

THE BIRTH OF A HAUNTED “ASYLUM”: PUBLIC MEMORY AND
COMMUNITY STORYTELLING

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by
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January 2014

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ABSTRACT

Public memory of “the Asylum” in contemporary American culture is communicated through a host of popular forms, including horror-themed entertainment such as haunted attractions. Such representations have drawn criticism from disability advocates on the basis that they perpetuate stereotypes and inaccurately represent the history of deinstitutionalization in the United States. In 2010, when Pennhurst State School and Hospital, a closed Pennsylvania institution that housed people understood as developmentally/intellectually disabled, was reused as a haunted attraction called “Pennhurst Asylum,” it sparked a public debate and became an occasion for storytelling about what Pennhurst meant to the surrounding community. I apply theoretical perspectives from memory studies and disability studies to the case of “Pennhurst Asylum” in order to understand what is at stake when we remember institutional spaces such as Pennhurst. More specifically, this case study uses narrative analysis of news stories and reader letters, ethnographic observation at the haunted attraction, interviews with key storymakers, and historical/cultural contextualization to examine why this memory matters to disability advocates, former institutional residents and employees, journalists, and other community members. The narrative patterns I identify have ramifications for contemporary disability politics, the role of public communication in the formation of community memory, and scholarly debates over how to approach popular representations of historical trauma.

I find that Pennhurst memory fits within contemporary patterns in the narrative, visual, and physical reuse of institutional spaces in the United States, which include

redevelopment, memorialization, digital and crowd-sourced memory, amateur photography, Hollywood films, paranormal cable television shows, and tourism. Further, this reuse of institutional spaces has been an occasion for local journalists to take on the role of public historian in the absence of other available authorities. In this case study, the local newspaper (*The Mercury*) became a space where processes of commemoration could unfold through narrative—and, it created a record of this process that could inform future public history projects on institutionalization in the United States.

In the terms of cultural geographer Kenneth Foote (1997), disability advocates attempted to achieve “sanctification” of the Pennhurst property by telling the story of its closure as a symbol of social progress that led to the community-based living movement. Paradoxically, since this version of the Pennhurst story relied on a narrow characterization of Pennhurst as a site of horrific abuse and neglect, it had this in common with the legend perpetuated by the haunted attraction. In contrast, other community members shared memories that showed Pennhurst had long been a symbol of the community’s goodwill, service, and genuine caring. In short, public memory of Pennhurst in 2010 was controversial, in part, because the institution’s closing in 1987 had itself been controversial. Many still believed it should never have been closed and were thus resistant to the idea of sanctifying its story as an example for future change.

When the State abandoned the Pennhurst campus, it left an authority vacuum at a site about which there was still as much public curiosity as there had been when it first opened in 1908. Indeed, this easily claimed authority is part of what “Pennhurst Asylum” is selling. Its mix of fact and fiction offers visitors the pleasure of uncertainty and active detective work—something usually missing at traditional historic sites. Visitors get to

touch a mostly unspecified, but nonetheless “real” past mediated by an abundance of historical and contemporary public communication that all attach an aura to Pennhurst as a place where horrific events happened. Rather than suggesting historical amnesia, the strategic fictionalizations made to create the Pennhurst legend show exactly what *is* remembered about “the Asylum.” The legend distances the story away from American history and sets it in a deeper past beyond most living memory. From my observation at the haunted attraction, it appears that the problem isn’t that the American public has forgotten “the Asylum”; it may be that we remember too well.

Overall, the relationship between institutions and their communities is one of intractable complicity, ensuring that the public memory of “the Asylum” will continue to be deeply fraught. News archives show that for decades local newspapers reported on adverse events at Pennhurst including fire, disease outbreak, accidental death, violence, criminal activity, and a series of State and Federal probes into mismanagement and abuse. This is especially significant because the power structures that allowed the institution to function remain mostly intact. Indeed, the “Pennhurst Asylum” relies not only on our previous knowledge of Pennhurst and the mythic figure of “the Asylum;” it also relies on our fear of medical authority, bodily difference, and most of all, our collective vulnerability to the social mechanisms that continue to define and separate the “normal” and the “abnormal.” Even among disability advocates, the act of remembering threatens to recreate the hierarchy of the institution. Some of the same people who had authority at Pennhurst continue to have the authority to tell its story today. Finally, the usefulness of the ghost story as a memory genre reflects both rapid change and surprising stagnation in the role of institutionalization in the United States.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: “HAUNTED HOUSE EXPLOITS REAL HORROR”

On September 14, 2010, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an editorial denouncing a haunted attraction set to open in nearby Spring City, Pennsylvania that October. The authors claimed the site of the attraction — the “infamous” Pennhurst State School and Hospital that was closed by court order in 1987 — as a place of remembering for people with disabilities. “Haunted House exploits real horror,” the headline read, “Pennhurst shouldn’t become a Halloween attraction.” At Pennhurst, it described, “abuse and neglect ran rampant.” Though the number of people in institutions nationwide has declined since the lawsuit that led to Pennhurst’s closure, the authors claimed that “the attraction would exploit misplaced fears of disabled people, which brought about the sort of institutionalization that once occurred at Pennhurst” (Clarke & Hanyok, 2010).

When I came across this editorial, it was significant to me for the way it mobilized two sets of vocabulary with which I was intimately familiar, but had never before seen used together; the authors used both the vocabulary of memorialization and the vocabulary of disability rights. They referred to “people with disabilities” as “a class of people struggling to achieve full civil rights and inclusion.” And they suggested that although the former Pennhurst campus was now privately owned, an organization called the “Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance” sought to find “an appropriate use for the property” instead of a use that “tramples on the memory of those who lived and died at Pennhurst.” The combination of these ideas amounted to a historical narrative that

identified Pennhurst as the site of a political struggle too cavalierly reincarnated as a site of entertainment.

The editorial also stood out for the way the phenomenon it described made me feel: *ick, a haunted house at a former institution—that's just wrong*. The more I thought about it, though, the more apathetic I became, in part because as I considered the cultural environment in which this phenomenon took place, I began to see its existence as a foregone conclusion. In other words, it *fit* with everything I knew about disability representation and the scarcity of disability consciousness in the general population. And yet, I couldn't see a way to deal with the attraction without falling into the same old routine: *popular culture is a wasteland of ignorance and hegemony, especially when it comes to the way the public abuses history*.

Even as I felt trapped by a limited set of analytical options, I kept following the story. Several thousand people attended the attraction *each night* during that Halloween season in 2010. During that fall, the attraction remained a hot issue about which certain members of the community were eager to opine. In the terminology of memory studies, the public conversation about the reuse of Pennhurst was what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1996) would call a *mnemonic battle*—when groups of people disagree about the past, how its story should be told, or if it should be told. Newspapers played a particularly important role in providing a public venue for conversation about Pennhurst. Early news of the “Pennhurst Asylum” haunted attraction was immediately described in local newspapers and later by *The Associated Press* (Walters, 2010) as a full-blown controversy. *The Mercury*, serving the Spring City area, published 25 news articles and 19 letters and editorials in 2010 on the subject of Pennhurst. The online version of an

article in *The Mercury* announcing the opening of the haunted attraction received 111 reader comments. In 2010 and 2011, Pennsylvania newspapers printed over one hundred stories and letters about Pennhurst in response to the haunted attraction. The front page of Philadelphia's alternative newspaper, *The Philadelphia Weekly*, featured a photograph of a dusty and rusted wheelchair posed in Pennhurst's underground tunnel system with the headline "The Future of Pennhurst Hospital Divides a Town" (Goldberg, 2010). Local broadcast news stations also featured several reports on the attraction and news vans were on the scene on opening night. The Pennsylvania chapter of the largest national advocacy organization in the United States for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the ARC of Pennsylvania, took out a full page ad in the *Daily Local News* to protest the "Pennhurst Asylum."

There was other evidence, too, that community members were engaged with the question of how to remember Pennhurst. The most visible resistance to the attraction was mounted by the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (PMPA), a grass-roots organization advocating for the preservation of the buildings and the story of Pennhurst. In September of 2010, a small protest against the attraction was organized by advocates at Philadelphia's Independent Living Center, Liberty Resources. Protesters held picket signs that read "People's suffering is not entertaining" and "Ignorance is the real horror" (Kessler, 2010, p. 1, 4). East Vincent Township residents Saul S. Rivkin and his wife Linda Fulton-Rivkin filed an injunction request to stop the attraction from opening on the basis that it violated township zoning code (Rellahan, 2010). That request was denied by a county judge on the morning of the attraction's opening night.

Anecdotally, it was common to hear discussions about Pennhurst at the attraction and around town. On one occasion when I told a waitress at a local bar that I was in town to attend a PMPA board meeting she immediately replied that a bunch of her friends were going to the haunted attraction but she refused to join them—“I’m with you guys,” she said. This wasn’t the only evidence that the issue had created an “us” and a “them.” Some PMPA board members also said they hoped to convince friends, neighbors, and local businesses to protest the haunt by not attending. Those opposed and supporting were also drawn to the PMPA Facebook page to continue the discussion — posts from the fall of 2010 fill 34 printed pages. According to reporter Laura Catalano, who covered the township meetings during this time, the haunted attraction issue had a lasting impact on the town politics around the use of public space because the Board of Supervisors were divided on the Pennhurst question (personal communication, July 12, 2013). In October 2011, in addition to the typical Halloween lawn decorations of pumpkins and fake cobwebs, some homeowners posted banners of support for Saul Rivkin, former PMPA board member and East Vincent Township historical commission chairman, who ran for a seat on the township’s Board of Supervisors on an anti-haunted attraction platform (Ellingsworth, 2011).

As I faced this flurry of civic engagement, new questions arose. I wondered what accounted for the public interest, even passion, about Pennhurst. I also started to get interested in the source of my own internal conflict—my initial *repulsion* to the haunted attraction, and subsequent *apathy*. As a media and memory scholar, I was interested in resisting the tendency of academics to look down on popular culture in general. It was more my style to try to understand why the popular takes the shape it does rather than to

simply deride it. But, as a disability studies scholar, I was interested in taking a critical perspective on disability imagery that I understood as having discriminatory origins and impacts. This conflict was the source of my apathy: in order to write about the attraction, I would have to actually listen to it speak. I would approach the haunted attraction and ask: *What is that? How did it come into being? Why has this place and the stories told about it come to matter now?*

The answers to these questions begin with context. In order to make sense of the attraction, it helps to know something about the history of institutionalization in the United States and disability representation in general. Furthermore, conceptualizing the attraction as an artifact of public memory provides a theoretical framework for exploring the larger issues this phenomenon touches on: historical authority, the mythic quality of memory, and the strategic use of narrative. Through searching archives, following articles and letters in contemporary local newspapers, spending time at the attraction, attending advocacy meetings, and interviewing some of the prominent figures in the discussion, I also learned about the many pragmatic and idiosyncratic circumstances that shaped the rhetoric of the PMPA, the “Pennhurst Asylum,” and the public conversation that attempted to define Pennhurst—what it was in the past, and what it is today.

While I limited the scope of my investigation to a single case study, this particular mnemonic battle reflects patterns in the physical, visual, and narrative reuse of “Asylums” in American culture. Likewise, the intervention by disability advocates that produced this local debate is only one example of many recent projects intended to bring disability history into the public consciousness. What’s exciting about this case isn’t the raised voices at zoning board hearings or the hateful posts in the comments section of

online news articles. That images and stories should so drive us to public engagement through protest or the humble letter-to-the-editor is in itself a wonder. Questions of memorialization, of what pieces of the past ought to be preserved and remembered publicly for the future, are examples of when representation matters. This is what is at stake for media and communication scholars in the study of public memory.

In the chapters that follow, I pursue the complexity and contradictions layered within and among the many versions of the Pennhurst story. In chapter 2, I consider the history of deinstitutionalization in the United States in relation to patterns in the physical, visual, and narrative reuse of “the Asylum” in contemporary American culture. I situate my approach to studying “Pennhurst Asylum” within both memory theory and disability theory and describe my methodological approach, which includes narrative analysis, ethnographic observation, and interviews. In chapter 3, I investigate the dissemination of the “official” Pennhurst story through the PMPA and local journalists as well as the many variations and contestations available in reader letters and editorials. I find that Pennhurst memory is controversial because the closing of Pennhurst, and places like it, was (and continues to be) far more fraught than the “official” story of “Tragedy and Triumph” reveals. In chapter 4, I create vignettes from “on the ground” at the haunted attraction in order to ask what exactly the “Pennhurst Asylum” is selling and what the attraction’s relationship is to history. While many have argued that the attraction simply overwrites history with legend, I argue that it is the attraction’s relationship to “real life” events that ultimately makes it a commercial success. Attention to the political rationality of the

attraction shows that “Pennhurst Asylum” reveals much about the history of institutionalization, almost in spite of itself. In chapter 5, I present profiles of some of the key figures in the community conversation on Pennhurst, the “storymakers” responsible for the most dominant versions of the Pennhurst story. These key community members show the impact of a small group of people and the biographical, historical, and pragmatic forces that ultimately shape processes of memory-making. Finally, in the conclusion, I pull together the three sites of my investigation in order to address the contradictions and parallels among Pennhurst stories. I advocate that rather than ignore these often uncomfortable rifts and touchings in public memory, disability advocates should engage the continually fraught relationship between institutions (past and present) and their communities. Further, scholars of public communication are in the unique position to provide holistic accounts of the socio-cultural forces that impact processes of public memory. Particularly at critical junctures when “official” stories about the past first begin to emerge, communication scholars should be able to apply the broad interdisciplinary nature of our field to understanding the complex communication landscape of public memory.

CHAPTER 2

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION AND “THE ASYLUM” IN PUBLIC MEMORY

The most common way to tell the story of institutionalization is as a social trend that came and went. Institutionalization as a solution to the problem of disability expanded during the 19th century and became prevalent in the United States around the turn of the 20th century. Indeed, the rise of institutionalization went hand-in-hand with the rise of the modern concept of disability as abnormalcy, insufficiency, and dependency (Davis, 1995; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). The rationale for early institutions included a mix of well-meaning approaches to moral care and the strategic segregation of people deemed unfit for citizenship, reproduction, and public life (Black, 2003; Trent, 1994). In general, early 20th century institutions were either privately-funded by charitable organizations or publicly-funded by state appropriations, though both housed individuals who were considered needy or unfit for a variety of reasons including insanity, feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, pauperism, and sexual or moral degeneracy. In the decades immediately following the first world war, the previous lumping together of what are today viewed as distinct ailments and behaviors (some no longer medicalized) began to change with the rise of the rehabilitation model of treatment (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). With more sophisticated diagnostic differentiation came increasingly segregated institutions intended to remediate disability through specialized rehabilitation.

Overcrowding was a perennial problem with the institutional model, but it wasn't until the mid-century that institutional populations began to peak. *Deinstitutionalization* refers to the effects of public policy changes at the national and state levels throughout

the 1960s and 1970s that led to the widespread release and/or relocation of formerly institutionalized populations to “group homes” or other settings. Some describe deinstitutionalization as having happened in two separate waves, beginning in the 1960s among those considered “mentally ill” and followed in the 1970s among those considered “mentally retarded” (Stroman, 2003). State departments of welfare or mental health split along these lines at various times. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health separated in 1986 into the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Mental Retardation.

With the decline in institutional populations came the rise of “community-based living” and ongoing efforts to make disability services available in non-segregated settings. However, both public and private disability institutions continue to operate in the United States today.

There are endless ways to operationalize the term “institution” in the calculation of population statistics and rates of institutionalization over time. For example, “including not only public mental hospitals but also private mental hospitals, psycho-pathic hospitals, psychiatric wards at general hospitals and VA hospitals, and public and private institutions for ‘mental defectives and epileptics’ and for ‘the mentally retarded’” the rate of institutionalization in America peaked at about 600 per 100,000 adults in the 1940s and 1950s (Harcourt, 2011, p. 52). As of 2011, the rate of institutionalization as defined above was about 50 per 100,000 adults (Harcourt, 2011, p. 52).¹ Census data for 2000 estimated the *disabled institutional population* at approximately 2 million Americans, or half of the 4 million Americans living in “institutional group quarters,” including “correctional institutions, nursing homes, and a lengthy list of other institutions, many of

which exclusively house people with disabilities” (She & Sapleton, 2006). This represents a significantly higher proportion of people with disabilities living in institutional settings (56%) as compared to living in households in the general population (12%).²

Several criticisms have arisen based on these trends. First, the incarcerated population has “more than quadrupled from 1980 to 2003,” reflecting not only growth in the general population, but significant increases in the incarceration rate (She & Sapleton, 2006). Disability rates are more than double in the prison population as compared to the general population, and “mental” and “learning” disabilities are especially prevalent in prison populations (She & Sapleton, 2006). Professor of political science Bernard E. Harcourt studies *aggregated institutionalization rates*, a calculation that includes *mental hospitals, facilities for people with I/DD, and prisons* together between 1934 and 2001 and finds the current aggregated institutionalization rate to be approaching the same heights experienced in the mid-twentieth century, with “the patterns of mental hospitalization versus incarceration ... practically inverted over the 20th and 21st centuries” (Harcourt, 2011, p. 41). In other words, if one includes the prison population, the narrative of institutionalization as a trend that came and went begins to deteriorate. Further, community-based living has been criticized as a “creaming” of disability institutions. In essence, by liberating the individuals deemed most capable of independent living and leaving behind those deemed severely-disabled, the movement has left intact the philosophy of institutionalization—that some members of society are unfit for public life.

As is evident from this review of population statistics, the vocabulary of deinstitutionalization reflects the instability of diagnostic categories over time and across disciplines and interest groups. The term *developmental disability* was first used in place of *mental retardation* in the 1969 reauthorization of the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act (P.L. 91-517) in an attempt to include other conditions that require a similar degree of support (Fujiura, 2006, 394-397).³ Around this time, facilities for people with I/DD became known generically as “developmental centers.” The term “developmental disability” (DD) is better thought of as a political and legal concept than a diagnostic definition. DD is an “umbrella term” for a variety of conditions, but the defining features of DD are “onset prior to adulthood” and “the need for significant, life-long supports.” Commonly encompassed under the term DD are conditions such as “intellectual disability, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and hearing and visual impairments.” However, since the definition of DD includes severity that requires “life-long supports,” an individual could be diagnosed with cerebral palsy, for example, and not fall under the umbrella of DD if they did not require “substantial support.” Likewise, an individual could be described as having an “intellectual disability” (ID), but if the condition was acquired after adulthood, they would not fall under the umbrella of DD. Most often, a person with acquired ID is referred to by the condition or instance that caused the ID, for example, individuals described as having “traumatic brain injury” or “dementia” (Fujiura, 2006, pp. 394-397). The complexity of these definitions makes DD nearly an insider term most familiar to service professionals and those who must navigate the social and medical systems they delineate.

In sum, there is no shortage of categories to define, segment, and control disability as a social problem. Of course, for the lay population, disability vocabulary is little more than an inscrutable moving target. Meanwhile, advocates and service providers are quick to highlight the distinction between intellectual/developmental disability and mental illness, in part because contemporary treatment, education, service, and policy-making are bifurcated along this line. This translates into disability-specific advocacy organizations, policy agendas, and rhetoric—as well as disability-specific public history projects.

Public Memory and Disability Identity

Given the shifting terrain in which the vocabulary of deinstitutionalization resides, a cultural analysis of “the Asylum” in public memory requires a flexible conceptual frame. When I use the term “the Asylum”—in scare quotes, no less—I do so to indicate my focus on the figure of “the Asylum” in the public imagination as somewhat distinct from, but inevitably related to, historically and geographically specific places. As should now be evident, the term “asylum” erases much of the specificity and diversity of institutional spaces known by a variety of terms over the past century or more, including “poor house,” “insane asylum,” “institute for the feeble-minded,” “sanatorium,” “state hospital,” “state school,” “mental/psychiatric hospital,” and “developmental center.” Moreover, by embracing “the Asylum” as a useful conceptual term, I want to suggest a cross-disability perspective that sees institutional populations as variegated and yet sharing a common history of systematic segregation and oppression. I chose this term in spite of the fact that “asylum” is considered a mischaracterization of the historical Pennhurst, being that its focus was to house people described variably as

“feeble-minded,” “mentally retarded,” and “developmentally disabled,” rather than “insane.” It is clear from both the history of institutionalization as a whole and the current reuse of the former Pennhurst campus as a haunted attraction called “Pennhurst Asylum,” that a disability-specific analysis that focused myopically on the history of developmental centers would fail to account for how and why the attraction came to be. Like it or not, these stories are connected in the public imagination of institutions and it is the nature of these connections that I’m interested in unpacking.

Similarly, my choice to use the term “memory” to define my object of study reflects a particular set of theoretical interests. Though memory scholars use a variety of terms to focus their investigations—including “social,” “collective,” “cultural,” “popular,” and “public” memory—the interdisciplinary field recently termed “memory studies” traces a common intellectual heritage to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (b. 1877, d. 1945). To begin, an interest in memory suggests a socio-cultural orientation toward understanding how the past is used in the present. Paradoxically, memory is, in fact, more focused on the present than on the past. This is not to say that historical facts become unimportant to memory scholars, but an emphasis on fact-finding is usually supplanted by an emphasis on meaning-making. In other words, to investigate memory is not to investigate what actually happened in the past so much as it is to investigate how and why the past is made meaningful by social actors in the present, and to what ends. Halbwachs (1992) referred to this tendency for people to view the past from subjectively-defined perspectives, which he associated with social group membership, as the “localization” of memory:

It is not because memories resemble each other that several can be called to mind at the same time. It is rather because the same group is interested in them and is able to call them to mind at the same time that they resemble each other. (p. 52)

Halbwachs' position explains why group members share common versions of the past since the past is always a product of socialization within a specific group—whether that group is as small as the family unit or as large as the nation.

Because Halbwachs applied a sociological lens to the phenomenon of what he originally termed “social memory,” contemporary memory scholars also tend to see memory as occurring at the intersection of the individual and his or her social world. It is this theoretical nexus that also puts memory within the purview of communication scholarship (Zelizer, 1992, 1995, 1998; Sturken, 1991, 1997, 2007; Kitch, 1999, 2005, 2006). Marita Sturken (1997) defines “cultural memory” as a communicative process that “involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of cultural meaning” (p. 1). Similarly, Barbie Zelizer (1995) explains that “collective memory...presumes activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation” (p. 214). Finally, Carolyn Kitch (2006) argues that this sharing process is what gives memory its unique relationship to media, which allows collective memory to take on a material form easily shared among a social group.

Even considering the strong role of social group membership in memory theory, more recent work has challenged some of these assumptions. Most notably, Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory* (2004) argues that the mass media's central role in modern memory transmission makes the essentialism often associated with identity politics obsolete. In other words, social memories are now so easily transmitted beyond their social group that we should no longer think of memory as “belonging” to anyone in

particular. Instead, Landsberg suggests that “prosthetic” memory has the potential to inspire an empathetic memory practice that is available to anyone. This practice allows the public to experience history through media and to transcend the limitations of personal historical experience and identity. Where my own perspective departs from Landsberg’s argument is in my assertion that in the case of lesser-known or repressed social histories, the identification of a particular social group for whom the memory may resonate can be a necessary step toward achieving critical empathy.

The conceptualization of public memory as a product of shared meaning among group members has several implications when applied to disability identity. For example, disability has been constructed through the same general processes of Othering evident across social categories such as race, class and gender (Davis 1995; Shakespeare, 1994; Kudlick, 2003). However, the move to draw a corollary between people with disabilities and other “Others” must also recognize the limitations of such comparisons. It was the increasing segregation of people with disabilities for the purposes of education, care, and control in early 20th century America – and the resulting necessity for political organization – that eventually led to the contemporary emergence of disability subjectivity based on this shared experience of oppression (Braddock & Parish, 2001; Carey, 2009). Custodial institutions, while not recognized as cultural locations, are nonetheless sites of cultural collectivity (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). While the medical model contributed to a disability-specific consciousness separated into “diagnostic categories,” changes in public policy throughout the twentieth century “contributed significantly to the transformation of disability from a series of pathological medical conditions to a politicized status, identity, and set of interrelated interest groups”

(Longmore and Umansky, 2001, p. 5). This is reflected in survey research, for instance, a 1986 study by the International Center for the Disabled, which shows a “shift in self-perception” among younger people with disabilities and documents “the emergence of a minority-group consciousness” (Longmore and Umansky, 2001, p. 11).

These opening premises guide the trajectory of my inquiry into memory and disability, including what kinds of questions to investigate. When applied to the case of “the Asylum,” a memory studies approach suggests questions such as: how does identity inform the story of deinstitutionalization? Why is the image of “the Asylum” important or useful to people today? Because I’m especially interested in the roles of local news, community advocacy, and the haunted attraction, I focus my study on “public memory”—representations of the past that are available to the public. As David Glassberg (2001) proposes, a central focus of such work is “to understand the interrelationships between different versions of the past in the public arena” (p. 8). Glassberg argues that venues for this work extend into politics, popular culture and place, but in all these cases, we might ask: “how do particular accounts of the past get established and disseminated as the public one?” (p. 10).

The Afterlife of “the Asylum”: Place, Politics, Popular Culture

What remains in circulation in public memory is often a question of what’s left behind. That is, physical objects and places act as mnemonic devices. Their very materiality sparks questions about their origins and the answers often come in the form of storytelling. In the case of deinstitutionalization, part of what is left behind in every state in the country is buildings, often entire campuses, that each housed hundreds or thousands of individuals. The predicament of what to do with publicly-owned land and

buildings that were former institutions can in part be attributed to timing—a number of decades have now passed since the greatest thrust of institutional closures. The options for what becomes of such places are not unlike the options for any other place which falls into disuse: demolition, abandonment, or reuse. Additionally, patterns in what compel social actors to preserve the past suggest that the threat of loss often spurs action (Barthel, 1996; Glassberg, 2001). As empty institutional spaces are threatened by decay or redevelopment, and as the disability advocates who led social change in the 1970s and 1980s begin to age, the time is right for memorial and preservation efforts.

In venues of public memory, remembering painful pasts may be particularly fraught with controversy, not only over how to remember, but whether to remember (Logan & Reeves, 2009). Cultural geographer Kenneth Foote (1997) studies the commemoration of difficult pasts by looking to American landscapes of violence and tragedy. Rather than considering abandoned places as necessarily forgotten, Foote describes commemoration as a process, which may move through four phases: sanctification (those widely venerated and specifically marked, and often transferred to public ownership), designation (those marked for significance without formal consecration, often including sites in a transitional phase prior to sanctification, such as minority causes), rectification (those exonerated from association with the tragedy and reintegrated into everyday use), and obliteration (those removing or covering up all evidence of tragedy and completely removed from use). There are examples of former institutional spaces in all four of these phases of commemoration, perhaps suggesting that public memory of “the Asylum” is at an especially critical tipping point, or at least occupies a somewhat unsettled or ambiguous status.

The afterlife of institutional spaces in particular has recently become an object of both scholarly and popular interest. It is not unusual for a building once used for one type of custodial care to simply be reused for another type. So, while the story of deinstitutionalization might lead us to believe progress has been made, dozens of mental hospitals, developmental centers and sanatoriums across the country have been converted to prisons, a pattern historian Anne Parsons calls “institutional recycling” (Parsons, 2011). Along those same lines, since such spaces are essentially residential and village-like in nature, many former institutions have been redeveloped as condominiums or townhouses, what Foote would call “rectification.” Examples extend beyond the United States as well. After closing in 1988, Kew Lunatic Asylum, one of the largest asylums in Australia, is since 1994 a gated community known as Willsmere (Reeves & Nichols, 2009). Owing to the development permit granted by the Historic Building Council, a section of the building was set aside to document the history of the site through a museum and accompanying archive, what Foote would call “designation.” Perhaps the largest scale example of institutional-to-residential redevelopment in the United States is Traverse City State Hospital in Michigan, closed in 1989. As reported in *The New York Times*, local developer Raymond Minervini acquired 63 acres, 27 Victorian-Italianate brick buildings, and 750,000 square feet of space in 2003 for a massive mixed-used development called the Village at Grand Traverse Commons (Schneider, 2010). Smaller-scale examples of multi-use redevelopment in the United States are numerous. For example, Foxboro State Hospital (1889-1976) now Chestnut Green in Massachusetts; New York City Lunatic Asylum (1841-1955) now The Octagon⁴; and Western State Hospital (1828-1970s) now The Villages at Staunton in Virginia.⁵ In 2007, *The Boston*

Globe reported seven sites planned for redevelopment in Massachusetts alone (Preer, 2007). Perhaps in measure with the threat of redevelopment, several “asylum” preservation groups have also surfaced. In Illinois, “Save the Bowen,” a small non-profit group, is dedicated to preserving the Bowen Administration Building of Bartonville State Hospital/Illinois Hospital for the Incurable Insane (1902-1972) (Save the Bowen Foundation, 2009). In New Jersey, Preserve Greystone, an organization made up of “preservationists, environmentalists and concerned citizens” is dedicated to “protecting the open space and historic buildings on the former Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital” (1876-2003) (Preserve Greystone, n.d.).⁶

Depending on your perspective, the redevelopment of institutional spaces produces either an overwriting of this past or an occasion to remember—or perhaps both. In 2010, *The Boston Globe* reported that Foxborough State Hospital (1889-1976), Medfield State Hospital (1892-2003), and Danvers State Hospital had all held memorial ceremonies in the past decade to mark or remark patient graves on their campuses (Morgan Bolton, 2010). In 2005, the *Medfield Press* reported that in a public ceremony the grave markers of 841 Medfield State Hospital patients, formerly marked by number only, were unveiled with freshly engraved names. The Commissioner of the State’s Department of Mental Health spoke at the ceremony, stating, “We publicly affirm the lives of many individuals who were mentally ill and lain in this anonymous cemetery for so many years,” adding, “reclaiming this cemetery and restoring their memory [is] essential to correcting the years of stigma and the years of living in the shadows of anonymity” (Mantone, 2005).

Importantly, this remembering occurs through a whole constellation of public communication that includes on-site mediation (historical markers, ceremonies, museums, architecture, performances, signage, brochures) and off-site mediation (newspapers, books, web sites, radio, television, films). A broad definition of mediation, as that which facilitates communication between parties, may lead to a view of public memory as always mediated by something. For example, Wertsch (2002) refers to “collective memory” as “mediated” by “textual resources” (p.6). Following Bakhtin, Wertsch sees oral traditions as mediated by the discourse available within the social context of an utterance. Since these textual resources are how we learn about the past, the analysis of textual mediation is key to understanding collective memory (p. 6). Wertsch explains:

Among other things, this means analyzing the specific forms that mediation takes in this case, especially narratives, and it calls on us to understand how such narrative texts are produced by the state, the media and so forth, and how they are consumed, or used, by individuals and groups. (p. 6)

For journalists, the redevelopment of institutional spaces is a perfect occasion for storytelling, as are memorialization and preservation efforts. Indeed, many scholars have argued that newspapers and magazines have a legitimate role in disseminating public history (Kitch, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007; Zelizer, 1992, 1998; Choi, 2008; Robinson, 2006). Journalistic sources have been the subject of particular interest in memory studies due to the crossover between news values and the values of historiography. For example, journalists and public historians both have mandates to serve the public good, to seek facts, and create representations of reality as objectively as possible. Still, much research on memory in journalism attends to moments when news norms are subverted in the

process of commemoration (Kitch, 1999, 2006; Zelizer, 1998; Robinson, 2006). Further, by seeing news as a set of narratives more so than a compilation of facts, scholars have approached news as a critical site of public memory. Choi (2008) finds news narratives are able to create a sense of consensus through the appearance of a set of repeated narratives, even when counter-narratives are also available. Robinson (2006) shows newspapers may also reflect moments of contestation when even the recent past resists the consensus or corroboration necessary for a master narrative to emerge.

While journalists have a role in contributing to public memory of “the Asylum,” the task is not limited to the realm of professionals. Internet archives—governmental, academic, amateur, and crowd-generated—provide another record of institutional spaces, a kind of digital public memory. Indeed, digitization makes records which may have once been the limited purview of academics and a few motivated library patrons into cultural artifacts that should be considered in the breath of public communication about the past. The National Register of Historic Places lists about 700 sites in the “health” category, many of them hospitals, asylums and state schools, while AsylumProjects.org describes itself as “a historic asylum wiki anyone can edit” describing over 1,300 asylums in eight countries, including historical and current. While the Asylum Projects lists asylums for all 50 states, due to the wiki format, some state pages list just a few sites, while others, such as Pennsylvania, contain current and historical population statistics and descriptions of over 150 state hospitals, state schools, almshouses, sanitariums, and public and private psychiatric facilities.

Further, abandonment is a common enough fate for institutional spaces that their informal archiving through photography by professionals and so-called “urban explorers”

could be described as its own niche genre. On Facebook fan pages such as one titled simply “Abandoned Asylums,” which has over 30,000 “likes,” users can share and comment on photos of a variety of abandoned spaces. Independent websites also give people a place to collect their “Asylum” images. For example, Ethan McElroy (2013), who describes himself as an amateur photographer/historian, created a web site documenting historical information and photographs from dozens of Kirkbride Buildings, the most well-known and influential architectural design of asylums. Similarly, Opacity.us, the creation of graphic designer Tom Kirsch (n.d.), includes photographs from 172 abandoned locations and has received over 100,000 user comments. Abandoned photography has also been the subject of independent and mainstream publishing. Self-publishers Mark Scurman and Mark Moran of the franchise *Weird NJ*, which has published a monthly magazine of roadside oddities since 1989 as well as dozens of books, recently published two Asylum-related photo books. *Forsaken: Abandoned in and Around New Jersey* (2010) is “a 164 page full color, heavy gloss magazine devoted to abandoned and forgotten sites in and around the Garden State” and features text and photographs by New Jersey native and blogger Rusty Tagliareni of decaying buildings including schools, military grounds, vacation retreats, railways, and five abandoned asylums.

Photo books of abandoned asylum photography include two notable examples worthy of closer comparison—one published by MIT Press and the other by The Museum of Disability History. In 2009, The MIT Press published *Asylums: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals* with New York-based photographer and architect Christopher Payne. The 207-page oversized color book features photographs of

public mental hospitals with an introductory essay by renowned best-selling author and neurologist Oliver Sacks. The result of a six-year project by Payne in which he visited 70 hospitals in 30 states, the book uses thematic sections which emphasize the similarities between institutions. Sections focus on exterior architecture, seclusion rooms, recreation, hygiene, self-sufficiency, surgical and acute care, clinical research, and death. Like most photography in the genre, the photos of crumbling interiors, overgrown grounds, the redundancy of personal items made impersonal (a cabinet of 20 toothbrushes, a pile of 50 seat cushions, a wall of hundreds of cremation canisters), and above all the absence (of people, of bodies, of life) imbue the photographs with sadness, loss, and loneliness. And yet, the book's interpretive approach via introductory and closing essays suggests a referendum on the "negative public opinion of these hospitals" (p. 202) and on the civil rights model of mental healthcare.

Sacks characterizes mental hospitals as places where one could be "both mad and safe" and could find "recognition and respect," "companionship and community" (p. 5). The collection opens with the case of Anna Agnew, a patient admitted to Indiana Hospital for the Insane in 1878 after attempts to kill herself and her children. Sacks notes, "she felt profound relief when the institution closed protectively around her" (p. 1). Additionally, Sacks relays his personal memories of Bronx Hospital, where he worked as a neurologist for 25 years starting in 1966. From this position he observed that the shift from the model of "moral care" to patient and civil rights in the 1960s produced, in his opinion, negative results. He rejects the notion that the practice of running institutions with patient labor constitutes "'exploitation'" (scare quotes original to Sacks), and instead sees "the outlawing of work" as depriving patients from its therapeutic and normalizing

benefits (p. 4). Photos depicting self-sufficiency, the way institutions often produced their own food, power, and material needs through on-site production, are described as especially appealing to Payne, who writes, “the idea of self-contained communities ... seemed to speak to a more environmentally sensible way of life.” While the buildings he photographs are abandoned, he notes that most of the places he visited were still operational, but on a vastly smaller scale such that large sections of institutional property and buildings were no longer in use. While the book seeks to soften and add complexity to the flattened image of institutions as “snake pits, hells of chaos and misery, squalor and brutality,” (p. 1) it simultaneously embraces a protectionist, apolitical, and idealistic view of institutionalization that sits in stark contrast to the rhetoric of disability advocates.

