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Flo Lasley Memoir

L335. Lasley, Flo (1909-1993)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 40 mins., 21 pp.

MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROJECT

Lasley, a recreational therapist, discusses her career and duties at Jacksonville State Hospital, patient recreation, volunteer programs, the hospital greenhouse and farm, epidemics, and employee conditions.

Interview by Rodger Streitmatter, 1972

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Rodger Streitmatter for the Oral History Office on October 13, 1972. Dan Horton edited the transcript.

Flo Lasley was born in Dixon, Illinois on January 14, 1909. In June, 1932, she went to work at Jacksonville State Hospital. As a recreational therapist, Mrs. Lasley helped direct patient activities and in 1952 organized a library for patients' use.

In her long career with the hospital Mrs. Lasley has worked in almost every department of the hospital and in her memoir discusses various services offered to patients at Jacksonville State Hospital.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed herein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Flo Lasley, October 13, 1972, Jacksonville, Illinois.

Rodger Streitmatter, Interviewer.

Q: Mrs. Lasley, could you tell me when you first started working at Jacksonville State Hospital and the jobs that you have done here?

A: I started working here at the Jacksonville State Hospital in June of 1932. First I worked with the nursing service for almost a year, then I worked in the newly formed recreational department of the Jacksonville State Hospital under Mr. May. At that time he made me a supervisor of all lawn activities.

During that time we had all kinds of things going on. In 1934 or 1933 we even purchased a merry-go-round. On the lawn activities we had calisthenics—every class had to come and have their calisthenics program. I also had a tennis team and we had tournaments; we had horse shoe tournaments. Then every morning we would stand in front of the flag as it was being raised—every sunny day, that was. We had ball-games; we had patient girl and men ballteams—softball. We had also employees, and employees and patients would play competitive games. We would have such parties as, in the wintertime in the gym, I would have "Solomon Gundy" parties, which was nothing in the world but a carnival.

Q: What was that term?

A: We called them "Solomon Gundy" parties. And we would have dances every week; we had movies. Also in the summertime we would have lawn

dances. The platform or the pavillion, we would decorate it once a month at least to coincide with the Fourth of July, or Halloween—we'd put corn shocks and everything. We'd have these dances on Saturday night. We would have a band which was composed of our own orchestra, but once in a while we would get somebody else just to be a little different. I also gave lessons in tennis to anyone who wanted to and also tap dancing. Well, we just had a lot of things going on—every minute.

Q: You mentioned a merry-go-round; was there actually a merry-go-round?

A: Yes, we had a merry-go-round which was fun. Every afternoon we would have it for the regressed patients and they would have the opportunity to ride the merry-go-round, then sometimes we would have it during the evening hours about once a week. But it was torn up. Too bad. I have the pictures of that but I didn't bring them. It was torn up during the wind storm, or tornado, that we had.

Q: When was that?

A: That was in July of 1934, I believe.

Q: Do you remember anything else about the tornado?

A: Well, it didn't do too much damage as far as the hospital was concerned actually, only that. Of course, it tore up Jacksonville—another part of town—quite a bit, but not too bad here.

Q: I guess no one was killed or anything?

A: No, it was in the evening. No, nobody was killed, not even in

Jacksonville. But it was terrible with lots of limbs and things. But
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our merry-go-round was just wrecked.

Q: Were there musicals or plays given at this time?

A: Yes, there were. Now I and another girl, who was going to MacMurray at that time, helped supervise these musicals with the band and the orchestra and the patients—they were always involved—but a dramatic student from MacMurray would help. I would have one probably, one each year, but we didn't have the same one usually.

Q: Do you remember some of the titles of the shows that you presented?

A: Well, isn't that awful, I can't think of a one right now. I could really give you some of them because I have some of my materials at home. I just can't really think—well, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was one I remember and that was really fun.

Q: Do you happen to remember any movies that were shown?

