen's cottage. Rose has been receiving your letters and really enjoys hearing from you. Perhaps she told you she was not receiving your letters because she did not get one on the usual day.

Rose Ellen continues to adjust to her cottage. She is now more satisfied with her new home and mixes well with the other girls. The attendant says she loves to crochet and does a very nice job."

The fact that Rose Ellen could read and write was one piece of information I recall knowing about her when I was young. Even then, I just could not understand how anyone who could read and write was deemed unfit to live with us, her family. Ours was a household of readers. Reading was a daily practice and books were ever-present. "Bring a book" and "Do you have a book?" were frequent reminders whenever we went on a trip or outing. To be stuck without a book was a calamity. I wonder what Rose Ellen would have liked to read. The staff member at the Molly Woods Hare school mentioned to me that there are photos of children from that era, being read to at bedtime but did that continue in Fort Wayne? It seems doubtful.

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Worry and concern

Papa Don's worry was acute. He became seriously ill just two months later. The past three years had been a downward spiral for my grandparents. As they aged, their concerns about Rose Ellen intensified. Their lives were becoming more difficult as Papa Don was diagnosed with cancer. Their visits were stopped but the letter-writing continued. I learned from one letter that my Papa Don spent months in the hospital and then was nursed at home by my Grandmama. The details of his care are found in a letter she wrote to Rose Ellen explaining why she could not come home for summer vacation.

Grandmama wrote the following letter on May 8, 1968.

Dear Mrs. Jacquay,

I do not know the correct person to write to, concerning the following. My husband was in S. Joe Hospital here from Nov. to the middle of Feb. Most of the time in Intensive Care. A (or most) malignant cancer was removed. The highlight of the year, for Rose Ellen, is her two-week vacation at home. This will not be possible this summer. Can anything be arranged there? This is going to be an awful thing for Rose Ellen to meet.

For weeks ...

(The second page of the letter is missing)

May 19, 1968

Dear Rose Ellen,

Now I am going to see if I can help you understand all the trouble since your father got terribly sick the first week of Nov. more than 6 months ago. I wrote Mrs. Curry asking her to please read this to you so you can be sure you understand. So please give her this. The 3 months your father was in the hospital I was there all day, every day. Since he is here I take all care of him. He has clean clothes each day. I wash all of them, except the bed sheets, by hand in the wash bowl in the bathroom- I feed him 5 times a day. I give him medicine regularly 9 times each day then there is extra medicine. I give him his baths (wash all bath towels) + give him enemas. I have to help him walk from bedroom to bath and back. I brush his hair, shave him, clean his teeth 2 or 3 times a day. He spits up lots, so I keep Kleenex at hand + burn it when used. I cut his toe and fingernails. The doctor does not know how long I will need to keep doing all this. And it is almost summer and I am worried sick about your vacation. With your father like he is, you cannot come here. **I don't say home for it isn't to me-just a place to stay.** So I know the children who do not go away from there, get to do something extra. But it would have to be settled ahead of time so I wrote and do hope you get to do something different. Rose Ellen you do not seem to know or won't believe I am always thinking of you. For months now, I hardly hear from you. How do you think that makes me feel? You know very well I love you. I am doing the best I can.

Mother

P.S. Also I answer all your father's letters that come to him. His hand shakes. There are more things too I do for him.

◇ ◇ ◇

“just a place to stay”

The situation could not be more heartbreaking. The “just a place to stay” as my grandmama calls her home, was a full “wing” of our family home. Their apartment had two large bedrooms, a small kitchen, a bathroom and a large living room, all beautifully furnished by them. The main part of the house was beautiful too, beautiful and somewhat chaotic in all the ways you can imagine with nine kids living there. Grandmama and Papa Don's “wing” had a door. We knocked before coming in and we came in often to play cards and cribbage and watch TV. We did not have a television so this was a particular treat. We were only allowed to watch what Grandmama wanted to watch: She loved westerns like Bonanza and Big Valley, talk shows and

Lawrence Welk. Sunday nights were an exception. We gathered up on her Persian rug to watch the Wonderful World of Disney. We also watched Roots and Love Story, both watched by my mother, too. Grandmama ate dinner with us most nights and had friends that took her to the senior center to play bridge. In the letter she wrote to Rose Ellen letting her know she will not be coming home for vacation because her father has been ill, she does not call this big beautiful house full of kids “home.” “I don’t say home for it isn’t to me-just a place I stay.”

They had moved into our house with us from their own home, and then soon after Papa Don became ill. I imagine it didn't feel like “home” to her. Her husband and older daughter are not with her. Her life had been totally turned upside down. Not only is she caring for her husband, but she is not able to visit Rose Ellen and then has to tell her she will not be able to come “home” for her summer vacation.

Mrs. Susan Duun, Social Worker replies to Mrs. Skeen, on May 24, just a few days later.

“We are very sorry to hear of your husband’s illness. We also understand your reason for not being able to take Rose home for a vacation; it would be too much of a burden on you to have to look after your husband and also keep track of Rose.

The nurse and cottage supervisor explained to Rose the exact reason for her not having a vacation this year and she understands completely. I am checking in to her being approved for the Adopt-A-Patient Program and will let you know as soon as I hear anything from Miss. Fuller.”

Six days later Grandmama makes a call to M. McCon-Inf, Harshman Hall. The notes on the call read:

“Rose Ellen’s mother called about 9a.m. 5-30-68. Said she had been unable to take her home because her father was ill and she didn't want her to know it, but someone told her. Her father passed away last night and she doesn't want her to know it now. She wants to tell her herself. Said it would be impossible for her to come to the funeral. She hoped that if anyone noticed it in the paper or did know that they would not tell her. I did not inform the cottage or anyone of this. She wants to tell her herself at a later date.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Moving Rose Ellen

There was an early period where my grandparents feared Rose Ellen would be moved. A very polite exchange of letters took place then as well (dated March of 1962). The facility was growing rapidly and overcrowding and crumbling buildings were a constant threat even then. My

grandparents were reassured that her cottage was not affected by a recent building closure. But what I found so touching was the prompt response and reassurance they received from the social worker.

“If a transfer for Rose Ellen should need to be considered at any time, her happiness and friendships would be of a prime concern.”

*Yours Truly,
(Miss) Karen Winje
Social Worker*

The documents reveal that Rose Ellen moved at least a few times during her decades-long stay at Fort Wayne.

It's a bit hard to piece together the moves from Dunham Hall to Harper Lodge or vice versa but what is clear is that Rose Ellen did not like the change if her “girlfriend” was not moved with her.

Writing to Mrs. Young, Grandmama says, in reference to an earlier move,

A ... ago someone wrote to me saying how happy Rose Ellen was in Dunham Cottage. Because of that I was looking forward full of pleasure in seeing her there today, September 20. Rose Ellen was waiting at the door for us. But it wasn't Rose Ellen child stomped her foot and sobbed bitterly and wrote how she missed “sweet” Harper. Her eyes looked as if she had been crying the month she has been at Dunham. 25 from Harper are there but her friends are at Harper I was told. My feelings are not to be (end of letter is missing).