By way of comparison, in 2013 the Museum of Disability History published *Abandoned Asylums of New England*, originally self-published by photographer John Grey, and reprinted with historical commentary by curator Doug Platt as part of the museum’s “Abandoned History” series. “From the gigantic Kirkbride campuses to the airy tuberculosis hospitals,” the product description states, “Gray’s photography reveals through its compositions the poignant echoes of the lives lived, and sometimes lost, at these disappearing asylums.” In an interview with the *Providence Journal*, Platt says of the impact of the book and the photographs: “This book will provide readers with a rich and engaging visual experience, and I hope that it will also lead to a desire to explore the history of individuals who lived out portions of their lives in these, and other institutions. I hope this book will be an opportunity for reflection on attitudes about ‘disability’” (“Interview with Doug Platt,” 2013). Overall, Platt describes the book as a testament to

progress in treatment: “[The photographs] help illustrate the enormity of effort and resources society put into erecting these structures to address the social issue of ‘the insane,’ and contrasts that with their current state of decrepitude ... In a way, the absence of people in the photographs serves as a testament to this now abandoned form of treatment.”

Side by side, these two photo books serve as an example of the politics of public memory. As Marita Sturken (1997) argues, memory not only “defines a culture,” it is also “the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed” (p. 1). According to Barbie Zelizer (1995), “collective memory is always a means to something else”—it enables the maintenance of social groups, political power, and cultural meaning-making (p. 226). While working with highly similar photographic content, the visual culture of “the Asylum” is being interpreted in radically different ways that ultimately seek to reconsider the social value of institutionalization in the present.

Among the many reuses of institutions, popular entertainment is perhaps the most visible—and the least likely to take on the politics of “the Asylum” directly. Further, the abandonment, reuse and commemoration of former institutional spaces inevitably resonates with fictional representations of “the Asylum.” Hollywood has long viewed asylums as atmospheric settings for horror. In 2008, Medfield State Hospital in Massachusetts was used as a location for Martin Scorsese’s film *Shutter Island*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a U.S. marshal investigating the disappearance of a patient at the fictional Ashecliffe Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Eastern State Penitentiary, “America’s Oldest Prison” and a Philadelphia historic landmark, was used as the setting for the 1995 film *Twelve Monkeys*, in which Bruce Willis (1995) stars as a time traveling

convict sent back in time to investigate the origins of a man-made plague. Eastern State Penitentiary has also been used as a filming location for the lesser-known movies *Return to Paradise* (1998) and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), as well as three music videos. Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, OH was a filming location for four feature films, including *Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Lesser known examples also include *Choke* (2008) filmed at Essex County Psychiatric Hospital in Cedar Grove, NJ and the cult film *Session 9* (2001) filmed at Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts before it was demolished. The plot of *Session 9* takes abandonment as its subject and tells the story of an asbestos cleaning crew working in “an abandoned mental hospital with a horrific past that seems to be coming back.”

Cinematic fictionalization is often intimately related to the “real-life” history of institutions. The Academy Award-winning classic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) was filmed at an operational psychiatric hospital, Oregon State Hospital (1883-present). Ken Kesey’s novel of the same name was inspired by his experience as an orderly in a psychiatric ward and published at the dawn of the deinstitutionalization movement in 1962. This was just one year after Erving Goffman’s (1961) seminal sociological critique *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, which was conducted via participant observation at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., a federal institution with over 7,000 patients. While *Cuckoo’s Nest* has become iconic in both literary and cinematic history, today, Oregon State Hospital remains “the state’s primary state-run psychiatric facility for adults,” serving those needing “long-term intensive psychiatric treatment for severe and persistent mental illness who are civilly or criminally committed” (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.).

In a more recent example of the thin line between fact and fiction in the reuse of institutions as filming locations, the documentary *Cropsey* (2009) focuses on the urban legend of “an escaped mental patient who lived in the old abandoned Willowbrook Mental Institution,” and his connection to the 1987 disappearance of Jennifer Schweiger, a twelve-year-old girl with Down syndrome, from her Staten Island neighborhood. Much of the filming of *Cropsey* takes place at the decrepit Willowbrook State Hospital (1947-1987) where kidnapper Andre Rand had worked as an orderly. Willowbrook, an institution housing people perceived as developmentally disabled, was made infamous first by Senator Robert Kennedy in 1965 who referred to it as a “snake pit” and then by Geraldo Rivera’s 1972 expose *Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace*, which won the 30-year-old investigative reporter a Peabody Award for public service. Recently, Willowbrook has been said to have inspired the creators of the television show *American Horror Story* (2011-present) in which the entire second season takes place in an “Asylum” for the criminally insane in the year 1964. In episode 13, “Madness Ends,” a journalist brings cameras into the fictional Briarcliff Insane Asylum to document inhumane conditions, creating an exposé that launches her into fame.

Beyond the use of Asylum themes in fictionalizations, several cable networks have recently created reality-based programming on the subject of paranormal research, creating a new popular formula through which the public can encounter “the Asylum.” The frontrunner of these shows was the Syfy Network’s *Ghost Hunters* (2004-present), followed quickly by the History Channel’s *Paranormal State* (2007-2011), the Travel Channel’s *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present) and *Paranormal Challenge* (2011), A&E’s *Extreme Paranormal* (2009), and Syfy’s own *Ghost Hunter* spin offs, *Ghost Hunters*

International (2008-2012) and *Ghost Hunters Academy* (2009-2010). Such shows feature a mix of ghost stories, interviews, historical information, and “paranormal research” at a variety of often historic sites including hotels, graveyards, private residences, battlefields, prisons, and asylums. One or more of the above series have filmed at: Lake County Poor House, OH; Willard Asylum for the Insane, NY; Rolling Hills Asylum, NY; Waverly Hills Sanatorium, KY; West Virginia State Penitentiary, WV; Northern State Hospital, WA; Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, WV; Clovis Avenue Sanitarium, CA; Overbrook Asylum, NJ; Norwich State Hospital for the Insane, CT; Old Charleston Jail, SC; Illinois Hospital for the Incurable Insane/Peoria Asylum, IL; Letchworth Village Developmental Center, NY; Cole County Poor Farm/Ashmore Estates, IL; Hill View Manor, PA; and Tooele Hospital, Utah.⁷ Since these shows are always shot on location at the landmarks and buildings reported to be haunted, they are carried by networks that feature a mix of travel and educational programming, and with the exception of the SyFy Network, these networks feature mostly “unscripted” or “documentary” entertainment.

In addition to being a medium through which the general public might learn something about the history of institutionalization and/or be exposed to mythic stories that use “the Asylum” as their setting, it is reasonable to assume that such shows also drive tourism to the locations they feature. One model of local tourism that appears economically viable for some owners of former asylums and prisons is to offer historical ghost tours and overnight paranormal investigations year-round, and host haunted attractions during the Halloween season. It is worth noting that ghost-themed attractions at historic places are neither a new phenomenon nor one limited to historic asylums. Approaches to such programming can vary widely among tourist attractions that attempt

to offer some combination of education and entertainment in order to remain economically viable. One historic ghost tour might be written by or in collaboration with a professional curator or historian, while another might rely more on the amateur local historian, performer, or storyteller to craft a night of entertainment for visitors. Eastern State Penitentiary is one example of a site run by a non-profit organization that has public education as part of its mission. While haunted programming provides for the majority of its operating budget, it allows the site to be open all year round for (non-haunted) historic tours and exhibits (Eastern State Penitentiary, 2011). In contrast, the privately-owned Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, Kentucky provides no professional interpretative programming other than ghost tours offered once per week by a “paranormal expert” (Waverly Hills, 2013). The only other way for the public to access Waverly Hills is by booking a private paranormal investigation.

Perhaps surprisingly, haunted attractions represent an entire industry. According to Haunt World, a haunt industry professional organization and publisher of *Haunt World Magazine*, haunted attractions generated \$1 billion dollars in ticket sales in the United States in 2012 (Haunt World, 2012). Haunt World estimates that there are about 1,200 haunted attractions across the country charging admission—that’s not including the estimated 300 amusement parks that produce haunted attractions or the 3,000 charity attractions. The average attraction hosts about 8,000 visitors per season. About 5% of attractions are described as “mega,” hosting between 40,000 – 80,000 visitors per season. In other words, in total the haunt industry is a fairly large-scale phenomenon.

It is possible that haunted attractions have been held at former institutions over the years at smaller scales, too. According to the *Boston Globe*, Foxborough State

Hospital (1889-1976)⁸ was the site of a “community haunted attraction” at some point after it closed in 1976, but before it was turned into condominiums (Morgan Bolton, 2010). Upon the demolition of the Old Lehi Hospital (1921-1968) in Utah, the *Salt Lake Free Press* reported that the location had been used as a “haunted hospital” in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite the fact that it does not appear that the hospital was dedicated to mental health treatment in particular, it developed a mythology about ghost nurses and “crazed” doctors. Each Halloween, the attraction featured “students playing the screaming insane asylum patients interacting with frightened guests” (West, 2010).

There are numerous examples of historic institutions that currently feature some combination of ghost tours, paranormal investigation, and/or haunted attractions. Peoria State Hospital, also known as Bartonville State Hospital or Illinois Asylum for the Incurable Insane (1902-1973) is home to the zombie-themed attraction “The Haunted Infirmary” (The Haunted Infirmary, n.d.). Paranormal tours are offered at Hill View Manor (1925-2004), formerly Lawrence County Home for the Aged (Hill View Manor, n.d.). Cole County Poor Farm, later known as Ashmore Estates (1916-1987) is available for private paranormal investigations and will host a haunted attraction for the first time in the 2013 season (Ashmore Estates, n.d.). Genesee County Poor House (1820-1975), now known as Rolling Hills Asylum, is the site of public and private paranormal investigations and flashlight tours (Rolling Hills Asylum, 2013). The Rolling Hills Asylum web site features a particularly campy voice-over in which a deep, male voice describes the location as “a hotbed of paranormal activity”:

Throughout the years [Rolling Hills] has operated as a poor farm, infirmary, orphanage, tuberculosis hospital, nursing home, *and more*. Past residents and inmates consist of widows, orphans, physically disabled, mentally unstable,

murderers, *and more*. Over 1,700 bodies are buried in unmarked graves and hundreds more deaths went undocumented. Rolling Hills Asylum is known for a plethora of phenomenon including disembodied voices, doors slamming, footsteps, sounds of furniture moving, full body apparitions, shadow people, ghostly touches, and *numerous* ‘class A’ EVP [electronic voice phenomenon]... (Rolling Hills Asylum, 2013)

In contrast to the spoofy approach of Rolling Hills, Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum is an example of an attraction with a clean, professionally designed web site that highlights both history and preservation issues (Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, 2009). Purchased from the state of West Virginia in 2007 when it was known as Weston State Hospital, the owners changed its name back to the original Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum (1864-1994). Trans-Allegheny offers perhaps one of the most complete arrays of Asylum-themed tourist attractions. Several themed “Heritage Tours” are offered year round focusing on the cemetery/farm, medical center, and the Asylum’s connection to civil war history. Historic tours cover topics such as “The history of the treatment of the insane prior to state run facilities as well as the people instrumental in improving that treatment,” “the nationwide influence of the Kirkbride Theory,” “The effects the Civil War had on the construction of the oldest parts of the hospital,” “The socioeconomic influence of the facility throughout history, including both World Wars and the Depression Era,” and “Medical procedures used throughout the years.” Alternately, visitors can also take “semi-guided” photography tours that do not include historical information. Trans-Allegheny also offers “ghost tours,” and a series of seasonal events in October including movie screenings, a costume ball, and a haunted house called “Aberration.” The stated purpose of the site is preservation: “With the aid of government grants, private donations, fundraising events, and a team of dedicated local volunteers, we

are committed to restoring the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum to its former grandeur, thus reviving the local economy and preserving an important piece of American history.”⁹

The use of history by ghost hunt shows and “asylum” tourism follows patterns in popular uses of the past in general. By Foote’s categories, these may be sites in the process of “obliteration,” as Foote uses this category to denote pieces of history relegated to “folklore.” When popular culture and history mingle, scholarly reaction tends to be divided. Popular uses of the past have been characterized as dangerous, inaccurate, and distasteful, on the one hand, and as integral to community, identity, and social cohesion on the other. Scholars with an interest in the role of the State in constituting collective memory see the potential for representations of the past to be used as instruments of State propaganda (Connerton, 2008; Ricoeur, 2004; Wertsch, 2002). Sharing the concerns of Marxist and Critical theory, others are focused primarily with ideological critiques, arguing that commercially viable representations of the past generally serve to reinforce a conservative social agenda (Biesecker, 2002; Sturken, 1997). Meanwhile, those interested in accuracy can be found scolding members of the general public, politicians, and the media for misrepresenting historical facts (Kammen, 1993). Others fear that the authenticity of the past is too often degraded through commodification and sanitation via the heritage and tourism industries (Barthel, 1996; Lowenthal, 1998). Simultaneously, more hopeful views see the past as source of shared meaning and values that can support community and identity in positive ways (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). Indeed, such scholars find that uses of the past often reflect not a top-down imposition of stories about the past, but a genuinely democratic bottom-up consensus (Glassberg, 2001; Linenthal,

2001). Many challenge the notion that the public are passive receivers of mass messaging, instead acknowledging the possibility of complicity between the public and the powers that be (Schwartz, 1988) as well as the public's ability to actively negotiate and create meaning (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

Ghosts of "the Asylum"

The narrative, visual, and physical reuse of "Asylums" as horror-themed, ghostly entertainment also resonates with the broader representational history of disability. Histories of disability have enabled connections between the locations disabled people have occupied during particular eras and their cultural portrayals (Braddock & Parish, 2001; Carey, 2009; Foucault, 2009; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Stiker, 1999; Trent, 1994). Perhaps most notably, Foucault's *History of Madness* (2009) argues that madness, rather than being a natural phenomenon discovered by the science and profession of psychiatry, is a social construction, the development of which he traces through three periods of Western European history: the end of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and the Modern Age. In tracing shifts in the conception of madness, Foucault also finds associated changes in the way one thought of one's self and one's neighbor during each period. While this history may seem far removed from our contemporary experience of "the Asylum," many of Foucault's themes—fear, alienation, haunting, place and confinement—remain palpable in the public memory of institutionalization today.

For example, Foucault begins at the end of the Middle Ages when the leper houses have closed and the leper is no longer a great threat to society. Still, Foucault describes the leper houses as retaining their former meaning. The spaces of containment

the leper inhabited “belong to the domain of the inhuman” and the disease’s “ghost still hovered” (p. 3). After a period of two centuries (p. 8), madness took the place of leprosy, engendering the same fear and eventually the same impulse for confinement. During this time, Foucault describes madness as having a diffuse and magical quality, “linked to Evil” (p. 134), and yet, a definite quality of human experience, “an inevitable peril,” though not one that could be isolated or made concrete:

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance had felt the menace of insanity at all the weak points of the world. They feared its lurking presence beneath the thin veneer of appearances, and their evenings and nights were haunted by presentiments that resulted in the spectacular bestiaries and apocalypses of their imagination. (p. 102)

In contrast, the Classical Age made madness the opposite of reason, so incompatible with reason that Foucault refers to it as *unreason*. Unreason was not only isolated through physical confinement during the Classical Age, Foucault argues that it was also conceptually isolated from reason, so that it was eradicated from both the figurative and the literal “landscape” (p. 102). If prior to the Classical Age, madness was a universal hazard of consciousness, it had to be “alienated” (p. 103) from that consciousness before it could be alienated socially through confinement: “something inside man was placed outside of himself and pushed over the edge of our horizon” (p. 80). What was during the Middle Ages and Renaissance a free floating, haunting, ever-present possibility, now took a concrete form in unreason, a form that could be recognized as “social types,” “the debauched and the dissolute, homosexuals, magicians, libertines and suicides,” characters distinguishable from “a social norm” (p. 102). Once conceptually isolated and identifiable, such social types were able to be physically isolated through confinement (p. 102). Of the Modern Age, Foucault explains that

psychiatry “secretly inherited the relationship that classical culture as a whole had set up with unreason” and despite “good intentions, madness was still haunted by an ethical view of unreason, and the scandal of its animal nature” (p. 159).

The association between fear, the monstrous, and disability persisted into the history of the 20th century. The era most often cited with respect to fear and institutionalization is the American eugenics movement of the early 1900s (Davis, 1995; Gould, 1996; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Through the budding science of human evolution, the rise of statistics, and the invention of intelligence testing, eugenics construed certain kinds of human difference as threats to the public health and the future of the nation (Trent, 1994; Davis, 1995; Gould, 1996; Black, 2003). This included ethnic, moral, mental, and physical differences that were seen as undesirable genetic traits that should be bred out of the national gene pool. The term “feeble-minded,” used both as a general term for undesirables and a specific term for people deemed intellectually inferior (Trent, 1994), is a hallmark of this period (and not coincidentally, is the term used in Pennhurst’s original name). This breeding out of undesirable traits was pursued throughout the United States, as well as internationally and most notably in Nazi Germany, through targeted regulation of immigration, coerced sterilization, and segregation through institutionalization (Black, 2003). The fear-mongering that accompanied this movement in the realms of science, politics, and popular culture created a representational legacy that persists in various forms today (Currell & Cogdell, 2006).

Among the limited representational options for disabled characters in contemporary film and television is “the monster,” a physically or mentally deformed

figure whose main role in any story is to threaten, haunt, hunt, and often, to kill or be killed (Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994). Today, it is somewhat more common to see representations of intellectual disability in particular as pitiable, angelic, or sentimentalized in part due to the work of the parents' movement of the 1960s during which the image of the "retarded citizen" was strategically developed specifically to replace threatening "negative" representations of the eugenics era with morally-instructive "positive" ones (Carey, 2009). Still, these kinds of representational strategies tend to exist in tandem with one another rather than ever achieving total erasure. For example, the recent television program *American Horror Story* (2011-present) features actress Jamie Brewer as a young woman with Down syndrome who habitually appears uninvited in the Harmon family's (haunted) house, always accompanied by an initial startle at her presence and then followed by threatening dialogue, such as, "you're gonna die." Even beyond horror stories and monster characters, scholars have suggested that fear of disabled bodies in the presumed able-bodied viewer (not unlike the alienation between reason and unreason described by Foucault) guides most popular representations of disability (Shakespeare, 1994). In the documentary film *Code of the Freaks*, disability studies scholar Carrie Sandahl says that since the function of disability in Hollywood films is primarily to create and then relieve anxiety about people with disabilities in the viewer: "In some ways, they're all horror movies" (Sandahl, 2013).

While the forces of cultural representation have certainly shaped public memory of "the Asylum" with respect to disability imagery, there is reason to believe that the ghosts of institutionalization also serve more complex social uses. For example, Judith Richardson (2003) argues that "hauntings demand deeper investigation because of what

they reveal about how senses of the past and of place are apprehended and created, what they suggest about the marginal and invisible things that, for many recent scholars, texture and define identity, politics, and social life (p. 3). Kathleen Brogan (1998) finds a trend in contemporary fiction toward ghost stories that attempt to address large scale social injustices not yet rectified in the public consciousness. For example, Brogan considers Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, both a ghost story and the story of slavery in the United States, as part of this trend. Geographer Tim Edensor (2005) argues that the ghosts of industrial ruins work in opposition to constructed memory spaces (e.g., "heritage districts and museums" p. 830). He explains, "dominant strategies of remembering tend to exorcise haunted places" (p. 829) – in other words, they tend to strip the "multiplicity" and "ambiguity" of meaning from the place. In contrast, at sites of ruins, the ghostly "resists interpretation and thus retains its power" (p. 836). Ruins also offer access to affective and sensual memory experiences as an alternative to the ordered way of remembering associated with official memory sites. In this way, ruins "confront the limitations of narrative remembering, for many dimensions of memory are neither available for inclusion in stories nor communicable" (p. 846). Ruins, Edensor notes, also attract those who seek ghosts "to recall that which has been forgotten, whether through deliberate political strategies or because the horrors of the recent past are too painful to confront" (p. 835).

Pennhurst State School and Hospital has been no exception to recent cultural trends in the physical, visual and narrative reuse of "the Asylum." Since 1986, pieces of

the original 1,200 acre Pennhurst campus have been converted for use by the Southeastern Veterans' Center. *The Mercury* began reporting on memorialization efforts in 2008 when the PMPA was established to advocate for the site's preservation and eventually sponsored a historical marker for the site (Hays, 2008). In 2009, the PMPA won grants from the Bard Foundation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and American Institute of Architects' Community Design Collaborative to fund a redevelopment plan suggesting a path to the ethical reuse of the 111-acre, 11-building "historic core," including residential, educational, and research facilities.

The digital public memory of Pennhurst is also robust. In part, this includes the informal digitization of news archives, via photo sharing sites such as Flickr, which allow photos of old newspapers to be posted and shared, and in the case of archival video, via YouTube. Prominent among this digital public memory of Pennhurst is the 1968 local broadcast news expose *Suffer the Little Children*. Similar to the more widely recognized expose on Willowbrook, *STLC* is known for documenting overcrowding and neglect at Pennhurst and raising public awareness about institutionalization in general.

Additionally, the PMPA assembled a content-rich site that features an interactive timeline, original videos, archival and contemporary photography, and sections for reader comments, including one especially devoted to Pennhurst memories (PMPA, 2009).

Urban explorer photography, as well as a great deal of historical information, can also be found at "El Peecho's Pennhurst Page" (El Peecho Productions, n.d.). Conceived of as a virtual memorial, the front page announces that the site is "dedicated to the residents of Pennhurst." Unlike other sites of this kind, this one includes transcripts from three interviews (one resident and two former employees) and dozens of scanned documents,

mostly dating to the 1970s and 1980s, including board reports, patient case studies, employee bulletins, behavior modification reports, and abuse reports. Contemporary photographs of Pennhurst are widely available online, including at the already mentioned Opacity.us, and have appeared among the places featured in Weird NJ's book of abandoned photography, *Forsaken: Abandoned in and Around New Jersey* (2010).

Pennhurst's atmospheric setting has also made it the subject of various haunt-themed stories. It was the filming location for an independent horror movie called *Pennhurst* (tagged: "You'd have to be crazy to go back"), released in the U.K. in 2012 and starring Hillary Duff's sister Haylie Duff. Paranormal television has been equally drawn to the Pennhurst campus, which has been featured on the shows *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Paranormal Challenge*, and *Extreme Paranormal* (in some cases on multiple episodes) and was the setting for a special live Halloween episode of *Ghost Hunters* in 2011. In 2013, the History Channel produced a special one-hour episode of *Haunted History* called "Lost Souls of Pennhurst." Visitors and tourists may pay to see Pennhurst in person via public or private paranormal tours at which they may bring their own audio and video equipment to record paranormal activity. And, since 2010, Pennhurst State School and Hospital has been the site of the controversial Halloween attraction "Pennhurst Asylum."

The Birth of a Haunted "Asylum" in Story, Scene, and Dialogue

What are the interrelationships between different versions of the Pennhurst story in local news and at the haunted attraction? How did the most dominant versions of the Pennhurst story get established? What cultural forces and individuals shaped these stories? Why has Pennhurst and the stories told about it come to matter now? What is the

haunted attraction's relationship to history and what is its social and cultural function? Through searching archives, analyzing articles and letters in contemporary local newspapers, conducting fieldwork at the attraction and advocacy meetings, and interviewing some of the prominent figures in the discussion, I studied the forces that shaped the rhetoric of the PMPA, the "Pennhurst Asylum," and the public conversation that attempted to define Pennhurst—what it was in the past, and what it is today. I conducted my investigation using three methods: narrative analysis, ethnographic observation, and key informant interviews. First, I conducted a narrative analysis of newspaper articles and reader letters/comments published on the subject of Pennhurst in 2010 and 2011. Second, I conducted participant observation at the haunted attraction and created descriptions and analyses of the display, performance, and related social interactions. I observed both the social "scene" and the theatrical creation of "scene," or setting and action. Third, I interviewed the key storymakers who are shaping the current public memory of Pennhurst in order to put personal memory in dialogue with public memory.

Story

Memory can be communicated in many ways—images, objects, archives—each with its own unique set of theoretical considerations. The relationship between memory and narrative is no exception to this rule. The sculpting of real events into narrative form makes events comprehensible and, therefore, meaningful. As Hayden White describes, the "value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (White in Sturken, 1997, p. 8). As such, the

narrativization of the past inevitably leads to “narrative linkages and omissions” (Kitch, 1999, p. 137) so that we can think of memory achieving simplification through narrative (Wertsch, 2002). Further, narratives may seek closure through morals and lessons that can be extended to the world outside the narrative (Kitch, 1999). Indeed, this is one of the ways a memory can be made “useful” in the present (Zelizer, 1995). Fitting events into existing narratives facilitates continuity across time and enables events that conflict with existing narratives to be either “forgotten” or reinterpreted. As Freud suggested in conceptualizing secondary revision, “renarrativization is essential in memory; indeed, it is its defining quality” (Sturken, 1997, p. 42).

Narrative analysis involves identifying patterns in the formal elements of storytelling. Most famously executed by Vladimir Propp (1928/1968) in his study of Russian fairytales, this work, like earlier work in structuralism and semiotics, endeavors to make “the system” the unit of analysis, considering relations between terms as an unconscious infrastructure (Levi-Strauss, 1963). Due to the relationship between story and memory, narrative analysis is frequently used in contemporary memory studies.

Carolyn Kitch (2007) explains the variety of elements involved in this analysis as focused on the what, how, and who of storytelling:

This kind of study takes note of the events and anecdotes in stories (what is in them and what is left out) as well as overall plot development (how, in what order and with what language, the story is told; how it opens; how its conflict is established and resolved; and how it ends) and characterization (who, within the story structure, emerges as the most salient players and how they interact). (p. 40)

Narrative analyses may attend to all or some of these elements. The benefit of this approach is that by attending to the system of meaning as it is communicated in the

elements of story, one can more easily compare stories from a variety of sources and attempt to identify patterns.

In order to understand the public conversation about Pennhurst during the haunted attraction controversy, I collected and analyzed all available news articles and reader letters on the subject of Pennhurst from 2010 and 2011, the first two years the “Pennhurst Asylum” was open. I attempted to gather a total census of news and letters by cross-checking three news databases (Access World News, Proquest, LexusNexus) and using the search term “Pennhurst” to identify the database that offered the most complete coverage.

I used Access World News to identify 281 articles from Pennsylvania newspapers and 56 articles from outside Pennsylvania. I separated these by geography in order to do a preliminary vetting. This included reviewing the list and separating obituaries, letters, entertainment listings, news, duplicate stories, misidentification (i.e., when the term “Pennhurst” refers to a street name, rather than the institution), and any other relevant topics. I discovered that the majority of news items appearing outside of Pennsylvania were a result of multiple outlets picking up one or two stories from the Associated Press. As a result, I decided to focus my analysis on the Pennsylvania papers only, which was where the topic was covered most in depth.

Of the 281 Pennsylvania articles initially identified, the final relevant sample included 224 cases. The articles removed from the sample were misidentifications or duplicates (in which an instance of publishing was listed twice). News articles appearing in multiple publications in nearly the same form were included in the set, but coded as

“Syndicated.” Of the 224 relevant articles appearing in PA newspapers in 2010 or 2011 containing the search term “Pennhurst,” 64 were Original News Articles, 20 were Syndicated News Articles, 79 were Letters or Comments¹⁰, 14 were Editorials or Columns, 18 were Event Listings (mostly for the haunted attraction, but also for a protest for the haunted attraction as well as for a theatrical production based on the autobiography of Roland Johnson, a former Pennhurst resident), and 29 were Obituaries. The obituaries were included in the sample because they reflect a subsection of the shrinking living memory of Pennhurst—people who were employed by the institution. The news articles, editorials, and columns reflect the work of 13 different bylined journalists and 15 different publications (though some are owned by the same media conglomerate). The 79 reader letters and comments appeared in 9 different publications; 56 of them (or more than half) appeared in *The Mercury*. Of the 64 original news articles, 27 appeared in *The Mercury*.

Once I compiled my set, I used Atlas.ti, software for qualitative data analysis, to help me organize the material and note patterns. I had already reviewed a preliminary data set of approximately 30 articles and letters printed in *The Mercury*, so I began coding the full set at first reading. In particular, I indexed characterizations of key figures, such as the attraction owner, disability advocates, and former residents and employees of Pennhurst. I also indexed all descriptions of what kind of place Pennhurst was and is. I indexed patterns in beginnings and endings to the Pennhurst story as well as to characterization of the role of institutions in society in general. I also indexed topics such as the creation of local jobs, zoning issues, distinctions between psychiatric and intellectual disability, eyewitness accounts, and the use of analogies to frame Pennhurst’s

place in history. After this step, I grouped the coded text, or “quotes,” into “families” based on larger themes. Atlas.ti allows the researcher to look at all quotes in a single family in one view, but also to switch directly back to the context of each quote. One of the benefits of using software for this process is that it allowed me to be comprehensive with my analysis of the entire set of articles while still keeping the context of the each article or letter in mind. I was also able to see how family groupings related to one another as elements of story. For example, the characterization of the attraction owner as a villainous profiteer was part of a larger narrative that saw the attraction as an extension of the mistreatment of Pennhurst residents in the past.

Scene

Ethnography is a methodology, that is, an “overall design” for research, employing a set of interrelated theories and methods (Jensen, 1991, p. 5). The debate over what qualifies as “ethnographic” methods primarily revolves around the assumptions of traditional ethnographic research, that ethnography should entail long-term fieldwork in which the researcher studies an entire culture through immersion. Without this defining feature, critics argue, research which claims to be ‘ethnographic’ fails to take advantage of the primary advantage of ethnographic methods, the production of ‘thick description,’ and is thus often referred to as ‘ethnographically thin’ (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Darling-Wolf, 2003; Murphy, 2003; Ortner, 1995). This is further associated with a concern that such research not only fails to embrace participant observation as the primary method of inquiry, but, in fact, fails to embrace any empirical methods. This tendency leads Kraidy & Murphy (2008) to describe such work as “*diluted in theory*” (p. 341, emphasis is original). Still, many argue that the assumptions of traditional ethnography are no longer

relevant given the compression of time and space associated with modernity, the presumed “hybridity” of culture, and the advent of “native” ethnographies, in which the researcher is already familiar with both the language and customs under study (Hannerz, 2003; Bird, 2003; Marcus, 1998; Pieterse, 1994; Garcia-Canclini, 1995). While I don’t consider the present study an “ethnography,” I do use participant observation and ethnographic writing in order to produce “thick description” of the scene at the haunted attraction.

I conducted participant observation at the “Pennhurst Asylum” during the Halloween season of 2010 and 2011. I attended the attraction eight times (four each year), including spending hours each time outside the entrance where patrons gathered to socialize. This was also the scene of many conversations about the public controversy surrounding the attraction and about personal memories and folklore of the place before and after its closing. I focused my observations on how “Pennhurst Asylum” structures public memory of Pennhurst as well as observing the ways community members attempted to make sense of the place in conversation with one another. Since the attraction proceeds as interactive performance, note taking was challenging. I often dictated my notes by audio recording immediately after going through the attraction. Once, I attempted to scribble notes while I walked through the attraction. I also attended with my husband several times and he assisted me with remembering and recording details. Since the attraction is an immersive, theatrical experience, recording fieldnotes included attention to sound, lighting, props, costumes, set design, space, pacing, action, actors, movement, voice—as well as my own reaction to the performance and the overall narrative. I adopted the process described by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) in their

book *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. The three primary features of this process are recording fieldnotes immediately after observation, indexing fieldnotes, and translating fieldnotes into an ethnographic text that may take the form of narrative, descriptive, reflexive or analytical writing.

In addition to my work at the haunted attraction, I also took a somewhat ethnographic approach to gathering additional background information, both on the social scene of disability advocates and other sites of public memory of “the Asylum” that informed my investigation, but were not central to it. For example, for one year I attended monthly board meetings of the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance and took fieldnotes during and after meetings in order to better understand member perspectives. I also attended several related disability advocacy events in 2010 and 2011, including conferences, the launch of a disability oral history web site, and speaking engagements by a local author who writes on disability-related subjects.

My background research also included reviewing news clippings in two archives: the Chester County Historical Society and Temple University’s Urban Archives. The Chester County Historical Society maintains a clippings file on Pennhurst and archives of about 20 local newspapers dating back to the time Pennhurst was established. Volunteers began collecting the clippings in the 1930s, when the Society moved into a bigger space that allowed them to expand their collection. The clipping file contains articles pasted into a book and spans 74 years, beginning in 1906, and is organized chronologically, ending in 1970. Temple University’s Urban Archives collection also holds a box of Philadelphia-area newspaper clippings about Pennhurst as part of their *Philadelphia Bulletin* collection. These are contained in envelopes and are somewhat organized by

decade and some broad category labels. The time period covered roughly includes the 1910s through the 1980s, though the majority of articles are from the later decades. In addition to doing an overview of the contents of both clippings collections, I also catalogued part of the Urban Archives clippings more closely in order to get a closer view. This involved recording the headline, newspaper, journalist, and date of 220 articles from 1915-1964. I also noted the general topic of each article, such as news on abuse, escapes, disease outbreak, superintendents and administration, deaths, investigations, etc. For key articles, I wrote short summaries, a sentence or two in length. While I ended up not focusing on a systematic analysis of the news archives, the archives did provide background for my overall analysis.

Finally, I also watched the ghost hunter shows on which Pennhurst has appeared, as well as watching episodes featuring other “haunted” landmarks in order to see what was formulaic to the genre and what was unique to the Pennhurst story. Ultimately, I found that the ghost hunt shows were very similar to my experience of the haunted attraction and so I did not focus my analysis on these programs. I also reviewed other texts, including amateur web sites with various connections to Pennhurst, the PMPA web site, the 1968 exposé *Suffer the Little Children*, several related films (such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *Cropsey*, and *Shutter Island*) and books featuring photography of abandoned places, including “asylums.”

Dialogue

The preservation of the past is often influenced by the actions of relatively small groups of people (Barthel, 1996; Glassberg, 2001; Linenthal, 2001). In order to understand how the dominant versions of the Pennhurst story came into public view, I

conducted key informant interviews with some of the most influential “storymakers.” In total, I conducted nine interviews, including members of the PMPA, a self-advocate, former Pennhurst residents and their caregivers, former Pennhurst employees, an employee of the haunted attraction, the designer of the haunted attraction, and the editor of a local newspaper.

I used informal interviewing, better thought of as “conversations,” or “mildly structured exchanges with room for spontaneous flow and unexpected turns” (Hannerz, 2003, p. 209). This mild structure may take the form of a general set of topics of discussion, rather than a specific set of questions that are posed to each participant. This technique also reflects a philosophical position that seeks a dialectical relationship between researcher and informant, acknowledging an exchange of information and meaning, rather than a unidirectional extraction of “data.”

The primary advantages of interview methods are the access to “multiple perspectives on a given topic,” and the ability to gather “more comprehensive information than might be possible with participant observation” (Newcomb, 1991, p. 101). While Newcomb (1991) suggests the disadvantages of interviews include the inability to gauge truthfulness of responses and the tendency for “canned” and “self-serving” responses, one could argue that these are all in fact part of the aforementioned strength of interview research – it reflects a “perspective” (p. 102).

All interviews were conducted with the approval of Temple University’s IRB and the signed consent of the informants. All interviewees consented to being interviewed “on the record” with their names and identities attached to their stories. I audio recorded all interviews and then took fieldnotes immediately following each interview in order to

capture my first impressions. Then, I listened back to each interview in order to transcribe important quotes and details into my fieldnotes. After compiling all the interviews, I shaped the fieldnotes into profiles of each informant. I chose to maintain each informant's unique story through the use of profiles because the interviewees were mostly selected due to their individual influence on the public memory of Pennhurst, rather than because they were representative of a particular group.

Put in the context of the history of institutionalization, memory theory, and the figure of "the Asylum" in popular culture, the "Pennhurst Asylum" attraction and the community dialogue it sparked both appear to be processes of public memory. Informal and even unintentional acts of remembering, as well as controversy, continue to fuel public memory of Pennhurst, turning a seasonal Halloween event into a call to remember for local advocates and other community members. Ultimately, the public controversy surrounding how to remember Pennhurst State School and Hospital reveals both rapid change and surprising stagnation in the role of institutionalization in the United States.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATING SANCTIFICATION: “THE ASYLUM” IN LOCAL NEWS AND
READER LETTERS

Remembering Pennhurst(s)

There was, and is, more than one Pennhurst. In local news media during the first two years after the haunted attraction known as “Pennhurst Asylum” opened to the public, the words of journalists, disability advocates, and other community members tangled over who owned the Pennhurst story, and what it symbolized.

Disability advocates and journalists both took on the role of public historian. They sought to educate the public about the “real history” of Pennhurst State School and Hospital, and they argued for Pennhurst’s representativeness as a “relic” of the culture of institutionalization in 20th century America. More than that, advocates, and many journalists, also crafted a universal story of “tragedy and triumph” that sanctified Pennhurst as hallowed ground. This story told of former Pennhurst residents who were victims of abuse and neglect, and of crusaders in the disability rights movement whose long battle eventually ended in legal victory and Pennhurst’s closure. Most of all, narrating sanctification for Pennhurst made the past useful in the present as a political strategy to support the continued closure of institutions for people with developmental disabilities, and to relocate them into group homes.