A: Well, we had current shows. Once in a while we would have them before they would have them downtown, at that time. Before we had our movie projector though, here at the hospital, we would go downtown once a week. We would go right down main street and go into the theater with about one hundred patients. So you see they went to the movies before we even had a projector here.

Q: Did the public seem to accept this?

A: Yes, I would say that the public accepted this the way we used to do better than they do now.

Q: Did you see silent films, or were they talkies?

A: They were talkies. We would have two shows. We would have one for

the more deteriorated in the afternoon, and then we would have shows in the evening for the working patient. Also employees or employees' children could come, too. It was really just one big happy family.

Q: When plays were given were patients actually the actors?

A: Yes, definitely. And there were some good ones, too.

Q: Did they ever present any plays anywhere else besides the hospital?

A: No. We never did. But we had people come in from the outside. They were always free to come in.

Q: Do you recall some of the Fourth of July celebrations?

A: Yes, that was a big affair, really, and it would take us quite a while to prepare for it, a couple of weeks ahead of time. Everybody came out and we had all kinds of activities. We had lawn games—sack races, ball games—carnival games of every description and we would have outside acts. We'd contact an amusement firm in St. Louis and we would have paid talent come in, too. In the afternoon, we would have the bandstand all decorated and the band playing. Then in the evening, we had fireworks that were just really wonderful and this whole lawn would be full of people.

Q: These were people from Jacksonville?

A: Yes, and surrounding area.

Q: Did you have a dinner, too?

A: No. We always took the patients back in at eleven o'clock. See,

we came out about 8:30 and we would take them back in at eleven o'clock and let them eat their dinner on the wards, and let them rest awhile because it was a big day. We always dressed them all alike and we very seldom had anyone escape. The men all had on white trousers and they looked nice. Of course I don't approve of this now, but the ladies would be dressed in white, too, because there were crowds of people here—community. It was a big day for everybody around.

Q: I think someone has mentioned a balloon ascension. Do you remember that?

A: Yes, that was right out here by the ball diamond—where it is now. Yes, (laughter) I remember that. I really don't remember too much about it, but I was here—and it was a big deal. And we used to have parades, too. You know around the—well, it wasn't clear around the loop either. We would have pet parades on that day, doll buggy parades. One time we had floats; well, more than one time we had floats and things with it. We'd spend hours making them—the patients would. They had lots of fun doing that. Now the pet parades would be employees' children, and the doll buggy parades would be employees or employees' children or anyone else who wanted to share. And we gave prizes for them, things that were made here by the patients.

Q: Is this when many of the employees were living on the grounds?

A: No, not necessarily. Really and truly the people who lived on the grounds, other than the doctors, couldn't have children here—just single people or just-married, meaning man and wife.

Q: You never lived on the grounds?

A: We only lived on the grounds about six months because when we came up here our oldest son was (inaudible). I never wanted to live on the grounds. I didn't think it was good, no.

Q: Were you at that time reimbursed for not living on the grounds?

A: Yes we were. It was very minimal though, really.

Q: Do you remember anything about your wages back then?

A: Yes, when I first came here I worked for \$48 a month. Big money isn't it? (laughter)

Q: Wouldn't go far today would it?

A: No, it wouldn't. I can hardly believe it; that's why I say I'm thankful for the things that I have.

Q: Did the patients really enjoy these activities?

A: Yes. At that time, I will say, maybe they were too closely supervised. But now of course we have a different outlook on life, I guess. But we've tried to keep them--everybody had to wear their coats if they danced on the floor, the men I mean. And the ladies had to be dressed properly, which I think is good. And now then, it's . . . (laughter)

Q: Of course at that time . . .

A: It was different. That's why I say, times have changed.

Q: I assume the clothes were all made for them, weren't they?

A: No, a lot of them had their own and if they didn't they got them. We saw that they got them. They were made here; we had a tailor shop here at that time and one was a real good tailor. In fact, one of our tailors at one time was retired from (inaudible). So he knew his coat-making.

Q: Did it generally seem to you that, back then, patients had less visitors perhaps than they do today?

