

The Fossil at Cherokee

Given the scale of what once was, it wouldn't be difficult to call the place "Siouxland's biggest fossil," a sprawling, endless petrification. Walk out the door of the lobby, keep the walls on your left and circle the entire place--it'll take you the better part of a half hour because the place is gargantuan.

A century ago, it had to have been perfectly colossal because 116 years later it still is. If you've never seen it, drive up sometime. It'll stop you in your tracks.

Once upon a time masons pieced together a smokestack from the inside, 25-feet in circumference, stone on stone to 192 feet high. That smokestack is long gone, but to get a sense of its size, you'd have to be way on top and still use a wide-angle lens.

Sheldon wanted it. So did LeMars, Ft. Dodge, and Storm Lake. They all knew it was going to be huge. When the legislature decided Iowa's new hospital for the insane would be planted in the far northwest, frontier towns knew bringing the castle home would put their community on the map.

Politics drove things along a century ago just as they do today. In Des Moines the battle raged. Storm Lake's candidacy got bumped when some pseudo-scientist claimed that water was far too inviting "as a means whereby lunatics commit suicide." [Their language not mine.]

LeMars became the favorite. But some now largely-unremembered bill about liquor angered LeMars-leaning democrats, whose favor then swung Sheldon's way. Who knows whose ear got bent and how; but when the smoke and fire cleared, Cherokee won the Hospital for the Insane.

The dimensions of that decision are themselves stunning. It was built big enough to hold a thousand patients on 840 rural acres a mile west of town. It's hung with 1810 windows and a thousand doors for 550 rooms, 23 dining rooms, 30 baths, and 18 mop closets. Twelve acres of floor surface, 93,000 yards of plastering, 2300 lights. It's foundation of Sioux Falls granite is 1 1/4 miles around.

Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride created the design back in the 1890s. He preached an enlightened gospel, to wit, that the treatment of mental illness required environs that looked like home, not prison. Kirkbride's "Moral Treatment" theories dictated marble fireplaces, spacious hallways, elaborate lighting. Still today, the Cherokee Mental Institute looks like a dozen Downton Abbeys.

The grounds are well kept, trees so tall and strong that one can only imagine what this behemoth looked like standing atop a bare plain with nary a tree in sight. It was a city on a hill.

Still, there's something from the pages of Edgar Allen Poe here. You expect bolts of lightning, men with vacant eyes and unreasonable smiles, inmates in straight-jackets or chains, hideous laughter racheting into screams. The place looks like horror, and for many, I'm sure, it was a place you were blessed to leave.

But a woman who grew up just down the hill told me she got used to seeing men and women in white walking through their garden. She never minded it really, never felt particularly afraid because the patients who'd wander weren't vicious or violent. Most were on their way back. The laboratories looked nothing like Dr. Frankenstein's. It's a foreboding place to be sure, but *monstrous* only in dimensions.

But it is a fossil because it holds remains of a time in the history of our treatment of the mentally ill that has almost nothing to do with today. Once, almost 2000 people lived there. Today, you'll see, not so. Part of the place is ghost town.

For decades, the Cherokee Hospital for the Insane was a palace people used as a dumping ground. They brought their grotesques here and left them because once upon a time we hid away people we considered embarrassments. The cemetery holds the graves of 800+ patients who died here, but none has a name because even in death, they were unwanted.

Asylum, people called it--and worse, "nut house," "funny farm," words that are themselves fossils. *Insane* is gone thankfully, thought obscene.

If the moral character of a society can be assessed by its treatment of its most vulnerable, then the story of the Cherokee Institute, this sprawling city on the hill, like a fossil, is full of and even haunted by stories of what we've been and who we are.

You can arrange a tour, and there's even a basement museum you won't forget. And the place is not a fossil, after all. Great work still goes on at and in the city on a hill.

Drive up sometime and see for yourself. It will take your breath away.