But just as disability advocates wrote letters to local newspapers to share what Pennhurst meant to them, so did other readers throughout the area. Some former employees of Pennhurst contested the image of their workplace as a site of collective pain and shame, instead communicating pride and even nostalgia for memories of Pennhurst

as a safe haven for former residents. Other community members contested the notion that the politics of representation could be brought to bear on a “fun, family-friendly” event such a haunted attraction. Perhaps most tellingly, many saw the controversy as an occasion to police the boundaries of the American sacred, often by drawing analogies between Pennhurst and places of pain already widely-venerated in American culture. In some cases, Pennhurst State School and Hospital was deemed unworthy of sacred treatment and excluded from the tapestry of stories that comprise American heritage on the basis that it seemed to fit better as part of the imagery of American horror films.

Overall, the publicly created memory of Pennhurst as it appeared in contemporary local news media reflected a process of selection. Narrators tended to focus on certain events from the past more than others, as well as on certain characters. Rather than contend with the question of collective or individual complicity when it came to Pennhurst’s past, they wrote of abuses without mentioning perpetrators, lawsuits without mentioning defendants, state-sanctioned segregation without mentioning state employees, legislators, or fellow citizens. In the pages of the local papers, there was no one culpable for Pennhurst’s past—but there was one clear villain in its present. In the reporting of current events, Pennhurst property owner Richard Chakejian appears as if on trial. Opponents of the haunted attraction easily vilify him for exploiting Pennhurst’s painful past for entertainment and profit; Chakejian and his supporters defend his character and laud the haunted attraction as a much needed economic stimulus. While the reuse of the Pennhurst campus became an occasion for sharing memories about its past, the controversy itself also became an outlet for the discomfort of collective shame.

Finally, my analysis also reflects a particular view on the function of journalism as more than a top-down delivery system for “information.” Rather, this case sees journalism as a form of ritual through which community values are expressed (Carey, 1989). Further, it can also be a venue for dialogue among community members in which many types of voices may be heard (van Dijk, 1988; Rosen, 1999). Somewhat predictably, there are not many voices of former residents in this story (though there are some), but there are those who act as compelling surrogates, either as family members or as people who see Pennhurst’s history as part of their heritage. As community members announce their place in the public conversation, the function of “interpretive communities” as sources for meaning generation also becomes apparent (Fish, 1980). As has been observed elsewhere, journalists wield their own force in this regard (Zelizer, 1992), but here each stakeholder in the Pennhurst story claims their own set of interpretive tools and related meanings. The picture created is a great deal more complex than one might assume would be possible to glean from the pages of the local newspaper.

The Controversy Ignites

In April 2010, months before local papers would break the news of the planned haunted attraction, a historical marker was dedicated near the Pennhurst campus, commemorating it as “a milestone in the disability civil rights movement.” As part of Pennsylvania’s State Historical Marker program, the marker text is one of the only official public narratives that testifies to Pennhurst’s past:

Between 1908 and 1987, more than 10,500 Pennsylvanians with developmental disabilities lived here. Public controversy over the inhumane treatment of residents and two decades of complex litigation, including three arguments before

the US Supreme Court, led to the institution's closure. Groundbreaking advocacy and new public policy, including transition to community-based living, made Pennhurst a milestone in the disabilities civil rights movement.

The Mercury, a newspaper that reported closely on the conditions at Pennhurst when it was operational, reported on the marker dedication ceremony and printed a letter from advocates who supported it. With these two exceptions, there was little talk of Pennhurst in the local news that year prior to the Halloween season.

Once Pennhurst property owner Richard Chakejian announced his plans for the abandoned buildings he purchased for \$2 million dollars from the state of Pennsylvania in 2008, the controversy caught the community's attention. On August 30, 2010, *The Mercury* published the first story about the planned haunted attraction ("'Pennhurst Asylum' Halloween attraction draws strong opinions"), immediately announcing the reuse plan as controversial. The online version of the article received 111 reader comments.

As David Glassberg (2001) observes, the history of a place is often not recognized until it is threatened, or "through the process of displacement" (p. 202). In the months that followed the announcement of the planned haunted attraction, *The Mercury* published 40 more stories about Pennhurst in its News and Opinion pages. In total in 2010 and 2011, 15 Pennsylvania newspapers published 84 news stories, 79 reader letters and comments, and 14 editorials and columns related to Pennhurst.¹¹ While early news focused on the controversy, later stories that reported on zoning hearings, an injunction request, and traffic and noise issues kept the issue alive for readers who continued to express their opinions through letters. Readers identifying themselves as associated with the developmental disability community expressed outrage and disgust at Chakejian's

plan to host a haunted attraction in which visitors would pay to be scared and entertained at a place where so much “real horror” took place. Diane Carey, Executive Director of the Arc of Chester County, wrote, “The Pennhurst Asylum is an affront to those who were forced into institutionalization in a time when there were few options for those with intellectual disabilities and their families... [it] only serves to sensationalize the horrors Pennhurst residents experienced” (Carey, 2010, p. 6). Other readers wrote in support of the planned attraction, often referring to it as harmless entertainment. One reader wrote to *The Mercury* of the plan, “An asylum is a popular theme. It's easily recognized. It's unpredictable. It is a good setting for horror. The show is about fear. Customers are coming for that experience and not a history lesson” (“Pennhurst deserves,” 2010, p. 6). Most importantly for memory studies scholars, the controversy surrounding how to deal with Pennhurst seemed to fuel public memory. As Brian Ladd (1997) observes, amidst calls to remember and calls to forget, forgetting is not possible. The controversy surrounding the reuse of the former Pennhurst State School & Hospital as a haunted attraction became an occasion for remembering, and for a few years at least, Halloween became an unintentional anniversary, and a call to remember for local disability advocates and journalists alike.

“Out of national shame came national triumph...”

When disability advocates and others gathered to dedicate Pennhurst’s historical marker in April of 2010, they passed around programs created by the Pennhurst Memorial & Preservation Alliance (PMPA), which titled the ceremony, "Tragedy & Triumph, Telling the Pennhurst Story." But the tragedy and triumph narrative was not

confined to the community of remembering that gathered that day. In fact, local disability advocates and journalists seemed to agree on the terms of Pennhurst's historical significance. News stories spoke of Pennhurst as the site of a battle for civil rights, and more than anything else, the subject of landmark litigation that ended in a legal victory. Advocates not only made the case for Pennhurst's historical significance, they narrated its sanctification by crafting a universal story of "tragedy and triumph." In many cases, journalists reflected this story, either by relying on advocates as sources, or in the case of *The Mercury*, by editorializing against the attraction. For advocates, the community-based living movement was described as if it were a phoenix that emerged from the metaphorical ashes of Pennhurst's tragedy.

In a story picked up by newspapers across Pennsylvania (and nationally), the Associated Press found that the debate happening among Spring City area residents was an occasion for journalism to do the work of public history:

Built shortly after the turn of the 20th century, Pennhurst grew to as many as 3,600 residents by the 1960s. It was closed in 1987 in the wake of a lawsuit alleging years of abuse and neglect, legal action that spawned years of appeals and three U.S. Supreme Court rulings. The suit alleged that residents had been found beaten by nurses, strapped to beds, left naked or alone and drugged into stupors. At the time, its 1,200 residents were sent to other facilities and patient advocates nationwide hailed the closure as a civil rights victory. (Associated Press, 2010b, p. 8)

This narrative construction, which foregrounds the opening and closing dates, like birth and death dates on a headstone, has the effect of compressing the entire history of the 20th century into a sentence or two. Used in almost identical ways by a variety of sources, it sets the stage for an understanding of Pennhurst as a relic from another time, a social tool

created by a logic of reform long disproved, but somehow inexplicably also inhabiting our own time into the mid-1980s.

By referencing the date of Pennhurst's opening and the social climate during its construction, narrators were also able to argue for Pennhurst's historical significance on the basis of its representativeness. Pennsylvania State Representative Thomas P. Murt wrote to the *Doylestown Intelligencer* of a time when "institutions like Pennhurst" were part of the standard of care:

For many years, individuals with intellectual disabilities were thought to be incapable of personal growth. As a result, starting in the late 19th century, many individuals with intellectual disabilities were housed in institutions like Pennhurst... Pennhurst is a relic of the past, when individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities were treated as less than human. (Murt, 2010, p. 10)

Representative Murt refers in general to the conventional wisdom of the late 19th century that ushered in institutionalization as a solution to the social problem of disability. Other narrators made similar gestures; one letter writer referred to Social Darwinism (Kessler, 2010c, pp. 1, 3, 5), while journalists cited the efforts of Dorothea Dix to develop homes for the "indigent insane," ("Pennhurst story," 2010, p. 6) and the American eugenics movement ("Volunteers needed," 2010, p. 2). All of these references situate Pennhurst as a symbol of a much more distant past than when it was last operational in the late 1980s. And they make the meaning of Pennhurst resonate beyond the boundaries of Spring City, Pennsylvania. As a letter to *The Mercury* argued, "Pennhurst is a part of local history, but its story is a part of national history" ("Pennhurst remembered," 2010, p. 12).

Situating Pennhurst as a symbol of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards disability undoubtedly serves the strategic purposes of contemporary advocates in the community-

based living movement. Still, the story told by advocates and journalists finds its central conflict not in Pennhurst's origins, but in the trial that led to its closure. While many newspapers reported only briefly on the controversy without engaging the tragedy and triumph narrative, they almost always cited the trial, Pennhurst's closure, and the mistreatment of residents as the basis for the institution's significance. The narrative focus on *Halderman v. Pennhurst* (1977) helps make the case for Pennhurst's historical significance as a legal precedent that would be used to close other institutions. More importantly in terms of Pennhurst's cultural meaning, focusing on the moment of legal victory sets the terms for the tragedy and triumph story, which allows for Pennhurst's sanctification by making it legible within a more universal narrative framework.

The Editorial page of *The Mercury* declared, "From a dark example of how people should be treated, [Pennhurst] became the agent that inspired change. That is the tragedy and the triumph" ("Pennhurst remembered," 2010, p. 12). The News section of *The Mercury* echoed the duality of Pennhurst's meaning: "[Pennhurst is] known both as a bastion of inhumane treatment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and as the impetus that changed institutionalization in this country" (Kessler, 2010e, pp. 1, 4). Another letter explained to the *Daily Local News*, "[the marker dedication] commemorated not just the end of what was for many a nightmare but the beginning of the end of much of the brutality implicit in the culture of institutionalization" ("Pennhurst story'," 2010, p. 6). News from *The Inquirer* also concurred, "The horrors at the former Pennsylvania Pennhurst Center led to landmark litigation that profoundly changed the treatment of the mentally handicapped" (Wood, 2010b, p. B03).

As these examples begin to show, in order to set up a story of legal victory and social progress, the tragedy and triumph narrative used by advocates and many journalists relies on a somewhat limited characterization of Pennhurst as “horrific.” Letter writers described the “devaluation of human beings” (Carey, 2010, p. 6) and a place with a “horrid history” (“Pennhurst a site,” 2010, p. 6). News from *Philadelphia Weekly* cited an advocate who attested, “People died there. Women were raped. There’s people buried throughout the property at this facility” (Goldberg, 2010, n.p.). An event listing for a protest against the haunted attraction referred to Pennhurst as a place where people “endured imprisonment” (“Protest of Pennhurst,” 2010, p. 5). News in *The Inquirer* cited Judge Raymond Broderick’s ruling to close Pennhurst, in which he attested to evidence of abuse, neglect, and sexual and physical assault at Pennhurst, and further concluded that the institution’s “depressing, restrictive routines” actually created impairments in Pennhurst residents (Wood, 2010b, p. B03). *The Associated Press* described the lawsuit that “alleged that residents had been found beaten by nurses, strapped to beds, left naked or alone and drugged into stupors” (Associated Press, 2010b, p. 8). Another news item from *The Inquirer* quoted the lead prosecutor in the Pennhurst case, David Ferleger, who described Pennhurst as “a place where people’s lives were wasted” (Wood, 2010a, B01). The *Philadelphia Metro* quoted the Arc of Pennsylvania, an organization boycotting the attraction because it “desecrates one of our nation’s most notorious institutions” (“The asylum is open”, n.p.).

As narrative resources, these characterizations of Pennhurst are so dark, they demand redemption in order to achieve narrative closure. In other words, it is only from the language of the “dark example” that victory and overcoming emerge. An editorial for

the *The Mercury* quoted Jennifer Clarke of the Public Interest Law Center, who argued, “The cloud of misunderstanding and fear over people with disabilities that led to people being segregated in poor living conditions was overcome because of the work done to close Pennhurst” (Strickler, 2010, pp. 1, 3). Quoted in the news section of *The Mercury*, former Arc of Pennsylvania President Pat Clapp saw a message of social change: “I think it goes to any of us, when you see something that needs to change, change it... The work is not yet done. Don't forget the past, don't let it happen again. Do what you have to do” (Kessler, 2010f, pp. 1, 6). *The Associated Press* said of the lawsuit that “patient advocates nationwide hailed the closure as a civil rights victory” (Associated Press, 2010b, p. 8).

Sanctification of the Pennhurst story was also achieved by focusing on advocates as agents of social change. An editorial for the *The Mercury* described the closing of Pennhurst as the culmination of “The tireless determination of families and human rights advocates” (Strickler, 2010, pp. 1, 3). News from *Philadelphia Weekly* credited PMPA board member Greg Pirmann for being “part of the institution’s sweeping post-expose reforms” (Goldberg, 2010, n.p.). News from *The Mercury* referred to advocates gathered for Pennhurst’s marker dedication ceremony as “heroes of the movement to end inequality for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Kessler, 2010f, pp. 1, 6). Indeed, one of the most striking things about the Pennhurst story as it appears in contemporary newspapers during this time is the sheer number of advocate voices—and as I will discuss later, the absence of an opposing side or guilty parties. The narrative focus on Pennhurst’s legal history lends itself to a focus on certain characters and organizations who were critical to the litigation itself, including organizational leaders, lawyers, and advocates in the parents’ movement. For example, The Arc, an advocacy

group led by parents that has local, state and national chapters, played a crucial role in the litigation. After *Halderman v. Pennhurst* was filed, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) joined the case to make it a class action lawsuit. Many current and former leaders of various chapters of The Arc wrote to local newspapers proudly asserting the important role The Arc played in closing Pennhurst. Charlotte Twaddell, past president of the Arc of Chester County, wrote to *The Daily Local News* of her work to close Pennhurst and advocate for former residents:

Nearly 50 years ago when I was a young mother, I became active in advocacy for the mentally challenged... Many years later, following years of hard work by so many persons and agencies, Pennhurst finally was closed.... We have come a long way in giving those folks a voice. (Twaddell, 2010a, p. 6)

Current Executive Director of the Arc of Philadelphia, J. Bruce Hulick wrote to *The Mercury*, “After many years of struggle and legal action, The Arc was able to first open public schools to children with disabilities, and then to close Pennhurst and bring all of our citizens out to the city they now call home” (Hurlick, 2010, p. 6).

Again, an emphasis on the role of advocates transforms the story into one worthy of sanctification. As Foote (1997) describes it, in order to sanctify a place of tragedy, a lesson must be learned, a heroic fight won, a sacrifice made. While the haunted attraction does much to reinforce the image of Pennhurst as “horrific,” if not tragic, it does little to honor the work of advocates, many of whom worked for decades to close Pennhurst and ensure that former Pennhurst residents were provided with services in the community. The threat of the haunted attraction is in part a threat to the legacy these advocates hope to leave behind. In particular, they had roles in gaining the right to education for people

with intellectual disabilities in the United States, and the community-based living movement.

Indeed, advocates were able to use the sanctification of Pennhurst's past in order to argue for the continued closure of institutions. *The Daily Item* reported on two issues of interest to advocates of the Arc of Susquehanna Valley: "taking a stand against... plans to turn Pennhurst State Hospital in Spring City into a haunted house" and "pushing for the closure of five state mental institutions... moving about 1,100 institutionalized residents into community-based homes" ("Valley group:," 2010, n.p.). Parent advocate Judy Iasiello wrote to *The Morning Call* to assert that state cuts in funding for community-based living for people with developmental disabilities threatened to "turn back the clock" on progress made through Pennhurst's closure:

When our daughter was born in 1962, large institutions like Pennhurst existed in Pennsylvania where people with disabilities were warehoused and treated inhumanely. Fortunately, Pennsylvania was a leader in closing many of these large facilities and moving to community-based services so people with disabilities could live in as normal an environment as possible near their families.

To jeopardize these community group homes would turn back the clock and undo progress we've made.... state centers that remain in Pennsylvania are receiving increased funding while funds for community-based homes are being cut.... I hope and pray our legislators will think about the quality of life issues as they choose what to cut and what needs to remain uncut. (Iasiello, 2011, A12)

Iasiello's statement shows the interrelation between past and present. She reads the closing of Pennhurst as a symbol of Pennsylvania's progressive movement toward providing community-based services, but at the same time acknowledges the threat of backsliding posed by a change in the allocation of state resources.

The sentiment that funding cuts could "turn back the clock" was also representative of the general response of disability advocates to the haunted attraction.

The attraction threatened the meaning of Pennhurst in particular ways. For advocates, it threatened their legacy. For supporters of community-based living and families whose community services were under threat by proposed changes to the state budget in 2011, the attraction represented public apathy to current need. Many voices echoed the sentiment that the attraction was an extension of historical oppression along the lines of the freak show, a product of the same “misguided thinking” (Twaddell, 2010a, p. 6) and fear that led to the institutionalization of people with disabilities in the early 20th century. An editorial for *The Mercury* during the attraction’s second year called it a reversal of victories won not only in the court room but also in the representation of “the mentally challenged” (“Pennhurst site attraction,” 2011, p. 6). In this way, the haunted attraction became part of the Pennhurst story, and a useful one at that—it allowed for the introduction of a villain into a story potentially filled with collective shame. A 2011 letter to *The Mercury* penned by PMPA co-president James Conroy and disability studies scholar Emily Smith Beitiks called the attraction “the final indignity,” and declared that due to its irresponsible reuse, “The name Pennhurst is infamous in the disability rights movement — not once, but twice” (Conroy & Smith Beitiks, 2011, p. 6).

The association of fear with Pennhurst—and by extension, with disability—wasn’t the only objection voiced. As narrator’s asserted Pennhurst’s sanctification, they also defined the terms on which to gain public recognition of Pennhurst’s past. Often, this involved asserting authority over the past and deriding the haunted attraction for obscuring the “true history” of Pennhurst by “mixing fact and fiction.” Disability advocates appeared in local papers as emphatic about their desire to preserve an authentic, authoritative history of Pennhurst, in one case calling the haunted attraction a

“distortion of history and myth trumped up to make money” (Conroy & Smith Beitiks, 2011, p. 6), and in another saying of the owner’s web site, “they don’t even have the courtesy to make mention of the real history on their history page” (“Attraction just reinforces,” 2011, p. 8). An editorial for *The Mercury* described the attraction known as “Pennhurst Asylum” as a “mischaracterization of Pennhurst’s history and the people who resided there. This was not an ‘asylum’ for the criminally insane; it was a home for the mentally challenged” (“Pennhurst zoning is argument,” 2010, p. 4). Local documentarian Betty Cauler noted in a letter that the museum rooms planned as part of the attraction will likely be made “ridiculous” by rampant errors, noting that the attraction’s web site “contains numerous mistakes, historical inaccuracies, misspellings and grammatical errors...” (Cauler, 2010, p. 4). Cauler goes on to write, “Any entertainment at the expense of people’s suffering is repulsive on its face and becomes more so, when there is no credible venue available for people to hear the true story.” (Cauler, 2010, p. 4). News from *The Mercury* cited PMPA board member Greg Pirmann’s refusal to cooperate with the current owners:

‘My cooperation with them would be disrespectful to the people who I knew at Pennhurst,’ Pirmann said. ‘I have boxes of stuff here’ that could be used in an historically accurate exhibition. But, ‘I will not cooperate with him (Chakejian). From the very early onset, we (at the PMPA) believed you could make much more money ... by offering tours that would tell the real story.’ (Kessler, 2010c, pp. 1, 3, 5)

The desire for “credible venues” that can be trusted to tell “the true story” points to the relegation of the Pennhurst story to venues not deemed sufficiently authoritative. But by limiting the problem of “Pennhurst Asylum” to a battle between fact and fiction, narrators

failed to recognize that having a purchase on historical authority does not necessarily yield a Pennhurst worthy of sanctification.

In contrast to the “tragedy and triumph” story found in contemporary newspapers, sociologist Allison Carey (2010) describes *Halderman v. Pennhurst* (1977) as not only less significant to the overall story of intellectual disability and civil rights in 20th century America, but also as a less definitive legal victory. Carey’s overall thesis about this history is that it is not a story of social progress, but one of ambivalence in which there has been little consensus about the rights of people perceived as intellectually disabled in America. With respect to Pennhurst in particular, Carey describes its significance in the context of related cases, including *Wyatt v. Stichey* (1972), *New York State Association for Retarded Children, inc v. Rockefeller* (1973), as well as the passage of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 1975. Among these cases, Judge Raymond Broderick’s ruling in *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School and Hospital* (1977) was the first to mandate residents of an institution to be moved into community settings, effectively ordering the closure of Pennhurst. However, as Carey recounts, Pennhurst’s closing was met with opposition from some parents groups as well as from employees of the institution. Furthermore, Carey highlights the limitations of the right to treatment as they were established in the courts during this time, making the Pennhurst case seem significantly less triumphant than it appears in contemporary Pennsylvania newspapers. Reviewing the net impact of these cases, Carey concludes:

...after many court cases, two of which went to the Supreme Court, a federal or constitutional right to treatment had been only minimally established. People residing within institutions had basic rights to ensure their safety, but the right to treatment was supported only as needed to protect their fundamental rights. People residing in the community in essence had no right to treatment and could

face years on a waiting list for services or be told that the services they needed did not exist. If in jeopardy of institutionalization, people with mental retardation could demand services in a less restrictive environment. For those who were not in jeopardy of institutionalization, they had little legal standing to demand much of anything. (p. 151)

Carey's work demonstrates yet another narration of the Pennhurst story, one told in the voice of sociological analysis. It shies away from declaring victory and shows less support for community-based living as a panacea to the problem of institutionalization. In contrast, the "tragedy and triumph" narrative sanctifies Pennhurst by recuperating a painful past. As a product of local pride, the narrative also tends to magnify the importance of Pennhurst. News from *The Mercury* quoted PMPA co-president James Conroy referring to Pennhurst as "probably the last really valuable civil rights property in America" (Kessler, 2010c, pp. 1, 3, 5). In their letter to *The Mercury*, Conroy and Smith Beitiks wrote, "Pennhurst deserves sacred memorialization and preservation. Out of national shame came national triumph..." (Conroy & Smith Beitiks, 2011, p. 6).

My emphasis on the fluidity of Pennhurst's meaning and the uses it has been put to in the present is not intended to deride disability advocates grappling for recognition in the public sphere; rather it is to understand the terms on which such recognition is earned. In letters and news items, advocates argued for Pennhurst's inclusion in the story of American civil rights by calling for an authoritative history and strategically crafting a universal narrative of tragedy and triumph. In addition to advocates being relied on heavily as sources for journalists from *The Mercury*, *The Inquirer*, and *Philadelphia Weekly*, the editorial position of *The Mercury* also mirrored the story told by advocates. Reading Pennhurst as a symbol of social progress makes it available for sanctification in Foote's (1997) terms. As Foote explains, sites often become invisible when their meaning

is unresolved, such as those “the country has yet to come to terms with” (p. 298). “Sites that do not fit an idealized, patriotic vision,” Foote writes, “are ignored or hidden in the landscape” (p. 336).¹² The triumph and tragedy narrative makes Pennhurst publicly visible again. If the institution were understood as horrific without the redemption of its closure, there would be no grounds for it to be revered and remembered. Likewise, if its characterization as horrific were not emphasized in the institution’s past, the legal victory would read as less dramatic. In this way, this particular narrative has clear social use. The story sanctifies Pennhurst, positions it as historically and universally significant, and makes it useful as a parable that supports the contemporary community-based living movement.

“The Shame of Pennsylvania”

In order to translate Pennhurst from a place nearly obliterated from the landscape to one widely acknowledged and revered, the tragedy and triumph narrative focused on the advocates responsible for Pennhurst’s closing; but this also meant screening out questions of culpability for the abuse and inhumane conditions documented in *Halderman v. Pennhurst* (1977). According to Foote (1997), the cause and blame associated with events often accounts for whether a site will undergo rectification or obliteration. When the cause of a tragedy is unknown, or when blame lies within the community (whether a perpetrator is a community member or blame is held collectively), “effacement” of the site is often the result (p. 180). It would be difficult for the community to accept a version of the Pennhurst story that focused too heavily on blame because Pennhurst employed so many community members—and as a state-run institution, the citizens of Pennsylvania and their legislators were responsible for its condition. When remembering would have to

include “reflective self-criticism,” making a forgotten site visible can be difficult and threatening (Foote, 1997, p. 300).

For journalists and advocates discussing Pennhurst in the local newspapers in 2010 and 2011, only the vaguest idea of blame enters into the story of legal victory. Both the early 20th century movement toward institutionalization and the deterioration of conditions at Pennhurst are most often referred to as a failure of “society” in general (Cauler, 2010; Murt, 2010). In one case, a former employee pinned responsibility for Pennhurst’s past more specifically on the Commonwealth, writing, “Pennsylvania is ultimately responsible for the conditions there” (“I worked at Pennhurst from the mid-60s,” 2010, p. 2). As a state-run institution, supervision and funding of Pennhurst was up to a chain of command that started with the Governor and state legislators and ended with the institution’s Board of Directors and Superintendent. While thousands of individuals had direct knowledge of Pennhurst, voting citizens of the Commonwealth clearly also should have had a stake in this public entity.

The potential weight of collective guilt and shame seems likely to have impacted the way journalists and advocates were able to narrate Pennhurst’s past. Several voices maintained that poor conditions at Pennhurst only came to light in the late 1960s. Betty Cauler wrote to *The Phoenix*, “...television [exposé’s] like Bill Baldini's 1968 ‘Suffer the Little Children’ showed the viewing public for the first time what conditions were like at the overcrowded, underfunded and understaffed institution” (Cauler, 2010, p. 4). An editorial for the *Daily Local News* credited “the public” for quickly adopting enlightened attitudes once conditions at institutions like Pennhurst and Willowbrook were publicly revealed: “What is astonishing, though, is how rapidly the assumptions about mental

institutions changed in the public view after television reporting and judicial cases brought the residents' stories in front of their eyes" ("Pennhurst story," 2010, p. 6).

However, this image of "the public" as mostly unaware of the world inside Pennhurst is contradicted by archives from local papers. The Chester County Historical Society holds a clipping file for Pennhurst with hundreds of local newspaper articles dating from 1908 into the 1970s. Likewise, Temple University's Urban Archives holds hundreds of Philadelphia-area newspaper articles on Pennhurst, mostly from the 1940s through the 1980s. While coverage increased dramatically in the 1960s, there had always been problems at Pennhurst. Prior to the 1960s, the institution had been the subject of numerous internal and external investigations, including by the State and Federal government. State probes into incidents such as fires, disease outbreaks, abuse, and accidental death were not only recurring, but also received journalistic attention.

Further, while singular in advocate memory of Pennhurst, *Suffer the Little Children* was neither the first nor only exposé on Pennhurst. Starting in the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, *The Mercury*, then known as *The Pottstown-Mercury*, was approaching Pennhurst as an opportunity for advocacy journalism. And unlike in contemporary memory of Pennhurst, *The Mercury* made no equivocations about who was responsible for conditions at Pennhurst. In a high profile special issue focusing on Pennhurst, "The Shame of Pennsylvania" (Geyer, 1972, p. 1), a sharply critical editorial on the front page announced, "The Mercury Challenges each member of the state senate, each member of the state house and Governor Shapp to eliminate the shame that is Pennhurst" ("Enough Talk," 1972, p. 1). When the Pennhurst issue required action, culpability was crucial.

Decades later, *The Mercury* demonstrated that it had an organizational memory of the paper's crusading coverage of conditions at Pennhurst—and that the editors considered it significant to the overall history of the paper—when it highlighted this reporting in a special 50th anniversary issue of the paper published in 1981 and reprinted for the 75th anniversary in 2006 (Contos, 2006). In other words, *The Mercury* already had a stake in Pennhurst memory prior to the 2010 haunted attraction controversy. In addition to *The Mercury*'s proximity to Pennhurst, its role in Pennhurst's past begins to explain why this paper published the most in-depth coverage of the haunted attraction and the most reader letters among other Pennsylvania newspapers.

In the paper's anniversary retrospective on Pennhurst, headlined "'Shame of Pennhurst:' *The Mercury* Led Crusade to Improve Conditions for Mentally Retarded," the paper described itself as having an active role in shedding light on conditions at Pennhurst. Particularly in the 1960s, the paper notes it received a commendation from the State legislature, which credited *The Mercury*'s coverage for leading legislators to visit Pennhurst and subsequently promise additional funds for the institution. Whereas stories that appeared in 2010 and 2011 used general terms to describe the real life horrors of Pennhurst, the anniversary issue recalled graphic descriptions in the words of legislators:

The odor of the crib ward is overpowering ... it follows the visitor away from Pennhurst. He washes himself thoroughly, but the smell won't go away. The reeking odor of human waste, and waste of human lives refuses to give way to soap. (p. E47)

The paper remembered its crusade in the mid-1960s as "an eye-opener to the entire state of Pennsylvania" (p. E47). In the 1960s, the paper had called Pennhurst, "'a nightmare, a grotesque dream that needn't exist'" (p. E47).

Despite the clarity of these reflections on Pennhurst, the 1987 ceremony that marked the official closing of the institution already showed signs that the public memory of Pennhurst would be divided. *The Mercury* described a ceremony that “recall[ed] camaraderie, not controversy” (Shelton, 1987, p.17). A photo accompanying the article was of former resident Margaret Dougherty, who lived at Pennhurst from 1956 to 1972, and continues to be a fixture in contemporary stories of Pennhurst. She is quoted in news items from 2010 and cited by all of my informants as an example of a “high-functioning” Pennhurst resident who still says she enjoyed her time there. In the 1987 article, Dougherty is quoted as saying, “Pennhurst was a home to me” (p. 17). She missed her friends and the activities at Pennhurst and worried that former residents living in the community would not receive proper care. This seems a strange focus for a ceremony that also celebrated the end of a hard fought legal battle demonstrating evidence of abuse and neglect. But especially because the original intent of the Pennhurst lawsuit was to improve conditions there, rather than to close the institution, there were many community members who opposed its closure and didn’t believe Pennhurst residents could be cared for in the community. Indeed, among *The Mercury*’s crusades was their later effort to delay or end the closing of Pennhurst due to claims that residents were being moved into the community too fast, without plans for support, and in some cases, against their will. It is possible that for advocates who are anti-institution, *The Mercury* was thus not always seen as an ally. This could partly account for the more prominent place of *Suffer the Little Children* in advocate memory of the dawning of public awareness about conditions at Pennhurst.

In addition to the pre-1960s record of journalism on Pennhurst, the image of the public as unaware of conditions there is also contradicted by the record of personal memory found in a section of the contemporary newspapers not yet mentioned: the obituaries. In 2010 and 2011, 26 obituaries appeared describing the deceased as having been employed at Pennhurst. They were nurses and nurse's aides, trainers, housekeepers, cafeteria workers, speech aides, dieticians, receptionists, and supervisors. Daniel L. Kirk, the superintendent of Pennhurst from 1957 through 1968 (the precise time when inhumane conditions at Pennhurst are said to have been revealed) is also among the deceased.

Considering the birthdates mentioned in these obituaries, as well as the descriptions of these local citizen's lives, they were also grandmothers, grandfathers, and elders in the community. It is unclear just how this is reconciled in community life, but the tension between what is found in the obituaries—proud former employees of Pennhurst now deceased—and descriptions of abuse and neglect at their place of employment certainly shaped the Pennhurst story told by advocates and journalists.

It seemed that the tragedy and triumph narrative found in local papers alongside these obituaries had to address the question: If Pennhurst was a site of tragedy, where did former employees fit into the story? Were they guilty by association? There was an overwhelming consensus from a variety of voices who asserted that employees: “did the best they could with what resources they had,” (Kessler, 2010f, pp. 1, 6) “tried to do the best they could for [residents] with limited resources,” (Cauler, 2010, p. 4) “did what they could with what little they had” (“I worked at Pennhurst from the mid-60's,” 2010, p. 2), and “gave their every effort to ensure that ‘patients’ received proper care and

encouragement” (“Haunted attraction disrespectful,” 2010, p. 12). An editorial for the *Daily Local News* that described the historical marker dedication stands out in its willingness to ask difficult, self-reflexive questions of a reader faced with the paradox of how good people can be involved with an inhumane system: “On the one hand, the good intentions of people who somehow participated in abuse make it seem worse, more hopeless. If good people can get caught helplessly in a bad machine, what can we do to correct injustice?” (“Pennhurst story,” 2010, p. 6)¹³. Overall, former Pennhurst employees are described as allies to former residents. The two groups of people are frequently referred to with plural pronouns that tie them together, such as in references to “their history” (Strickler, 2010, pp. 1, 3).

The 26 obituaries are not merely a reminder that Pennhurst was a huge employer in the area; rather, the obituaries demonstrate that Pennhurst is part of the life story of countless individuals living in the community. As a major employer in the area, Pennhurst comes to mean something unique to the people who worked there. This is not unlike other communities of memory clustered around industries such as steel or coal mining. When a single industry is an economic dominator in a community, social memories are easily created out of that shared experience. Likewise, when industries are displaced, this also creates the circumstances for the emergence of public memory. As deinstitutionalization potentially comes to be publicly memorialized or remembered by disability advocates and people who identify as disabled, entire communities of institutional labor will also have their own stories to tell.

“Closing Pennhurst was the greatest abuse”

The tragedy and triumph story was strengthened by the consensus among advocates and some journalists, particularly those writing and editorializing for *The Mercury*, who had similar approaches to narrating Pennhurst's historical significance. But by publishing reader letters, local news media also became an outlet for personal narratives that spoke to the contestability of Pennhurst's past, as well as to the wide variety of uses it could be put to in the present. What local news media were able to capture is a picture of a far messier, more dialectical public memory than would be typical of sanctioned narratives (such as the one that appears on Pennhurst's historical marker), which tend to speak with a tidy, univocal authority. Furthermore, when readers wrote to voice their opinion about the haunted attraction, they invariably did so by first positioning themselves as having a personal stake in the meaning of Pennhurst as a symbol within their communities. When read alongside the story of tragedy and triumph, these voices reveal the cultural legacy of institutionalization—that is, its impact on our ability to make meaning.

A few former Pennhurst employees were among advocates for the PMPA and some wrote to their local papers to provide eyewitness accounts of the abuse and neglect that are central to the tragedy and triumph narrative. But surprisingly, former employees also wrote to refute the negative image of Pennhurst entirely. "I worked for Pennhurst for 27 years until it was closed," one wrote. "It was not a place of horror. The individuals I helped were well taken care of and had the best healthcare, meals and activities" ("I worked at Pennhurst from the mid-60's," 2010, p. 2). Another former employee denies ever seeing poor conditions, instead painting an image of the institution as a place of caring and community:

I worked at Pennhurst for 25 years and I worked every ward. I have never seen anyone abused or hurt. I get tired of everyone saying how bad it was. People were taken care of. They had activities all the time — they had a circus, they had baseball games, they went out to shows. It wasn't a horrible place. I can't believe all the people who worked there can't stand up and admit that it was a nice place. (“I worked at Pennhurst for 25 years,” 2010, p. 2)

Just as this reader emphasizes her helping role, another echoed the impulse to defend the character of former employees, writing, “I worked with many kind and caring people. I get very tired of hearing about the horrors of Pennhurst.” (“I worked at Pennhurst from ‘80,” 2010, p. 2). In these cases, the contestation of Pennhurst’s memory made visible the sense of ownership and pride many felt with respect to their role as helping professionals there. Pennhurst meant something different to these readers than it did to the advocates who fought for its closure. Despite attempts by journalists and advocates to shield former employees from scrutiny, these reader letters show that just as the haunted attraction threatened the legacy of advocates, the tragedy and triumph narrative threatened the legacy of former employees.¹⁴

Like the above reader’s description of “baseball games” and “a circus” at Pennhurst, others wrote with similarly fond remembrances, complicating the often flat characterization of the institution as a place of neglect:

Regarding the recent front page article on the “Pennhurst Asylum,” I am vehemently opposed to this haunted attraction. I worked at Pennhurst in the 1960s, and so did several members of my family. My father was a dentist at Pennhurst for 20 years. At Christmas time the donations of food and gifts from various businesses were overwhelming. My father played “Santa Claus” every year, and it was such a hit with the clients. I taught sewing in the school building, and several years ago I ran into a former resident who thanked me for teaching her how to sew as she was able to sew her own wedding dress. (“Take a stand,” 2010, p. 4)

This reader paints a picture of good intentions and genuine caring at Pennhurst. It is valuable inasmuch as it offers a more mundane portrait of life at Pennhurst than the ones painted in letters from advocates or by the haunted attraction, which in their own ways both rely on a Pennhurst filled with “horrors.” However, this story is also a product of what some have described as the charity model of disability (Longmore, 1997; Stiker, 1999) in which disabled individuals are the presumed objects of charity. In this case, it is the system of institutionalization itself which naturalizes this relationship to disability; in other words, if the State had not radically segregated Pennhurst residents from the general population, there would be no need for the organized charity the reader describes. As Foucault describes in *History of Madness* (2009), the institution creates the needy population simultaneous to its attempt to address it. It is only logical that this relationship between the community and its institution would impact the shape of public memories about institutionalization, particularly with respect to the interaction between memory and identity.