A: Well, I don't know. No, I would say that they had more. I think people were more aware of mental illness then, I believe, than now. I think we take it too much for granted as far as mental illness is concerned.

Q: Was there a roller skating rink?

A: Yes, we used the gym. The gym floor was a maple floor and we used that. That, to me, was a real good program and we had very few broken legs or arms.

Q: Did both patients and staff skate?

A: Yes, why some of the patients were just beautiful skaters if they wanted to skate. But we had a skating class and if they really didn't want to, they would never learn. They had to really want to learn to skate to really skate. I had quite a time with some of them, but I think it was fun and they all enjoyed it that skated.

Q: How about bowling; is there a bowling alley?

A: Yes, there's a bowling alley here. Now I haven't been in contact

with the bowling alley for quite some time since I've been here with the geriatrics, but I think they have a very nice bowling program. Or at least they did have two or three years ago, I don't know what they're doing now.

Q: Do you remember when patients were walked?

A: Yes. Well, we called that our walking program. It was everybody—regardless of whether you were in occupational therapy, or the sewing class, or the tailor shop, or anything—they had to walk the loop one time before they went to class. And, of course, then in recreation we had what we called the walking class. If they couldn't roller skate or they couldn't participate in other activities, then we would take them for a walk.

We had to have assignments at this time from the doctor. The doctor had to know the patient well enough to know that he was able to walk this loop, or whatever he did. We had prescriptions then, we didn't just come and pick them off the ward and tell them. Therefore if this prescription was written, you see, we had to explain back to the doctor, if he refused to go, why he didn't go and then it was taken care of. Everybody had a job to do; patients and employees.

Q: About how long would you say the loop was?

A: It's a mile. It was a mile then; I think it has been cut off a little bit, but it was a mile. We never took them out in a rain or zero or anything. We didn't do that, but if it was nice at all, we walked them three times in the morning. Lots of times we would walk

twice, and then we would rest some place and as we would return back for dinner, or lunch rather, we would walk the loop again. They ate hearty then. (laughter)

Q: Do you remember much about the living conditions of the patients at that time?

A: Well, they were very good, very good. Really. Everything was clean; it was old, but it was clean.

Q: How about the food?

A: Well, the food was wholesome. They didn't have much variety, not near as much as they do now. I think the food program at this hospital is just excellent! They had wholesome food, but not much variety. It was good, what they had.

Q: Was most of this food at that time, was it produced at the farm?

A: Yes, it was, a lot of it. And you see, another thing, they had several farms. I don't know exactly how many, but they had several farms and they put out all kinds of vegetables: tomatoes, beans, corn, beets, spinach, mustard greens. Then the recreation and occupational therapy classes in the summertime would go out to the field—now the men did this a lot—and harvest it. However, I have taken, many times, a group of ladies and picked beans, tomatoes and things like this. Then we would bring them back and we canned them in the canning factory.

Q: Would the patients help can?

A: Yes.

Q: And then they were stored?

A: They were stored until we used them in the winter.

Q: And you also had cattle?

A: Yes, I don't know that at any time they ever had enough milk to supply the hospital, but they had cows and killed their own beef and own hogs. The red farm that the District #117 now has bought, that was called the hog farm and they raised their own hogs for their pork.

Q: Did they produce dairy products, too, in addition to the milk?

A: I don't know about that, I don't believe so. I don't believe they churned the butter or anything like that. They had the milk that they drank.

Q: Do you remember the greenhouse?

A: Yes, the greenhouse was a beautiful place. It was a pretty good-size greenhouse, and Mr. Young, at that time when I first came, was the florist. There was a banana tree that actually produced bananas. He furnished flowers for the governor's mansion twice a week—sent over by car. And also flowers for the hospital at that time; every day they had flowers for the hospital here, and the wards, every once in a while, would get bouquets of flowers. He was a real gardener and florist. He enjoyed picking them and seeing that somebody enjoyed them.

Q: You mentioned bananas?