In September of 1967, Papa Don wrote the following letter to Dr. Ackerman, the Superintendent of the institution.

*Dear Dr. Ackerman,
We went to visit Rose Ellen today after receiving the enclosed letter from her new home in Dunham Hall for she seemed very happy with the change.*

To say that we were startled with the change shown in her mental condition and her outbursts of sobbing would be to put it mildly. She is one of those kinds of people who become attached to their surroundings and attendants and she is extremely homesick for Harper and the belongings she had there.

We had to leave her without being able to get her to see that she was changed because of her being one of the older residents and that it was for her benefit that all the fine new surroundings were provided.

***We are seriously concerned about her mental state** and just possibly it would be a help to her to adjust if she knew that she could be returned to Harper later. And another item worth considering would be to return to her the footlocker she had at Harper with her sewing that she loves so well and is constantly busy about. **She also lost a Judy Monkey doll** in the change and if that could be found would be of help.*

We are making the request of you that she be returned to Harper and if possible, to her old room and bed and it seems feasible to do this by merely making an exchange rather than waiting for a vacancy in Harper.

As you review our files, I am sure you will find not a single mention of any criticism, as this is certainly not. We think that the new facilities are a truly wonderful work that you and your staff have done and we intend to make an effort to say so to the ones higher up and who aided you.

I'm sorry we could not have seen you personally for a letter is such a cold and impersonal thing, but I am sure you will realize that we are interested only in the welfare of our daughter who has been so well cared for over these many years.

*Sincerely,
E.D. Skeen*

Dr. Ackerman refuses their request to move Rose Ellen back to her old home in Harper Lodge. "It will not be possible to make a trade of a resident at Harper so that your daughter may be returned there." It continues, adding that "Harper was seriously overcrowded to the point of placing residents living in this unit in serious jeopardy". They stated they wanted, "better homogenous grouping of residents." Stating, "We found that we had a great number of residents who, in addition to being mentally retarded also had physical disabilities. We felt that it was necessary to group these individuals with multiple handicaps together in a facility that would allow them easy access to the dayrooms, dormitories and dining rooms." And it goes further, "We are not encouraging residents to have footlockers in our new buildings. Perhaps she could keep her sewing in the locker provided in the dormitory." This letter is dated September 22, 1967.

But, the monkey doll, what about the monkey doll?!

“I will ask the Nursing Service to check on the Judy Monkey doll that has been misplaced in the transfer of cottages.”

Dear Mrs. Skeen:

September 25, 1967

*Your letter concerning your daughter, Rose Ellen, was referred to me by Mrs. Young. I understand your apprehension about Rose's new cottage and her adjustment there. I checked with nursing service at Dunham about Rose Ellen's placement. They said that Rose has been getting along much better these last few weeks. **Her monkey doll was found.** She also **made many new friends** with the people that are living in Dunham. The nurse on duty said that **Rose Ellen's sewing was found.** She has been busy working on this and has asked for more supplies.*

Rose Ellen has adjusted very well to her new situation. I am sure you will find her quite changed upon your next visit. If you have any more questions, please write and I will be glad to help you.

*Sincerely,
Mrs Carole Jacquay
Social Worker*

In Oct. of 1969 Dunham Hall suffered wind damage and the residents were moved. Rose Ellen was transferred to Harper Lodge. In a letter addressed to Mr. Collins, dated Nov. 1, 1969, Grandmama writes,

“I had not known of the damage to Dunham until today. I need to know the following. I will leave room in the answer, hoping to make it easier for you.

- 1. What time did damage occur?*
- 2. Was Mrs. Curry present at Dunham at time*
- 3. How is Mrs. Curry*
- 4. Where are Rose Elen's clothes?”*

The letter goes on to ask for clarification on her clothing. Many pages of the letter are missing as the list of questions jumps to 9. Asking if there is insurance to pay for the loss of Rose Ellen's clothing as she had provided a "good" supply, plentiful to last two years.

She concludes the letter with a recounting of their attempts to visit her often, Dr. Skeen's illness, the fact that she just became housebound. But just a month ago she was able to visit her and was *"relieved and grateful to find her calm, satisfied. Now she is back at Harper which I had assured her would be torn down (One reason for her staying at Dunham). So to her I am a liar."*

The dates are missing on some letters which makes these moves difficult to track. But, the sentiment is clear. Rose Ellen grew attached to her surroundings and her people and moving deeply disturbed her and therefore my grandparents.

My Aunt

Here is what I know about Rose Ellen. She was a child then woman who made friends and kept them for a long time, who had a special "lovey" a Judy Monkey doll that brought her happiness and maybe a sense of security. She had cake on her birthday, at least once, and loved sewing. Her parents visited her regularly, wrote her letters and put money in her canteen for things she needed. They gave her a small radio and a card table and kept her sewing supplies plentiful. They also expected a letter from her every week.

The letters went back and forth between Rose Ellen and her parents. In the records, there are three letters written by Rose Ellen. Her cursive is neat and her spelling and punctuation, minus a few periods, are correct. They are hard to make out as they are poor photocopies. But in one she says:

9-10-1967

Dear Mother,
Just a few lines to let you hear from me. I am fine and I hope you are the same. Give my love to everybody for me. Oh yes Mother we are in a new building and everything is new. We have our own lockers and it is real nice. I am real happy here and I will be looking for you all to come and see me whenever you can. So be sweet and I will be a good girl. Everybody here is real nice to me and I like them all

With all my love
Rose

FW/SS-SD-14
 3-58-100
 Fort Wayne State Hospital and Training Center
 301 East State Boulevard
 Fort Wayne, Indiana
 09000051534
 TO: Mrs E. E. Sheen FROM: Rose E. Sheen
419 N. Sunnyside St. Durbin Hall
South Bend Ind 46617 DATE: 9-10-1967
 Dear Mother just a few lines to
 let you hear from me & am fine
 and hope you are the same fine
 My love to everybody for me
 As you mother we are in a new
 Building and everything is new we
 Have our own lockers and it is
 real nice I am real happy here
 and i will be looking for you all
 to come and see me whenever
 you can so be sweet and
 i will be a good girl every
 body here is real nice
 to me and i like them all
 With all my love
 Rose

Letter from Rose Ellen 9.10.67 from the Fort Wayne Archive Records

But the mail was not always consistent. In 1962, Rose Ellen complained to her parents that she was not receiving their letters.

March 31st, 1962

State School Gentleman:

Enclosed is one of Rose Ellen's letters and we have had three this week that she is not getting her mail.