Paul Longmore (1997) has discussed the way the charitable relationship reflects the social worth of what he terms “the givers” and “the takers.” Longmore highlights the value of charity for the givers, arguing that by giving, we demonstrate our own social worth and moral value; by giving, we solidify our own identity as “a giver.” When this relationship is amplified as media spectacle, as Longmore describes is the case with telethons, this “conspicuous contribution” also justifies the social systems that create inequity. Public giving, Longmore argues, can be read as a political argument that we do not have a system of inequality, but rather, one of surplus and generosity. By giving, we set an example for others that demonstrates that the social system is working, as

evidenced by our own overabundance of resources. What is important in Longmore's observations about charity and disability is his attention to both the impact on "the giver" and the role of charity in maintaining the status quo. While Pennhurst is a symbol in the community of horrors real and imagined, the above comments from former employees suggest Pennhurst has also been a symbol of the community's goodwill, charitableness, and moral worth. Although the charity bestowed on Pennhurst was not of the heightened variety Longmore describes as typical of televised charity, Pennhurst was highly visible as an object of charity in the community¹⁵. The tragedy and triumph narrative erases this relationship between the community and its institution. The somewhat defensive reaction by some former employees demonstrates that part of what is lost or threatened in the disruption of the status quo which deinstitutionalization represents is the identity of countless human services workers faced with the devaluation of their social worth. At the same time, Longmore's "conspicuous contribution" makes visible how the image of a Pennhurst that is "integrated" into the community by the kindness of donations and a volunteer "Santa Claus" is also a political argument that institutionalization was, and is, a successful social solution to the problem of disability.

In addition to those writing as former employees, other community members not only refuted the image of Pennhurst as the site of tragedy, they also refuted the image of its closure as a triumph. "I believe it was one of the worst decisions ever enacted by one of our government representatives to initiate the action of closing Pennhurst," one reader asserted ("Closing of Pennhurst," 2010, p. 12). As I have already suggested, public memory of Pennhurst is controversial in part because its closure was controversial. Not only did some employees fear for their jobs and for the quality of care residents would

receive outside of the institution, many parents opposed Pennhurst's closure, having assumed that *Halderman v. Pennhurst* would lead to reform of the institution, not its closure (Carey, 2009). George Myers of Boyertown wrote to *The Mercury* and highlighted this piece of Pennhurst's past, which was rarely mentioned elsewhere in local papers during the haunted attraction's opening years.¹⁶

An association of concerned parents protested vehemently about closing Pennhurst, worried about how challenged people could be let out on the street. But Judge Broderick decided these people had their 'rights.' Living in Spring City, I saw a number of former residents on the street living in rooming houses. One was seen throwing the money from his disability check into the air while bystanders easily grabbed it. (Myers, 2010, p.6)

Myer's story shows again that what is at stake in Pennhurst's past is the culture of institutionalization in the present. Myers remembers what the tragedy and triumph narrative screens out, that Pennhurst's closure was controversial in its time. He also refuses the rhetoric of "rights" as advocates have applied it to people perceived as intellectually disabled. He supports his stance by sharing a memory whose sole purpose is to paint former residents as incompetent, and unable to live outside of an institutional setting.¹⁷

The lack of consensus around how to read Pennhurst's closing disrupts the story created by local advocates who read *Halderman v. Pennhurst* as a definitive civil rights victory. Alison Carey's (2010) somewhat dismal assessment of the lack of consensus on granting the rights of full citizenship to people perceived as intellectually disabled seems a more fitting characterization in light of the contestability of Pennhurst's past. Myers shows this when he makes the usefulness of his memory explicit by connecting past and

present: “[Pennhurst] was needed then and needed now. Challenged people have a ‘right’ to it. To me, closing Pennhurst was the greatest abuse” (Myers, 2010, p.6).

“Shame on those who would do such an insensitive thing...”

In addition to narrating sanctification or obliteration, the public conversation about the haunted attraction was also about morality. Stories of Pennhurst’s past skirted issues of blame, preferring instead to focus on crusaders in the disability rights movement, but in the reporting of current events, the owner of the haunted attraction was easily vilified for exploiting Pennhurst’s painful past for profit. In this way, the controversy regarding the reuse of the Pennhurst campus revives local memory while obscuring collective guilt or blame. Not only was the event itself evaluated by opponents in moral terms, the moral character of the proprietor himself repeatedly came under attack. The owner and his business partner were characterized as insensitive, anti-social, and above all, greedy. One reader addressed them directly, writing, “I think you people have no other way to bring revenue into a small community, so you are going to make an asylum into a nightmare to make money????? Sick greedy people looking to fill their pocket” (“What our readers,” p. 3).

Again and again, opponents of the haunted attraction expressed their position as the moral high ground. Charlotte Twaddell wrote to the *Daily Local News*, “Shame on those who would do such an insensitive thing and shame on those who would get a Halloween thrill in such an uncaring manner” (Twaddell, 2010b, p. 6). Another *Daily Local News* reader responded in the paper’s “Sound Off” section:

What's up with this Pennhurst Halloween horror thing? Have they no compassion or sense of right and wrong? To make light of the people that lived and worked in that place is what's horrible. Find another place that's more appropriate. Think of

the families that you are hurting with this outlandish idea. (“What’s up with this,” 2010, p. 6)

Many readers admonished the owner and attacked his character, but the logic of why each reader deemed the haunted attraction inappropriate was often left unsaid. Advocates aligning themselves with the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance tended to be more explicit about their objections, making strategic arguments for the property’s value as a historical landmark and a symbol of the disability rights movement. They read Pennhurst as a site of social struggle, and thus found it to be both politically useful and culturally sacred. However, when anonymous community members reacted in the Opinion pages, it was not always clear why they thought Pennhurst should be off-limits to parody. It may be implied that the attraction is inappropriate because some individuals suffered abuse at Pennhurst, and thus it is read as a space of personal (not necessarily political) tragedy. It may be implied that the practice of institutionalization is itself deemed immoral and is thus off-limits to parody in the same way slavery might be. Finally, there are plenty of implicit suggestions that the residents of Pennhurst are inherently abject by virtue of their disability, and are thus off-limits to parody regardless of their situation at Pennhurst or elsewhere. This is a subtle distinction from the political argument that many advocates made regarding the representational history of disability. In that case, advocates argued explicitly that the attraction exploited entrenched cultural meanings that equate disability with the monstrous, dangerous and fearful. In contrast, the assumption that former Pennhurst residents are abject, and therefore inappropriate subjects for parody, aligns with the view of severe disability as pitiable.

In addition, the moral suspicion of the owner is heightened by the characterization of people with developmental disabilities as hyper-vulnerable, moral subjects. Anne

Weicheld Pennpacker wrote to *The Mercury*:

“It is difficult to find terminology strong enough to express my feelings about the insensitivity of the people who are planning an "attraction" at the Pennhurst facility.... I will be first in line to picket and oppose this insulting indecent assault on the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society.” (Weicheld, 2010, p. 8)

Former residents were repeatedly referred to with descriptors that focused on their vulnerability and the haunted attraction was thus read as entertaining “at the expense of others less fortunate” (Twaddell, 2010a, p. 6). While the owner’s moral character was suspect, former residents were called “precious” and former employees called “fine people” (“Someone who cares,” 2010, p. 2). Another *Daily Local News* reader responded in the paper’s “Sound Off” section:

I have worked with developmentally disabled people for more than half of my life and they are without a doubt the kindest, most caring and least judgmental people I have ever been acquainted with. To have them portrayed any way other than that is abominable. (“This is a comment,” 2010, p. 8)

It may be oversimplifying the issue to say that the owner of the haunted attraction became a scapegoat for a century of segregation of people perceived as intellectually disabled. However, the glaring lack of either past perpetrators or social actors who stood in opposition to Pennhurst’s closure is rivaled only by the opposition’s fixation on attempting to shame the owner and the paying public into shutting down the haunted attraction.

“I listened in horror...”

The overarching legal victory story relies on a characterization of Pennhurst as the site of horrific conditions. However, journalists and advocates tended to refer to these

conditions in abstractions rather than by recalling specific scenes of the inhumane conditions. In one exception, an advocate is quoted in *The Mercury* as remembering “seeing a girl strait-jacketed to a bench” and “an elderly woman clutching a baby doll and being kept in a cage...[as discipline] for not giving up the baby doll” (Kessler, 2010f, pp. 1, 6).¹⁸ In most cases, it was through letters that readers shared eyewitness accounts of their fearful experiences of Pennhurst. One community member writes *The Daily Local News*:

I was only 16 years old in 1963 when my senior class in high school was taken on a field trip to Pennhurst. Obviously, at the time, the conditions there were not thought to be as bad as they were and as we say them to be. I will never, ever forget that day ... it was a horror then and the thought that it continued into the late '80s is hard to comprehend. (“Speaking out,” 2010, p. 6)¹⁹

A former employee similarly supports the image of Pennhurst as horrific, writing, “It was a nightmare daily when I worked there. Don't know if I would want to return and pay to be frightened” (“What our readers,” 2010, p. 3). Another former employee, signing a letter to *The Mercury* as “ONE WHO HEARD THE SCREAMS,” writes:

That place was a hell hole of human suffering. I know because I worked there 60 years ago. The things I saw made it impossible to stay for long. The way those people were treated was more than I could handle. The screams coming from that place were real. I feel that place should be bulldozed to the ground and the bones found should be buried. (“I’m appalled,” 2010, p. 2)

The impact of a visit to Pennhurst on the visitor or employee is palpable in all of these recollections. In most cases, explicit images are not shared, but rather an overall description of the way it made the viewer feel, and the urgency of retelling the tale. Since it is the viewer’s feeling of aversion that is central to these stories, there is a way in which they unintentionally reinforce fictionalizations of Pennhurst (like the haunted attraction) that also take creating aversion in the audience as their main goal. Although the readers

speak of real horrors, they also coincidentally mimic the representational patterns observed in fiction in which disability is used primarily to produce affect in audiences (Longmore, 1987; Shakespeare, 1994; Snyder and Mitchell, 2006; Siebers, 2010). The eyewitness accounts are in some ways not about Pennhurst, but about those who bore witness to conditions there. This is most salient in an anecdote shared by Harry Goldbacher of North Wales, in which he feels compelled to pass on the experience of a friend, now deceased. Goldbacher writes to *The Reporter*:

As a young man in the early 1960s I had a friend who was a local medical student.

One of his requirements was to perform a two-week internship at Pennhurst. Years later — but still many years ago — we got together and as we talked about our career paths, he recounted his experience there.

Visibly upset, he told me of the heinous atrocities he had witnessed there as a student — I listened in horror and disbelief; he had never before talked about it.

My friend was a U.S. Army major, a battlefield surgeon in Vietnam, and had treated physical injuries of the most grotesque nature.

He was a guy who could “take the fire, flak and flesh,” as he cavalierly used to say, but he apparently still couldn’t, even after all those years, “take” Pennhurst. (Goldbacher, 2010, p. 5)

In this account, Pennhurst’s potency is measured against the toughness of a U.S. Army major who is set up as someone who could “take the fire.” Pennhurst’s significance in the story is not as a place of injustice, segregation, or legal victory; rather, its primary function and power is in bringing a man who is accustomed to the “grotesque” to a “visibly upset” state many years later. It is Pennhurst’s ability to shock, horrify, and be remembered, that is most central to these eyewitness stories.

“...it makes me feel like I’m less of a human being”

Although only a few former Pennhurst residents were represented in local news media during this time, many others described being able to identify with former

Pennhurst residents past and present through various articulations of disability identity.

Dana Lips of King of Prussia wrote to *The Mercury*:

I have a neuromuscular condition called cerebral palsy, which likely resulted from premature birth. My aunt is mentally retarded, which resulted from an accident that she encountered at age three ... Perhaps if my aunt or I were born under different circumstances in another decade, Pennhurst might have been our fate. For these reasons, the idea of hosting a haunted attraction at Pennhurst leaves me with an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach. (Lips, 2010, p. 12)

Lips is able to imagine herself as a Pennhurst resident by transporting herself to another time when institutionalization was more commonplace. The same imaginative move is also made by Laura Fabiani of West Whiteland, the mother of a young man with cerebral palsy who describes her son as “completely dependent upon his parents, family and others for his very survival” (“Pennhurst a site,” 2010, p. 6). Fabiani writes to the *Daily Local News*, “I imagine he is not unlike some of the individuals who lived on the grounds of Pennhurst, except for the fact that he lives at home, with a family who has the ability to care for him” (2010, p. 6). Betty Cauler writes to *The Phoenix* and explains her Pennhurst connection is based on ancestry, “The subject has special meaning to me as a my grandfather’s half-sister Dolly Neiman spent seven years in Pennhurst after her family could no longer care for her at home” (Cauler, 2010, p. 4).

These narrators each demonstrate ways disability identity can be deployed in order to read Pennhurst’s past as part of their personal heritage. This has the effect of legitimizing the sanctification of Pennhurst, but it does so through the limiting terms of special interest. Many narrators felt compelled to explain their positions on the haunted attraction by identifying their connection to disability. Lisa Lightener of Avondale wrote to *The Daily Local News*, “Here’s my disclaimer: I parent a child with special needs and I

am in a training program at the Arc of Chester County in order to become a special education advocate” (Lightener, 2011, p. 8). Lightener implies having a connection to disability is a bias—it requires a “disclaimer.” One *Mercury* reader suggested of the haunted attraction employees: “I guess if some people are happy working here, that's great, but I'm guessing anyone who works here probably doesn't have anyone who's actually mentally deficient in their family. Otherwise, they might care” (“What our readers,” 2010, p. 3). Such perspectives imply the only way to identify with former residents would be to have some personal or familial connection to them. While these claims assert the viability of disability identity as a position from which to argue for political representation, they inevitably also reinforce the rigidity of identity categories that made social segregation possible in the first place. They also have the unintended effect of minimizing the role of education in disability consciousness. In other words, advocates often take for granted their own knowledge of areas such as disability history, not realizing that their reaction to the haunted attraction has as much to do with their subject position as it has to do with their expertise. The increasing public participation of people with disabilities creates constant opportunities to reinforce or reinvent the terms on which individuals and groups seek public recognition of the pasts they find meaningful. While identity will continue to have a role in this process, it is important that disability advocates recognize the substantial knowledge gap between their own cultural arena and what constitutes common knowledge of local and national disability history.

The emergence of new identities allows us to excavate and reclaim new pieces of the past (Glassberg, 2001). While historians or sociologists do not necessarily require personal identification with the past in order to make it interesting or meaningful, laymen

often do (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). In other words, the realization of disability as a sociological and historical concept allows for scholars to use it as a category of analysis, but the realization of disability as a formative part of an individual's subjective experience allows the layman to claim these new pieces of the past as heritage.

Only self-advocate and PMPA co-president Jean Searle reaches for a more transcendent vision of how to make the story of institutionalization meaningful. News from *The Mercury* quotes Searle, saying: "I'm hoping the owner [of the haunted attraction] understands this is important for all people not just people with or without disabilities" (Kessler, 2010a, p. 1, 4). Ultimately, Searle claims this past as significant not just to a politically defined social group, but as integral to the way we define humanity. "This is... very important to me because I used to live in an institution... For the owner to be doing this [the haunted attraction], it makes me feel like I'm less of a human being" (Kessler, 2010a, p. 1,4).

"Pennhurst is not hallowed ground. It's Halloween ground."

The black or white characterization of Pennhurst as either a place of neglect or a place of caring wasn't the only point of contestation taken up in local newspapers after the haunted attraction opened. The controversy also became an occasion to evaluate the sacredness of Pennhurst through historical analogy. If the story of tragedy and triumph set out to sanctify Pennhurst, these analogies showed whether or not the story had been successful. Analogies also helped community members voice their opinions about the haunted attraction and whether or not for-profit entertainment was an appropriate reuse of

the site. Well-established sacred or historic sites were used like templates against which the meaning of Pennhurst could be said to fit well or poorly, often showing the connections between the sacred and national identity.

The coincidence of other similar regional and national media stories occurring simultaneously to the first year of “Pennhurst Asylum’s” opening impacted the public conversation about Pennhurst. In September 2010, reports began to circulate that the construction of a mosque was planned near the site of the World Trade Center. At the same time, a regional story emerged about one of Pennsylvania’s many prominent sites of American history: there were plans for a casino at Gettysburg. In addition to comparisons to Gettysburg and the World Trade Center, narrators compared Pennhurst to Auschwitz; the Titanic; Fort Mifflin; Fort Zachery Taylor in Key West; the Lizzie Borden house; a slave market in Charleston, South Carolina; and another Philadelphia historic landmark, Eastern State Penitentiary.

While it is tempting to critique the analogies drawn by applying a historical lens, comparing the events that transpired at each site to assess the similarities and differences, I chose instead to apply a cultural lens, comparing the symbolic meaning associated with each place, as each writer constructs it within a particular utterance. I do this because I believe it is in the context of a debate about cultural meaning, rather than about facts, that these particular utterances are best understood. Readers used historical analogies in order to defend their reading of cultural symbols in an environment in which the meaning of Pennhurst was particularly unstable. When I refer to the difference between symbolic similarity and historical similarity, I am really arguing that readers frame their analogies

with respect to the way sites of tragedy are treated by society in the present, rather than with an interest in the specificity of actual events that transpired in the past.

The nearest and most frequently-cited comparison was to the local historic landmark Eastern State Penitentiary. While the Penitentiary operates a haunted attraction during the Halloween season, unlike Pennhurst it is owned and operated by a non-profit organization and is open to the public for historical tours 365 days a year. Still, one reader commented that on her recent trip to ESP, “despair, loneliness, and confinement wept through the walls,” and she wondered, “how having a haunted house at either Pennhurst Hospital or Eastern State Penitentiary could be called entertainment. Both institutions were notorious for the inhumane treatment of their inmates” (“Eastern and Pennhurst,” 2010, p. A18). More readers considered the attraction at ESP a model for an appropriate and socially responsible balance between entertainment and education, though none acknowledged ESP’s mission to educate the public as part of what distinguishes it from Pennhurst:

The state of Pennsylvania has several prisons that are now opened for touring and Halloween thrills, Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia for one. It is a very popular location in the month of October. It doesn't demean the prisoners who stayed there it just allows people the opportunity to get behind the huge walls and learn a bit about history and get a thrill as well. (“Finally a use for,” 2010, p. 4)

I went to Eastern State Penn for the haunted house tour a few years ago and while the ‘haunted house’ aspect was the ‘entertainment’ in sync with the seasons, I also left with a deep appreciation for the inhumane way we've treated each other over the years. (“Skippack, Lansdale,” 2010, p. 5)

Many readers seemed to include Pennhurst among other historic places in an unlikely way—on the basis that it is equally susceptible to exploitation:

The only reason East Vincent wants to haunt Pennhurst is that a handful of people will be making fistfuls of money. The IRS should be there selling tickets and

collecting taxes. There is no haunted hayride around the Titanic only because it's under water. Nothing is sacred when there is money to be made. ("Speaking out," 2010, p. 6)

This is to all those who think Pennhurst shouldn't be turned into a Halloween fright house. Did you ever hear about Lizzie Borden? Here's how it goes: Lizzie Borden took an ax, gave her mother 40 whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father 41. That was on August 4, 1892 and 104 years later in 1996 they turned that house into a bed and breakfast. People, just get a life. ("This is to all those," 2010, p. 2)

In a way, these analogies both argue as the first quote does that "nothing is sacred." To support this claim, these comments use relatively uncharged, distant, or small-scale events for comparison to Pennhurst. They also both refer to events that have been widely sensationalized. In the case of the Lizzie Borden house, the site of real life tragedy has also been the subject of folklore, similar to Pennhurst.

In many cases, narrators used sites of tragedy in American history more widely-recognized than Pennhurst as touchstones to evaluate, and often denigrate, the notion that Pennhurst could be understood as sacred:

Well, the mosque in New York is going to happen with more people upset about that than the amount of people upset about the Pennhurst Asylum. I say, what the heck. It's for Halloween. No big deal. If you're going to do anything, fight the mosque in New York. That's a mockery to the people who were murdered on 9/11. ("We're really excited," 2010, p. 2)

In this case, the comparison is used to suggest that opposition to the "Pennhurst Asylum" lacks a critical mass. The haunted attraction is "no big deal," partly because Pennhurst pales in comparison to the import of the World Trade Center. Similarly, another comment seeks to gauge the relative import of sacred places: "Even places like Gettysburg where thousands of our countrymen lost their lives during the Civil War is a huge tourist attraction" ("Finally a use," 2010, p. 4). While this narrator concedes that other sacred places are also attractions, the comparison is used to minimize the import of Pennhurst by

comparing it to one of the most widely recognized landmarks in American history—particularly recognizable to local readers likely to live no more than a few hours from Gettysburg. In both of these comparisons, additional emphasis is put on the loss of life at each site. In the case of 9/11, it is the identification of the deceased as having been “murdered” that defines their status as sacred victims. In the case of Gettysburg, the identification of the deceased as “countrymen” serves the same function. The loss of lives and patriotism that are central to the meaning of both the World Trade Center and Gettysburg are used to minimize Pennhurst’s import as (presumably) a site with claims to neither.²⁰

While some compared Pennhurst to widely-venerated sites of tragedy and found it wanting, others used similar touchstones to argue that the haunted attraction was inappropriate in light of the gravity of Pennhurst’s past:

‘The fundamental point is that this is a place with history that needs to be treated with deep respect, sadness and understanding,’ Clark said. ‘Anything that’s going to be treated as a haunted place, an asylum ... you can think of a lot of places you would not do that with. You wouldn’t do that with a death camp, a Nazi death camp. You wouldn’t do that because it’s too serious.’ (Kessler, 2010c, p. 1, 3, 5)

How would this event be any different than having a House of Horrors in the slave markets in Charleston, South Carolina or a Fun Camping Bonfire at a Nazi death camp? (Weicheld, 2010, p. 59)

What if it was a defunct military base? What if, as part of the scare factor, we had soldiers terrorizing civilians, even killing them, just to scare you? Not a nice part of American military history, but hey, it’s happened. If it was an old concentration camp and we were portraying Holocaust victims, it would be unacceptable. If it was held on an old plantation and people were chained up as slaves, it would be unacceptable. This isn’t acceptable. (Lightener, 2011, p. 8)

In all of these cases, the narrators appeal to the sense of propriety, especially sensitivity, applied to sacred places. They reach for these analogies, not because they want to argue

that the historical events are necessarily similar, but because they want to argue that Pennhurst should be treated with comparable reverence. The above selections also show that advocates found sites associated with systematic dehumanization especially useful as models for how Pennhurst *should be* treated. By referring to such widely-sanctified places, these narrators show that what is primarily at stake is the question of *inclusion* among the sacred. The sanctification of Pennhurst also symbolizes the reification of people with disabilities as a historically marginalized group, oppressed through philosophical and social systems comparable to those used to enslave African-Americans or exterminate European Jews.²¹ In other words, in the hands of advocates, these analogies are acts of rhetorical inclusion.

While many individuals used brief comparisons between Pennhurst and other sites of tragedy to argue their points, columnist Gil Spencer writing for the *Delaware County Daily Times* devoted an entire column to the topic. Connecting the constellation of public memory controversies occurring around September 2010, Spencer wrote, “To build or not to build, that is the question when it comes to mosques, casinos and haunted asylums” (2010, n.p.). Spencer’s reading of these three places shows how such controversies become an occasion to stake out territory around national identity. As was clear from the way advocates argued for Pennhurst’s historical significance, the site’s sanctification relies in part on the inclusion of disability history as a part of American history. Tellingly, Spencer applies the terminology of national identity to his interpretation of all three sites, though he locates “Americans” differently in each case. “Speaking on behalf of the 30 percent who supported the mosque,” Spencer begins, “left-wing commentators accused the anti-mosque 70 percent of being un-American and Muslim-hating bigots”

(2010, n.p.). Spencer goes on to symbolically bestow citizenship to a Muslim cab driver opposed to the mosque:

Even a Muslim cab driver who was recently stabbed by a deranged man who belonged to a pro-Muslim liberal group in New York City expressed the opinion the mosque should be built elsewhere. Add his voice to the 70 percent of his fellow Americans and let the left deride him as an Uncle Towelhead. The rest of us know better.

In the process of declaring the cab driver's voice among "his fellow Americans," Spencer also symbolically strips citizenship from the perpetrator, who he refers to as both "deranged" and part of a "pro-Muslim liberal group." In Spencer's words, "*Even a Muslim cab driver*" is more American than the "deranged."

In the case of Gettysburg, Spencer explicitly engages the concept of the sacred in order to argue against the planned casino:

Gettysburg truly is hallowed ground in this country. Its battlefields are soaked with the blood of Americans who fought each other in perhaps the greatest and saddest battle ever fought on this continent. Some 50,000 men were wounded or killed and the tide of the Civil War was turned.

Spencer further sanctifies Gettysburg by going on to quote Abraham Lincoln, adding the flavor of historical authority to the death toll at Gettysburg, and the image of land soaked in "American" blood. Spencer concludes by again inviting analogy between places, suggesting "turning [Gettysburg] into a gambling mecca would detract from what [civil war soldiers] did here." The use of the term "gambling *mecca*" has the effect of pitting one sacred place against another—in Spencer's terms, it seems that the threat to American sacred places like Gettysburg and the World Trade Center are mosques and Meccas.

When it comes to the controversy in nearby Spring City, Spencer sees Pennhurst's relationship to "Americans" in a different way. Spencer argues that the lessons of Pennhurst and places like it have already been learned, as evidenced by the fact that "Americans spend billions of dollars annually to help special-needs children and adults." In this configuration, "Americans" are defined by their status as taxpayers, and those with "special-needs" are simply excluded by definition of their being the recipients of "help." Much like the community members who wrote with fond memories of Pennhurst's past, Spencer figures people with disabilities as the recipients of charity, a designation used to exclude them from the rest of the American public. The charity model of disability prevents Spencer from reading Pennhurst as a legitimate historical entity. Instead, he jumps immediately to reading disability as individual impairment, reducing its social meaning to an accounting of social services.

When it comes to Pennhurst, Spencer also stops deploying the rhetoric of American history and reaches for a different set of cultural touchstones that take Pennhurst immediately out of association with the sacred, reading it instead through the popular. Spencer quotes local advocate Betty Cauler who calls the plans for the haunted attraction "insulting, offensive and disrespectful," and argues "the inhumane treatment of a group of people should never be sensationalized to entertain the public." Spencer rebuts Cauler's argument by suggesting the story of Pennhurst is a better fit with Hollywood horror than with American history:

I don't suppose Betty Cauler ever went to see "Shutter Island," "Silence of the Lambs" or "Psycho." But despite her feelings, Americans have been entertained for decades, if not centuries, by scary depictions of homicidal maniacs and the criminally insane.

It is partly Spencer's inability or unwillingness to interpret Pennhurst as historically significant that leads him to align the place with fictional narratives. "Americans" are named as a social group from which advocates such as Cauler are excluded—according to Spencer, Americans know how to enjoy a harmless horror story without politicizing images of mental illness. In Spencer's words, "Pennhurst is not hallowed ground. It's Halloween ground."

Conclusion

What accounted for the flurry of civic engagement surrounding Pennhurst memory? Why did this issue matter both to advocates and other community members? What was the role of journalism and storytelling in this debate?

The debate about the "Pennhurst Asylum" was as much about questions of ethical reuse as it was about defining the story of the historical Pennhurst. The haunted attraction became a call to remember *and* a call to reevaluate not only what happened at Pennhurst, but also the entire project of "the Asylum" and its value to American communities. What I have come to think of as the "official" Pennhurst story—because it is the one sanctioned by traditional authorities including the State in the case of the historical marker and journalists in the case of news items—situated Pennhurst as a significant civil rights victory and a mythic story of "triumph over tragedy." But in order to remake the Pennhurst story into a sanctified memory—one which imparts a lesson and reaffirms existing values—the narrative had to be shaped to provide closure. Describing Pennhurst as a tragedy from which the phoenix of community living emerged and focusing the

narrative on the heroes of the movement made Pennhurst available for sanctification and therefore worthy of remembering.

Counter to the sense of closure pursued by the “tragedy and triumph” narrative, the public discourse that ensued through reader letters revealed that the story was far from over. As this narrative attempted to save Pennhurst’s memory from the fate of obliteration (being relegated to the vulgar position of community legend) storytellers used this reinvigorated symbol to support their positions within the contemporary politics of institutionalization. For advocates writing letters to their local newspapers, Pennhurst’s memory could be used as a parable in the battle to end the continuing institutionalization of people with developmental disabilities. For many others, the “tragedy and triumph” story was impossible to assimilate because it relied on two assumptions their own memories and attitudes did not support: it assumed Pennhurst was a site of “horrors” and that its closure had been a success. For those community members who still imagined Pennhurst as a “good place” and continued to embrace the philosophy of institutionalization, the “tragedy and triumph” narrative was rejected on both counts. Moreover, for those who fought to close Pennhurst, the memory carries an appropriate degree of local pride and is therefore doubly useful as a tool that affirms their social identity in a positive way. For those who opposed its closure or who were otherwise implicated in its decades long existence, the tale is considerably less useful in this regard. Indeed, as Alison Carey’s research suggests, civil rights for people perceived as intellectually disabled have failed to be definitively won. The ongoing nature of this battle may account for the difficulty in creating a meaning for “the Asylum” outside the realm of the haunted Halloween attraction and within the realm of civil and human rights.

Stated in more positive terms, this means that the creation of a robust, critical, and politically-engaged public memory of disability in the United States can have a vital role in continuing social change.

Amid the diversity of perspectives on Pennhurst—what I described as a sense that there was more than one Pennhurst—we might conclude that public memory of institutionalization in the United States is so fractured that consensus about the public meaning of this past is not yet possible. Consensus is indeed a defining quality of creating publicly acceptable meaning, both as it has been configured through the theory of interpretive communities and in memory theory. Depending on your perspective, this past either suffers from a greater lack of consensus or a greater threshold for permitting dissenting opinions to enter into public discourse. Perhaps more unsettling, we could argue that the greatest consensus of meaning still resides with the image of “the Asylum” as a house of horrors. What is most surprising in my analysis—and will remain a recurring finding throughout my investigation—is that the images of Pennhurst that have the most resonance with one another are the ones that seem as if they should be the farthest removed. The narrow characterization of Pennhurst as the site of horrific conditions and abuse created by advocates and journalists (past and present) is most similar to the fictional horror created by the “Pennhurst Asylum.” The resulting duty for those crafting public communication about the history of institutionalization should be how to deal with this cultural resonance head-on. Further, one must assess the proper role for the stories of former employees who—while often relying on the charity model of disability—offer a more mundane and therefore *normalizing* account of life in an institution like Pennhurst.

Finally, the role of journalism in this phenomenon has significance at a national scale. Beyond the well-documented connections between memory and identity that clearly have a role in what makes public memory of “the Asylum” a battleground for contestation, this past has the unique feature of continuing to take up physical space in our landscape. What this means for local journalists is that “the Asylum” can and should continue to be a part of their domain of authority and influence. The continuing reuse, demolition and abandonment of such spaces has put “the Asylum” in the headlines once again and local journalists are claiming this past for their communities all over the country. By providing a public venue for the negotiation of meaning and community values, local journalism is and will continue to be one of the key sites where the public memory of institutionalization is shaped. Crucially for those who study public communication and public history, this is a terrain of both process and product. The reuse of former institutions can spark the kind of storytelling that is the backbone of Maurice Halbwach’s classical conception of social memory. When these stories are documented by the local newspapers, they can provide a record of the complexity of public memory as well as clues to how members of the public are likely to interpret the emotionally and politically charged ground of “the Asylum.”

CHAPTER 4

“THE FEAR IS REAL”: STRATEGIC FICTIONALIZATIONS AT “PENNHRUST ASYLUM”

One of the most often stated objections to the attraction known as the “Pennhurst Asylum” has been the allegation that it exploits and commercializes Pennhurst’s history, especially the suffering experienced there. In the local news, this argument appeared as a narrative that characterized the owner of the Pennhurst property as a villainous profiteer exploiting what one editorial referred to as “the weakest and most vulnerable members of society” (Weicheld, 2010, p. 8). In this chapter, I want to dig deeper into the idea that the haunted attraction exploits Pennhurst’s past by asking, what exactly is the haunted attraction selling? What were the historical and contemporary conditions that led the Pennhurst property to be reinterpreted as a haunted attraction? How does “Pennhurst Asylum” use history, and how can I use history at the “Pennhurst Asylum?”

“Pennhurst Asylum” sells access to a forbidden place, the aura attached to a place where bad things happened, the pleasure of uncertainty, and the liberation of fantasy. All of this relies on a mythic sense of the history of Pennhurst.

First, the “Pennhurst Asylum” sells legal access to a property formerly closed to the public. We could argue this is the case for any tourist attraction, from the Statue of Liberty to Alcatraz. What you get for your ticket is access to a place—you get to be there. But in the case of “Pennhurst Asylum,” you get access to a place formerly forbidden, though in different ways over the one hundred years some version of it has stood. When Pennhurst was operational, there were always interactions between individuals living

inside and outside the institution, but it was rarely open to the public. Once Pennhurst closed, it remained off limits to the public, although by the ample graffiti covering the site, a somewhat significant number of people were willing to risk a trespassing violation in order to be there. Today, the attraction offers a safe, manufactured “urban explorer” experience, letting visitors dabble in the danger of exploring abandoned buildings. This is all a way of saying that “Pennhurst Asylum” is selling “the real.”

Second, the fear the haunted attraction promises visitors relies on the aura attached to Pennhurst as a place where horrific events happened. In other words, the Pennhurst campus is not an empty stage on which the haunted attraction’s actors play their parts. Pennhurst, like other historic landmarks, is an atmospheric setting suggestive of a very real past. This is where the role of mediated memory is particularly important. Not only should the property itself be viewed as mediated by the performance that occurs there, but visitors are likely to engage with the attraction only after encountering it through the voluminous representations of Pennhurst in ghost hunter shows, photographic archives, and for some, in their personal memory of local journalism. Far from erasing Pennhurst’s past, the attraction appears to want visitors to engage with it, though in a limited way, inasmuch as it contributes to their entertainment experience.

Third, the attraction’s ambiguously drawn line between fact and fiction allows visitors to experience the pleasure of uncertainty and active detective work. As visitors move through the attraction, there is no way to tell what is “artifact” and what is “prop,” what is “history” and what is “legend.” Even in the rooms referred to as the “Pennhurst Museum,” fact and fiction frequently inhabit the same space without any available authority to distinguish between them. On the one hand, this creates the impression of an

egalitarian space in which visitors happily fill the authority vacuum left in the absence of historians or other sanctioned experts. The result is one that public historians and museum professionals long for: visitors actively trying to make sense of what it is they're looking at. There are no doubt some truly knowledgeable visitors and staff at the site who exchange information and stories with one another, based on either first-hand knowledge of Pennhurst or on their own research. As is the case with the fictionalization of real events more generally, the pretense of fiction sparks curiosity about the real. However, in most of the attraction's more heavily produced spaces (where actors, props and smoke machines take center stage), the possibility of engagement is supplanted by a parody of institutional life reflected through the prism of the horror genre.

Fourth, as reality and fantasy blend, visitors also find that, as at any haunted attraction, we are allowed to behave in unseemly ways. We may scream as much as we like, we may giggle nervously, we may grab a stranger's coat. We also find that we are being watched. We allow ourselves to be surveilled, and even threatened (though just for fun), in exchange for the thrill of fear. In this place originally designed for confinement, we are visitors liberated by fantasy.

The Legend of "Pennhurst Asylum"

One way the producers of "Pennhurst Asylum" have tried to address their critics is by using the attraction's web site to ostensibly bracket the history of Pennhurst safely away from the "fun" of the haunt (Pennhurst Asylum, 2012). The web site features separate pages for "history" and "legend," broadcasting the separation between the two as a display of apparent respect for the distinction. Randy Bates made this distinction explicit when he told the *Daily Local News*, "The storyline (is what) we came up with to

make sure that people understand this has nothing to do with mentally handicapped people” (Kessler, 2010d, pp. 1, 6).

