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The Revolutionary St. Louis Insane Asylum

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Introduction: Even with its grand structure on Arsenal Street towering over the city below, few residents of St. Louis and surrounding areas are aware of the grand history or even existence of the St. Louis Insane Asylum. The building is over 150 years old and was a place of hope, failure, strife, and empathy. The asylum had a large impact on St. Louis and provided revolutionary outlooks, unique perspectives, and curious therapies.

Edward C Runge:

- Progressive views, condemned people who thought negatively of the mentally ill
- Learned the name and history of every patient
- Allowed well behaving patients to come to his home, walk parks, shop
 - Decreased use of restraint
- Quick to call out corrupt behavior
- “A violent word applied to a patient was followed by immediate dismissal of the offender, for I hold that an uncontrollable tongue presupposed the existence of uncontrollable fists”
- “In spending our days among them, we must be like the very sunshine to them, cheering and inspiring them with that essential element of human happiness — hope”



Early Photo of The Asylum in 1872: small beginnings of a large history



Cramped Quarters of the Asylum: too many patients, too little breathing room

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly:

- St. Louis had one of the better asylums, but it was not perfect
- Overpopulation and underfunding
- Government corruption
- Custodial vs curative
- Overall Runge did the best with what he had
- A nursing program affiliated with the asylum, idea was from Runge
 - Even suggested to have a female physician
- Lots of expansion over time

Odd Therapies:

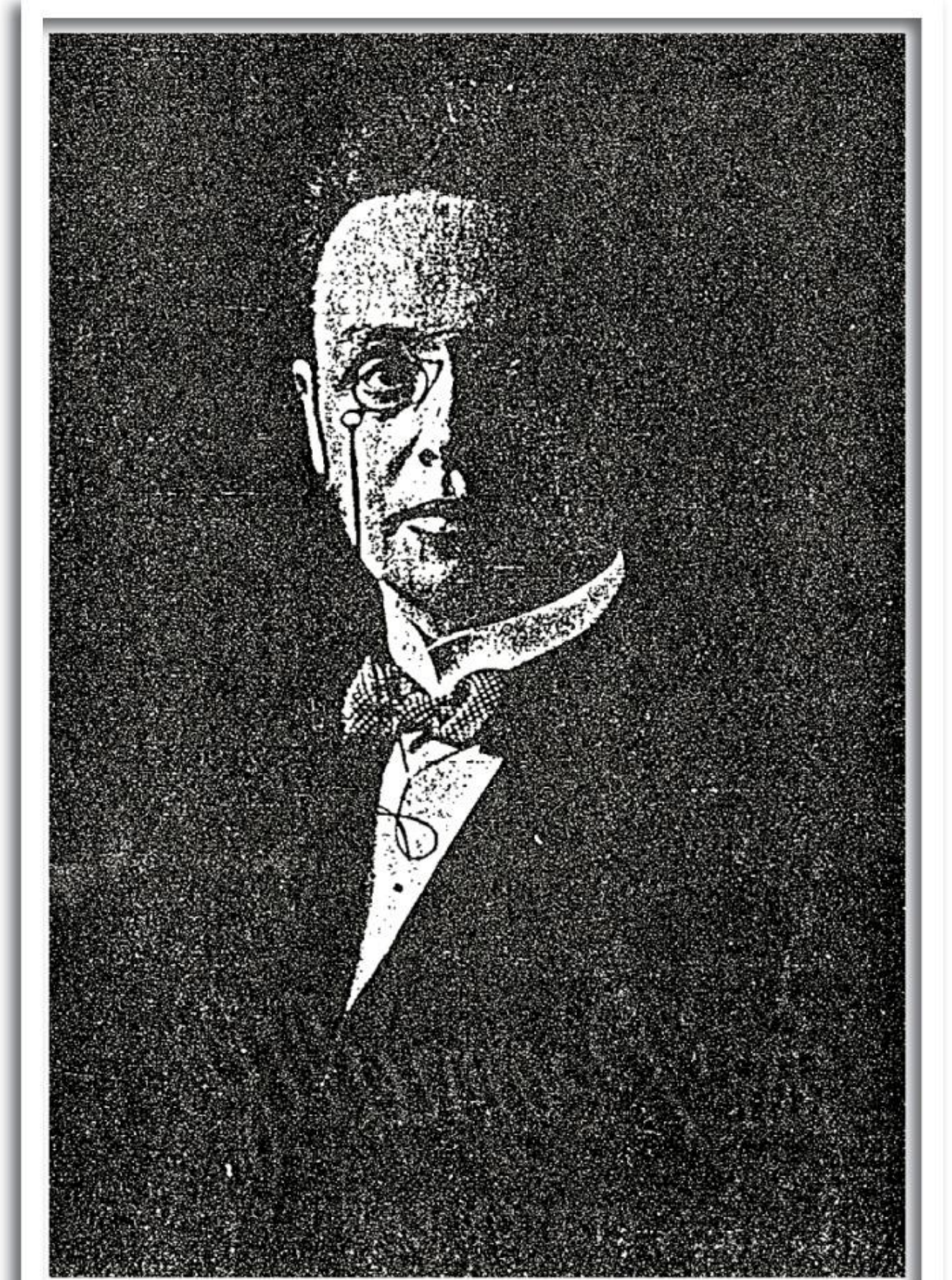
- Occupational Therapy/Vocational Rehabilitation: keeping patients engaged and creative, helped when short-staffed
- Hydrotherapy: inexpensive yet effective, swaddling patients in wet sheets, areas were quiet and promoted relaxation
- Theelin therapy: large doses of estrogen were given to female patients for hysteria and psychosis
- Malaria Treatment: purposefully infected people with malaria to flush out toxins in people with syphilis
- Metrazol: cause seizures that people thought would restart the brain

Conclusion:

- In comparison to the other asylums of the time, the St. Louis Insane Asylum was ahead of its time in respect to the attitudes and behavior towards the mentally ill
- Many factors were at play that affected the success of the asylum
- Edward Runge was a man ahead of his time and would have had an even greater impact if it weren't for corrupt government officials
- Many of the treatments that were practiced in the asylum are not longer deemed safe or appropriate
- As for future research and awareness into the topic, I suggest three things:
 - Further investigation of the long-term effects of the therapies used at the asylum
 - Outreach programs or some other way of spreading the history of the building
 - To let this be a motivator into funding for scientific research and mental health programs

Sources:

Hensley MA. *The consequence of the trend of decline: the life of the St. Louis Insane Asylum*, ca. 1900. *Mo Med*. 2010 Nov-Dec;107(6):410-5. PMID: 21319691; PMCID:PMC6188234. Hunyar, Amanda. *St. Louis State Hospital: a 150 Year Journey Toward Hope*. Reedy Press, 2019, pp 1-38. Runge, Edward C. *The Annual Report of the Superintendent of the St. Louis Insane Asylum*. 1897



Picture of Edward C Runge