We never miss a week writing to her and this week we have written three times. Will you please give this your immediate attention? She cries when she doesn't get her mail and is not mistaken or forgetful.

I am sure there is some unforeseen accident that this has happened and I appreciate the difficulties in operating as well as you do, so do not consider this a criticism, just trying to make things smooth for Rose Ellen.

Sincerely, ED Skeen

A surprising response came just over a week later.

Dear Dr. Skeen April 9, 1962

We do not know why Rose Ellen has been writing to you about not receiving your letters. Rose received your letters of March 26th, March 28th, March 31st and April 1st. These were all given to her.

It could be that Rose Ellen was a little homesick when writing her letters and was seeking your sympathy.

Mrs. Ringquist is aware of the importance of your letters to Rose Ellen, so she makes sure that Rose Ellen receives them.

We appreciate your calling your concern to our attention so that we can check for you.

Yours Truly,

(Miss) Karen Winje, Social Worker

In 1965 the situation was that Rose Ellen was not sending her weekly letters home. A few internal memos between Mrs. Burns, K. young and Mrs. Clements show them trying to figure out what exactly is happening. They say they are posting letters except when: To Mrs. Burns from Mrs. Clements, *"There was one time her letter could not go because she had written something she did not need to write. I gave it back to her and told her to rewrite it. She did and I took it over to be sent. Now as to whether she writes every week I couldn't say for sure. But as*

far as I know there is a letter that goes real often and I have taken them on Tuesday night as well as Sunday night.”

And on May 7th, (Mrs.) Karen Young writes to my Grandmama saying how sorry she is that she has not heard from Rose Ellen for a few weeks. She explains how the mail system works slowly and then adds:

“Rose Ellen is very fortunate to receive a letter every week from you. We wish all the children were shown this attention. Please be advised that Rose Ellen will continue to be encouraged to write.”

The issue arose again in correspondence from 1968.

To the Office, a letter today from Rose Ellen Skeen, Dunham Hall, says she is not receiving her letters from me, her mother. Since last September I have written twice a week or one letter and one card or package a week because Rose Ellen was so disturbed at the transfer to Dunham from Harper where she had lived many years. The nurse advised this. I never neglect these letters and always have my address on the corner of the envelope. Someone there told me the mail goes to Dunham each day. Please check this. Rose Ellen was upset too much by the change. Now she seems to be adjusting to Dunham. Lack of my letters is bothering her. Thank you.
Mrs. ED Skeen

The correspondence from 1969 included a very warm letter from Richard Grime, Administrator, Unit IV

Dear Mrs. Skeen,
Thank you for your letter. Please accept my apologies for being late in answering it as I have been on an extended vacation. Rose Ellen is doing fine. She no longer mentions returning to Harper Lodge and seems very calm and well satisfied in Dunham Hall. When weather permits, Rose attends occupational therapy classes and apparently enjoys this very much. Rose also enjoyed the visit with her sister on March 26 of this year. She is in fine physical condition and appears to be quite content. I certainly hope that your own physical condition has improved.

Please contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Again, the correspondence between the staff at the institution and my grandparents reveals so much about the struggles of caring for Rose Ellen from afar. It is remarkable that the staff

responded to these letters in such a timely way given the known overcrowding and understaffing they faced every day.



The dreaded side room

“Rosie jumped out dorm window and ran away.”

Then, after “*straying*” from the cottage she is put in *a side room*.

The staff note reads, “*Rose is small in stature, eats good, wets the bed every night. She has strayed from the cottage, and had to be put in the side room. Today she strayed to McDonagle Cottage, had to be brought back, she cried, wants to go back to Harper.*”

The mention of the word “side room” brought tears to my eyes. It was an abrupt reminder that Rose Ellen was not living in an old-fashioned school for girls. She was not at boarding school. She was institutionalized.

I only hope that her time there was short and infrequent. For others that was not the case. A "side room," where inmates in the old days were put for punishment, was unadorned except for a light bulb and bucket, which served as a toilet.

A standard punishment for those who did try to escape, before Sasser's time, was confinement to one of the "side rooms," makeshift cells in the dormitories. The side rooms were small, about 9 feet by 12, and had one strong door and one heavily screened window. Overhead a powerful light bulb glowed 24 hours a day. In addition to the bulb the only object in the room was a bucket. Men were confined to these rooms, naked, three at a time, for periods of days or weeks. They would scratch at the plaster walls with their fingernails until they worked through to the lath. Sometimes, finding a metal nail in the lath, they would write on the walls. Over many years the walls and even the ceilings became covered with inscriptions. In one side room, for example, there are more than 500 inscriptions, only two of which are obscene. In contrast, the word "love" appears dozens of times, as does the Christian cross, together with many phrases such as "Mom and Dad" and "I love my God very much" (Wallace, 1958).

1970-1971 Move to South Bend

In November of 1970 the institution was making arrangements to discharge Rose Ellen to a nursing home. Sadly, this coincided with a particularly harsh and cruel period of my Grandmama's life.

A full sixty pages of letters and documents were included in the archives from one year Nov. 1970-Nov. 1971 concerning the move from Fort Wayne to a nursing home. In January 1971, Miss Diane Knothe, Social Worker, wrote a letter to my mother letting her know a staffing situation had occurred. It reads:

“A recent unit staffing involving all the hospital’s disciplines felt that our hospital had offered to your sister all the training that it could.” Miss Knothe suggests that a nursing home could give her as good or even better care. She tells my Mom that “Rose Ellen comes to visit her at least once a day to tell her that she wants to be placed in a nursing home in South Bend. This could be easily arranged if you and your mother would so desire. Perhaps if Rose Ellen was nearby, it would be easier for you and the other family members to visit.”

My Grandmama was quite distraught at the thought of Rose Ellen being moved to a new facility. She expresses her deep fears in the following letter.

Dear Miss Knothe,

Jan 24, 1971

I would be glad to meet Kathleen Bajo. Mrs or Miss?

In the meeting you write about, the main thing has been overlooked_ home, the belonging place.

Rose Ellen was 19 when she went to Ft. Wayne. Shortly she was placed at Harper Lodge where she has remained almost continuously. She's 60. When 6 years old, we put her in Molly Woods hare school, Langhorne, Pa. where she learned, including third grade and perfect needlework. During the first depression we had not have enough money for there, so put her in Dr. Sylvester School, Des Moines, Iowa. Again, no money caused us to bring her home at 18 years. For a year we tried to help her “fit in”. Week after week we watched her get..... (missing page?)

And now you want to take her from the only home she has known.

In a new place her speech would not be understood. I cannot understand her. She would know no one. She would be lost and crushed again. Would other residents accept her? No way to know. I will soon be gone. I rarely see my daughter here. She could not assume more; her life is very complicated.