However, there is little doubt that the “Pennhurst Asylum” owes its success to public awareness about the real Pennhurst. In fact, the attraction’s marketing sells the real as much as the fiction. As the “Pennhurst Asylum” t-shirts sold as memorabilia warn us, “The Fear is Real” (Photograph 1). In 2011, “Pennhurst Asylum” was involved in cross-promotion with the tourism board of Brandywine Valley. A promo on NPR used the promise of “history” to lure listeners to the tourism board’s web site, wrapping with the call to action: “For information on the history of Pennhurst and tickets, it’s BrandywineValley.com.”

A closer look at the story reveals that rather than neatly separating fact and fiction, the Pennhurst “legend” actually weaves the two together in order to have a very specific effect on the audience: fear. In other words, this interplay between fact and fiction is a narrative technique that helps ghostly tales achieve their desired payoff. Consider the mix of fact and fiction one would expect from the archetypal ghost story told over a camp fire: the main characters might share the same names of the people gathered around the fire to listen, the action of the story might take place in the same woods where the campers will sleep, *it all happened under a full moon, just like tonight...*

Public memory and ghost stories have an easy compatibility. Fear, like memory, is a product of narrative and an imaginative interplay between fact and fiction. Ghost stories invite their audience to imagine a past that will makes us fear for our future. In this way, *ghost stories are a memory genre*. As Judith Richardson (2003) describes, “Ghosts operate as a particular, and peculiar kind of social memory, an alternate form of

history-making in which things usually forgotten, discarded, or repressed become foregrounded, whether as items of fear, regret, explanation or desire” (p. 3). As an expression of public memory that follows the narrative conventions of a ghost story, the legend of “Pennhurst Asylum” makes strategic use of historical facts, connecting them to fictional narratives in order to produce fear.

The “legend” page introduces itself with a video. A shaky camera quickly pans around a dilapidated kitchen. The video cuts to a woman with her head tilted back as if poised for a dental exam, her mouth bloody. The next cut shows the cupola of Pennhurst’s Administration Building, and finally settles on a still of the building’s exterior, made to look as if it has been photographed from behind the cover of thick brambles.

The text on this “Legend” page begins with the facts. It describes how “Pennhurst State School” opened in 1908, was closed in 1986 when “allegations of mistreatment” were proven to be true, and was then left to “rot.” Attempts were made, the story continues, “to see if there was any feasible use for these buildings” (such attempts were, in fact, made through the “feasibility and reuse study” commissioned by the PMPA). These facts bring us all the way into the near present, where the “legend” begins.

The reader is told of a “hamlet” in Eastern Austria, well-known for its medical research facilities, where a “psycho surgical genius” named Dr. Chakejian (after Pennhurst property owner Richard Chakejian) performed operations on patients with “brain injuries and diseases.” At first, his experiments used corpses, but he soon found

that he needed live subjects in order to advance his work and “discover the cure for brain ailments.”

With some encouragement, Austrian prisons agreed to release prisoners to Dr. Chakejian for his experimentation, under the condition that these dangerous criminals not be released back into society. For two decades, the story continues, “convicted murders, rapists and sociopaths,” became the subjects for experimentation with “untried drugs, new procedures, and open brain surgery.”

Word got out about Dr. Chakejian’s experiments and the “intense psychotic deterioration” that resulted. As the Austrian government and the European Medical Association began to close in, Dr. Chakejian undertook a global search for a place to hide “the worst of his experimental failures.”

This is when the story traverses the Atlantic, and fast forwards closer to the present moment. According to the legend, in his search Dr. Chakejian comes across the “deteriorated complex in Southeastern Pennsylvania outside the town of Spring City.” There stands the “once majestic” Pennhurst complex, “almost destroyed by vandals.” Dr. Chakejian purchases the complex from the State (which indeed, the real Richard Chakejian did), and then begins his “program of restoration,” in which “roofs were mended, windows replaced, asbestos and lead were abated.” (Again, the real Chakejian was often cited in local newspapers, extolling the positive impact his purchase had on the abandoned campus, including these exact restorations.) Dr. Chakejian also put in place a strong security force to deter vandals (as did the real Chakejian).

When the restoration was complete, “the former criminal monsters of Eastern Europe, now tragically altered by radical experimentation began to flow into Pennhurst.”

With a new hospital staff in place, the experimentation continued “behind the walls and under the complex,” including “electroshock therapy,” “psycho surgery,” and experimental treatments such as “body suspension, light deprivation, and intense drug therapy.” As the property filled with Dr. Chakejian’s research subjects, the legend explains, “Pennhurst was alive again with activity.”

But, when a fire broke out one night on the second floor of the administration building, Dr. Chakejian and several of his patients and staff were killed, some by the fire, others by inmates who escaped in the chaos. Some inmates remained locked in the underground cells, left for dead.

At this point, our story brings us into the imagined present visitors will encounter at the attraction. “With Chakejian dead,” the story continues, “the buildings were once again abandoned.” But it is believed that the ghosts of Chakejian, his staff, and his inmates are still there—and their ghosts are still doing experiments. The legend concludes: “... As the number of missing people in the area would attest, the good Doctor is always looking for new test subjects.”

The Pennhurst “legend” uses several key facts that help it resonate with the concreteness of the physical structure at which the haunt takes place. The doctor of legend shares the last name of Richard Chakejian, the current owner of the real Pennhurst property. In light of the conversation criticizing the haunt for demonizing the residents and staff at the real Pennhurst, this move is likely meant to make the owner the butt of the joke, casting himself as the villain in his own story.²² Additionally, the story begins and ends with the indisputable physical presence of the Pennhurst campus in its current

decrepit state, and it reminds the reader that the buildings in the story are the same ones that stand in Southeastern Pennsylvania, just outside of Spring City. The same ones that have been plagued by vandals, the same ones that have undergone recent repairs after their purchase from the State by Chakejian.

Importantly, the legend seeks to address the same questions that would prompt a historical investigation of Pennhurst's past: How did these buildings get here? Who inhabited them? Why were the buildings abandoned? How should we regard them now, in our time?

The narrative also integrates itself with various themes that are taken up at the attraction itself. Although the attraction originally included access to just two sites on campus, it grew quickly its first three years and came to include four different sites. The Administration Building is mentioned several times in the "legend" as the site of medical experimentation, which is the central theme of the performance that takes place there. Elsewhere on the web site, the Administration Building is described as the site of "a hospital themed walk-thru attraction" complete with "artifacts that were a part of the original State School." An attraction new for the second year known as "The Dungeon of Lost Souls" is a reference to the legend's inmates left for dead in basement cells after the fictional Dr. Chakejian's death. Finally, the end of the legend provides the pretense for Pennhurst being a haunted space; the doctor and some of his staff and inmates are killed in a fire, thus allowing them to haunt the grounds. Related to this theme, the second year also saw the opening of the attraction billed as "The Ghost Hunt," hosted in the Mayflower Building. Described on the web site as "the most active" building at Pennhurst (referring to paranormal "activity"), it is the only attraction at "Pennhurst

Asylum” in which there are no actors. Visitors are armed with a flashlight and given permission to take photographs and a chance to pretend they are ghost hunters or urban explorers. Ironically, in this space visitors are encouraged to hunt for “real” ghosts, i.e., ghosts of real former Pennhurst residents, while in the more manufactured spaces the fictional storyline remains mostly intact.²³

In addition to making use of a few key facts to ground the fictional story in the physical reality of the Pennhurst campus, the story also makes several strategic fictionalizations. The narrative choices that allegedly translate the Pennhurst story from fact to fiction shed light on contemporary disability politics, as well as the complex interactions that happen when public memory is filtered through the lens of the horror genre. Most notably, the fictional story substitutes one set of diagnoses for another, telling a tale about psychiatric illness and incarceration, rather than a history about intellectual disability. This substitution highlights the need for cross-disability research: analyses that remain aware of the distinctions among disabled populations, but also investigate the intertextuality between related narratives in public discourse.

Newspapers reported that there were plans for the haunt to use actors to impersonate former Pennhurst residents (Kessler, 2010c, pp. 1, 3, 5). Whether this really was Chakejian’s plan or whether this was merely rumor, the outraged response by community members and advocates could have influenced the owner’s decision to craft a fictional story that would not be misinterpreted as overt impersonation of people with intellectual disabilities.²⁴ The conflation of the two populations played itself out at the attraction as well as in public discourse on Pennhurst. While mental health advocates objected to the association of psychiatric illness with violence and fear (Associated Press,

2010b, p. 8), intellectual disability advocates objected to the association with psychiatric illness (Carey, 2010, p. 6).

The choice to change the source of fear in the story from intellectual disability to psychiatric illness reflects the assumption that the haunt would have permission to imply one group was dangerous but not the other. It reinforces the common stereotypes of both groups: that “the mentally ill” are violent and “the intellectually disabled” are hyper-vulnerable and innocent. It also conveniently blurs the distinction between victims and perpetrators by identifying Dr. Chakejian’s psychiatric subjects as prison inmates. Their own presumed wrongdoing (they are described as murderers and rapists) disallows the audience’s empathy in order to replace it with fear. This choice follows suit with another historical landmark nearby, the Eastern State Penitentiary’s “Terror Behind the Walls.” Similarly, a final strategic fictionalization seems to speak directly to the question of guilt, or how we remember places associated with collective shame. In light of the PMPA’s interest in raising consciousness about Pennhurst’s place in *American* history, it is no doubt significant that the legend manages to relocate much of the story outside of the United States, instead attributing wrongdoing to a doctor of Austrian decent.

The uses of fact and fiction in the legend of “Pennhurst Asylum” are clearly motivated. As I’ll discuss in the next sections, they also resonate clearly with the experience of attending the haunted attraction, a space in which fact and fiction are sometimes indistinguishable from one another.

Arriving at “Pennhurst Asylum”

To get to “Pennhurst Asylum,” I drive an hour from my home in Philadelphia along the Schuylkill Expressway, the major Interstate Highway that connects the city with its western suburbs. Pennhurst is twenty minutes northwest of the Interstate past King of

Prussia Mall, the nearest landmark I'm familiar with. Looking from the vantage point of a city-dweller, I would describe the area as rural suburbia. As soon as I exit onto the local highway, I get lost. The intersections all look identical to me: each has its own Wawa convenience store and gas station. I get more disoriented as soon as I turn onto the back roads. I pass farms, wooded areas, and the occasional housing development. Finally, I find myself on a small town main street past its prime. Most blocks have at least one or two vacant storefronts. Unlike the Wawa intersections and strip malls along the local highway, mom-and-pop shops dot the main street: Sweet Ashley's Chocolate, White's Barbershop, Steve's Ice Cream Shop. American flags are stuck into every other streetlight and brick houses sit close together with postage stamp front yards. When I find my way again, it's a long winding road that leads to the entrance of what remains of the Pennhurst campus.

Several attendants are stationed along the road and flag me toward a dirt parking lot. I'm lucky to have gotten a space at one of the nearby lots. There's another lot farther away on the property and one off-site lot where school buses shuttle visitors the final few miles onto campus. After I park, I walk through a stretch of dark woods to get to the attraction entrance. More attendants wearing bright yellow "STAFF" t-shirts and brandishing flashlights point the way, but I still find it easy to feel chills walking alone in the dark. A banner hung above a tunnel that opens out onto the campus announces that we are entering "Pennhurst Asylum. As we walk through the tunnel, traces of the past are already visible. Graffiti covers the walls, as I will find it does most every surface at Pennhurst. One message on the wall asks, "Are you scared yet?" [Photograph 2].

On the other side of the tunnel, there is a ticket line and concession stand, dubbed the "Corpse Café," and a crowd of visitors milling around. The entrance to "Pennhurst Asylum" is situated such that the backdrop is the iconic cupola of Pennhurst's Administration Building [Photograph 3]. I recognize the cupola from the Internet: from photographs posted at sites like flickr, YouTube clips from the television show Ghost Hunters International, the "Pennhurst Asylum" web site, and from local newspapers and broadcast news programs. On opening night at the haunted attraction, there were several news vans parked just outside the Administration Building, the cupola in the distance of their wide shots.

Before getting on line, I wander around for a while through packs of parents waiting to pick up their kids and other groups of people hanging around to chat, drink hot chocolate, or have a smoke. A bonfire, at least twenty feet wide, blazes in the square between buildings. Near the bonfire, a local rock band plays on a raised platform. Someone in the crowd of onlookers says there will be fireworks later.

After buying a ticket, I walk along the elevated walkway that connects several brick buildings at Pennhurst. It's a wide path with railings on both sides. The line to enter the attraction zigzags back on itself like the lines at amusement parks. Then the line stretches from the Administration Building, out onto the elevated walkway about 100 yards.

"Pennhurst Asylum" tells us a lot about the history of institutionalization, almost in spite of itself. Even if we don't know anything about Pennhurst *in particular*, the fear

is built into the geography of such spaces, in the long dirt road that leads up to the gate or stone wall, in the distance from here to town. There is no clearer argument that the attraction is part of the legacy of institutionalization than the amount of distance and alienation implied by its geography and design. “Pennhurst Asylum” sells a meaning system put in place long before the State School closed. By selling tickets and memorabilia, the owners inadvertently reveal some of the cultural value of such spaces. They understand Pennhurst, and places like it, as a resource whose power can be harnessed. By the second year of the haunted attraction, the concession area took on a carnival atmosphere and was expanded with picnic benches, tents, and lights hung around the perimeter. Also new for the second year was advertising signage, which showed the event was brought to us by Wawa and the soda Orange Crush.

I have always taken for granted that one of my jobs in making sense of the *haunted attraction* would be to grapple with the nature of *attraction* as it relates to the public understanding of institutions and their commodification. That I waited on line for two hours on opening night in 2010, and that three parking lots were needed to accommodate visitors, is anecdotal to the subsequently published estimates that “Pennhurst Asylum” attracted 40,000 visitors in 2010. At around \$30 per ticket, it also attracted \$985,000 dollars (Brandt, 2010, pp. 1, 4).

That “Pennhurst Asylum” should arise as a commodity in 2010 is in keeping with the social function of the original Pennhurst State School. The relationship between Pennhurst and the surrounding community was always discussed as an economic one. The first story on Pennhurst’s construction in 1906 reported on a labor strike (“Labor strike,” 1906). A 1907 article describes an appropriation of \$243,500 for Pennhurst as

“Spring City’s Windfall,” saying it will bring profit to local merchants and employ mechanics, helping to ameliorate the effects of the failed glass and knitting industry (“Spring City’s windfall,” 1907). During the rise of institutionalization, rural areas were also seen as rehabilitative, or at least preferable, for patients thought incapable of navigating the complexity of modern city life (Nielsen, 2012). Rural areas also offered discretion for families who sought refuge from what one Pennhurst Superintendent called “the wagging tongues of misunderstanding neighbors” (Pennhurst State School, 1954).

The economy was also a common thread in contemporary news about the “Pennhurst Asylum.” In the *Daily Local News*, Randy Bates, partner of the property owner, noted the boost to the area’s economy, which he referred to as “not the largest economic growing area in Pennsylvania” (Kessler, 2010, pp. 1, 6). One editorial hailed the attraction as an economic stimulus, saying it “puts Spring City on the map” (“Pennhurst Asylum was terrific,” 2010, p. 10). Many owners of local businesses, like the ones I observed in my accidental drives along the main street in Royersford and Spring City, appeared at zoning board meetings to support the attraction because they felt the swarm of visitors each October would be good for their bottom line (Associated Press, 2010a, p. A09). The *Daily Local News* reported that the attraction employed 80 people in the 2010 season and twice that number in 2011 (Ellingsworth, 2011, pp. 1, 3, 4). The state of the national economy during this time, post-Great Recession, may have contributed to the feeling that any added stimulus, even a seasonal one, was welcome. Anecdotally, several “Pennhurst Asylum” employees told me that their work at the attraction was a second or third job. The owner of Steven’s Ice Cream Shop told me his store used to close for the winter, but he started staying open year-round since the

economy got bad. When I stopped by on an evening in October 2011, the ice cream shop was decked out for Halloween, cardboard spiders hung from the ceiling as if to welcome “Pennhurst Asylum” visitors. Even the passionate editor of *The Mercury*, who describes herself as the first to editorialize against the attraction, says the only thing that gave her pause was the potential economic impact of the attraction: “Of course our editorial philosophy in an area like ours is always supporting new business” (Nancy March, Interview, July 23, 2013).

Indeed, the meaning of Pennhurst over time seems remarkably static. A 1907 article in *The Daily Local News* introducing the newly opened institution to the community contains many of the same themes that can be found in the contemporary discussion (“Soon opened hospital,” 1907). A sub-head early in the story declares unequivocally, “NO INSANE HERE,” a running theme of distinction between diagnoses that would come to be known as mental illness and mental retardation. Less than a year after Pennhurst officially opened in January of 1908, *The Daily Local News* reported that a special committee was investigating charges against superintendent Dr. Henry M. Weeks alleging “mismanagement, cruelty and neglect” (“Special investigation, 1908). Specifics of the investigation included allegations of the scalding death of a resident, beatings and lashings, violating quarantine laws leading to a diphtheria outbreak, lack of adequate medical and food supplies, patients allowed to walk around with open sores, forced labor in the fields for the strong without proper nourishment, and “incompetent and insufficient” staffing (“Board of trustees investigation,” 1909). A 1935 article reports on the death of a resident who had lived at Pennhurst “almost from birth” and was referred to as “the child without a face.” According to the report, the child’s body was

sent to the Pennsylvania anatomical board where the child was "classified as a monstrosity" ("Child without a face," 1935).

A long list of historical circumstances produced the conditions for "Pennhurst Asylum," but perhaps the most relevant is what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes in her investigation into the nature of curiosity in her book *Staring: How We Look* (2009). As Garland-Thomson sees it, shifts in how we deal with difference in the United States during the past several decades have led to a reintegration of some individuals who were formerly removed from public space. The erasure and subsequent reintegration of a certain kind of difference from the public landscape, particularly differences understood as disability, naturally leads to public curiosity. What is removed is made taboo, and simultaneously, made fascinating. While Garland-Thomson investigates the way this history impacts public engagements between individuals, I also see the public's fascination with "the Asylum" as an outgrowth of the same historical circumstance. Buildings that were once off-limits to the public are being reborn as public spaces fueled by the same curiosity. As the institutionalized population has come to increasingly inhabit public space outside of segregated communities, "the Asylum" has also become increasingly subject to inhabitation by the public and the public's gaze.

Garland-Thomson departs from much of what has been written on the exploitative nature of "the gaze" as domination. Instead, she pursues an alternative to the power/resistance dyad by reframing the gaze as a relationship between a "starrer" and a "staree." What she accomplishes through this is a more compassionate approach to understanding both sides of the stare. What I appreciate about Garland-Thomson's approach is that she identifies the potential for positive engagement even within the

socially forbidden act of staring.

The idea that institutions hide some members of society such that the rest of us are able to forget them helps account for the public's curiosity and attraction to such spaces. Indeed, the 1907 article introducing Pennhurst to the community reflect this, too. It describes the new institution as an instant source of curiosity: "...there will be much talk about the institution then, because of the great number of people interested. What is it like?" ("Soon opened hospital," 1907). However, this kind of narrative about exits and entrances into public space can also obscure the relationship that exists between starers and starees—in this case, between institutions and their surrounding communities. In other words, framing institutionalization as total erasure from public life overlooks the many points of contact that ultimately come to color the public's view of "the Asylum" as an idea and as a localized memory.

The scene at the haunt feels like any other unremarkable community event in this Eastern Pennsylvania town. It is a site of commerce—selling tickets, concessions and memorabilia—but it is also a site of community—gathering, socializing, and sharing a common experience. It might be tempting to describe the attraction as inherently hostile and exclusionary toward disability, but the public that gathers there is about as hostile and exclusionary as any other public space in contemporary society. It offers "handicapped" parking and a main attraction in a historical building with stairs and no elevator. It assumes visitors can competently navigate a dark, crowded, noisy space. But one can expect the crowd gathered includes variously disabled bodies as does just about any other public space. And, according to haunt employee Ruth Himes, the attraction also remains a beacon for some members of the disability community. She reports that staff

from Holmesburg and Selinsgrove Centers have taken their clients to the attraction to check it out. One family from Ohio told Ruth they saw Pennhurst on a ghost hunter show and decided to make the pilgrimage to Pennhurst because the place felt like part of their family history—the family included a child with Down syndrome, a condition that frequently led physicians to recommend institutionalization in the past, and less frequently still does today. Several sources have described former Pennhurst resident Margaret Dougherty as frequenting the grounds, often talking of her time at Pennhurst and taking pictures of the campus and the actors and sharing her photos with others. Margaret’s presence at the attraction should not be taken as representative of the position of all former residents, although it does nicely demonstrate that one of the impacts of Pennhurst’s closure is that former residents are now in a position to visit, to photograph, to turn their gaze back on “the Asylum.”

While the haunt may be the first time in recent history that the general public has been legally granted access to this section of the Pennhurst campus, Pennhurst always had connections to the surrounding area. Although the campus was conceived of as a self-sustaining community separate from the one beyond its campus, it was also the site of social gatherings, both inclusive and exclusive of local area residents. Starting around the 1940s, Pennhurst had a softball team, a marching band, a Boy Scout troop, and campus-wide celebrations for May Day and the 4th of July (Pennhurst State School, 1954). The first news of recreational events appears in the Chester County Archives in 1945 when the “varsity musical show by Pennhurst State School Band and Glee Club” was performed at the Spring City High School Auditorium. Admission of 50 cents was said to benefit the “children's Amusement Fund” (“Children’s amusement fund,” 1945).

A women's group began organizing service days at Pennhurst in the 1960s ("Women's projects aid Pennhurst School," 1964). In my interview with former employee Greg Pirmann, he recalled that taking the full tour of Pennhurst was a "rite of passage" for area high school students who would visit with their health classes (Interview, June 10, 2013).²⁵ Probably most importantly, and as I already alluded to, Pennhurst was an employer for a great many people. During a zoning hearing in 2010, one community member commented that those concerned about the traffic created by the haunted attraction must not remember how busy Pennhurst Road was when the institution was operational and staff working either night or day passed each other in their cars during shift changes (Kessler, 2010b, p. 1, 5).

Still, unless you worked at Pennhurst, volunteered there, lived there, or knew someone who did, local newspapers were your primary source of information about the people who lived at the end of Pennhurst Road. Journalists could go inside and give the outside world the news from within. The reason this is important when considering the historical conditions that made Pennhurst a commodity is that it acknowledges the fact that Pennhurst was a storied place literally from the day the first brick was laid. The presence of news vans at the opening night of "Pennhurst Asylum" can be viewed as a continuation of this relationship between Pennhurst and its storymakers.

Newspaper clippings available at two local archives, including articles from 1908 through the 1980s, show that journalists covered a somewhat limited range of stories on Pennhurst.²⁶ These include Pennhurst's economic impacts on the community (job creation and employees); technology at Pennhurst (the institution's self-sufficiency and amenities); rehabilitation at Pennhurst (techniques and staff training); community at

Pennhurst (idyllic descriptions of recreation and celebration); and notably, adverse events at Pennhurst. Adverse events included reports of abuse, disease, fires, murder, and other criminal activity. For example, a 1949 State probe was covered in at least 60 stories printed in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* and other papers and involved accusations of mismanagement, abuse, slave-labor, malnourishment, and methods one former attendant described as “torture” (Semonski, 1949). In a potent foreshadowing of things to come, one expert commented during the investigation, “In every institution...the ingredients for a ‘horror story’ are always present” (“Institution Troubles Explained by Experts,” 1949).

This mediated memory (all the ways I came to know about Pennhurst before stepping foot on its campus) is evidence of a long-held stare between “the Asylum” and its public. The ample mediation of Pennhurst demonstrates an additional social use related to economics but still separate from it, the ability of “the Asylum” to generate narratives, to demand explanation in much the same way Mitchell and Snyder (2006) argue disability demands explanation and is thus an oft-used impetus for storytelling.

Even with all of these points of contact between Pennhurst and the broader public, I want to be careful to not underestimate the stigma, secrecy, and isolation of such places. My intent is to flesh out the nature of what connections do exist between such institutions and their communities in order to make their resonance in present day public memory more visible. What’s more, the nature of the starrer/staree relationships that did exist very much follow the generic pattern for relationships between populations perceived as disabled and non-disabled. Pennhurst was a community, an employer, an object of charity, an object of State surveillance, and an impetus for storytelling.

Pennhurst Stares Back

Two actors are assigned to entertain the waiting visitors. One actor is lanky with long, jet-black hair. He wears contact lenses that alter the color of his eyes to an unnatural amber. His act is to stare at you too long, stand too close, blink too infrequently. Black leather pants and a straightjacket make him look like part heavy metal act and part Hannibal Lecter. Another man is dressed in overalls and a burlap sack over his head with two eye holes cut out—a scarecrow. He performs a hunchback and a limping gait. His act is simply to walk near to the line in this unique way. To be unexpectedly within your sightline when you turn your head so as to surprise your vision. The actors manage to elicit periodic yelps from the crowd, usually followed by twitters of laughter from those who surround the source. Occasionally, the first yelp is followed immediately by a second yelp, like a call and response of startled voices.

Girls and boys wait on line together or sometimes a pack of girls is followed closely by a pack of boys who alternate between ignoring one another and occasionally exchanging middle school gossip. Two kids standing behind me talk about how much they like math. There are also plenty of groups of younger children dragging along their weary-looking chaperones. A young boy waits with his mom trying not to make eye contact with her while she explains that Pennhurst was a place where they kept “sick kids.”

As we finally make it to the front of the line, we pass by the security guard who half-heartedly looks into my bag. He insists that there’s no way anyone is getting through with anything they’re not supposed to have. He’s confiscated plenty of knives, he assures me. We are also reminded that there will be no photography or video of any kind allowed in the Administration Building.

“The hunchback” and “the psycho” aren’t the only ones acting strangely at the haunted attraction. I scare easily and at least one or two of the yelps that the actors elicit from the crowd are mine. Waiting to enter the “main event” is not unlike other live performances in which a great part of the experience is its communal nature: sharing laughter or tears or whatever catharsis the theater has planned that day for you and a room full of strangers.

Not only do visitors pay to see actors perform abnormalcy, we also pay for permission to act out ourselves. Here, as at any haunted attraction, we may scream at the top of our lungs or giggle uncontrollably or even throw a stranger in front of us so he is

made to lead the way into the dark of the haunted house. It is anti-social behavior to say the least—although in the context of a haunted attraction, it is not only permitted, but also expected. And to be sure, one could easily imagine plenty of ways to transgress even within the expectation of strange behavior at the attraction. One primary way would be to fail to recognize the make-believeness of the place, to truly panic and run screaming from the scene, trampling your fellow visitors as you flee. We get a little latitude, not a free pass.

We may be staring at the actors, but once we enter the attraction, we aren't permitted to photograph or record them in anyway. In contrast, the security presence at the entrance to the Administration Building isn't the only sign of surveillance in the attraction. The Administration Building has the small rooms and hallways you would expect from office space, and there are often people in yellow "STAFF" t-shirts directing us where to turn next, as well as blocking off spaces where we may not tread. Although some of the rooms are dimly lit, in general the spaces are brighter than one would expect of a haunted attraction. Some of the rooms are almost so bright as to irritate your eyes, and they seem to be referencing areas of staged surveillance, like a medical theater or an interrogation room. Security cameras hang at the corners of the ceiling in strategic locations, perhaps to ensure visitor safety or as a means of crowd control to keep the flow of visitors even.

In any case, we certainly feel like we are being watched. And indeed, this is an integral part of how a haunted attraction operates in general. Just as the actors who worked the line often seemed to be standing just behind me without my knowledge, throughout the attraction, actors hide in places where they can see you but you cannot see

them in order to execute jack-in-the-box-type shocks to the stream of visitors. In my interview with Randy Bates, he explained that in order to ensure proper flow, big scares almost always originate from behind the visitor, essentially scaring them forward and propelling them into the next space (Interview, June 13, 2013). Sudden, loud noises are another technique designed to put visitors on edge, which also requires actors watching us without us knowing, and then triggering the loud noise when the time is right.

There's so much irony here it is difficult to keep it straight. At the very site that historically was used to discipline abnormal social behavior by segregating and training those deemed unfit, the public now gathers to ritualistically perform outside of social norms, and to be surveilled while we do so. We gape, or stare, at the actor's performances of abnormalcy, respond with our own degree of acting outside the bounds of normal everyday life, all while the gaze is returned by the actors and staff, partly for our benefit (to entertain us) and partly for theirs (to control us).

Along the same lines as Bennett (1995) conceives of the museum as a force of social division, the political rationality of Pennhurst has not changed since it was operational in the sense that, then and now, it served to inscribe what is considered normal and abnormal. When Pennhurst was operational, this was accomplished through mechanisms of the State and the medical profession; today, entertainment professionals produce this inscription of abnormalcy. In both cases, big money is involved; in both cases, it took the public's consent to agree to the meaning of the place.

Mechanisms for staring out into the population, to preserve Garland-Thomson's terminology, included tools such as IQ tests, which were sometimes described as a means of providing specialized, segregated education to the feeble-minded, or alternately as

means of ensuring the integrity of the body politic by keeping the feebleminded safely out of the gene pool (Gould, 1981; Largent 2008). It was also common for family doctors to recommend institutionalization upon examination of babies and children who had easily recognizable genetic conditions, such as Down syndrome, or who failed to meet developmental milestones. The dynamic I'm attempting to describe is one of mutual interest. In other words, if "the Asylum" has emerged as an object of fascination for the public, we are always watching them watching us. We must not forget when assessing the public's interest in such spaces, that this legacy of educational and medical surveillance colors our curiosity in the figure of "the Asylum" as a symbol of the systems that continue to have the power to sort us into "able" and "disabled." This is perhaps another sense in which "the fear is real." In other words, the attraction exploits visitors' curiosity about Pennhurst's past as much as it does our fear of being ousted further away from whatever proximity to normalcy we may inhabit.

Understanding how to identify and describe the people who lived at Pennhurst is a fraught undertaking. The woman who attempts to describe to her son that this was a place for "sick kids" is representative of other searching, halting conversations I overheard at the attraction. In another case, I chatted with two former Pennhurst employees who explained to a father waiting for his kids that Pennhurst was not, in fact, an institution for "crazy people," but rather for "kids, like kids with Down syndrome." When the man learned this, his mouth dropped and his eyes widened. It seemed to me that he found this discovery somewhat less palatable than his original assumption.

Still, the image of Pennhurst residents as kids is pretty common, likely owing to the word "School" in the institution's name and the perception of people with intellectual

disabilities as eternal children. As was noted in *Suffer the Little Children* (Baldini, 1968), staff often referred to residents as “the children,” possibly because many required the kind of care associated with children, such as assistance with toileting, dressing, eating, and bathing. In 2011, while I was visiting a day program attended by several former Pennhurst residents, a staff member referred to two individual clients who required this kind of care as “two babies” – they were both over the age of fifty. According to the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study (Conroy & Bradley, 1985), the 1154 residents at Pennhurst in 1978 ranged in age from 9 to 82.²⁷

Nonetheless, young people still have an important stake in Pennhurst’s history. Richard Chakejian told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* he guessed that “99 percent” of visitors would be 12 to 20 years old and totally unfamiliar with Pennhurst’s history, adding “They’re here to get a scare” (Wood, 2010a, p. B01). At most of my visits, the line looked about half-filled with visitors under 20 years old. Though these young visitors may be unaware of Pennhurst’s history, Pennhurst is part of widespread political and social change that has had perhaps the most impact on young people.

By the time the right to education movement began to swell in the 1960s, the gaze of State Hospitals had extended into the public school system. When children registered for kindergarten, officials such as school psychologists had the right to indefinitely deny a child entrance if he or she failed to test at a mental age of five or was deemed by a psychologist to be “uneducable and untrainable” (24 Purd.Stat. Sec 13-1375). A child rejected by the public school system in this way had few options for services outside of the State Hospital system (Carey, 2009).

In Pennsylvania, the foundation for the right to education for children with disabilities was established by a precursor to the Pennhurst case: *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971). In PARC's first waylay into seeking civil rights through the justice system, the board proposed suing the Commonwealth for denying Pennhurst residents a right to treatment. Instead, attorney Thomas Gilhool redirected PARC to first seek a case that would establish the right to education, around which there was far more legal precedent than the right to treatment (Carey, 2009). The PARC case victory resulted in a consent decree stating that "[every] retarded person between the ages of six and twenty-one shall be provided access to a free public program of education and training appropriate to his capacities as soon as possible but in no event later than September 1, 1972" (PARC v. Pennsylvania, 334 F.Supp. 1257 (E.D. PA 1972) Paragraph 42).

The teenagers on line at the "Pennhurst Asylum" likely include students with documented disabilities who receive accommodations as a result of the right to education movement fought in Pennsylvania and nationwide.²⁸ If they themselves don't receive accommodations, they surely attend school with someone who does. It would be easy to take for granted the premise of diversity in public schools. Popular television shows like *Glee*, which features an actress with Down syndrome and an able-bodied actor who plays a wheelchair-user, suggest that an ethic of integration is the norm. According to a publication of the U.S. Department of Education, in 1970 U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, but 25 years after the All Handicapped Children Act, the Department claims the majority of children with disabilities attend neighborhood schools with their non-disabled peers. It is unclear whether this claim is more a reflection of the

increase in diagnosis of learning and behavioral disabilities (i.e., ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, etc.) such that a larger percentage of all students are deemed “children with disabilities” or if it reflects the successful integration of the smaller number of students deemed “severally disabled” or with “multiple handicaps.”

There’s another way that the young people at “Pennhurst Asylum” are being watched—they are, of course, watching each other. In my interview with “Pennhurst Asylum” employee Ruth Himes, she commented that as she stands at her post in the “Pennhurst Museum” among photographs of former Pennhurst residents, one thing that really bugs her is when she hears kids on line calling each other “retarded” (Interview, October 19, 2011).

“The Pennhurst Museum”

At the top of the Administration Building steps, a red-wigged woman in a nurse’s uniform waves our group up. As I get closer, I see she wears ghostly white face paint and her uniform isn’t really from this time. It’s more like the form fitting a-line dress and stiff triangular cap seen in films like One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Her wig, too, is of another era. It’s a deep auburn, styled in pin curls.

When you get to the top of the steps, old-timey music is playing—it has the quality of something played on a gramophone. It feels designed to give visitors a sense that they are stepping into another time, but I can’t be sure which one.

The nurse welcomes us to Pennhurst and says that the doctor is seeing patients now (we are the patients). She says he’s doing his lobotomies. Then she explains what a lobotomy is, I assume because so many of the people on line are young, and she’s gotten some questions from those unfamiliar with the term.

Before the red-wigged nurse ushers us into the building, she says something that surprises me. She says she worked at the real Pennhurst. Then she says something else of note before she waves us into the first rooms of the Administration Building.

“Everything in the first three rooms is real. Those are the historical rooms,” she explains. “Everything else after that is fake.”

As we move through the rooms called “The Pennhurst Museum,” the old-timey music from the entrance continues to play. Between rooms, a Halloween trick is played. Monitors are placed behind the small window in doors so that the image on the screen appears to be the reality on the other side. The monitor plays a loop of an actor appearing to be banging frantically on the window, screaming to be let out. To add to the

illusion, an effect has been added to the video to make it appear as if there is a crack in the glass.

The majority of the displays appear similar to images found in a thirty-two-page brochure from 1954 that is also posted at the PMPA's web site. The brochure features posed photos of residents and staff showcasing the various facilities at Pennhurst. Since it was described as both a school and a hospital, the health care facilities are highlighted: the clinic, operating room, and hospital ward. The nurses in the photos wear uniforms strikingly similar to the one worn as a costume by the red-wigged nurse. Other photos show the farm, the dairy and pigs, recreational activities, classrooms, and celebrations. One photo shows a Halloween celebration, a masquerade ball with costumes and masks and cardboard skeletons hanging in the background. Some photos are staged like class photos taken of elementary school children in which the group is arranged in two or three neat rows. These feature either staff or "working residents," both in uniform.

There are a few objects as well. A strip of cloth with buttons on one side and button holes on the other, and what looks like a large wooden loom.

As visitors shuffle through the "Pennhurst Museum," the red-wigged nurse explains that Pennhurst was "a good place." When one visitor asks, "How bad was it?" she responds, "I didn't witness any abuse." She says that there were calls for the closing of Pennhurst before she started working there in the 1980s and that by the time she was there, improvements had been made.

I would learn that the red-wigged nurse/former Pennhurst employee was Ruth Himes, whom I would later interview as a key informant. Ruth's nurse's costume is congruous with the legend narrative on the "Pennhurst Asylum" web site, the one about there having been a fire and inmate uprising. The nurse seems to be costumed as a ghost, as if she had been killed during the fire and now haunts the property. Even though nurses certainly worked at Pennhurst, her reference to "lobotomies" reinforces the legend's association with mental illness.