A: Yes, the banana tree, every once in a while, would have bananas and

everybody would go and look at the banana tree. And we had a big alligator at one time.

Q: Alligator?

A: Yes, and he was a big thing. They had him in a cage some way, in water. It was in the dome part and he would just circle that. They had beautiful roses.

Q: They were all used here at the hospital or at the governor's mansion; they weren't sold?

A: No, nothing was ever sold from the hospital, then, and I guess not now, either.

Q: Do you remember when the greenhouse was torn down?

A: Well yes, it's just been recently, really. I would say maybe 1966 or 1965 maybe, not very long ago.

Q: It was torn down because it was in bad repair?

A: Yes, that's what they said. But then they put up that other thing that they've got over there that's nothing.

Q: It probably wasn't used for a number of years?

A: Yes, it was. But I realize that glass and stuff does deteriorate.

Q: You were working when World War II occurred. Do you remember any changes that happened because of the war?

A: Well, of course, I was working at that time in occupational therapy.

But as I say, I've worked in most every part of the hospital: activity therapy, tailor shop, weaving shop—we did lots of weaving then. Yes, we couldn't get supplies; I remember that, and we had to improvise a lot of times.

Q: Did very many of the staff members leave to actually serve in the military?

A: Well, no not really—I can't remember. Actually we were older. Most of us in the occupational therapy, recreational department were older than the draft age. There were a few, I remember.

Q: Do you remember there being any kind of epidemics, any kind of diseases?

A: Yes, I was in two—a diphtheria epidemic and I was quarantined in here about eleven days, and there was also spinal meningitis and we were quarantined in and that was for about fourteen days, I believe.

Q: Do you have any idea what the date was?

A: Well, the spinal meningitis was about 1933; it was right after I had come to work here, in the wintertime. The diphtheria was when I came back to work the second time, which was maybe 1945.

Q: And then staff members and patients all just stayed?

A: Everybody stayed. I happened to be on what they called 5 North on the old annex that was torn down. When they diagnosed the case as diphtheria, everybody that was on duty stayed. We worked 24 hours.

Q: You were married at that time and had children. They just stayed

out and you stayed here?

A: Yes, I couldn't afford to go home with diphtheria—to the children, see. I always had hired help, so therefore it really wasn't no problem.

Q: Do you remember, in either case, if anyone died?

A: No, I don't think so. I know they didn't in the diphtheria, and I don't think they did in the spinal meningitis either. I think they recovered. They detected it soon enough.

Q: Didn't you have problems with supplies, staying in almost two weeks?

A: Well, no not really. You see there again, everybody came to your rescue. The dietary would send you the best they had and set it on the outside. The laundry would come—they never entered the building, see, but it was all on the outside. No, we had no problem. In fact we had better accommodations than anybody in the hospital at that time.

Q: Was that a total quarantine on the whole hospital?

A: No. It was for the spinal meningitis, but it was not for the diphtheria. It was only that wing—it was really three wards at that time.

Q: About how many people would be on a ward?

A: At that time they usually had around sixty. The annex was pretty good sized wards, so it would be close to two hundred people.

Q: Do you have any idea what the patient-staff ratio was at that time, about how many aides or attendants of all kinds would there have been on

a ward?

A: Well, it wasn't near as much as it is now, I'll tell you. There would be about two on each shift with a relief, so the ratio was not near what it is now. There was about four, maybe five, activity therapy therapists.

Q: Do you remember much about the history, the beginning, of the patient library?

A: In 1952 another activity therapist and I set up the patient library and the veterans diagnostic. Then we had veterans, and I was given the program over there to start a new program for the veterans, on the new diagnostic. There was a library built—and it was all donated books at that time—and that was the beginning of the library. However, they had had a very small one in another area over here, actually on A-3 West, and I can't remember where it was before.

Q: Volunteers are probably a big part of activity therapy programs. I believe volunteer services was not organized until the early 1950's. Do you remember how volunteers were handled before that time?