Rose Ellen in a new place, new everything, could it ever be home? How long would that take? I was glad when she was returned to Harper after the roof blew off Dunham. She went home. Many supervisors have been there. Each one told me Rose Ellen was satisfied there. Poor little Rose Ellen whom I dearly love, my first thought on waking and last before sleep.

Mrs. E.D. Skeen

Her worries and anxiety about Rose Ellen just continued. In March she writes,

“Dear Sir,

Yesterday afternoon I called Saint Joseph County Health and Welfare to give and asked for a report on a visit to Fountain View Home in Elkhart. I was asked to see another nursing home, Ridgedale Nursing Home, in South Bend...” she ends, “I will be relieved when this is settled. I am sure you will be also.”

She seems to be warming, slightly, to the idea of a move and is willing to take steps. But, then, just a few weeks later she sent the following letter. Dated March 20, 1971, it is in response to the Progress Review held the past November. She is notably upset at the errors in the report and this is where I learn that Rose Ellen had her teeth pulled and was not fitted with dentures and she was not given adequate vision care. Her alarm is visceral. I feel it too and ache for her and for Rose Ellen. She states that she is “*distressed beyond description*”. Reading this, so am I.

Dear Sir,

The report of Unit A Planning and Progress Review Proceedings sent to me, is over your signature. That holds you responsible for it. It is full of wrong statements and suggested ones. I will keep it.

Frist- the name is Rose Ellen, not “Rosellen”. In all business matters correct names are necessary.

Second- you write, “fair amount of interest has been maintained in Rose Ellen by her mother, Mrs. Joel Bullard.”. Mrs. Bullard is not her mother. Nor is she 85 years old. Didn’t Mrs. Barnes have anything to say on this point? I can not understand how, as person in charge at Harper, she wouldn’t know and tell about a letter to Rose Ellen coming from me each week always written on Sunday, canteen money always in Rose Ellen’s account and a package for her from me arriving often.

Dec. 4th, 1969 I was on my way to see her when an accident left me with both legs broken, and arm, neck and ribs. It was Feb. 1970 when St. Joseph hospital released me. I was in no condition to know much that occurred in the hospital. It was May 1970 before I could try to walk. I resumed weekly letters to Rose Ellen before I could walk.

Three-Further in your letter- "she (Mrs. Bullard) has indicated that in the event of Rosellen's death etc." Wrong. Dr. and Mrs. Skeen, about ten years ago made death arrangements with Welsheimer Funeral Home, South Bend, for themselves and Rose Ellen.

Four-Mrs. Bullard does not receive social security benefits.

Five- If transfer from Dunham is included, the reason should be given-wind blew roof off Dunham

Six- Rose Ellen was not educated in private schools ten years before going to Fort Wayne State School. It was fourteen years.

Seven- "Rosellen is no problem in the cottage as long as she has her knitting and thread." Doesn't; this suggest she causes trouble when she isn't doing something?"

Here the letter continues with Grandmama asking that a corrected version of the report be sent to Ridgedale Nursing Home in South Bend. She closes with some serious complaints.

"The reason Rose Ellen has no dentures. The school advised me her health would improve if her teeth were extracted. They never made dentures fit, so they could be worn."

Dr. Skeen and I wanted her eyes tested. The school advised no. She could get along without glasses.

A tremendous amount rests on your letter to Ridgedale Home.

I am distressed beyond description, first, because you want Rose Ellen removed, second, for her to adjust to a new place, third, I am past 86 and just must live to see this move accomplished.

*Yours truly,
Mrs. E. D. Skeen*

In mid-April three letters were written and sent confirming that Rose Ellen will be placed at the Carlyle Nursing Home in South Bend, on Thursday April 22, 1971. But my Grandmama was confused. All that remains is the first page of the following letter she wrote:

Dear Sir,

I do not understand the legal or financial aspects of the Rose Ellen Skeen transfer.

I have received nothing in writing to which I can refer.

I do not remember telephone calls explaining.

Please write a complete. Detailed clarification of this”

Mrs. Knothe then wrote to my mom to put into writing the discussion they had by telephone. April 21, 1971, The unit staffing recommendations were discussed again and it was shared that all the correct forms had been submitted and signed by Mrs. Skeen.

And then the real explanation on how, when and why, Rose Ellen was being moved was stated.

*“Perhaps it would help if I would explain a little of the background leading up to our recommendation to place Rose Ellen in a nursing home. About three years ago, the Commissioner of Mental Health of Indiana and the commissioners of states all over the nation suggested a change in philosophy for all mental institutions to adopt regarding the care they offered to their residents. **Institutions in Indiana now only accept those people who can benefit from some type of training offered by institutional disciplines. Our geriatric have received this training and can no longer benefit from the services offered, other than mainly custodial care.** Our hospital has been directed to place as many people as possible back in the community to make room for younger retardates who can definitely benefit from training. Under this philosophy and state directive, the major goal of our social service department is to find satisfactory placements for our geriatric residents.*

Mr. and Mrs. Bullard, I am sure you can understand the idea of making room in our hospital for younger retardates who can gain from training we offer and return to live as productive a life as is possible in the community. Right now our hospital has no choice but to find alternative placements for our geriatric residents. Since you are unable to keep Rose Ellen in your home, we are placing her in a nursing home.

We are not on a campaign to indiscriminately place our residents but want to better their station in life.” - Miss Diane Knothe

The end of the letter states how successful they have been in placing residents. “143 were placed last year and only 6 had returned.”

The move was made and still the flurry of desperate communication continued. The latest is a Western Union Telegram.

1117A EST APR 23 71 DEA679

DR ACKERMAN SUPERINTENDENT
FT WAYNE STATE HOSPITAL AND TRAINING CENTER FT WAYNE IND

ROSE ELLEN WAS BROUGHT HERE AGAINST MY WISHES CARLYLE
NURSING HOME HAD TO CALL THE DOCTOR FOR HER TONIGHT BECAUSE
OF HER BEING TERRIBLY DISTURBED IT WOULD BE A CRIME TO MAKE HER
GO THROUGH THIS TIME AFTER TIME TO ADJUST. YEARS AGO BEFORE FT
WAYNE DR SKEEN AND I KEPT HER HOME FOR A YEAR SHE WAS
WRETCHED PLEASE RETURN HER TO FT WAYNE IMMEDIATELY.

MRS E V SKEEN

There is one last handwritten letter, again addressed to Dr. Ackerman. Grandmama tries hard to convince him that Rose Ellen needs to be moved back to Fort Wayne. She implores him to let her be settled “*in her real home*” before her time is done.

The final words cut right to the heart.

“Just now at 10:00am I was called from the nursing home where Rose Ellen is.

I am going to make a statement which I could never prove because it would be denied. Much too often when we had her home it would happen. She is not wanted where she is. I went to several homes and in none did I see anyone who did not appear and look normal. Have you seen Rose Ellen? I wouldn't think so nor expect it. She is pathetic and is not normal-looking. She is not wanted and as my last letter said, she is terribly worried and lost. A doctor was called.