But the distant time period that the costuming and sound evoke don't line up with the legend at all, which is supposed to have taken place after the real Pennhurst closed in the 1980s. It may be that setting the attraction in a deeper past lends itself better to imagination and makes it easier for visitors to gain the needed distance from the

disturbing parts of Pennhurst's history. Perhaps one must create a kind of Goldilocks distance in order for horror entertainment to have the desired effect: not too close, but still near enough to scare. Pennhurst's long life as an institution makes entering the space as a place of memory infinitely more complicated than the entrance of a space noteworthy only for a single event or for a shorter time period. When you step onto the Pennhurst campus, do you enter the Pennhurst of 1908, when William H. Taft had just been elected president of the United States, or do you enter the Pennhurst of the Reagan era? From the costume choice alone, it seems that "Pennhurst Asylum" lightly references the time period depicted in the squeaky clean images from the 1954 Pennhurst State School brochure.

In retrospect, I'm somewhat envious of Ruth's confidence that fact and fiction at the attraction would be so easily delineated from one room to the next. In light of what follows, it would be comforting to know for sure which is which, but I don't think that's the experience visitors are likely to get. Still, Ruth is spot on in terms of "Pennhurst Asylum's" messaging. It is not only the website that features separate pages for "History" and "Legend;" the owner has been quoted in several articles making the same distinction. However, even the "Pennhurst Asylum" website suggests a less clear division when it describes the Administration Building as containing "artifacts," as well as "a combination of high tech animatronics, digital sound and motivated actors." Likewise, the first ghost hunt show to feature Pennhurst, *Ghost Adventures*, Season 3, Episode 2 (Groff, Bagans & Lage, 2009), included interviews with Richard Chakejian, several PMPA members, and former Pennhurst resident Betty Potts, all using artifacts found in the buildings to illustrate stories about Pennhurst's past, including ghost stories.

Overall, the first rooms of the attraction perform not a clear division between fact and fiction, but something that in its essence reflects the building in which the attraction is staged. Moving through the Administration Building, visitors experience erosion between boundaries that occurs over time, much like peeling paint or rusted metal. We see an overlapping of elements like the texture created from deterioration and chemical reactions. It may be why so many people are attracted to the aesthetics of decay; it symbolizes some complexity or middle state that seems true to the way we experience the past, as a mix of imagination and evidence. For example, even though the first rooms of the Administration Building are referred to as the “Pennhurst Museum,” what I call “old-timey music,” plays throughout the building, not only in the museum rooms, and suggests continuity between supposed spaces of fact and fiction. As I later learned in an interview with attraction designer Randy Bates, the music was in fact inspired by the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, in which the villain Nurse Ratched plays records over the ward PA system to soothe the patients (Interview, June, 6 2013).

The photos that take up most of the museum rooms were printed in an informational booklet designed to introduce parents to the services and community at Pennhurst.²⁹ In this sense, the historical intent of the images are best described as marketing pieces. Not only were they curated by the administration at Pennhurst to create the best possible image of the institution, they also reflect only a single snapshot in time. Another way of orienting the year 1954 at Pennhurst would be to say that the brochure was produced sometime after the 1953 FBI probe into the mismanagement of Pennsylvania State Hospitals (“Governor criticizes,” 1953) and sometime before the 1956 State police investigation into the possible beating death of resident Thomas (Buddy)

Savage (“Aide fired,” 1956). Instead, the first few rooms of the “Pennhurst Museum” actually create a whitewashing of Pennhurst’s past. However, as amateur collections of artifacts go, the one at the “Pennhurst Museum” is not so unusual. There are no interpretive labels and no apparent unified method of display or principle of collection.³⁰ There are, however, objects in the “Pennhurst Museum” which speak if you are fluent in their language.

The strip of cloth with buttons was likely a teaching tool designed for residents to practice motor skills in the context of activities of daily living. What I remembered as a “loom” was more likely a printing press, which Ruth Himes described in our interview. Both items though would have been used at Pennhurst and are symbols of what is often referred to as the “self-sustaining” nature of institutional design in the early 1900s. Looms and similar devices would have been used by “high-functioning” residents at some point in Pennhurst’s past to make clothes. The 1954 brochure features a photo of residents working at similar looking machines with the captions, “weaving,” “sewing,” and “mending.” The page heading is “Occupational Therapy,” but the body copy explains that the images show residents making and repairing “institutional clothing.” Early news of the institution always positioned it as “self-sustaining” (“Soon opened hospital,” 1907) and this message remained static even in the 1954 brochure in which the superintendent calls it “an almost completely self-operating community” (Pennhurst State School, 1954). Contemporary disability advocates and scholars dating back to Erving Goffman (1961) would tend to see such practices as a form of slavery, since the economy of institutions could not function without the free labor of inmate residents. In the case of those confined to institutions with no pretense of loss of rights as punishment for wrong-doing

(in other words, they are ostensibly “patients” rather than “prisoners”), the case against using labor in this way is even stronger. On the other hand, this is the kind of labor that Oliver Sacks argues was “therapeutic” for patients in psychiatric hospitals in his introduction to the photo book *Asylums: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals* (2009). Mine is just one possible reading of a loom/printing press, but one that would not likely be available to most visitors. In the context of the surrounding brochure photographs, the dominant reading of a loom might be something closer to the idyllic 1954 account: the loom is old, precious, and used to occupy the time of those with few other options. Ruth Himes reports that visitors had asked her if the printing press was some kind of torture device (Interview, October 19, 2011).

The “Pennhurst Museum,” like the rest of the haunted attraction, is mostly interpreted not by labels, but by people like Ruth. Visitors tend to work together to extrapolate meaning from objects and spaces, but they are often aided by staff members who work as unofficial docents. I use the word unofficial because according to Randy Bates and several staff members I spoke with, they are not trained with respect to historical content, and yet many share information with visitors not as part of their job duties per se, but because they want to. For example, Ruth Himes admits to holding very clear opinions about the closing of Pennhurst, feeling that institutional care is superior to community-living in group homes. As I observed at the attraction, when visitors ask her questions such as “how bad was it?” she frequently replies, “Pennhurst was a good place.” In another example, an unofficial docent stood on a railing along the elevated walkway offering facts about Pennhurst, mostly the basics such as dates of opening and closure, but also that it was a place for “the mentally ill.” When a visitor walking by

asked, “why did it close?” the unofficial docent answered, “lack of funds.” This is true, but only in the most slippery way. Theoretically, if more money had been funneled into Pennhurst, conditions might not have deteriorated the way they did, but strictly speaking, a judge mandated Pennhurst’s closure because he found the institution was actually causing harm to residents, and their commitment was therefore unconstitutional since the only reason to hold them there was on the assumption of care and rehabilitation. A staff member at the “Ghost Hunt” confirmed to me that visitors often asked him questions about Pennhurst, but that employees received no training about Pennhurst’s history. He explained that his mom knew a lot and was always telling him there’s a lot of stuff to learn about Pennhurst on YouTube. While I like the idea of crowd-sourcing history, I start to feel skeptical about the authority vacuum at “Pennhurst Asylum” when I realize that the unofficial docents are trained on YouTube.

Suffer the Little Children, A Prelude to Parody

The final museum room, a smaller space than the first two, contains a single display: a projection screen on which “Suffer the Little Children” plays on a loop. The room is dimly lit for the sake of visibility of the moving images, but in a haunted attraction, the dark also portends the shift from real to imagined horrors.

The footage plays soundlessly. The only accompaniment is the old-timey music and the yelps of visitors farther along in the attraction. Also in this room, there is another trick door with a video loop of an actor trapped behind its window.

I delay my entrance into the next room so that I can watch the video, but I’ve already seen it in its entirety on the Internet.

Throughout the video, identifying features of residents are avoided through close-ups that inadvertently objectify the subjects. The frame fills completely with an ankle wrapped in a leather restraint and searching for movement within the few inches that inscribe its freedom. In another shot, a wrist is bound with cloth and tied to a hospital bed. Several shots show residents wearing restraining garments. Flies swarm around one resident and then dead flies are shown stuck to a roll of flypaper. Men mill around a crowded day room, many of them barefoot. Pants are too short or else too wide. Most of the men are shirtless and everyone’s hair is shorn close to the scalp. Many shots of the day room are taken facing sunlit windows such that the identity and humanity of residents is reduced to a mob of shadow figures that rock and pace within the frame. Another shot

of pacing feet creates a long shadow on the floor within the squares of light from a nearby window. Rows of adult-size cribs contain men clothed only in diapers. One man in a crib is shown curled face down in the fetal position. The bars of one crib make yet another set of long shadows. A group of residents sit at a cafeteria table unattended and eating with their hands from trays, the food spilling around the table and on themselves (Photograph 4-5).

When I watch the video at home again on the Internet, I notice that most of it shows interviews with nurses, doctors, and administrative staff at Pennhurst. It also shows rehabilitation, training, and recreational activities. Famously, it cuts back and forth between a tiger pacing in the Philadelphia Zoo and the residents pacing in the packed day room. The audio explains that, at the time, the State was spending more per zoo animal than it was per Pennhurst resident.

Suffer the Little Children (STLC) aired in the first week of July in 1968— ten years after the 1958 brochure with its squeaky clean photographs, and six years before the Pennhurst case was eventually filed in 1974. During my fieldwork with disability advocates, I have heard much talk of the series as a watershed moment for the movement, a long-awaited reveal that exposed the horrific conditions that taxpayers and the State were ultimately responsible for and complicit in. As a display in the “Pennhurst Museum,” the video comes with no descriptive or interpretive label. Though it originally aired as a five-part series, STLC is now most accessible as a continuous 35-minute Internet video widely available via the PMPA web site, NBC 10.com, and on YouTube, where it has been viewed over 200,000 times.

According to representatives of several disability organizations, STLC is still frequently screened during advocate workshops or new employee training sessions as an introduction to the history of human services for people with intellectual disabilities. The closing of places like Pennhurst led to the opening of countless service organizations that have taken its place, so to speak. For those who work at day programs or other providers of community-based services, their organizations and their jobs literally did not exist

prior to Pennhurst's closing. In this way, the video is used as a kind of organizational origin story. For advocates, it is also used as a warning against the threat of backsliding into the past and a motivation for continued advocacy in the midst of economic hard-times and public apathy. While there is a powerful mythology surrounding the broadcast of STLC and I have encountered many people with personal memories of viewing the broadcast, I was surprised to find little evidence of its immediate impact in newspapers that covered other events related to Pennhurst. Searching all issues of *The Inquirer*, *The Daily News*, and *The Pottstown-Mercury* (now known as *The Mercury*) published in the month of July 1968, it did not appear that the impact was immediately recognized by these publications.

STLC's use in the final "Pennhurst Museum" room makes this the most markedly liminal space of the entire attraction where the most transparent recycling of the real past occurs. What was once regarded as evidence of inhuman treatment is reconfigured such that it can be read as little more than a horror movie. This is made possible by the content and style of the original footage, but also by the recontextualization of the footage within the haunted attraction.

In STLC, the framing of shots used to conceal the identity of residents and create an emotional response in the viewer forces a visual style that is at home in the horror genre. As in a Hitchcock film, the viewer is made uneasy by what we are *not* able to see: the faces of residents, the details of their figures obscured in shadow, the whole human being removed from tight shots of hands, wrists, feet. The sense of confinement at Pennhurst is not only achieved through documenting the use of restraints and cage-like cribs. The viewer also feels confined along with the residents through the limitations of

the frame and the repetition of windows as a visual theme that reminds us we are trapped on the inside. Long shadows that cut starkly through bright window light have a similar, foreboding effect. Flies swarm but are then shown captured on fly tape, stuck as the residents themselves are. The repeated footage of the crowded day room in which bright light entering from windows in the background throws the figures of residents into full silhouette is so stylized it actually resonates with horror films that depict violent mobs of monsters or “zombies.”

In the “Pennhurst Museum,” the visual signifiers associated with the horror genre, already *inadvertently* present in STLC, are exploited in several ways. STLC does contain many disturbing images of residents unattended, crowded together, and confined; however, minute-for-minute, it contains far more footage of talking heads: administrators at Pennhurst being interviewed by reporter Bill Baldini. It also contains fairly mundane images of residents engaged in rehabilitative activities, such as a young boy playing with a stack of colored plastic rings and a woman in dark glasses practicing the use of a long cane to detect objects in her path. While much of the program attempts to make an emotional argument by exposing the public to conditions at Pennhurst, more of it is spent making a reasoned argument about why the conditions deteriorated and who was accountable. The loop of images that runs at the “Pennhurst Museum” shows only the most emotionally charged, disturbing images, images that, when removed from their context, are presented as a horror film. The lion’s share of the footage, visually uninteresting talking heads in collared shirts and ties, is removed from the video loop.³¹ The darkened room, as well as the substitution of the original STLC soundtrack with the atmospheric sounds of the attraction—old-timey music and the ambient screams of

nearby visitors and actors—recontextualizes the video as if its only significance were as a prequel for the haunted attraction. Though used under the guise of history, the true purpose of the film within the overall experience of the attraction is to prime visitors for fear. As in a ghost story, it establishes the setting for what follows, telling visitors that they are standing in the very spot where these images were captured.³²

Suffer the Little Children demonstrates the transiency of cultural resources. In Freudian terms, the “renarrativization” of memory, the fact that memories do not exist in our brains like completed books on the shelf to be referenced at any time, but rather are reconstituted each time we need them, means that cultural resources like STLC get recreated each time they are accessed, often with wildly different or even opposite meanings. What is perhaps even more surprising is that we might be tempted to view both journalism and video as documentation that would be less susceptible to such manipulations. After all, unlike our individual memories, the video *does* exist in its original form to be accessed as whole data at any time. However, part of the relationship between media and memory is this seeming contradiction: that *even* something as fixed in its meaning as a broadcast news program must be reconstituted each time it is remembered publicly. When used in the haunted attraction, STLC appears as a horror film in its intent to arouse the viewer’s emotions. In its original context, this arousal was intended to spark *action towards positive social change*. And, it was paired with reasoned argumentation and dialogue between the journalist and his subjects. The use of STLC in the “Pennhurst Asylum” challenges us to think through the relationship between the vocabulary (visual and verbal) of fictional horror and the documentation of real life horrific events.

“You belong to Pennhurst now”

After the museum, we are ushered in to another room by a woman dressed as a nurse who yells at us harshly to “File in!” A man dressed in a white lab coat stands in front of another projection screen. This screen projects a Rorschach test, the ink blotches used in a technique of psychological diagnoses. The doctor welcomes us to Pennhurst and refers to us as his patients. Then, he starts to get angry. He asks what we see in the image on the screen. When people reply with silence and unclear murmurs, the doctor shouts at the top of his lungs: “What do you see?!” Finally, someone says, “a skull.”

Then the doctor says, “It doesn’t matter what you see, because you all belong to Pennhurst now!”

After the doctor finishes his bit, he directs the group to the delousing showers. We walk through a dimmed hallway fitted with showerheads above that hiss and steam with fake fog.

When the delousing is through, we turn the corner to the left and enter a room representing a cafeteria. Two mannequins dressed in hospital gowns sit complacently in their wheelchairs, an institutional meal laid out before them (Photograph 7). Several tray return racks with trays imply the other imaginary multitudes served in this fashion. A legless mannequin balances with both hands on a walker; the bottom of the torso looks ragged and bloody, as if the legs have been severed. Shortly after we enter the room, a female cafeteria worker appears as if from nowhere. She wields a serving spoon in our direction to usher us into the next room.

We emerge into the stairwell where a petite, young woman with long matted hair, also wearing a hospital gown motions for us to ascend the steps. First though, she screams in our faces a few times and then directs her attention to a real centipede that happens to be climbing on the wall. With child-like attention, the actress places her finger on the centipede’s path and wrangles it onto her hand, looking at it lovingly. Then she looks back up at us and with her other hand gestures with her index finger for us to come forward and then up the steps.

As we climb, we can hear her scream at the next group.

In many rooms, we simply walk through and receive a sudden fright, hear a snippet of creepy dialogue, or get screamed at by someone who either appears to be acting like a “crazy” patient or a “crazy” doctor. The rooms begin to blur together in a series of images of medical horror and confinement.

A woman is strapped into a hospital bed with leather restraints, screaming to be released. We keep walking, down the hallway past bloodied dummies that hang from the ceiling on hooks as in a meat locker. At the end of the hall, a woman sits in a chair with her head cocked to one side and points the way forward.

In the next room, a dentist in scrubs tends to his mannequin/patient who sits inert in a dentist’s chair (Photograph 8). The patient has already had some teeth removed. The dentist wields dirty forceps and draws out the invitation: “smiile!”

In the electroshock therapy room, a body hooked up to electrodes convulses wildly as a doctor throws the power switch.

In the lobotomy room, we are finally treated to the brain surgery we were promised by the red-wigged nurse. We watch as the doctor pokes inside the skull of a wakeful patient who wears a black wig with exposed brains sculpted in latex at the top.

In a hallway between rooms, a woman sits in a cage and screams "Let me out!" A man pops out behind the cage. He is wearing a straight jacket and speaks of his escape.

In another operating room, a woman lies on an examining table in a hospital gown that is bloodied between her legs. It's not clear if she's having a baby or an abortion. There are female mannequin torsos, with pregnant bellies and without, all around the room, bloodied on their stomachs and legs.

In what could be viewed as a neonatal unit, several baby incubators fill a room. A nurse cradles a bloodied baby torso in her arms. She appears catatonically unaware of the baby's condition. The sound of babies crying fills the room. The nurse turns angrily in our direction when we arrive. "You woke the baby!" she scolds.

In the morgue, there are numbers on each drawer as if to identify the corpses. The presumed pathologist, another ghoul in a white lab coat, pulls out one of the drawers and shakes the corpse/mannequin beneath the sheet. "There's room for one more," he says.

Residency at Pennhurst was never voluntary because the individuals living there were either wards of the state or minors under their parent's authority. This is not to say that there were not individuals who wanted to stay at Pennhurst, especially when it was the only home they had known. But the choice of words by the actor/doctor ("you belong to Pennhurst now") and the repeated images of confinement (people in cages, straightjackets, restraints) are particularly telling in the sense that part of the mythic quality of institutions is their association with confinement and loss of liberty. Perhaps the figure of "the Asylum" represents our collective fear of this loss.

I see in the "Pennhurst Asylum" a constant dialogue between the mythic and the historically specific. Straightjackets speak in the mythic pitch as a signifier of insanity, but also resonate with the images documented in *Suffer the Little Children* of residents in restraining garments, also called camisoles. The abundance of doctor's lab coats in the attraction, a potent signifier of medical authority, is another example. The actor/doctor's Rorschach test reinforces the "Pennhurst Asylum" legend as a signifier of psychiatric

illness rather than intellectual disability. Still, the medical theme used throughout the “Pennhurst Asylum” sits in undeniably close proximity to Pennhurst’s history. In the “Pennhurst Museum,” photographs of the real Pennhurst feature many of the same institutional spaces that are then parodied throughout the rest of the attraction: hospital beds, nurses, doctors, operating rooms, etc. Pennhurst superintendents were for most of its history physicians by vocation. Although there were and are several social systems that might funnel people into a State Hospital, the legacy of medical authority is a real part of Pennhurst’s past since it was family doctors or specialists who often recommended institutionalization as the only option for some children. Over and over, the “Pennhurst Asylum” gets the details wrong, but manages to retain something true about the cultural meaning of “the Asylum.”

One of the objections to early plans for the attraction were that it would scare visitors by using actors to play former Pennhurst residents. There are still many actors in the attraction who play “patients”—they wear hospital gowns instead of the institutional grey pants and housedress shapes worn by the men and women featured in STLC. The “patients” of “Pennhurst Asylum” hide under the sheets of operating tables and jump out at us. In the parlance of horror films, they play “psychos.” But the additional conceit of the haunted attraction is that the *visitors* are the patients, held at Pennhurst against our will. In this way, it presumes that the source of our fear as we move through the attraction is not only our fear of “psychos” and “mad scientists;” it is our fear of a loss of self. In other words, in the world of the attraction, we are not who we assume ourselves to be before we enter. Instead, we are “patients,” and as the Rorschach doctor tells us, we “belong to Pennhurst now.” This reversal follows a familiar narrative convention used in

films from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) to the Asylum-themed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and more recent *Shutter Island* (2010), in which the primary threat to the normate hero or heroine (with whom the viewer is presumed to identify) is their reinterpretation as a "freak," "patient," or "madman," and subsequent destruction or internment. As an artifact of public memory, albeit a crass parody, the attraction remembers accurately the real loss that institutionalization produces in its subjects, a loss of self.

Furthermore, while much of the aesthetics of the attraction are generic to the horror genre (fake blood, fake brains, fake dead bodies), it is also filled with signifiers of disability. It is not only that a mannequin is featured with bloody fragments where its legs should be, it is that the mannequin is using a walker. Other mannequins are featured in wheelchairs. Several actors are featured in various forms of restraints. This is all without even scratching the surface of the multitude of performative features which can be read as signifiers of disability in the pitch of Hollywood caricatures: heads cocked to the side, vacant stares, bodies rocking back and forth, unchecked screaming, limping, and twitching. Although the legend alters the diagnosis of its fictional patients, it undeniably exploits the association between disabled bodies and this particular place, as well as the techniques common to Hollywood horror films that rely on hyper-vulnerable, dismantled, misbehaving bodies to evoke fear in audiences.

I'm never sure if "Pennhurst Asylum" wants us to forget completely about the real Pennhurst or if it wants to remind us of it. Early in my research process, I was talking with my husband one night after we went through the Administration Building. I mentioned that I couldn't help constantly dialoguing with each new tableau as we moved

through the attraction, asking myself: *Was there ever electroshock therapy here? Pennhurst did house epileptics in its earlier years well before modern pharmacology—were any of them subjected to brain surgery? There must have been a morgue at Pennhurst, because I know there was a graveyard. Was the dentist chair a real artifact?* I have since noticed that even at historic landmarks with a mission to educate the public, where history takes a more prominent place than legend, I often overhear these kinds of questions from my fellow visitors. We want to know what is authentic and what is false. Still, when I told my husband that I was most disturbed by the rooms in the Administration Building that seemed to reference what I considered real aspects of life at Pennhurst, such as the dentist's office, he surprised me by saying that he wasn't thinking about that at all. Never once while he moved through the attraction did he consider the authenticity of the space or the props, he claims. For him, it was a fiction and only a fiction and he felt very little curiosity about its relationship to the real.

Pennsylvania Pompeii

One of the two attractions added to the "Pennhurst Asylum" for the 2011 season was the "Ghost Hunt," in which visitors are given flashlights and set loose to explore the Mayflower Building, a residential hall. Employees are stationed at every entrance and exit in the building and ropes hang to block off doorways into all but a few rooms. Many of the rooms have a single hospital bed or maybe two hospital beds and a chair. Some of the rooms seem to be set up for socializing. Short, squat, thick foam chairs covered in white dust are arranged around a day room. A solitary toy airplane on the floor looks too clean to belong there.

I ask an attendant, who is dressed as a medical orderly in whites and a black bow tie, if all the objects in the "Ghost Hunt" are original to the building. He says yes, in this building the idea was to keep it all as it was. I assume he means as it was when the current owner bought the property, because clearly it's not as it was. Graffiti covers not every surface, but most walls. I notice big blocks of purple paint cover some of the graffiti. One reads something like, "Jake is a BLANK and a BLANK." I imagine a giant purple paint roller moving along the walls, censoring what I assume are curse words.

The Mayflower Building is the only building in which we are permitted to take photographs. Unlike the more heavily staged buildings in which we encounter actors,

tableaus and props, in the Mayflower Building nearly every visitor comes armed with their camera or smart phone. We are hunting for ghosts, but also for a semblance of story or truth. This is the space in which one can hear the most active engagement of visitors trying to make sense of what they are looking at.

I accompany one older teenage girl who is there with her mother and two younger boys. It is at least her second time at the attraction and she narrates the space, hypothesizing and imagining what it was like to live there. In what everyone seems to agree was a communal bedroom, we are surprised to find that the walls don't go up to the ceiling, much like office cubicles. On each cubicle wall, four last names are printed in neat, stenciled paint. The older teenage girl hypothesizes to us that these must have been the names of the people who resided in each cubicle. Beneath many of these names are various additions written in graffiti. Many of the names are of well-known serial killers: Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy. [Photograph 8] If these were here before the haunted attraction, it's evidence that Richard Chakejian didn't invent the association between Pennhurst and mental illness, violence, and horror.

On my way out of the "Pennhurst Asylum" one night, a man wearing a yellow "STAFF" shirt strikes up a conversation with my husband and me. He is tending a trash can fire at the exit to the parking area. He says he has lived in Spring City since the 1980s. He worked as a security guard at Pennhurst for three years before the haunted attraction started, chasing away vandals, kids mostly, who used the spot as a place to party. When Pennhurst closed its doors, he says, people thought they were coming to work the next day. Then, it was just closed. When urban explorers began trespassing there, he says they found bowls of food abandoned in the cafeteria. The way he describes it, it sounds like Spring City's very own Pompeii.

Richard Chakejian has described the deteriorating buildings on the Pennhurst campus as "a very attractive nuisance." According to the *Daily Local News*, it was the chronic issues with vandals and trespassers that led Chakejian to the idea to host a haunted attraction in the first place. He estimated that "If you count asking people to leave (the property) politely without getting the police involved," about 1,000 people had trespassed since he had become the owner. He recounted that it was his son who actually proposed the idea of charging admission:

"It first occurred to me about a year or so ago when I was driving with my then-13-year-old son, Richard. I was complaining over the trespassers and throwing people off" the property for trespassing, Chakejian said. "And he suggested, 'Dad, why don't you just charge people to come? It's very creepy and everybody has a high curiosity.'" (Kessler, 2010d, p. 1, 6)

This is more or less the definition of commodification—assigning an economic value to an object or idea that previously had a non-economic social value—although Chakejian’s convenient retelling in which his 13-year-old son comes up with the idea lends it a kind of common sense innocence. But as I suggested earlier in this chapter, the recent commodification of Pennhurst—and of the figure of “the Asylum” in popular culture more generally—is complicated by the fact that institutionalization has always had both a social and an economic value. In other words, “the Asylum” was always already commodified—it portended to centralize and make efficient the care and control of populations deemed unintegratable, create jobs for those on the outside, and hum with self-sufficiency on the inside. So when Pennhurst closed, the economy of care and control became geographically decentralized to the many community service organizations that now trace their lineage to that flashpoint moment in time. The money was thus dispersed, but the social value, signified by meaning and actions rather than by dollars, clung to the Pennhurst property. Most parts of the property were sold for their use value, buildings and land were converted into a Veterans’ Center, for example. But the pieces that remained untouched allowed for the collective expression of curiosity about the past, the forbidden, the taboo. When Brian Ladd (1997) extols the virtues of abandoned spaces, his tone is perhaps over-celebratory, but he gestures to this simple absence of commerce in the state of abandonment. Whether or not an absence of commerce is by definition more virtuous, ethical, or educative is a point of debate.

The story of abandoned bowls of food in the cafeteria may be legend³³, but what’s more important about what this staff member told me is the sense that Pennhurst was

somehow frozen in time. This attraction to the way Pennhurst makes a piece of the past accessible is shared by urban explorers, ghost hunters, architecture buffs, and art photographers. In other words, abandonment represents an opportunity to commune with the past in an untouched and therefore authentic form. So instead of risking a trespassing violation, the public can now experience a simulated, sanitized urban explorer experience at the “Ghost Hunt” attraction where the Mayflower Building is presented as authentic because it represents a time before the haunt, but after the Pennhurst State School and Hospital had long been closed.

Reading the names of residents on the cubicle walls of their “bedrooms” feels like an invasion of privacy, since the people who lived and worked there couldn’t have imagined the context in which we would now be reading them. Although we don’t know if the people listed are alive or dead, the unintentional preservation of their names conjures the feeling of a memorial. This conflation of life and death is indicative of the rest of the attraction. During the second year, the expanded visitors area included whimsical displays such as a hearse decorated with fake cobwebs and a coffin and a collection of fake gravestones with the names of other institutions in Pennsylvania (Photograph 9-10). This fake graveyard expresses much of what is at issue in the public memory of institutionalization in the United States, and what is often a large part of how disability advocates wish to use public memory to impact public policy: in the United States, many such disability institutions are still alive and kicking, so to speak, even if most of their contemporaries have been long dead, abandoned, or reincarnated as something else entirely.

I have noticed that as I exposed myself to more and more personal memories, historic photographs, archival news of Pennhurst, my inner dialogue with the attraction became tinged with sadness in spite of myself. I always intended to approach the attraction as an artifact of popular culture, and therefore, I assumed that meant attempting not to judge it for its indulgences, trying to see it for as long as possible as an “average visitor” would, whatever that could possibly mean.

Just prior to the second year of the attraction, I had the opportunity to meet a former Pennhurst resident as part of my work with the PMPA. I’ll call her M.A. She was able to speak, but much of what she said was not intelligible to me or even to the other people in the room who were very familiar with her speech. When I did understand what M.A. said, her comments seemed relevant to the conversation about half of the time. I spoke mostly with her caregiver, with whom she had lived for many years in what is called a *life-sharing program*. I let the caregiver take the lead in terms of what she wanted to talk about. She didn’t want to talk about what life at Pennhurst must have been like for her friend M.A., but she did say that she remembered the first time she saw *Suffer the Little Children*. She cried just remembering how she felt watching that video and thinking about her friend in that terrible place. Mostly, I learned about the details of their lives together now. What seemed most important to M.A.’s caregiver was the love she felt had grown between them over the years.

Soon after that encounter, I attended the “Ghost Hunt” for the first time. As I walked through the cubicles I found myself involuntarily picturing M.A. there in the residential hall, and very much in spite of myself, I felt my eyes start to well before I realized what was happening. I try to be vigilantly aware of sentimentalizing this place

and the former residents because it feels like as big a sin as buying into the trope of “the haunted Asylum.” But once I had a human face to associate with the place, it was hard to forget it. And I can’t be sure if what I’m expressing even now is a self-centered fascination with my emotional response to “disability,” or the result of an honest engagement with a person who lived in this place, a person who is no ghost, who hugged me the first time she met me, loves her coffee any time of day if she can get it, is energetic and expresses herself through an almost constant stream of words, is known for her smile and “soulful eyes,” was once a “handful” and had “a lot of behavior issues,” and is deeply loved by the person with whom she shares her life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve situated the “Pennhurst Asylum” in the historical/cultural context of the long-term relationship between institutions and their communities, which I’ve suggested can be understood as a long-held stare, or a relationship defined by mutual interest. I’ve considered public communication of an interdisciplinary and long-term nature as it is likely to have impacted both the production and reception of this multi-media, interactive display and performance. I’ve used this context to do a close reading of the rhetoric of the attraction and its use of related narrative, visual and material culture. By recovering the attraction’s dialogue with the historical, I find that at the “Pennhurst Asylum,” visitors receive a complex grab bag of value for the price of a ticket. We touch a mostly unspecified past in the form of peeling paint and dusty remains, a slightly more historically specific story of real life abuse and neglect, the myth of disabled bodies and minds that have peopled medical horror narratives from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island* (2010), and for those with personal memories of the

Pennhurst campus, a kind of homecoming to a space which had been publicly owned and thus was always already a part of their community, in principle if not in purpose.

In the PMPA's forthcoming book, a collaboration with historian Dennis Downey, disability scholar Emily Smith Beitiks concludes that "Pennhurst and other similar locations have been overrun by commercial mechanisms that concoct the haunting stories, overwriting 'social memory'" (in press). With this, Smith Beitiks erases the conceptualization of social memory as it has evolved from Halbwachs through to contemporary memory scholars. Instead, I argue that the "Pennhurst Asylum" *is* an example of social memory. In many ways, its provenance and impact is a precise remembering or recycling of the political rationality of the "Asylum"—though one which, it goes without saying, is clearly devoid of disability consciousness or a critical historical perspective.

Too often the recycling of historical narratives and the popular use of "a sense of history" (Glassberg, 2001) is figured as a cooptation, as if the past rightly belongs to some of us more than others. My analysis of "Pennhurst Asylum" shows just how untenable this position is. Rather, memory is a ubiquitous cultural resource—associational, flexible, and unlikely to stay put in one hierarchical system or another. While we certainly *use* the past to stake out political and cultural territories, this finally only supports the case that narrative resources reside in culture/s, as Wertsch (2002) (following Bakhtin) describes, to be pulled and referenced by anyone at arm's length. This is a paradox similar to how Tony Bennett (1995) describes the issue of access at the museum: demands for equality will always be "insatiable" (p. 103) since it is the museum's very claims to universality, both in representing the human experience in its

totality, and as a space open to the public in its entirety, that guarantee its failure and make it a space for political struggle. Likewise with social memory, its universality, the fact that the past can be claimed and used by anyone (though often through vastly different means and ends, and with distinctly inequitable results), makes the past a space for political struggle. If the past were truly the unique provenance of historians or filmmakers or community advocates or the unofficial docents of the “Pennhurst Asylum,” or the former residents of Pennhurst, the scope and depth of the political uses of the past would be limited, indeed.

One way to finally understand the attraction is to play on its own terms—to imagine. What would happen if we inserted a human face into the legend? What if, for example, a kind of guerilla public history project suggested that visitors to the haunted attraction could use their smart phones to access oral histories of Pennhurst residents, families and advocates, thus intervening on the current reuse of the property? How would such an intervention play in this space? Would access to what advocates might call “authentic” stories of Pennhurst sufficiently undermine the system of meaning on which “Pennhurst Asylum” is built?

In the first ghost hunt show to feature Pennhurst, former resident and self-advocate Betty Potts is among those interviewed in order to give the program its historical background (Groff, Bagans, & Lage, 2009). But her presence in the program doesn’t stop the show from using many of the same mechanisms of the haunted attraction. Once the paranormal investigation begins, the hosts use the historical specifics as a launching pad for stories of tortured souls and evil spirits. The historical background

is only a prop, or put another way, a “narrative prosthesis” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2006) that enables the ghost story to achieve its desired effect.

The term “prosthetic” has also been used in memory studies by Alison Landsberg (2004) to describe the ability of mass culture to produce something like authentic cultural memory in an environment where we have little other means of encountering the historical reality of those far removed from our own experience by time, place, or social circumstance. In other words, Landsberg defends mass culture as a legitimate vehicle for social memory that has the potential to create genuinely compassionate encounters with the past. While I agree that this is possible, I would argue that authenticity is ultimately less important than understanding the political rationality of an artifact such as the “Pennhurst Asylum,” as well as its explicitly-stated goals—in this case, to scare and entertain. Real and not real are so thoroughly interchangeable that they do little work as evaluative measures. When *Suffer the Little Children* can be recycled as a horror film, it is not, in the final analysis “the truth” that is at stake; it is the meaning we make of it.

CHAPTER 5

THE STORYMAKERS: INTERVIEWS ON INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL MEMORY

Scholars of public history and historic preservation, such as David Glassberg (2001) and Diane Barthel (1996) have suggested that what remains of the past is often the work of a few key stakeholders. These stakeholders are often people who enjoy some level of social leverage, have a personal connection to the event or place being remembered, and have political motives in the present for promoting a certain version of the past. As a social system, institutionalization performs a stark division of power between what Erving Goffman would refer to in general terms as “inmates” and “guards.” How does this power dynamic impact the community memory of places like Pennhurst, the storymakers, and their stories? What personal stories helped shaped the most prominent public versions of the Pennhurst story? Who has the power to represent “the Asylum?”

In talking with members of the PMPA, the editor of *The Mercury*, the designer of the “Pennhurst Asylum,” two key former Pennhurst employees, and three former Pennhurst residents and their caregivers, I saw some of the same patterns and contradictions that arose in my analyses of local news and the haunted attraction. But these interviews also allowed me to make connections between the individuals and their social worlds, to map exactly how personal memory, or in some cases a lack of personal memory, impacts social memory.

What becomes quickly evident in these interviews is the degree to which personal history, self-presentation, practical concerns, and social position all impact the process of

making public memory. Most of the people I interviewed had intimate connections with Pennhurst. It was often easy to see this place was, in fact, a part of their identity.

Pennhurst also tended to be a symbol of a larger value system that related to their view of institutionalization in the United States in the present. Further, each storyteller had to navigate their own self-presentation with respect to the Pennhurst story. In some cases this included pride in their role; in other cases this feeling was more complexly inflected with regret, sadness, and fear. I also learned about some of the practical matters that impacted the public stories. These included everything from the wait time at the haunted attraction to the aesthetics of the designer to the ownership and editorial policies of a local newspaper. While these may seem like minor findings, in fact, given the resources required for historic preservation, and to a lesser extent for storytelling in any form, practical issues exert an enormous force on what remains of the past. Finally, the social position of each storyteller impacts both their opportunity to access authority over the story and the way they exercise that authority when given. There is always a danger that the power relationships that defined the past will continue to define public memory in the present. In other words, the act of remembering may merely recreate the hierarchy of the institution. Some of the same people who had degrees of power at Pennhurst—employees, “working” residents, researchers, advocates—continue to control the Pennhurst story. And, while popular culture has always been a venue in which storymakers could define “the Asylum” in the abstract, the abandonment of places like Pennhurst has created a new, or at least recycled, resource that puts legend in even greater proximity to living memory.

