

Caldwell Matthews

On April 21, 1921, an article appeared in the Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger titled “Boy ‘Fireburg’ Sent to Asylum; Sobs in Mother’s Arms.”¹ The “fireburg” in question was Caldwell Matthews, a 17 year old boy who had confessed to multiple counts of arson before being found unfit to stand trial and “committed indefinitely to the Friend’s Asylum.” When Caldwell arrived at Friend’s Hospital on April 25, he was one of the youngest patients in the institution, if not the youngest.²

Caldwell’s age definitely affected his activities while he was institutionalized. During the two years that Caldwell spent at the hospital, he maintained the active lifestyle of a teenager. He went on daily walks and participated in indoor games nearly every day. Caldwell also took part in industrial and gymnastics classes, went out horseback riding and attended entertainment. He attended Sabbath services every week with few exceptions, more reliably than many adult patients did. Additionally, Caldwell received a steady stream of frequent visitors: during June 1921, Caldwell had a visitor every day for a week.

As Caldwell’s time at the hospital stretched on, he was given increased privileges and freedom. As early as November 1921, Caldwell began eating at the officer’s table weekly, an event which usually marked the end of a patient’s stay at the hospital as a reward for good behavior. Instead, Caldwell remained at the hospital for more than a year after his first meal at the officer’s table. In December 1922, Caldwell began going on walks without an attendant, a privilege not given to many other patients. Caldwell was even given permission to leave the Hospital for special

¹ “Boy ‘Firebug’ Sent to Asylum; Cries in Mother’s Arms,” *Evening Public Ledger*, April 25, 1921, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045211/1921-04-25/ed-1/seq-1/>.

² All following information, unless otherwise noted, is from Daily Record Book, 1921-1923, MC-1261, Item 75, Friends Hospital Records, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

occasions: on December 25, 1922, Caldwell visited home for Christmas and on March 4, 1923 he attended religious services in the city.

On April 5, 1923, Caldwell was discharged from Friends Hospital after two years of treatment. After his discharge, Caldwell married Lavina Nonamaker, who he had two daughters with.³ He worked as a stockbroker. On February 13, 1964, Lavina died of a heart attack, and just weeks later Caldwell committed suicide on March 26, 1964.⁴ He was 60 years old.

Though Caldwell had considerably more freedom at the hospital than other patients, his continued institutionalization in spite of the recovery he seemed to experience reveals the complicated relationship between mental hospitals and the legal system throughout American history.

April 1921

- Admitted 3:20 PM on April 25, 1921 to Ward 2
- Taking medicine, walking w attendant, reading, indoor games
- Visitor on April 30

May 1921

- Daily: medicine, indoor games, walking w attendant, reading
- Occupied in ward
- Attends sabbath services
- Outdoor games or indoor games depending on day (probably weather?)
- Entertainment
- Frequent visitors

June 1921

- Daily: medicine, reading, indoor games, walking w attendant
- VERY frequent visitors, sometimes every day for a week
- Some outdoor games

³ "1930 United States Federal Census," digital image s.v. "Caldwell F. Matthews" (born 1905, residing in Pennsylvania), *Ancestry.com*.

⁴ "Pennsylvania, U.S., Death Certificates, 1906-1969," digital image s.v. "Caldwell F. Matthews" (died 26 March 1964), *Ancestry.com*.

- Sabbath services

July 1921

- Daily: medicine, reading, indoor games, walking w attendant
- Weekly sabbath services
- Weekly visitors
- industrial classes, when offered

August 1921

- Daily: medicine, reading, indoor games, walking w attendant
- Vistors
- No sabbath

September 1921

- Daily: medicine, occupied in ward, reading
- Less walking, less indoor games
- Destructive september 8-14
- Attends sabbath
- LOTS of visitors

October 1921

- Daily: reading, medicine, walking w attendant
- Often occupied in ward
- Frequent visitors
- Industrial class
- Sabbath
- Outdoor games
- Occasionally destructive, especially towards end of month

November 1921

- LOTS of activity this month
- Daily: reading, medicine, walking w attendant, indoor games
- Ate at officer's table three times
- New activities: horseback riding, time outside, gymnastics class, entertainment
- Occasionally destructive, sick in bed three days
- Lots of visitors

December 1921

- Daily: medicine and reading
- Ate at officer's table 4 times
- Frequent gymnastics class, indoor games, visitors
- Attends sabbath services 4 times
- Entertainment

January 1922

- Daily: walking w attendant, indoor games, reading
- Medicine @ beginning of month
- Frequent visitors
- Industrial class, horseback riding, gymnastics

February 1922

- Very similar to previous month
- Eats @ officer's table three times

March 1922

- Similar mix of activities to previous two months
- Eats @ officer's table 4 times
- Less visitors than prev months, only one?

April 1922

- Lots of activities, mix similar to previous months
- Eats @ officers table twice

May 1922

- General theme of being very active
- Officer's table

June 1922

- Same as previous months

No men's ward records july-september 1922

October 1922

- Similar to previous months
- Frequent visitors

November 1922

- Less activities, some days only walking w attendant, indoor games, occupied in ward, reading
- Restrained november 15? For undisclosed number of hours

December 1922

- BEGINS WALKING OUTSIDE UNATTENDED!!!! December 14, daily
- Indoor games are no longer daily
- Daily: reading, occupied in ward
- Eats at officer's table once
- Visits home on dec 25

January 1923

- Continues walking with and without attendant
- Occupied in ward, reading, indoor games
- Frequent visitors
- Industrial class, gymnastics

February 1923

- Walking without attendant, reading, occupied in ward, indoor games
- Eats at officer's table
- Frequent visitors
- Industrial class, gymnastics
- Sabbath services

March 1923

- Very similar to past months
- March 4: attends religious services in city

April 1923

- Discharged from hospital April 5 1923!!!!

Died 3/26/1964 of suicide. Barbiturate overdose.

https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/5164/images/46628_520306900_0014-02378?usePUB=true&usePUBJs=true&pId=14681564