Please take her back to be among those like herself and fit in and be “home”.

*Sincerely,
Mrs. Skeen*

She didn't get moved back to Fort Wayne and as far as I know, she did adjust. The Social Worker from the nursing home sent a letter to the director at Harper Lodge in Fort Wayne, asking them to continue to correspond with Rose Ellen. She writes, *"Rose Ellen seems to be adjusting to her new life here very well. However, she does miss some of her friends from Harper Lodge and has written a letter to them. If possible, would you please encourage their corresponding with her as it will surely cheer her up and help to alleviate some of her fears about her new home."*

Once again, on April 26th, Miss Knothe wrote to my Grandmama. *"She appreciates her concern for Rose Ellen and was moved by her note the following evening (April 22nd) she called Carlyle. The head nurse and administrator assured Miss Knothe that Rose Ellen was "getting along beautifully. They did not contact her doctor for tranquilizing medication or for any other medical care. She was eating well and seemed "quite satisfied".*

The final document included in this trove of information, is a letter dated April 29, 1971. I will include it here in its entirety. It is from Mrs. Janice Baker, Social Worker and Dr. Ora A. Ackerman, Ed. D. Superintendent.

Dear Mrs. Skeen,

Your correspondence to Dr. Ackerman was referred to me for a thorough investigation of your complaints. After consulting several people who know Rose Ellen best and having a lengthy conversation with Mrs. Visniewske at the nursing home I am convinced that Rose Ellen has accepted her new home happily. Mrs. Visnieski described to me the joy Rose Ellen exhibited after painting a bowl and pitcher in her ceramics class. The nurses here have a cat here to which Rose Ellen has taken a liking. They allow her to put a leash on the cat and walk it around the halls. The attachment has proven to be beneficial for Rose and a great source of satisfaction and amusement.

You stated that because Rose Ellen is "different" she was not wanted at Carlyle. The other patients and the staff members, I was told, have described Rose as being adorable, sweet and a joy to have around. Mrs. Visnieski said Rose writes little notes to her and other staff members expressing her thanks for various services offered to her. They remarked that Rose certainly must have had some good training in manners and in being a lady, as I'm sure she did.

Mr. and Mrs. Bullard seemed anxious to hear what the law states on the matter of mental health patients. I cannot quote the law to you, but I can tell you that the staff at Fort Wayne State Hospital and Training Center is in the best position to decide what course of action is to be taken on present and future plans for their patients. The staff to which I refer is composed of a medical director, a psychologist, a speech and hearing therapist, a

nurse, an activity therapist, a social worker and the aides that care for the patients physical needs. This group of people consider all aspects of each patient's existence here, and after discussing at length the various proposals, arrive at what they believe to be the best possible decision for each individual.

It is the sole responsibility of the hospital staff to determine what needs to be admitted and who is ready for release.

We appreciate the fact that change is, at times, difficult for people to accept, especially when it involves loved ones. Although, we have found that our judgment was in error on a few occasions, for the most part, the patients we have placed have made excellent adjustment and are often happier in their new home than they were where.

Hopefully, over the next few weeks you, too, will recognize that Rose Ellen is enjoying her new life at Carlyle and that she is truly better off there than she was in Fort Wayne. We are not without sympathy for you as you attempt to readjust your thinking about Rose Ellen. Please do try to accept our judgment in this matter. We will do whatever we can to help make these next few weeks easier for you and your family.

From time to time one of our special workers travels to South Bend to make calls. If at any time you would like to see one of our workers please let us know. Someone will be happy to stop by and talk with you.

Yours Truly

Mrs. Janice Baker

Social Worker, Ora A. Ackerman, Ed. Superintendent

P.S. The reason the doctor was called was to obtain Rose's admitting orders which is routine for all new admissions. The nursing home must do this to comply with Medicaid and Medicare standards. Rose was not disturbed.

◇ ◇ ◇

The South Bend Years-Rose Ellen's death

Rose Ellen lived at Carlyle Nursing Home for the next 13 years. I was 10 years old when she came to South Bend. I believe my sister Rosie did her sleuthing about two years after the move. In the next few weeks and months, our interest in the mystery of Rose Ellen was quickly eclipsed by thoughts and concerns of pre-teen life. With my few attempts to get information rebuffed by my Mom, I stopped asking and stopped thinking about her until a few months ago, when Rose

Ellen came back to me, with such an intensity. When she died in 1984, I was in graduate school at Indiana University, Bloomington, studying Speech and Hearing Sciences. Rosie was living at home, after a stint in the Peace Corps. Out of the blue one day, my parents told her that Rose Ellen had died. She went with them to her funeral. She said it was sad, no one else was there.

There is no gravesite to visit, no baby photo to admire, no one left alive that knew Rose Ellen. Now, I think of her often. I can even picture us working alongside each other, chatting and writing notes back and forth.

Family ties

I have been very lucky in my career to do what I loved. I found my work as a speech-language pathologist endlessly interesting and always challenging. I loved building relationships with my little clients and their families. I loved the developmental process unfolding and understanding how each child is learning. Watching a child learn to communicate is like watching a birth, every time. It is new, fresh and expansive. I used to joke that I was bilingual because I spoke “toddler.” It was enchanting work. But, most of all, I loved playing. It was easy to know when your “therapy” was making a difference because it felt like play. You could feel it in your relationship with the child and you could see it in how the kids engaged or played or felt their emotions, how they reacted to situations, people and toys and how they regarded their world. But the one thing I did not like about my work was the physical environment. The hospitals, gyms and clinics I treated kids in were filled with toys and climbers, art supplies and stickers. But they were all indoors and often in very small “treatment” rooms. I longed to play outside with my kids, to use nature as the teacher, to use nature to challenge, and stimulate the senses, feel the warm sun and cool breeze.

All of my best childhood memories happened outdoors and all of my favorite times with my own children were at the beach, at the park, in the woods or walking through the neighborhood. My mother believed in the healing power of fresh air and sent us out of the house not to return until the streetlights came on. Working day after day over years in sterile, enclosed spaces began to get me down. I couldn’t help but think that my little kids could be feeling the same way. I was only slightly ahead of the times, as Nature-Based Preschool is now a national trend. When I started the Seattle PlayGarden, there was one other nature-based preschool program in the Seattle area and now there are many. How many of those programs accept kids with disabilities? Sadly, very few. But what a rich environment for kids who need space or sunshine and fresh air or big body play and lots to talk about? Have you ever seen a child work with a purpose? They will work hard to fill a wheelbarrow with rocks, then move those rocks and begin again, with no prompting to “put one more in” no need for a kind adult to offer her stickers for her “work.”