“Once you have the institution in your body, you can never get it out”

An interview with Jean Searle,
current PMPA co-president, former institutional resident

I meet Jean for our interview at the Starbucks on City Line Avenue in Philadelphia near her new apartment. We always hug hello and goodbye and this occasion is no different. I know Jean from PMPA meetings. She’s always been extremely warm to me, though more than once she has made fun of me for taking notes rather than taking part in things more. Once she even accused me of just sitting there and “looking pretty,” a dig I might have disliked more if it was coming from someone I didn’t like so much.

Jean’s bio on the PMPA website describes her as a self-advocate, so I start the interview by asking how Jean would explain the term “self-advocate” to someone who wasn’t familiar with it. Jean says it means being someone who helps other people with disabilities make sure that they’re getting what they want from their agencies, and helping people understand how to get out of an institution. She talks to support coordinators, staff members, law firms, and tells them what she knows about the system.³⁴

Jean says she’s mostly involved with letting people know what institutionalization is like. Jean lived in two different institutional environments, from age twelve to twenty-two, and remembers the date she finally got out: June 9, 1984.³⁵ At fifty-one years old, she’s lived outside of institutions longer than she’s lived in them, but says she still can’t get it out of her bones.

“Once you have the institution in your body, you can never get it out....

Sometimes I feel like people are going to call me and say pack up your stuff; you’re

going back to the institution. You don't belong in the community. You don't belong with regular people."

Jean says she ended up in the institution because her parents were both alcoholics and they had seven children. Some of the children lived with her grandparents, others lived in foster homes. Her dad kept making promises he couldn't keep. The agency thought that since there were seven children and her father couldn't take care of her, the only place to put her, because she couldn't go into a foster home, was the institution.

When I ask Jean how she got involved with advocacy, she says, "it just fell in my lap." It was some time after she testified in the Pennhurst case. For the purposes of the trial, Jean is considered a Pennhurst class member. In her case, this means she's someone who would have been sent to Pennhurst if it had not closed. She says she's been "a part of Pennhurst ever since." Jean started working at the Public Interest Law Center in 1991 and then the Disability Rights Network in 1994, where she says she now still works as a receptionist.

Jean has frequent speaking engagements and is an example of someone contributing to the social memory of institutionalization among disability professionals by sharing her personal story. Recently, she's been to the PARC conference in Harrisburg quite a few times, she says, and to several disability service agencies. In November, she and PMPA co-president Jim Conroy are going to Clarion University to talk to professors and students about Pennhurst—what it was, and what their dreams for it are. In addition to talking about her childhood, she also talks about her life now, and "things that are happening that shouldn't be happening," like more people being sent into institutions.

“I just want people’s lives to be better than mine. To get the services they’re paying for... Right now, it [the system] sort of sucks... it’s very confusing.”

I ask Jean what her time in the institution was like, reminding her that she can speak about it without getting into any detail that she doesn't want to share.³⁶

“You have certain curfew times, certain times you can use the telephone, certain times you can be in the front room watching TV, certain times for meals, it was like being in prison... You see people get abused every single day by staff... Sometimes I feel like people have to be in my shoes for 24 hours [in the institution].” Then, Jean says, people would understand the abuse and the rules.

When I ask what Jean thinks about the fact that some people have fond memories of their time at institutions, she says she knows they see it as a “safe haven... they feel comfortable there. I always say, you can do whatever you want, but all I know is when I was in there I didn’t feel safe.”

I ask Jean when she first visited Pennhurst, and she replies that it was after she was already involved with the PMPA. She took a drive there with Jim. Jim has known Jean since she was 21. I have heard them say on previous occasions that they have a kind of a sibling relationship.

Jean says being at Pennhurst made her feel “uncomfortable” and the only way she could describe it was that she feared that Jim was going to leave her there and she wouldn't be allowed to come back to the community.

“I couldn’t believe how much I felt like I was back home.... I felt like he was just going to drop me off and just drive away.... Send me to the administration office, do paperwork on me, that was going to be it.”

Again and again, Jean describes this deep vulnerability that is at once novel to me and also completely relatable. I understand something more about the loss of freedom institutionalization represents as I talk with Jean. Her expression of vulnerability is also in stark contrast to the trope about people with developmental/intellectual disabilities being society's "most vulnerable." The vulnerability Jean describes isn't related to a diagnosis or developmental stage. It is nothing inherent about Jean that makes her vulnerable; by her description, it is purely the way she's been treated (by the State, no less) that makes her feel uncomfortable and disoriented. Moreover, her personal memory of abandonment continues to resonate in her present as she seems to consider it a very real possibility that she could be taken away again.

Jean says she feels like people don't understand that the PMPA really wants to make Pennhurst into something special. "We want people to leave there happy, not leave there with some scary memories." If they had a museum on the premises, and could get stories from self-advocates who lived there, she says, that would be a start.

I ask Jean what she thought about the fact that there weren't more former Pennhurst residents or families involved with the PMPA, something that's often concerned me. They tried to get people involved, she said, but for a lot of them it was just too difficult to be reminded of the past there. "I understand that it's a scary thing to talk about. I understand. I live it. I know."

Jean reminds me that former Pennhurst resident Betty Potts is on the PMPA board. I never met her in the whole year I attended meetings. Jean says Betty wanted to be more involved, but it was a problem because her attendant would come to the meetings but not stay with her as she should have.

When I ask if there's anything else I should know about, Jean tells me that there's a graveyard at Pennhurst. She visited it once with a few other PMPA members. There's a large rock engraved with the name Pennhurst State School and Hospital. She says they counted about 40 headstones—from around 1913—all marked with numbers instead of names.

“A lot of that stuff in the files is negative. I don't want to sit with them and talk about that.”

Interviews with caregivers of former Pennhurst residents,
Tina Yetter, Program Director, Keystone Human Services,
with Terrance Jennings and Dena Campbell
Rebecca Nace, Program Director, Keystone Human Services, with George Rolles

In a pre-interview by phone with Tina Yetter, caregiver to former Pennhurst residents (and housemates) Terrance Jennings and Dena Campbell, I ask if there is anything she wants the interview to focus on in particular. Like others I've spoken with, she indicates that she would like to focus on how far Terry and Dena have come in the time she's known them. And, she says she doesn't feel it is appropriate to focus too much on what happened to them in the past.

Tina has known Terry and Dena for 19 years. She explains that neither Terry nor Dena use language beyond a few words. For example, Terry likes to listen to music and can request “jazz,” but if you ask him a yes or no question, Tina says, he is likely to do a lot of mimicking. Tina says she thinks they understand a lot of what is said around them, but that she can't always be sure.

Before and during my in-person interview with Tina, I have the opportunity to meet and interact with Terry and Dena. When I ask Tina how she thinks Terry and Dena

had been affected by their time at Pennhurst, Tina says simply that they were “traumatized.” For example, Dena would habitually put her hands in her mouth, causing herself to vomit, a behavior that Tina explains was the result of not having her needs met. Now, the behavior is something Dena may do occasionally, but since she is now cared for in a home with direct supports, her needs are more carefully attended to. Though this is one of the ways Dena has progressed, Tina notes that the years of engaging in this habit during her time at Pennhurst did permanent damage to Dena’s esophagus, requiring surgery every few months. According to Tina, Dena prefers to be alone in her room to sharing space with others. One of the ways Tina feels she’s gained Dena’s trust over the years is just her willingness to be in the same room with her sometimes.

Similarly, Tina explains that when she first met Terry, who is blind, he had a much harder time feeling secure in his home environment and he was very hesitant to be out in the community. Tina thinks Terry’s blindness may have made it even more difficult for him to feel safe in an institutional context without enough support. In the time that Tina has known Terry, he’s become more comfortable being in the community, and they often go on field trips to eat or do activities such as go to the bowling alley. When I ask Tina if she can remember a time when she felt proud of Terry, she replies that she knew she had gained his trust the first time Terry allowed Tina to clip his fingernails for him.

Hearing Tina speak about Terry and Dena reminds me of the intimacy of caregiving and how this relationship affects the kinds of stories likely to be told by direct service providers. An analogy might be to imagine a time in one’s life when one required

close personal care and then imagine that the person or people in charge of that care were the only available people to tell the story of that time—or of one's entire life.

Besides wanting to protect the best interests of the people they care for, the caregivers I have met often don't know much about their charge's past prior to meeting them. This was the case with Rebecca Nace who has cared for eighty-two year old George Rolles for the past four years. A piece of paper in one of George's files indicates that he was sent to Pennhurst when he was 19 years old, and stayed from 1950-1956. He spent the next forty years at two different institutions before he was placed in his current living situation, a house with two housemates and support staff to care for them. George has a sister who is still in his life, sending birthday cards and sharing phone calls, although Rebecca notes this contact is waning since George's sister is also aging and is currently cared for in an assisted living facility.

The irony of George's past, and indeed of all people who have lived large portions of their lives in an institutional environment, is that his life has been minutely recorded, and yet, its contents remains almost entirely obscured and inaccessible. Rebecca shows me a three-inch binder full with George's "current" files. Periodically, staff store outdated material in the basement where there are dozens of boxes of similar paperwork. Each shift with George requires that the caregiver complete a report, so in some ways his life is documented more than most. But of course, the files contain details dictated by the needs of the service agency, rather than by George himself, or even by the people who care for him and know him best. Further, this record is obscured by both its volume and the protected nature of what amounts to health information. Finally, it is not

clear to me whether the records kept at George's home are complete or if older records from his institutional life are now lost.

George uses a few words to communicate and can reply yes and no. There are times when his responses to questions seem very clearly motivated and directed and others when it is not clear if he has understood or has the word to respond. I didn't learn much about George's time at Pennhurst by talking with him, but I did learn a little about George by interacting with him. George likes to accumulate belongings. Rebecca guesses this is a reflection of having lived for so long in situations where this was not permitted. When I walk into George's house, he is sitting in a comfy chair and painting a birdhouse. Next to him is a pile of about twenty or thirty other birdhouses all in the process of being painted. George has never allowed any of his birdhouses to be sold, discarded or gifted, with the exception of one, which he gave to a former staff member who had cared for him for a long time. Before a birdhouse is complete, it sits on shelves in the living room with others where he can ask for it, work on it a bit, return it to the shelf, and so on. When a birdhouse is complete, he will allow a staff member to store it in the basement. George goes to the store and picks out his supplies, both his birdhouses and his paints. Rebecca says he's gone through phases where a single color will dominate for a time, although the houses next to George's chair now are all similarly covered in a mix of bright colors, often layered on top of one another.

George also loves photographs and his photo albums accumulate in a similar way to his birdhouses. He takes a photo album to his day program every time he goes and likes to flip through the pages and share them with others. Rebecca says he especially likes to see and share photos of himself. I sit with George as he pages through two

particular albums, both with photos from before Rebecca knew him. In one large black and white photo, George appears as a younger man standing at the steps of a building that may have been at one of the institutions where he lived.

What is significant about both the birdhouses, and to a greater extent the photo album, is that they are examples of how material culture can communicate a past in the absence of words. Particularly in the case of George's photo albums, these are able to tell us more about George, his past, the people in his life, and what is important to him, than a basement full of social service records likely could. Crucially, by keeping and sharing his photo collection on a daily basis with those around him, George essentially carries his memories, including images of himself, that show who he was and is.

Meeting with former Pennhurst residents and their caregivers gave me an opportunity to see some of what is screened out of the "Pennhurst Asylum." Former Pennhurst residents are storymakers in a different way than the others in this chapter; they're more likely to be the subject of stories than the storytellers. But the practical obstacles to documenting their stories extend beyond their degree of facility with language. Many caregivers and former residents simply don't want to focus on traumatic pasts, the memory of which may be harmful. Further, communication barriers make interviewing an inferior method for learning about many former Pennhurst residents. While this is the most efficient method of information gathering for the interviewer, it is not well suited to the task of interviewing people who don't use much language. My time with George was especially instructive in this regard. Also, while a certain kind of documentation of institutional life is abundant, the stories of many former residents are

probably best told by people who knew them in the past. However, as institutional residents often lack the continuity of relationships that last across a lifetime, such storytellers are a scarce resource.

“I cared about the people at Pennhurst... They don’t deserve to be made into monsters twenty years later.”

An interview with J. Gregory Pirmann,
current PMPA board member, former Pennhurst employee

I meet Greg at a coffee shop nearby to his home in Barto, PA, a little over an hour northwest of Philadelphia. Like Jean, I know Greg from attending PMPA meetings. I have seen photos of his trip to Ireland where he went with his sister to research his family heritage, and heard many stories about his experience working at Pennhurst.

Greg graduated from college in May of 1969 and was hired at Pennhurst by September of that same year. He had a draft notice and although he was fairly sure he wouldn’t pass the physical, he knew he would have chosen jail if he was drafted; his brother was already serving in Vietnam. Ever since Greg was a kid, he always wanted to be a writer. He describes himself at the time as an English major with a Psych minor, and therefore, pretty unemployable. He was working for a band that summer after graduation and the rhythm guitar player told him he should take the civil service test to become a caseworker because they couldn’t make him cut his hair. At the time, Greg had a long red ponytail and a red beard, which he jokingly points out are now white. Greg calls Pennhurst his first “real job.” He stayed on for thirty years.

In order to qualify for civil servant jobs, you had to go on any interview they set up for you, so Greg had no choice when the interview at Pennhurst became available. At

the interview, he got a tour of every part of Pennhurst, even the “crib cases.” He describes these as a room with fifty or more cribs, with almost no space between them. These were people we never saw in society, Greg says. Especially for the people who required “total care,” he admits, the conditions were pretty horrible. Greg, like many others, remarks on the smell and sound at Pennhurst on his first visit, calling it “overwhelming.”

Although the conditions he encountered at that first visit were “unsettling,” he says it was presented as something that they wanted to change. For Greg, working at Pennhurst meant trying to make things better. He thought he would only be there for a year, but says he stayed because it felt like work that would allow him to make a difference. He got married the following June of 1970 and his wife, Suzie, began working at Pennhurst that September.

Greg started as a caseworker. This meant he had a caseload of 150 women who all lived in one giant room, in what was later called Capital Hall. It also meant he was responsible for correspondence with the women’s families, helping them write home, and primarily, helping them move out of Pennhurst. Pennhurst had just started a program called “family living,” which was essentially moving residents to live at boarding houses. Greg describes Pennsylvania as “one of the first states in the country to start a formal community-living program.” One of the first CLAs, he notes, opened in Pennsylvania in 1972, so the family living program was a very new concept for 1969.

Parents who had put their children in Pennhurst thirty years earlier because they were told by doctors and pastors that it was the right thing to do, that the child would destroy their family, were now being sent a letter saying that there was a new program

that would enable the family member to live in the community.³⁷ Part of Greg's job at the time was to follow-up on the letter with a visit to the family to discuss the program. He says it didn't go over very well with most. Most said, no, it couldn't be true that their daughter was able to live outside the institution because they never would have sent her there in the first place if it were. People were very fearful, Greg says. In the past, they had been able to take comfort in the fact that a placement at Pennhurst would at least be permanent, so the institution represented security for families.

Greg says he had only been at Pennhurst six months when the new person in charge switched from the medical model to the developmental model (this meant a change from custodial care, as the developmental model holds that all people can benefit from treatment and training). Medical professionals had always run Pennhurst, Greg explains. Before the switch to the developmental model of treatment, the job of social services at Pennhurst was mostly limited to family correspondence.

The role of social service began to change drastically just shortly after Greg was hired. The new director, Donald Jolly, broke the place up into units that were separated by the client's developmental levels. The medical doctors were no longer in charge. Within a year of Greg starting, he was promoted twice, first to program manager and then unit manager, with nurses and doctors working under him. Before the switch, Greg says, the norm was to have 75-100 clients on a ward with two paid employees whose job was to supervise the "working residents," clients deemed capable enough to care for others. It was also not unusual to have a ward where the staff would stay on the second floor and on the third floor would be all the "high-functioning" clients. According to Greg, the staff would just go up to the third floor every once in a while to make sure "no one had died."

Greg concedes that some of the working residents liked their lives at Pennhurst. These people often defined themselves by their work there. They thought that if they left Pennhurst, “the babies” —a name for residents of any age who needed total care—would die. As it turned out, Greg explains, working residents were being told this by the aides, who knew that if the working residents were moved to the community, the aides would be left “changing the diapers.”

I ask Greg to tell me more about his relationships with the clients over the years. He replies that one of the jobs they gave caseworker trainees when they were “wet behind the ears” was to act as a counselor. He recounts one client who had been burned by a kerosene lantern before she came to Pennhurst. She was extremely disfigured. Although Greg had no formal training in therapy, he was expected to counsel this resident. At first, Greg remembers, she would come to meet with him with a coat over her head so he couldn’t see her. Eventually, experts were brought in and were able to help her. She became willing to go to Pottstown on a “town pass” to shop and travel independently. According to Greg, children would scream when they saw her. She ended up living independently for twenty years outside of Pennhurst before she passed.

Greg remembers another resident, a man who had been confined to a small room for much of his time at Pennhurst. He was thought to be so dangerous that he was held back with a broom when he was fed. Greg eventually wrote up a case report that argued that this man could be treated outside of this room. In the process of researching the man’s file, Greg discovered that what was alleged —that the man had killed someone— was not the case. In fact, he had injured someone and they died of pneumonia while under medical supervision in the hospital. The man had come to Pennhurst as a child. He

was put in an adult ward and soon after he arrived, he was attacked by someone who scratched his eyes. Greg thinks that's how the client got the idea to scratch another client in the eyes. Legends proliferated that the client had plucked his father's eyes out, but in reality, he had never met his father—the client had been born in jail. According to Greg, the man spent 15 years locked in a little room. “He turned out to be the nicest guy,” Greg says. He's still living in a community home in Chester County.

I notice that almost all of Greg's client anecdotes include the happy ending of moving to the community. He clearly agrees, though, that the community is not a universally happy place—people can be abused and disserved by the system there, too, he admits. He also naturally remembers times that he took part in making things better, and although he recognizes that the changes were incremental, he still emphasizes that improvements were made. When I think about the client stories Greg shared with me, many involve the same themes found in newspaper archives and contemporary discourse: fear, violence, happy endings.

It bothers Greg that people believe that the Pennhurst that closed in the '80s was the same as the one Baldini filmed in 1968. Since Greg was one of the many people working to improve Pennhurst before it finally closed, he sees it differently. Greg shows me a photo on his tablet of a large residential room divided by cubicle walls, which he says was taken in Devon Hall. He shows me this as an example of improvement in comparison with the crowded rows of beds shown in much earlier photos.

The photo reminds me of the room in the Mayflower Building that is now “The Ghost Hunt.” Just as when I saw this set up in person at the haunted attraction, the image of living in cubicles made me feel sad. I don't even want to work in a cubicle, much less

sleep in one. I'm guilty of presentism in this way, whereas Greg has an easier time judging the cubicles as an improvement as it was intended and seen at the time.

Greg goes on to explain that there were "two Pennhursts," an idea that he and I share. The way I've conceptualized this, though, is as a purely rhetorical division—not so much "a tale of two Pennhursts," but multiple tales about the same place. In contrast, Greg refers to what he perceives as a material distinction between the experiences of working residents and the experience of being on the "behavioral ward."

Greg worked the behavioral ward for eight years. This was the place for residents who were a danger to others. Behavior like "gouging someone's eyes out," repeated biting, or any other consistent attempts to hurt others might land a resident there. Prior to putting in place the developmental model, Greg says, "these were the people who were either locked in little rooms or tied to beds for decades." Restraints were still used on the behavioral ward. There was even a time, Greg recalls, when he considered using "negative modification" ("painful stimuli" delivered by electric pulse) to treat a client who had hit himself in the face so repeatedly that he lost vision in one eye. At the time, negative modification was used elsewhere, Greg mentions— the Valley Forge Army Hospital was doing it on post-Vietnam vets. He says he's not proud of the fact that restraints were used but that sometimes there were no options. They would use restraints for as little time as possible, only when people were attacking others.

Greg says he wishes they had better tools and better thoughts at the time. Eventually, restraints were outlawed and using positive behavioral approaches became the norm. Then there was a time when the focus was getting everybody in "training."

“We spent five years teaching people how to put on their socks,” Greg remembers.

“Finally we said *who cares?* Let’s find out what *he* wants to do.”

When Greg first started at Pennhurst, he says it was clear to him that about half of the population didn’t belong there. His first caseload was working residents and he was confident from the beginning that these were “capable people” who could live in the community. It would be a while, until around the 1970s, before Greg says he would come to be of the opinion that anyone could live in the community with the right supports.

Greg eventually testified in the Pennhurst case that there was “no magic in the institution,” there was nothing people were getting there that they couldn’t get outside.

Today, his perspective on the politics of community living is that people who want to live in the institution and are able to choose should be given that option. We still have five institutions open in Pennsylvania with 1,100 people in them, Greg reminds. “There’s still so many things we do wrong in the name of what we believe to be right... Human services are still driven by what the system needs... There are three-bedroom institutions, because the mindset is the same, it hasn’t changed.”

The slow shift in consciousness Greg describes, and his acknowledgement of the continued inadequacies of community living, isn’t reflected in the PMPA’s discourse on institutionalization. The story of social change is told as if a switch was flipped and usually implies that lack of consciousness and backwards approaches to care were errors of the deep past that we are happily free from in the present. Although there are inevitable blind spots associated with viewing the past through a single individual’s perspective, it does provide insight into the internal conflicts and complexity of living through social change.

Another reason Greg is such a valuable resource is that he knows much more about Pennhurst than what he personally experienced there. After working the behavior ward, Greg became the Special Assistant to the Superintendent. In this position, his writerly inclination was finally put to use—his duties included writing the employee newsletter. Greg’s newsletters often included bits of historical information and stories sourced from decades of biannual board reports stored in a vault in the President’s office. Greg says if he lived another life, maybe he would have been a historian.

In addition to supervising staff and writing the company newsletter, he was responsible for all kinds of monitoring, especially during and after the Pennhurst case. Greg and I share the opinion that the rhetoric during the Pennhurst case has had a lasting impact on what the public knows about Pennhurst.

It upsets Greg that Pennhurst came to be known as “a horrible place where horrible people did horrible things.” In part, he believes this is a result of the work of the lead prosecutor, Attorney David Ferleger. Ferleger had to represent Pennhurst in the starkest possible terms in order to paint a picture of abuse, Greg contends. “During the trial and the appeals process, stories were placed very deliberately to emphasize the worst thing as a means of pushing forward the plaintiff’s case—that’s what lawyers do.”

As an example, Greg explains a story would come out that “Terri Lee Halderman was abused forty-three times,” but the reality was that she had forty-three incident reports in her record. Since every incident had to be documented, some of these were “hangnails,” some were “self-inflicted,” some were “unknown.” Obviously, Greg concedes, some people really were abused at Pennhurst. Greg knew a staff member who had beaten a female resident with a belt.

Greg also explains that while the case continued, the staff was just trying to go on business as usual to make the place better until the day it closed:

I used to feel bad when all of these newspaper stories would come cascading down on top of us about, you know, conditions at Pennhurst and this, that, and the other thing. Because this is what I was trying to do with my life. At that point I was ten years in. I had spent ten years trying to make things better and still the headlines are ‘horrible people doing horrible things.’ So naturally you feel bad about that. Beginning the time I was a Special Assistant, I was writing the employee newsletter, trying to keep 1,500 employees from despairing. So I was trying to explain what was happening in court to them and saying, ignore everything you hear in the newspaper, our job is to make things better here until the day it closes.

Again, the relationship between human service workers and their clients is complex and varied. Any story that attempts to remember institutionalization will need to contend with the conflict between implying the system was inhumane and implying that all the people who ran it were also culpable. This is especially true in the case of places like Pennhurst that are still active in living memory.

Greg maintains that Pennhurst didn’t close because there was abuse there; it closed because the service model that maintained, “people with disabilities should be shuttled off and forgotten,” was always wrong to begin with. Horrible things did happen, he agrees, but this was the case from the day it opened. It bothers him that this message continues to get lost in what the public knows about the case.

Greg got involved with the PMPA in 2007 when Nathaniel Guest, the preservationist of the PMPA, contacted him as the local expert on Pennhurst history. Greg feels that the PMPA hasn’t had any impact on preserving Pennhurst, but that they are keeping the memory alive to remind people that we can’t let this happen again. Differing from many advocate opinions that appeared in local papers, he doesn’t feel like

the Pennhurst campus is sacred. He worked there, so to him, it's just buildings. They're not beautiful or even especially valuable as far as he's concerned. Still, he refers to the haunt as "a travesty."

"The whole history of Pennhurst and all the hundreds of Pennhursts across the country is premised on *these people are not the same as us*, we can send them away, we can let them live in horrible conditions because *they're not us*. That's the central tenet of dehumanization... this [the haunted attraction] is just another facet of *they're not us*... I cared about the people at Pennhurst... They don't deserve to be made into monsters twenty years later."

"Maybe I had blinders on, I still feel Pennhurst was a good place."

An interview with Ruth Himes,
current "Pennhurst Asylum" employee, former Pennhurst employee

I first met Ruth Himes on one of my trips to the haunted attraction. Dressed as a ghost nurse, she worked in the "Pennhurst Museum" and instructed visitors that she had also worked at the "real" Pennhurst. Ruth was eager to talk and excited to learn that I was writing about Pennhurst. When I asked if I could interview her sometime, she gave me her business card, a paranormal investigation service she does as a hobby with her husband and son.

Ruth suggested we meet at the McDonald's across the street from where she works in Malvern, Pennsylvania. It's about forty-five minutes away from my home in Philadelphia, and in fact, also across the street from someplace I used to work. When Ruth arrives, she jokes around with the cashier—they know each other by name. She returns to our table with her drink in hand and tells me she knows everyone who works

the day shift—she’s here for lunch almost every day. Ruth is wearing Halloween earrings. They have little ghosts, witches, and pumpkins on them.

Ruth worked at Pennhurst for two and a half years in the 1980s. She says she hadn’t even heard of Pennhurst before she started working there. She was unemployed and on food stamps when her social worker told her about a job opening she had to go interview for. It was an entry-level position at Pennhurst. Ruth was excited about the idea of a job. She mentions several times that she had to pass the civil service exam in order to qualify. Pennhurst got her started working with the State, a career of service she is quite proud of. She’s worked at a few developmental centers and once at a prison as “clerical,” and for a time as a maintenance worker with 40 men.

At Pennhurst, Ruth started as an “A Trainee,” which she explains involved six months of training, including in-class and practical. When she completed that, she says she became a “Mental Retardation Aide.” Ruth’s detailed description of her training seems like an attempt to legitimize the work that she and others like her did there. In a way, she’s rebutting an unspoken assumption that the employees at Pennhurst must have been incompetent or undertrained.

When I ask Ruth what she remembers about her first encounters at Pennhurst, she struggles for anything that stands out, until she says that her first day on the job she learned, “CYOB, Cover Your Own Butt.” Every bruise or bump that happened to a client, if they hit their leg on their own wheelchair, for example, or were pinched accidentally during transferring them into a bed, it all had to be written up, Ruth says. There was a lot of paperwork. She’s accustomed to that now, she says, since she’s a secretary, a “Typist 3” to be exact.

If you had six to eight ladies on your shift, Ruth explains, you had to write something up for each one before you left your shift. And there was no staying late for paperwork. When it was 11:15, she says, you were downstairs clocking out. If someone got sick and you had to clean up, you still had to finish the paperwork before your shift was over.

I ask Ruth why Pennhurst is an important place to her. She says she never knew anything about the controversy or any horrific conditions when she worked there. If this is true, one could see how shocking it would be to learn that your place of employment was notorious for abuse and inhumane conditions without your knowledge. Maybe it was because she had a cottage with “high-functioning women,” she wonders. But she says everyone there was taken care of. “Even on the hill, the people in cribs, the people that cared for them called them by name and cared for them.”

“It was like a babysitting job,” she says, then corrects herself. “It wasn’t a job, it was like extended family.” Indeed, Pennhurst is where Ruth met her husband.

In evidence of the homey atmosphere, Ruth recalls fondly a staff member bringing in a guitar for sing-a-longs. And they used to color with the clients, she says, but then adds that this was eventually “disallowed” because it wasn’t considered an “age-appropriate activity.”

It seems the one thing Ruth is still trying to work out is the nature of the relationship with clients and the somewhat artificial restraints that are put on that relationship. Ruth tells me about one special client, Jenny. Ruth says Jenny was like a grandmother to her. She remembers fondly that Jenny used to call her “Russie,” because she couldn’t say the “th” sound.

When Jenny passed away, Ruth was offered her ashes. Soon after, she learned that because she was a State employee, she wouldn't be allowed to have them. She never knew where those ashes went. She did end up with a photo of Jenny, though she says probably even that was given to her illegally.

Ruth says Jenny was a ward of the state. Her parents just dropped off her and her sibling one day and never came back. Ruth describes Jenny as “institutionally retarded,” a term intended to distinguish a person who presumably has innate biological “retardation” from a person of presumably “normal” intelligence whose development is “retarded” by the situation of living in an institution.³⁸

When I first met Ruth, she mentioned her “furlough notice” several times, saying that she still had it and had considered bringing it in to include in the “Pennhurst Museum.” She doesn't ever directly mention the economic impact of closing Pennhurst or the fact that the worker's union protested its closure, but she is careful to mention that she wasn't fired, she was furloughed.

When Ruth got her furlough notice, she had the choice of going to Norristown Hospital, which was too far away, or to Embreeville. She describes her first visit to Embreeville in much the same way as some describe Pennhurst—she says it was “horrid.” She remembers she visited on a Wednesday. *The Price is Right* was on the television and a group of staff were gathered around watching. Wednesday, they said, was mattress washing day. Ruth says she saw people lying on bare mattresses, crying and screaming while the staff sat around and watched television. “That upset me,” she said. She declined pursuing the job there and took her furlough to the Laurelton Center instead. Later, when I ask Ruth why it is that she feels institutions are “good places” when she has

seen one like Embreeville, which in her own estimation was too awful to work at, she says she guesses that maybe Embreeville was so bad because the staff was “African-American” and may have been more “cocky” about having a State job.

I include this racially charged suggestion of Ruth’s, not because I wish to indict her, but because this reverberates with comments from other former employees whose sense of identity is connected to their work at Pennhurst. In the case where Ruth sees a “horrid” institutional space, she is able to easily discount its existence primarily by distancing herself from the employees there through a racial discourse that explains away its existence rather than coming to terms with the idea of institutionalization as a social injustice in which she was intimately implicated. Furthermore, Ruth’s comment points to the way institutions can be viewed as reflections of the communities in which they reside, both in terms of community identity but also in terms of social inequity. That Pennhurst should have been the subject of landmark litigation, and not Embreeville, is perhaps not unrelated to the difference between their populations, Embreeville having more African-American residents at the time. Again, this difference gets reinforced through the public memory of institutionalization as the PMPA attempts to support the emergence of the Pennhurst story as the definitive one.

Laurelton Center, Ruth explains, was a “good place.” She adds with some indignation that the governor decided to close Laurelton in 1998. “He decided all the mentally retarded were going to live in group homes now,” she explains, letting the Governor sound a bit like a despot making a declaration from on high. Ruth is unequivocal in her opinion on institutionalization. She believes institutions are safer than letting people live in the community in group homes.

Ruth applied for the job at the haunted attraction just for the chance to be back at Pennhurst. When the owner learned that she had worked there, he asked her to help with the museum. From Ruth's description, it appears that among the attraction's employees she's considered an expert on Pennhurst. For example, she shares an anecdote about a time when she was walking around Devon Hall with a fellow haunt employee and they noticed a pile of clothes. Among them was something that looked like a blanket, but she explained to her co-worker that it was actually a wheelchair cover. When it rained, the staff would use these covers plus a poncho to keep the clients dry. As they looked through the pile, Ruth started naming people who she knew had used a wheelchair cover. When they looked at the tag on the cover, sure enough, she says, it was one of the people she had named. To me, this is a small example of the authority that comes from simply having lived through history. For example, Ruth made sure a photo of her favorite client Jenny was included in the "Pennhurst Museum." There were photos in the Museum from 1954, Ruth says, but "who remembers those?" She felt like the photo of Jenny made the museum "more legitimate."

Ruth doesn't always tell visitors that she used to work at Pennhurst. Sometime she can tell by their attitude she shouldn't say anything. One time she told a man and woman that she worked there and the man replied, "I'm sorry." She replied, "you don't have to be sorry, I'm not." Then his companion replied, "Well why aren't you sorry for the things you did while you were here?" Ruth says that wasn't the only time she's gotten comments like that.

Ruth says if she could change anything about the haunted attraction, she would give the museum its own space. It's confusing to people, she thinks, that when they enter

they meet a fake nurse and then see the real stuff and then it's back to the haunt. She also comments that many visitors, even adults, confuse the legend of the haunt with the history of Pennhurst. Many don't realize that the photos in the museum are real. Ruth tries to spend some time with the people who are interested and want to learn about the real Pennhurst. That makes it all worth it for her.

Toward the end of our interview, I ask Ruth to tell me a little about her involvement with paranormal investigation. Although Ruth is a paranormal enthusiast, she is not a fan of the ghost hunting shows; in fact, she's quite critical of them. They're not accurate enough for her. For example, they say that hundreds died at Pennhurst. This is true, she concedes, Jenny died at Pennhurst, but that's just because that's where she lived; hundreds didn't die of murder or suicide, she says. One show in particular, *Paranormal Challenge*, went over the line she felt when an investigator pretended to act like one of the residents.

When people come through the attraction at Pennhurst and ask, "so what makes this place so haunted," Ruth says she replies, "well I don't know if it is." Because Ruth sees Pennhurst as a genuinely good place, she doesn't feel there's reason for it to be haunted.

I find Ruth's critique of the ghost shows significant because it is one more example of the way in which advocate stories are often more in line with the most sensationalistic views of institutionalization, while someone like Ruth takes issue with the ghost shows on the basis that they're not historical enough, i.e., they paint too negative a picture. In contrast to Ruth's opinion about Pennhurst being haunted, when *Ghost Adventures* host Zak Bagans asked Jim Conroy if he thought Pennhurst had "a lot

of dark energy” and was “a good candidate for being haunted,” Conroy replied, “In my lifetime, I couldn’t pick a more likely place” (Groff, Bagans, & Lage, 2009).

Ruth says it wasn’t until the attraction was set to open that she started hearing the horror stories about Pennhurst, from the visitors, but also from the local newspaper.

“We’re a small paper, but we won two Pulitzers.”

An interview with Nancy March, current editor of *The Mercury*, former reporter at *The Mercury*

When I sit down with Nancy March, editor of *The Mercury*, she almost immediately steals my first question: “where are you from?” This takes me off guard and I stumble over my answer, apparently having forgotten where I’m from. “New Jersey, near Princeton,” I say. Nancy says she wondered if I was from a similar kind of town to Pottstown, one with “a blue collar tradition.” I was wondering that myself as I drove in. There are similarities, I tell her, but the area where I grew up was far more developed than Pottstown.

Nancy also anticipates one of my intended questions about the history between Pennhurst and *The Mercury*. As we walk back to her office she mentions immediately that *The Mercury* has a long history of reporting on Pennhurst.

When we formally begin the interview, I finally get to ask where Nancy is from. She tells me she grew up in the area, near Boyertown, just fifteen minutes north of Pottstown. She's been in journalism for 37 years and came to *The Mercury* as a reporter in 1975. She was the editor from 1989 to 1991, then was gone for 7 years, and returned in 1998.

“Growing up around here, everybody knew about Pennhurst,” she says. “If you were in a church group or any kind of youth group, you often went to Pennhurst to do things.” She knows she was there, but can’t remember exactly in what context. “It was *not* a frightening place,” she says, already growing passionate about her perspective, “it was a very, very, very sad place.”

“They didn’t mistreat people there, it was just sad that this is what we did to people. Pennhurst was a place that made you count your blessings, you felt so blessed to have a family home to go to... It was never frightening, but they were different than people you would encounter in your regular life, because some of them were severely mentally challenged.” Lots and lots of people from the community also worked there, she says.

The other way that growing up around here that you were aware of it [Pennhurst] was *The Mercury*’s coverage. *The Mercury* historically covered Pennhurst as a place where the, you know, where people were warehoused. And the credit for the media exposure that actually closed Pennhurst goes to Bill Baldini from Channel 10 because he did the first documentary, sort of a news piece on it that was broadcast, but *The Mercury* was reporting on it through those years very aggressively. Really compelling, strong pictures and reporting that was intended to have people upset about it, like what are we as a society doing that we are warehousing people like this? And that’s what led to the lawsuits that led to it being closed.