A: Well, we didn't have them really. Only just—I can remember at Christmastime, before volunteers, maybe my church group, some of the children would come out and perform for the patients, or a dance group, or maybe a little Christmas play from someplace. Actually, they just came out on their own, by invitation only. It really was not a volunteer program until we had a volunteer supervisor. I was working in O.T. Center when they first started. There was a little stage there and we had lots

of fun with the volunteers. They would come and give programs and, well, they did it and we were the observers. Activity therapy—occupational therapy at that time that I was in—this used to be two sections, recreational therapy and occupational therapy. This was a sad part of it; they were rivals. Well, I had a little bit of both of them, so I can understand the problems. But they really didn't have any, as far as that goes; but, again, everybody was afraid of everybody maybe. I don't know. Then when Mr. Gronseth came, things did change.

Q: Were there any other lawn activities that you can remember, back when you first began working?

A: Well yes. I had a big dream that we would have a maze, and I had one built out of small gas pipe and it was quite a big thing. The patients would enter at one point and try to get themselves out at the other. It proved to be quite an activity, and they enjoyed it very much.

Q: This was on the lawn?

A: This was on the lawn and we had that for one Fourth of July and we left it on the lawn all the summer.

Q: That sounds like fun, now. (laughter)

A: Yes. Well, I guess if some of the psychologists watched a patient going through, they might learn something about them.

Q: Was there at one time a miniature golf course?

A: Yes, and that was lovely. It was one of the best in this part of

the country. In the summertime we had patients that that was all they did was take care of this golf course. It had all kinds of challenges. I've been around a lot and it was one of the finest I have ever seen. They really enjoyed it, and they were proud of it. We usually had it two nights a week. It was lighted and it was just really grand. It was out in front, right on the highway.

Q: Did you also mention horse shoes?

A: Yes, we had horse shoe pits and they were all sand and we had lots and lots of men that enjoyed horse shoes.

Q: What about croquet?

A: Yes; we had croquet, sure. Also in the wintertime lots of times we have had checker tournaments and chess tournaments. And cribbage! You would be surprised how they used to like to play cribbage, too. There was several that liked to play chess. Again there, chess is becoming quite popular and it used to be years ago. I can remember when we had lots of fun with it. I'm not a chess player myself, but a lot of people like it.

Q: Do you remember any observances of birthdays? Did you ever observe patients' birthdays?

A: Yes, we observed them. Lots of times we would do this in some activity. Like if the patient's birthday was in May, everybody who was in May, we would recognize them.

Q: I bet they enjoyed that.

A: Yes, and we still do that. I do it in my area every month. Everyone who has a birthday is the star for that day. I think it's nice because, after all, you like a birthday even if you do get older.

Q: Well, that about finishes the questions I have, unless you have something you would like to add, something I haven't covered.

A: I just can't think of anything right now. I'm sure there's lots more, and it is sort of nice to think back. I wonder sometimes if people really think that these things happened back several years ago. But I can assure you that they did, and they were well received by the patients themselves, the employees and the community. I've enjoyed working here the 35 years. I think I have learned to understand people a whole lot better than if I had not. I don't know, the future for people who are going to work in mental health; I don't know whether I would change it now or not, but there's a lot to be learned.

Q: It has certainly changed a great deal in 35 years.

A: Yes it certainly has, some of it is good and some of it is bad. I try to be flexible on it.

Q: With the reorganizations that occur, you have to be. It seems strange that over the years there's one kind of therapy that is "it," and everyone uses it. Maybe ten years later that one's out and a new one in. It must require a great flexibility.

A: Well, I can see right now a trend going back to some of the things that we did back when I first started, and somebody has come along thinking it is a brand new idea, but it isn't. Sometimes I think there

is nothing new, only the approach. (laughter)

Q: It all swings back and forth, back and forth.

A: Yes, that is right. I guess I'm the oldest activity therapist in the activity department at this hospital now—according to the years of service, I mean.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

END OF TAPE