Outdoor play is intrinsically rewarding, ever-changing, and requires constant adaptations and lots of problem-solving. Then there is the sheer sensory nature of the outdoors: the hard and soft, rough, wet, warm, constant movement and hum of the birds and bees, the ups and the downs, under and on top of that is all experienced in the body and the brain. I believe that all kids deserve an outdoor life to go along with the warm and cozy indoors, but it may be especially valuable to those who have limited freedom to access it. As my mother knew, nature-based education aka: time spent outdoors, was good for you. So did a group of educators that formed the American Nature-Study Society. One member of the society was a past principal of the Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth, and the author of the article *What Birds Have Done for Deficient Children* published in The Nature-Study Review Vol.8, No.8, November 1912. The article is included at the end of this story.

Cyrus D. Mead's article should be read in its entirety as it is such a warm, wise and wonderful depiction of how residents of the institution were encouraged to explore the grounds and to spend time "studying" the birds who lived there. Stories were written by students about the original bird and nature experiences they were offered. The stories were collected and included in the Indiana Arbor and Bird Day Annual "Reader" to be used by other institutions. It is lovely to know that the children's well-being was enhanced by spending time outdoors. It adds a new dimension to my thoughts on how Rose Ellen may have lived. In the early years of the Institution, there were many such activities, actual "work" for the residents including farming, milking cows and tending chickens in addition to indoor tasks, lessons and chores. From descriptions of Rose Ellen (crippled, "does not do a lick of work", etc.), it does not seem likely that she was included in any of these activities, but just maybe she was able to spend time outdoors, in the fresh air, surrounded by nature and bird song. My mother's binoculars sit on a small table in my living room along with her annotated bird book. I became a novice birder during the pandemic. There is a golden thread from little Rose Ellen that runs through her mother, Ethel, through my mother, Lou Ann to me.

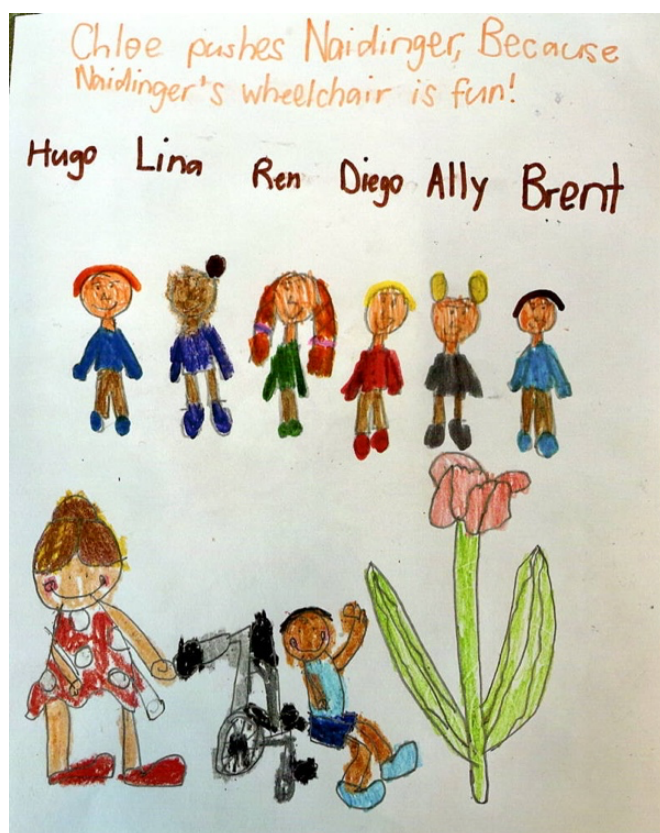
"About three weeks ago I saw a hole in a little old willow tree on our playground. I climbed up on a box to look in the hole and a mamma flicker flew right in my face. There were a lot of chips on the ground by the tree. I lay down on the ground. She came back to the hole and went in the hole and stuck her head out two or three times.

Then she brought up more chips and dropped them on the ground. Now she has a nest there. Now she is not afraid of me. I can go up to her and she will not fly away. She is tame. Sometimes she scolds me but I would not touch her nest, for I love the birds."-
Thos. Lee D.

The above story is one of many written by school children of the Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth at Fort Wayne, Indiana. (Indiana Department of Public Instruction, 1907-08).

Twenty pages of original bird and nature experiences of these children were given in the “*Indiana Arbor and Bird Day Annual*” of the State Superintendent Cotton in 1907-8. This material furnished the basis of an institution “Reader” now in the hands of the state printer for publication. The State Superintendent in his preface of the Annual to the teachers and pupils of Indiana said: “*Late in the autumn I visited the school at Fort Wayne and found teachers and children so much interested in birds and nature in general that I decided to place as much space at their disposal as they wished. The result is more than gratifying.*”

“It is a great privilege for one to be so fortunate as to come in contact with the sometimes keenly perceptive powers of a child to whom book learning comes with pain. What the bird and the bee and flower and nature rambles have done for the ordinary boy, they have done for his slower brother. They have meant just as much to the deficient child if he has been allowed to see them.” (Mead, November 1912)



Art by Nicole Ijeoma, PlayGarden Program Assistant

Nicole is a Program Assistant at the PlayGarden. She is a young woman with autism. She bakes for the preschoolers, waters the garden and fills the bird feeders. She reads to the kids, has a beautiful singing voice and she is an artist. One of her favorite things to do is to make lists. The lists may be 20 names that start with the letter your name starts with or capture a scene from the PlayGarden.

Carter's dream job was to be a groundskeeper at the PlayGarden. He attended summer camp from the age of eight and spent most of his time watering the garden and playing basketball. He finished school and is now tending the PlayGarden's one-acre grounds and garden. He sings and recites favorite lines from shows and movies, while he power washes, cleans the rabbit hutch and chicken coop. He weeds, waters and sweeps all the while, moving quickly

and decisively through his tasks. One day, as he readied to mop the Fieldhouse floor, he came across seed pods from a dried artichoke flower, floating around the room. They looked like

delicate stars. I told Carter I wanted to gather them up to save them so he stood by with his mop and said,

“A single seed. What is the meaning of art? What is the purpose of beauty?”

Asher is a program aid at the PlayGarden. He has a superpower which is connecting people together. He meets everyone with equal gladness and curiosity. He wants to know how your flight was, is your son feeling better, where you will go that weekend and how will you get there. He invites all of us to his sporting events, out to dinner and to visit his other friends at the programs he attends. He makes sure everyone knows that our fundraising luncheon is coming up and that they should register. Asher takes public transportation around the greater Seattle area and I believe he knows more bus drivers by name than anyone.

Not all PlayGardeners are nature nuts, but nearly all are, in some way. They love the puddles, making bouquets, harvesting basil for pesto, holding a chicken or a rabbit, mud, lavender, cherries, pebbles, tall grasses, worms, butterflies and bees. They make statements about the wind and the clouds and have deep knowledge of many kinds of rain.

As Cyrus D. Mead concludes. *“or the heart after all ‘sees and the heart ‘feels’ and the heart ‘knows’ and a heart cannot be feeble-minded.”*

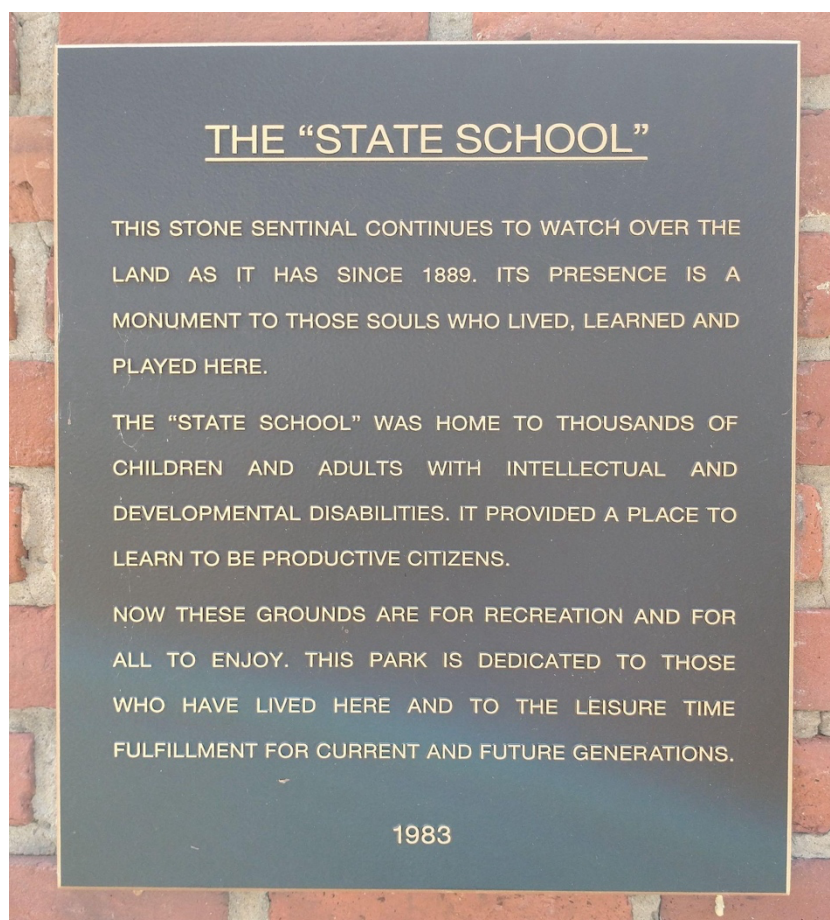
Nicole, Carter and Asher have grown up in a different day and time than Rose Ellen. They were raised by their parents in their own home, and in Nicole’s case, alongside several siblings. They attended school and had “early intervention” and many many hours and years of therapy of many kinds, aimed at easing their way through childhood and into adulthood. They have friends and work life and community. Clearly, their lives are on a magnitude better than Rose Ellen’s. Our lives are that much better than my Grandmama’s and Papa Don’s, who had to relinquish their six-year-old daughter to an institution to raise, to merely “visit” her and “parent” her by weekly letters. The sister bond between my aunt and my mother suffered nearly irreparable harm and myself and my eight siblings, well we lost out too.

I shudder when I think of what Asher, Nicole, and Carter’s lives would have been like had they been born at an earlier time, a time when they would have been deemed “a danger to society” as all “feeble-minded” people were considered. Asher has a profound impact on me and I imagine most who meet him. He shows, by example, how to converse with others and how that alone, can bring a smile to someone’s face. He reminds you to live in the moment, stop and say hello and ask someone a question about themselves, to regard each other. We could all take note. I admire Nicole’s enjoyment of life, her drive to create art and her willingness to do hard things. Carter charms me every day as he moves quickly and decisively through the PlayGarden but sometimes stops to laugh at a joke.

But that is not to say that “all is well” for kids and families these days. If born today, Rose Ellen would still have been excluded from most summer camps, organized sports, private schools and her experiences out in the community would still be met with obstacles both physical and societal. Schools are still grappling with providing quality education to kids in special education and there are very few options of employment in adulthood and adult centers are sparse. Families continue to pay a huge burden to care for their disabled children at home, well into their senior years.

My dear friend and founding board chair of the PlayGarden, Abe, improved the lives of millions of people, through his work doing “political medicine”. He also loved the PlayGarden as much as I do. He visited every few days just to be there, to experience the vibe and to see, up close, firsthand the impact of his and our work. He had seen and done a lot in his 91 years but the PlayGarden always made him smile. So, it seems strange to me, that while we had worked closely together for years building the PlayGarden, we didn’t talk about Rose Ellen. That is up until just a few months before he died when I decided to try and learn more about her. He was equally fascinated by the archival records I was able to find. Having been born in the 1930’s and practiced medicine for several decades, Abe lived a similar life span as my Mom. He lived through the disability rights movement of the 1970s too. Our time together ran out before I could ask him the hundreds of questions, I have about those decades but I suppose, really the people I want to talk to are my Mom, my Grandmama, my Papa Don, and most of all Rose Ellen herself.

Like most state-run institutions, the Fort Wayne School was demolished. In its place is a park. There is a plaque commemorating the institution and its residents. It reads:



A plaque commemorating the Fort Wayne State School and its residents.

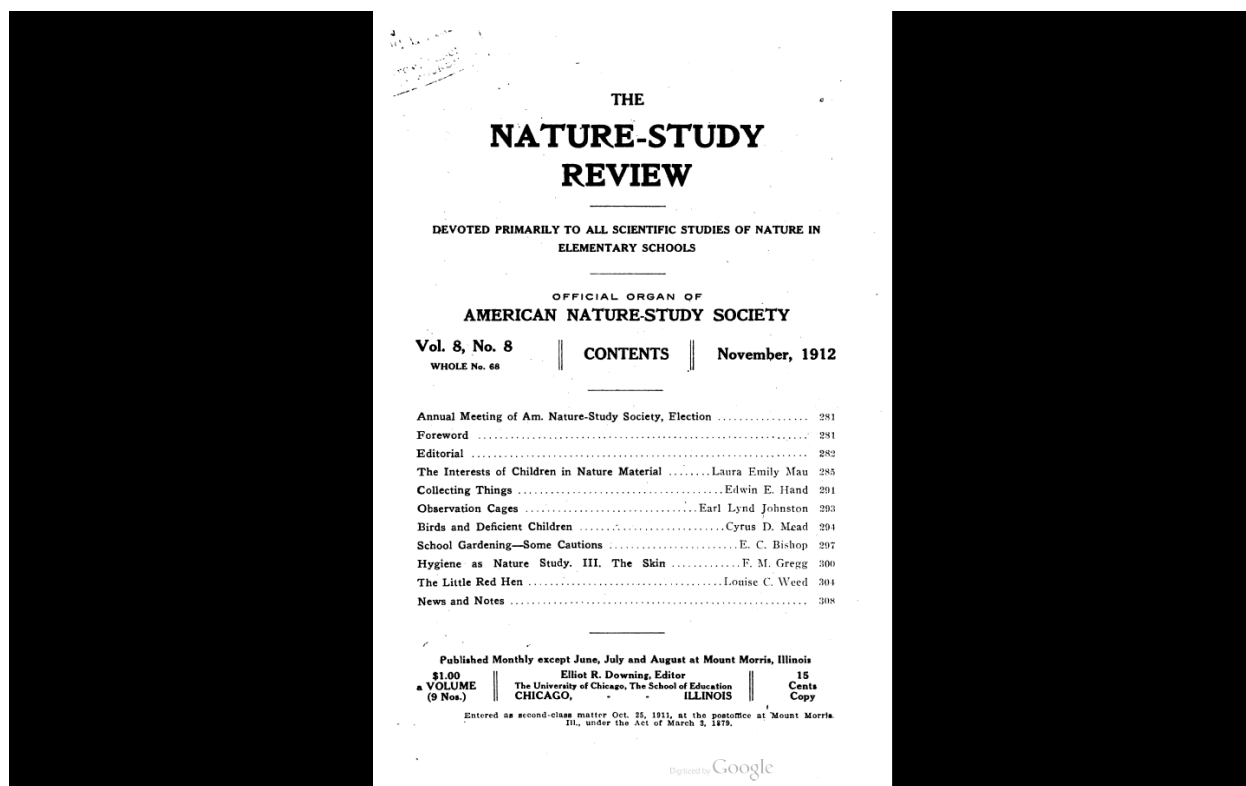
The Dream

One winter day a long, long time ago, a little baby with a snub of a nose, was born. Her Mama and Papa loved her and marveled at her pink cheeks and soft skin. Her brother beamed with pride and then got back to his Legos. The family grew, each was accommodated according to their need and allowed to follow their own paths, play the way that felt right and learn through exploring wherever their eyes and ears, and hands led them. Things got hard, even scary sometimes. Problems came up and solutions were found, or not, and everyone went about living and loving. The little girl grew into a young woman who liked to sew and do embroidery. She made beautiful things that her niece has on her bookshelf now.

The End.

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What Birds Have Done for Deficient Children

Cyrus D. Mead

Past Principle, Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth

“The Flicker’s Nest.”

“About three weeks ago I saw a hole in a little old willow tree on our playgrounds. I climbed up on a box to look in the hole and a mamma flicker flew right out in my face. There were a lot of chips on the ground by the tree. I lay down on the ground. She came back to the hole and went in the hole and stuck her head out two or three times.

“Then she brought up more chips and dropped them on the ground. Now she has a nest there. Now she is not afraid of me. I can go up to her and she will not fly away. She is tame. Sometimes she scolds me but I would not touch her nest, for I love the birds.”-Thos. Lee D.

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the Annual to the teachers and pupils of Indiana said: "Late in the autumn I visited the school at Fort Wayne and found teachers and children so much interested in birds and nature in general that I decided to place as much space at their disposal as they wished. The result is more than gratifying."

It is a great privilege for one to be so fortunate as to come in contact with the sometimes keenly perceptive powers of a child to whom book learning comes with pain. What the bird and the bee and flower and nature rambles have done for the ordinary boy, they have done for his slower brother. They have meant just as much to the deficient child if he has been allowed to see them.

The education of the past has been too much the training of the intellect, for with it crime and vice, grief and bitterness have gone. Today, more than ever before, this intellect training is being balanced by a moral and an aesthetic teaching. Hand work serves its means rather than finds its end, but nature work and zoölogy of past days, taking the object to study its petals, its feathers, or its bones, but the nature work in the school of "feeling" and the school of "seeing". This is the spirit of the nature work in the Indiana School and it has carried its benediction into the heart of the child as well as into the heart of the teacher.

Not so much is made of nature "study" as nature "feeling" and nature "seeing". The father of Greek education said, "knowledge" was the thing. "Know thyself". His pupil and disciple, the best-educated man the world has ever seen, inspired the present-day teaching by answering that mere "knowledge" of good was nothing, but a "functioning" of that knowledge, a "living" and a "feeling" and a "doing" of that good. These children never heard of a dentate, stipulate, palmate leaf or leaf arrangement but they have "seen", in the sticky horse chestnut bud, order, symmetry, and protection. They do not know and do not care whether the ichneumon fly is Hymenoptera or just a plain insect with wings, but in the collection of two hundred tussock moth caterpillar cocoons in one walk around their administration building last fall they "felt" God' protecting care for us through his placing this parasitic fly in the larvae of our shade tree' ravagers. They do not know the difference between a sepal and a petal, but a boy of one of the upper grade schools took clandestinely a trillium from the waste basket under the teacher's desk and pressed it in his book because, as he told her, "he could always study better with a flower on his desk!" A division of bright little chaps tussled and sweated hour after hour to dig worms to toss to a limb where a mother robin took them to feed to her babies. If you should tell them a "Troglodytes aedon" was in the Rose of Sharon bush outside their Kindergarten window they would stand speechless and dumb, but if their wren should "say his beads" as he never forgets to do, from his birdhouse which occupies its place close to each school, the windows would be stamped without ceremony.

A "shrike" that built its nest on the north side of the grounds, preened itself, within four feet of its nest, while kindergarten children fed "bugs" to the handsomest babies of the world.

The blue jay was made to bury his acorns and "sass" his neighbors from the limbs of trees. One was found once on the grounds hanging head down entangled in his own nest building. One Boy's room took a morning off that that bird might be disentangled, taken to the fairground woods and liberated. Boys will fight, actually fight, for the protection of nests and birds when a few years ago wings of the young of sparrows were pulled off to see them suffer. The general spirit of observation, sympathy, kindness, charity, "seeing", "feeling" "love" has been studied abroad in the Indiana School and the bird is the progenitor.

They believe with Van Dyke, that "There is more of God in the peaceable beauty of the wood-violet than in all the angry disputations of the sects." The, "We are nearer heaven when we listen to the birds than when we quarrel with our fellow-men." They have felt with Ruskin that, "The greatest thing a human soul ever did was to 'see' something; that to 'see' clearly was poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one." While they have a weak will to appeal to, it does not follow that the emotions are equally infirm; for the heart after all "sees" and the heart "feels" and the heart "knows", and a heart cannot be feeble-minded."



This Golden Celebration rose flowers from spring through frost with unusually deep and rich golden-yellow blooms and has an exceptional fragrance of tea and strawberries.

It symbolizes joy and eternity.

Rose Ellen now has a "place" in our hearts and in our PlayGarden.