I tell Nancy that I agree with her perspective, but would add that *The Mercury* was reporting on Pennhurst long before the 1960s. Nancy isn’t aware of that coverage; she’s only aware of the coverage from her personal memory. She also doesn’t seem to be aware that although her personal memory of Pennhurst is as “sad” rather than “scary,” *The Mercury* and other papers sometimes produced sensationalistic reporting on Pennhurst that painted a fairly scary picture.

What's most important about my conversation with Nancy is that the relationship she describes between Pennhurst and *The Mercury* exists at both personal and organizational levels. Pennhurst is important to Nancy and Pennhurst is important to *The Mercury*. The former point is best evidenced by the fact that *The Mercury*'s coverage of Pennhurst was featured in the paper's 50th Anniversary issue—almost as prominently as was the paper's two Pulitzers.

Even before she was interested in journalism, Nancy says, she can vaguely recall knowing about Pennhurst from the headlines in the paper while she was growing up. When Nancy shows me the Anniversary issue of *The Mercury*, she points out a state legislator's commendation of the paper for their "crusade" on Pennhurst in the 1960s. Referring to the 1960s coverage, Nancy remarks, "That's what I would have seen as a high school student seeing the paper go through my kitchen."

When I ask why Nancy thinks it is that most people remember the Baldini program as the first coverage of Pennhurst, she guesses that maybe it has something to do with the small distribution of *The Mercury*. She explains that the paper's work was "very recognized in journalism circles," but she guesses, "the public just remembers TV more."

Nancy remembers writing about Pennhurst, too. As a student, she took an investigative journalism class at Penn State. She wrote about a group home near to campus and in doing so she remembers researching Pennhurst as background. Later, as a reporter for *The Mercury*, she wrote about Pennhurst in the late 1970s. She recalls that this was around the time the paper won a Robert Kennedy National Award for reporting on the lawsuit. In particular, she says *The Mercury* featured a story about a man who was

“horrificed” by having to leave Pennhurst and that the paper’s crusade led to a more careful approach to relocation.

Compared to the other storymakers, Nancy is keenly aware of Pennhurst having been the subject of journalistic attention well before *STLC*. Is it possible that the people who have stark recollections of Pennhurst’s past are the ones who subscribed to their local papers? Is it possible it is even more limited than that? Is it only the ones who subscribed to *The Mercury*? This also makes me wonder about the contemporary letters and comments to the paper. If you read *The Mercury* today, how likely is it that you grew up in the area? How likely is it that your parents also subscribed? In other words, of the people who write and comment on the controversy, which are the people whose imagination of Pennhurst was shaped by *The Mercury* to begin with? I’ve also hypothesized, as Nancy does, that the recollection of *STLC* as integral to the Pennhurst story is also a question of medium. Memory scholars have proposed that images, especially emotionally potent ones, often become central tools for sharing cultural meaning about the past. The content of *STLC* was not qualitatively different from stories found in *The Mercury* during the same period—but it was told in moving pictures, and it is possible this made a difference.

Throughout the interview, Nancy returned again and again to the fact that she never felt the community or readers understood or cared about what an important landmark the closing of Pennhurst was.

“I think an important milestone in human issues occurred at Pennhurst and I always felt that was important because it was such a local story to us and I always felt that it didn’t get the recognition as such an important story. People didn’t grasp what a

milestone that was when that place closed and the deinstitutionalization of mentally challenged people... and it started right here.”

Nancy recalls assigning a reporter to cover the 2010 historical marker dedication because she felt it was a “big deal.” The younger reporter had not heard of it, and for Nancy, she felt like that was the whole point.

“This is a huge landmark in human history to deinstitutionalize people and change that whole thinking and it occurred because of a lawsuit that came out of that place, which is in our area. That’s just a big deal to me, that’s a big deal. And it should be to everyone in our community.”

Nancy characterizes *The Mercury*’s coverage of Pennhurst over the years as “aggressive,” and repeatedly refers to it as a “crusade”—which is also the language used to described it in the 50th Anniversary issue.³⁹ Even then, she says, the paper wanted to wake up people to what was happening at Pennhurst.

As Nancy talks, I hear the same story that the PMPA tells today. It is also similar to the framing of Pennhurst as a milestone that I’ve heard other disability advocates repeat, but hers and the PMPA share a connection that gives the story a cast of local pride. I start to realize that the story is the same perhaps because they made it together—advocates and journalists. The thread of the story began in the seventies and it is that shared cloth that local advocates and local journalists continue to weave.

I ask Nancy why she felt it was important that the paper cover the haunted attraction in 2010. She replies that she simply thought the attraction was an “outrage” and hoped others would feel the same.

“[The attraction] was like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* or something, and that’s not what [Pennhurst] was... It wasn’t terror, it was tears... There weren’t serial killers housed there whose ghosts are now haunting people and frightening them, there were, you know, children with Down syndrome—that’s not the same thing. I was just appalled by the marketing.”

While reporter Laura Catalano, whom I spoke with briefly on the phone, was adamant that the purpose of her reporting was to show both sides of the issue, Nancy was openly motivated by seeking public action. She says she editorialized the attraction before *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and more passionately, she believes. She says she wrote four or five editorials because she felt so strongly about it.

Although the paper received reaction in letters, phone calls, and online comments, according to Nancy, it was only a few people, it wasn’t a “groundswell.” She doesn’t think the paper’s coverage of the haunted attraction had much impact on the community. She kept expecting a public outcry but there never was one and she’s still upset about that.

“I was very disappointed in the sort of lack of consciousness raising—I just didn’t feel it. It just seemed like—oh yeah, that was history, I’m going to the haunted attraction... I found that a little troublesome.” She felt like even for the people who came out to meetings against the attraction, it was more about the inconvenience to them, the traffic and the noise.

In addition to Nancy’s personal involvement with Pennhurst as a reporter in the 1970s and the important role Pennhurst has as a point of pride in *The Mercury’s* organizational memory, there are two other circumstances that may have contributed to

the way the haunted attraction controversy appeared in contemporary local news during 2010 and 2011.

When I ask Nancy about the selection process for letters and reader comments, I'm surprised to discover that there isn't much of one. *The Mercury* prints all letters as long as they are signed and verified by phone. They don't receive more letters than they can print, she explains, and they don't have the resources to carefully select or to fact check reader letters. Letters are vetted for libel or flagrantly inaccurate statements, although Nancy is hard pressed to come up with an example of a statement that would not make it into the letters section. I suggest perhaps something about aliens? No, she says, aliens would make it in.

Likewise, the "sound off"⁴⁰ section (a common mechanism among local papers in which readers can simply call in with comments that are then transcribed and printed) goes through no selection process besides removing comments that are "too long or rambling" or "just don't make sense." She later says that they sometimes moderate the "sound off" section to be "a little more positive." In light of this, the voice of readers in the paper actually reflects something similar to the total amount and nature of feedback the paper received, rather than being shaped strongly by editorial interests, as might be necessary at a larger paper. This policy certainly contributed to the diversity of reader voices—and Pennhurst narratives—published by *The Mercury*.

Ownership and organizational structure may have also contributed to the character and diversity of Pennhurst stories available in the local papers during the haunted attraction controversy. *The Mercury* is owned by the Journal Register Company, distributor of 350 multi-platform products to 21 million Americans in five states (and is

in turn owned by Digital First Media⁴¹, which as of April 5, 2013 had sold JRC to 21st CMH Acquisition Co., an affiliate of funds managed by Alden Global Capital). Nancy happens to be the Regional Manager for the area papers owned by the Journal Register Company. The Philadelphia region includes six dailies and nine weeklies. According to Nancy, Journal Register Companies share content and are not allowed to duplicate stories. They work geographical areas as a corporate policy to save resources, so many JRC papers picked up features on Pennhurst that originated from *Mercury* reporters. Whether or not one JRC paper picks up a story from another, Nancy explains, rests with each editor. However, part of Nancy's role is to facilitate communication between editors. If *The Mercury* is doing a big feature, she'll send an email to let the other editors know—this was the case with the Pennhurst features.

It is possible that Nancy's leadership role and her personal interest in the "Pennhurst Asylum" story influenced editors at other JRC papers to pick up the content. While this didn't impact the number of articles I reference in Chapter 4, since I excluded duplicated material in the final count, it obviously impacted the number of reader letters and comments. Stories that originated from *The Mercury* received comments from readers across JRC papers—and reader comments are obviously unique to each paper.

Due to the conglomeration of local papers, the 2010-11 "Pennhurst Asylum" story likely enjoyed a wider readership than it could have if each local paper had to allocate resources in order to cover it. While *The Mercury*'s small distribution in the past may be responsible for the fact that many claim they never heard of Pennhurst prior to Baldini's expose, I wonder if *The Mercury*'s 1960s reporting would have traveled farther if the forces of conglomeration had influenced Philadelphia area papers sooner.

Finally, it may be more than coincidental that Nancy March is the Regional Manager for JRC papers—as Nancy points out, *The Mercury* has a long and distinguished history among small papers. A paper like *The Mercury* may also be more likely to feature and promote local memory stories because they were more likely to have had a role in the original reporting of past events as they unfolded.

“We’re proud of our history,” Nancy admits. “That [Anniversary] issue reflects our pride. We love what we do.”

“...the granddaddy of all studies of quality of life in this field”

An interview with Dr. James Conroy,
current PMPA co-president, former researcher at Temple University’s Developmental
Disabilities Center (now the Institute on Disabilities)

I don’t think it is an overstatement to say that Jim Conroy built his career on Pennhurst. He calls his most prominent research, the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study, “the granddaddy of all studies of quality of life in this field.” According to Jim, the study, which tracked people leaving Pennhurst in order to determine if they were “better off” in the community, was the first of its kind. Jim is also the co-president of the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance and currently runs a non-profit consulting firm that specializes in human services outcomes research. With respect to the 2010 “Pennhurst Asylum” controversy, Jim was the leading force of the PMPA, interviewed for a number of news stories, authored several letters-to-the-editor, appeared on ghost hunt shows about Pennhurst, and in 2011 was a guest on the NPR radio program *Voices in the Family*, along with PMPA co-president Jean Searle, for an episode about “inhuman institutions.”

I sit down with Jim at his office near Philadelphia, where I have been many times before to attend monthly PMPA board meetings between 2010 and 2011. A few weeks earlier, I had had lunch with Jim during a conference organized by the PMPA with the goal of establishing a statewide disability history coalition in Pennsylvania.

I ask Jim to tell me about the first time he became aware of Pennhurst. At age 21, he got his first job at a consulting firm in Bethesda, MD. The firm had a contract related to the newly established Developmental Disabilities Act of 1970. The Department of Mental Retardation had just been changed to the Department of Developmental Disability, Jim explains. This was more than a semantic difference; it meant that the department now oversaw social services related to many conditions beyond mental retardation, including “epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and related conditions.” The contract Jim worked on was to estimate the number of people in the country with these conditions and describe their characteristics and needs. A mail survey was sent out to over 3,000 individuals. A certain number of in-person visits were done in order to verify the accuracy of the mail data. These sites were selected randomly. The first site Jim selected for an in-person visit was Pennhurst.

“That’s how I got involved,” Jim says of this first encounter with Pennhurst, “because that visit changed my view of the entire world.”

It was 1971, three years after *Suffer the Little Children (STLC)* had aired. Jim says he had no idea that Baldini had done *STLC*. He had never even heard of Pennhurst, had never seen people with significant disabilities like at Pennhurst, had no idea they even existed. Describing his first encounter with people with significant disabilities, he says, “It was a shock beyond words at the time.”

When I ask Jim to describe what he saw on his first visit to Pennhurst, he says he saw 3000 people in a facility designed for 700. Beds that were crowded thirty in a room, one inch apart. People had to crawl over each other to get in and out. The first room he came to was the sunroom in Keystone Hall. He was led there to find a certain individual who had been selected for in-person verification of mail data. In the room, he says, 30 to 50 people milled around, “two-thirds were undressed [and] feces [were] everywhere.” Patients were unengaged, self-abusing, and doing violence to one another. There was “screaming and constant noise.” A few “nurse-type” people were in a room behind glass. When they let Jim into the room, they locked the door behind him.

That day, Jim got a tour of Pennhurst. Not a full tour, but maybe four or five units. They were all just as bad, he says. Never having seen a person with significant disabilities in his life, he says he was scared: “there was a lot of fear.” The words that Jim says come to mind to describe his experience of the conditions there are “outraged” and “sickened.”

Even in this case in which the storyteller is a long-time disability advocate and researcher, Jim is open about his initial fear of Pennhurst residents themselves—attributed to the impact of their segregation from the general population—and his anger and disgust at the conditions in which the residents lived. This complex affective response is indicative of other similar storied memories, and is also an issue in the reception of public memory of institutionalization. The register of “disgust” doesn’t necessarily allow for a rational parsing out of disgust at “conditions” and disgust, or fear, in response to disabled bodies. This, I would argue, is what is disturbingly lasting in *STLC*; it takes on the perspective of a viewer unfamiliar with significant disability such

that the object of the camera's curiosity might be something like a resident rocking back and forth, an action that in and of itself doesn't signify anything in particular about institutionalization, but rather simply signifies abnormal behavior.

After that first visit, Jim didn't return to Pennhurst for another four years. He got another job with a consulting firm in 1974, this time in Washington, DC. Soon after, he was invited to move to Philadelphia along with his boss, who would be heading up a new grant for a "UAFP," University Affiliated Facilities Program at Temple University. The UAFP would later be known as a "UCEDD," University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.⁴² Jim wasn't at Temple long before he met a lawyer, Tom Gilhool, who was talking about an institution that the ARC was angry about: Pennhurst.

From 1974 to 1978 the UAFP at Temple was engaged in helping Gilhool and the Public Interest Law Center with the Pennhurst trial. It became clear, Jim says, that what Gilhool needed was researchers and policy analysts, "people with degrees" who could testify in court. A team from the Center began collecting data on every resident at Pennhurst. By 1978, they had baseline data on everyone there.

In contradiction to Greg's story, Jim claims that Pennhurst was just as bad in 1974 as it was on his first visit in 1971. However, similarly to Greg, Jim describes a slow evolution of thought with respect to the role of institutions. When I ask Jim if he thought closing Pennhurst was the goal of his work there, he says no. They didn't really know what they would ask for if they won the case. He thought he was dealing with "hippie revolutionary radical nut lawyers." He thought Broderick's decision to close Pennhurst was "radical and dangerous." Jim, like others involved, came to Pennhurst thinking that the goal would be improvement because there was no other way to think about it at the

time. He references his first published article in 1977, which was on the subject of deinstitutionalization in mental health and the failures of that project and why it should not be done in the MR community. He calls the experience with deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities “a national disgrace” in that “people were let out of institutions with 30 days of these new medications and a pat on the back.”

After Pennhurst had closed and the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study had concluded, Jim continued working at the Center, running state-wide monitoring for quality until 1992. Those involved with the Pennhurst Study began lecturing on it and doing other dissemination. To this day, Jim’s continuing lecturing career is still almost always about his work with Pennhurst. He was in Finland this past February doing a lecture tour, and at every stop he described the Pennhurst study. So even though Pennhurst had closed in 1987, Jim and others close to the story never stopped talking about it.⁴³ This kind of repetition is well-described as a phenomenon of narrative and memory. The more often we tell a tale from the past, the more what we remember of it is our retelling rather than the experience itself. This helps account for the unique meaning Pennhurst holds for advocates, many of whom, not unlike Jim, continued to use the story after its closure. Importantly, this wasn’t a story shared with the general public; rather, it was one told through employee trainings, workshops, and professional conferences. It is better described as “social memory,” a memory belonging to a particular social group, than “public memory,” a version of the past intended for the general public.

In the 80s and 90s, Jim got involved with the self-advocacy organization Speaking for Ourselves, which may be how he became even more passionate about his view and characterization of Pennhurst. Here, Jim says he “formed friendships that will last a

lifetime,” but he also heard former Pennhurst residents begin to speak out about sexual trauma they experienced at Pennhurst. In all the time he had studied former residents, he had never heard anything about this kind of trauma, including “nightly rapes.” Jim refers in particular to Speaking for Ourselves president Roland Johnson whose experience being habitually sexually abused was documented in his autobiography *Lost in a Dessert World* (1994).

“I knew that place was bad,” Jim says, “but I only went there in the day time, I didn’t know shit about what was going on.”

In light of this, I ask Jim how he reconciles the fact that people have very different memories of Pennhurst than the horrific picture suggested by these stories of sexual abuse. Specifically, I ask if he finds positive memories threatening to his goals as an advocate. He replies that fond memories aren’t threatening because the science tells us that institutions are bad for almost all people and almost all people say they are happier in the community. “The evidence is so clear,” he says, “that positive memories can’t hurt the science anymore.... The issue is closed and fond memories can’t hurt that.” Jim is all too aware of the thousands of people still residing in institutions for the developmentally disabled in the United States, and his continued research shows more than his words just how far the issue is from being “closed.”

I ask Jim how he first learned about the PMPA. He says it was an article in *The Mercury*. He already knew Greg; they had met in 1978. If you were trying to find someone at Pennhurst, Jim explains, you’d go to Greg. “He knew every person by name and he knew them as people... That’s why despite our differences over the years, I’ve always been loyal to Greg... He fought us in court for a decade and frowned at us and

viewed us with disdain,” but Greg, Jim claims, changed when he saw community-living working.⁴⁴

When I ask Jim what kind of impact the PMPA has had, he says he thinks the newer attractions shy away from using the disability imagery. He also notes Easter Seals, the international disability charity organization, pulling out of their relationship with the haunted attraction. Initially, the attraction advertised plans to make a donation to Easter Seals from their profits. Jim says when he contacted Easter Seals and told them where the money was coming from, they backed out, refusing to accept the donation. I ask about the many letters-to-the-editor that seemed to originate either from the PMPA or their allies in the disability community. Jim doesn’t take much credit for these. He seems to regret that there wasn’t a more organized effort. Each PMPA board member did their own part, but there wasn’t a lead on communicating with the press. He calls it an “uncoordinated effort.”

Prior to the PMPA, there was another presence online that many agree was instrumental in the founding of the PMPA and gives a clue into how the public story of Pennhurst came to be. Like Greg and “Pennhurst Asylum” partner Randy Bates, Jim says it was an urban explorer who went by the name Chris Peecho who really started the whole PMPA thing. According to Jim, Chris accumulated a massive amount of history about Pennhurst on his urban explorer site, “ElPeecho” (<http://www.elpeecho.com/pennhurst/pennhurst.htm>). In his urban explorer adventures prior to the sale of Pennhurst, Chris had picked up documents on the Pennhurst grounds, scanned them, and posted them online. “Without Chris, none of this would be happening now. His website was the stimulus.” In particular, several sources agreed that the

message board at El Peecho was apparently very active and instrumental in keeping people informed about the sale and plans for reuse of the Pennhurst property. Now defunct since the controversy over Pennhurst's reuse, the forum link still exists on the website with the single posting: "RIP forum – 2007 – 2010."

Jim has been perhaps the most enthusiastically involved of the PMPA in its continuing relationship with cable television ghost shows featuring Pennhurst. The group agonized over whether or not to do the first ghost hunt show, Jim explains. By a unanimous vote, they agreed they would be involved to prevent it from turning into "a complete circus." Jim believes they succeeded.

Similarly, Jim is currently in communication with the new owner/operator of Pennhurst, Tim Smith.⁴⁵ Jim hopes that if he can get Bates out of the arrangement then he can get the disability imagery out and then Tim Smith and the PMPA could be collaborating and have a museum at Pennhurst within the next five years.

Jim says he wouldn't be opposed to there being a medical theme at a Pennhurst haunt, as I mention to him there is at Eastern State Penitentiary's newest exhibit/haunt attraction: "The Operating Room"/"Infirmary." Jim says the experimentation that happened at Pennhurst is important not to forget. He references a recently documented account of medical experimentation at Pennhurst in which feces were put into the food of the residents as part of a disease study.⁴⁶ "In the effort to remember the horrible things we did, there's going to be some horror," Jim argues, "but that's not degrading horror."

“I like realism. That’s my style.”
An interview with Randy Bates,
“Pennhurst Asylum” partner, “Bates Motel and Haunted Hayride” owner

Randy Bates is a likable, practical, creative guy. I met him at the farm where he lives and operates his “Bates Motel and Haunted Hayride.” His parents bought the 82 acres in the 1950s because his mother loved farming. As small as the farm is, his father always had to have another job. It’s hard to make a profit from farming, Randy admits, “unless you can find some sort of niche market, like organic farming, or the entertainment industry.” I reply that the same is true of historical landmarks; the thing itself is often only profitable with the addition of something for supplemental income.

Randy says he got into the haunt business without realizing other people were doing it. He was just giving friends a scary hay ride. It was the 1990s and he had been doing hayrides for church groups and fraternities and so on. In 1991, he started doing the haunted hayrides. It was 1996 when Randy first went to a haunt trade show in Chicago and that year he opened up the “Bates Motel,” a Victorian-themed haunted house. He says he was lucky to have friends who were artists, sound and lighting designers, who made a great team.

Randy describes himself as “a nuts and bolts kind of guy.” He also describes himself as a farmer and a family guy. He loves the haunt industry. “That’s what gives me enjoyment. I just entertained 5000 people on a Saturday night.” He doesn’t get dressed up, he says, “but I’ll stand behind a door and scare the crap out of you.”

Randy learned that Pennhurst might become an attraction in the fall of 2009 from a producer for the *Travel Channel*. Randy and a few of his friends, founders of America Haunts (an invitation-only, market-exclusive industry organization of major haunted

attractions across the country) had the idea to make a documentary about what they do. They filmed it and sold it to the *Travel Channel*. Randy says they liked it so much, they wanted the America Haunts production company to shoot three more shows. One of the producers told him the Pennhurst owner was thinking of doing a haunted house and he wanted it to be in the show. Randy said it was in his market, so he'd have to sit down and meet the owner. It turned out that the owner already knew about Randy and the success of his "Bates Motel" attraction. He wanted Randy to be a partner in the attraction, rather than to just hire him. They formed a partnership that winter. Randy wrote a business plan and they opened that fall.

When he started the Bates, Randy says, he had no expectations. "It was a bunch of my friends and relatives scaring people out on the hay ride trails... it was a very small-time operation when I started." But with Pennhurst, he says his goal was to "make it a world class attraction right out of the gate." It was a project that allowed him to put his nineteen years of experience to work. He says he spent a month writing the business plan. He knew web designers, logo designers, vendors for props, masks, make-up, fog, strobes, lighting and sound equipment, companies that make custom soundtracks for haunted attractions, port-a-potty rentals, point of sale systems, plus he had to make a plan to clean up the buildings, they had to go to an engineering firm to ensure it would be safe, add emergency lights and exit signs—according to Randy, it cost almost a half-million dollars to open the attraction.

When I ask Randy if he had heard of Pennhurst prior to hearing about it from the *Travel Channel* producers, he says no. He grew up there at the farm in Glen Mills, which is located about 45 minutes to the south of Pennhurst and the same distance west of

Philadelphia. Thinking back on it, he says, he thinks he kind of remembers seeing it on television back when they were saying they were trying to close it in the 70s, but he doesn't really remember.

What he remembers most about his first visit to Pennhurst was all of the practical issues that would need to be addressed before you could let the public through those buildings. He described twenty-five years of overgrowth, piles of rubble a few feet deep in all of the buildings, and an amazing degree of vandalism: smashed toilets, all the copper wire stolen, radiators stolen, marble stolen, filthy mattresses surrounded by candles, and tons of graffiti. All of the windows in the Administration Building had been smashed. Later in the conversation, he admits that Pennhurst is “one hell of an atmospheric setting,” but he seems genuinely less focused on that than on “the nuts and bolts” required to get a place like Pennhurst up and running as an attraction. People tell him all the time that they have the perfect location for a haunted attraction. Right away they want to talk to him about buying props and so forth, and he's always reminding people that thinking about the scare is way far down the line—first you need to think about parking and zoning.

Still, Randy has the final say on thematic and design decisions. He says he has a fantastic crew of very artistic people with whom he sits down to brainstorm overall themes and stories for his haunts. When he describes what a brainstorming session is like, with each person building on the other's ideas, his eyes light up. I tell him it sounds like a lot of fun.

I haven't yet brought up the controversy when Randy introduces the subject. “I didn't have any idea there was gonna' be any kind of backlash against us using the

property.... I was really taken back. I'm a practical person. A building's a building."

Randy says he has a friend in New Orleans that bought an old mortuary and made an attraction out of it. He notes that we wouldn't think that was demeaning to the hundreds of people who had funerals there. He attributes the dominant view of Pennhurst to "typical America," always focusing on the bad:

I've had so many people interview me about the place, and they always start harping on how these people were chained to their beds and mistreated, but they never talk about the good things that came out of that place. I've talked to a lot of people that worked there and I've talked to a lot of people that were patients there... and they said they loved it, they said it was awesome. They had friends there, they played games, they played baseball, they were on the different social groups they had there, they had a Boy Scout group there, they had all kinds of stuff going on. And they would talk about these people that worked there... Monday through Friday and then would come in on Saturday on their day off to spend time with these people. You know, typical America, you're always harpin' on the bad stuff, they never look at the good stuff that came out of it.

Randy explains that, as I had suspected, the "Pennhurst Museum," like the fictional back-story, were both attempts at cooperation with advocates. Randy offers, again without my asking, that it was PMPA co-president Jim Conroy's idea to create a fictional story so that people would understand that the haunt didn't have anything to do with the real Pennhurst.

"He said, hey, I can help you get this thing open without a whole lot of trouble from people... create a story that's going to be totally separate from the mentally handicapped people there." Randy says he was going for "the criminally insane" not the mentally handicapped, and then adds that many people at Pennhurst were "mildly handicapped" and others not able to care for themselves, "but it was never an insane asylum."

When Randy heard advocates were calling for Pennhurst to be turned into a museum, he saw a way to solve his queue problem—he needed a few rooms of interior queuing to control the visitors on line. He put the make-up designer in charge of designing the museum rooms. Randy says she lives about a half hour away from Pennhurst and was pretty interested in the history.

Randy describes his haunt style as “realism.” He takes pride in being different in that way and says he doesn’t want to be Hollywood; he doesn’t have a Jason or a Frankenstein or werewolves. He’s not interested in doing horror fantasy. When he set up the operating room at “Pennhurst Asylum,” he says he brought over an actual operating room light, which weighed about 150 pounds, from the real operating room on campus. He had his crew paint halfway up the walls to look like tile and then put cabinets above that. When you walk in, he says, he wants it to feel like a real operating room.

I tell Randy I’ve been through the attraction many times and noticed that there are lots of images of restraints. I ask him if he thinks about the real people who experienced the use of restraints at Pennhurst when he’s designing an attraction like this. I acknowledge, too, that that’s the way all horror entertainment works— obviously people get murdered in real life as well, and yet we’re accustomed to watching horror movies about murder. Randy says, no, he’s not thinking about the real use of restraints, and then goes on to explain that one of the best scares is when an actor appears to be in restraints, but then appears to break free from them because you get the initial scare of thinking the person is going to come after you, but then calming when you see the restraints, and then another scare when you realize he’s broken free and is able to lunge at you after all.

I ask Randy repeatedly if the “medical experimentation” and “criminally insane” theme felt okay to him, if he genuinely thought no one would have a problem with it. He replied that he knew some advocates wouldn’t be happy until he left the place.

“They’re saying the property’s sacred ground and all that crap. You know, it’s an old dilapidated building that’s been rotting for twenty-five years.” At a township meeting, he says, when someone complained the new owners were neglecting the property, the township supervisors stood up and said hey, these people have put more money into that place in the past six months than the state has in the past twenty-five years. Randy adds that last year, he paid \$80,000 in amusement tax.

Despite the uncertainty advocates created, Randy believes the controversy helped draw crowds. Randy’s detailed business plan included press contacts and a \$125,000 marketing budget for radio ads, posters, flyers distribution, email marketing, social marketing, haunt industry websites, etc. But he claims that each time the ARC of Philadelphia ran a full-page ad protesting the attraction in the *Daily Local News*, his sales “quadrupled.” When the injunction trial let out, he had a Channel 6 news camera in his face. The breaking news on KYW radio at 1 PM was “Pennhurst Asylum” set to open tonight. On opening night, channels 2, 4, and 6 were all present to see the winner of the “first couple to get to enter ‘Pennhurst Asylum’” contest. You can’t pay for that kind of publicity, he says.

“How do you buy the breaking story with Jim Gardner coming on at 11 o’clock at night with live shots from the haunted attraction?”

The first year, he hoped to get twenty thousand people through; that was his break-even point. Instead, he had about forty-five to fifty thousand people. They've had about the same attendance every year since.

While Randy agrees that the history of Pennhurst may draw visitors, he thinks it's the history "in general" that "it's an old dilapidated mental institution."

"The buildings are falling down. It has a heck of an ambiance... I don't think people are going there because of the history of the mistreatment of people and things like that. I think they're going there because they heard it was really a cool location, maybe they weren't allowed to come in and see it because they shut everything down."

When I ask Randy if there's anything else I should know, he tells me that he's helped the community. The Wawa on the corner changed their renovation plans from October because that's their most profitable month when they do about three times the business. Area hotels book up with people staying from out of town. Restaurant owners love it, he says. Randy also describes a few former residents who told him that they loved it at Pennhurst and were excited to go back to visit. He describes one man, in his forties or fifties, who works as at the Spring City Diner. The man told Randy that he'd learned to wash dishes at Pennhurst, which is what he does at the diner. He spoke of his fondness for his friends at Pennhurst and that he thought the attraction was great.

I share with Randy how strange I think it is that the versions of Pennhurst that have the most in common are the one told by advocates and the fictional one told by the haunt—in both cases, Pennhurst is pictured as a terrifying place. He agrees.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

When I first learned about the “Pennhurst Asylum,” I saw what I thought were two diametrically opposed stories: a historical narrative about a people’s struggle to achieve civil rights and a legend about a haunted “Asylum” and the horrible things that happened there. I returned again and again to the image of Pennhurst’s historical marker, which neatly describes why Pennhurst is historically significant for individuals with developmental disabilities and all Americans. I also returned to the “Pennhurst Asylum” web site with its foreboding soundtrack and medical horror imagery [Photograph 11]. What surprised me most as I learned more about Pennhurst and the stories we tell about it was that the history and the legend had more in common than I thought.

The idea that Pennhurst was a “bad place,” as many letter writers referred to it, was hardly original to haunted attraction designer Randy Bates. “The Asylum” has held mythic status as mysterious and threatening for at least the past hundred years, if not more. Likewise, there is also a long history of cultural representations of disabled bodies as fearful and anxiety-producing. As Foucault (2009) tells it, such places of confinement can be traced to the pre-Renaissance leper colony, places associated with the inhuman and which retained their ghostly meaning even after they had closed. Even into the modern age, the ethical view of madness persisted, and with it, the connection between madness and evil. As many disability scholars have observed, the propaganda associated with the early 20th century American eugenics movement is particularly rife with arguments for the threat posed by a host of attributes understood as “biological

deficiency,” including “feeble-mindedness.” This history goes hand-in-hand with the narrative use of disfigurement and mental unfitness to identify the villains and monsters of fictional stories. And, more contemporary “Asylum” narratives, especially those found in popular film and television, continue to be layered with these enduring tropes.

But the image of “the Asylum” is not only the stuff of fiction and the deep past of the leper colony. Observational accounts of institutional life populate the journalistic record from the past century as well. As a brief review of the afterlife of “the Asylum” showed, true stories are often buried not far beneath the sanitized surfaces of “Asylum” redevelopment projects or the popular legends of ghost tours. Pennhurst is no exception to this pattern. Even from its very inception, the news from Pennhurst was often appallingly bad, and not unlike the stuff of horror movies. For decades, local newspapers reported on fire, disease outbreak, accidental death, violence, criminal activity, and a series of State and Federal probes into mismanagement and abuse. As *Mercury* editor Nancy March and former Pennhurst employee Greg Pirmann both suggested, the newspaper was one way local people would have learned about Pennhurst, especially during the Pennhurst trial. In all of these ways, there has always been reason to fear Pennhurst. While advocacy journalism such as *Suffer the Little Children* intended to create repulsion in audiences as a means of motivating social change, when viewed retrospectively, the intended social use of such stories is stripped out through their recontextualization in the present—i.e., there is no social action we can take to change the past. What remains is strategic rhetoric that no longer serves its intended purpose. Lacking any other historical or critical interpretation, as is the case when *STLC* is viewed at the “Pennhurst Asylum,” its images serve only to create affect in the audience.

Even more crucial to my understanding of the contemporary mnemonic battle over how to remember Pennhurst, its meaning to disability advocates was also based on a characterization of Pennhurst as a truly horrific place. As Greg Pirmann argues, lawyers and advocates working for the prosecution in *Halderman v. Pennhurst* had to create the most horrific picture possible in order to win their case. As I learned from reader letters and my interactions with contemporary disability service professionals, Pennhurst went on to become part of the origin story for agencies providing community-based services in the present. Telling the Pennhurst story or watching *Suffer the Little Children* reminded these service providers of the importance of their own work and distinguished it from their profession's past sins. And for those still fighting to close institutions for developmental disability in the United States, Pennhurst's dark past was an integral part of the tragedy and triumph narrative—a parable that could be used in contemporary arguments for community-based living. Using a memory studies lens led me to focus on this relationship between social roles and memory making. I found that community members were invested in the meaning of “the Asylum” in a variety of ways that related to their roles as disability advocates, former employees, former residents, or journalists. Each of these groups constitutes an interpretive community with unique experiences and textual resources that contributed to shaping their perspective on the past.

What's shocking about “Pennhurst Asylum” is that the stories of journalists and advocates, which were intended to expose real suffering and injustice, unintentionally paved the way for the attraction's parody of Pennhurst. Moreover, advocates needed Pennhurst to be the site of real horrors just as much as the “Pennhurst Asylum” did. The haunted attraction sells a meaning system put in place long ago, but it also relies on

visitors understanding the site as authentic. Visitors get to touch a mostly unspecified, but nonetheless “real” past mediated by an abundance of historical and contemporary public communication that all attach an aura to Pennhurst as a place where horrific events happened. The strategic fictionalizations made to create the Pennhurst legend paradoxically show exactly what *is* remembered about “the Asylum.” The legend distances the story away from American history as well as from the uneasy recognition that the horrors of Pennhurst were committed against people who are elsewhere called “the most vulnerable” members of society. The attraction further distances visitors from the story through design choices that set it in a deeper past beyond most living memory. From my observation at the haunted attraction, it appears that the problem isn’t that the local community has forgotten Pennhurst; it may be that they remember too well.

The public controversy surrounding how to remember Pennhurst State School and Hospital reveals both rapid change and surprising stagnation in the role of institutionalization in the United States. While the abandonment of former institutional spaces is a result of the deinstitutionalization of hundreds of thousands of Americans over the past fifty years, the meaning of “the Asylum” remains fraught.

When *The New York Times* reported on the eventual settlement of the Pennhurst case in 1984, Pennsylvania Welfare Secretary Walter W. Cohen was hopeful that the case would put a hard stop on the story of institutionalization in the United States, stating, “We join in closing one chapter in the history of care for the mentally retarded and opening a new chapter - one which holds further promises for the lives of those who are residents at Pennhurst” (“Pennsylvania Settles,” 1984, n.p.). When the last two residents

left the Pennhurst grounds on November of 1987, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* declared, “The final chapter has been written in the story of Pennhurst Center for the Mentally Retarded” (Campisi, 1987, n.p.). Similarly, when advocates, politicians, and former residents gathered at a ceremony that marked the long-awaited closing of the Pennhurst campus, State Public Welfare Department Deputy Secretary Steven M. Eidelman remarked with what now seems like an undue degree of finality, “Pennhurst is no longer a place” (Woestendiek, 1987). This chance wording belies the desire to rush to resolution of a past that had only just been made. But the notion that stripping the meaning from the place would be as easy as closing the doors for the final time proved untenable. Even its abandonment by the State spoke loudly, hinting at its shameful past and the unwillingness of any traditional voice of authority to take responsibility for telling the Pennhurst story.

In fact, Pennhurst’s abandonment may be the most meaningful social act of its century-long existence. The message of ambivalence perfectly reflects the unresolved role of “the Asylum” in American culture. As reader letters and interviews with key informants showed, despite the cultural resonance between real life and fictional horror stories about Pennhurst, there were many other approaches to narrating Pennhurst’s past. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this ambivalence in part accounts for the usefulness of the ghost story as a vehicle for working out the meaning of “the Asylum” through films, ghost hunter television shows, haunted attractions, and paranormal tours.

Of course, this ambivalence is observable only at the social level—at the individual and group levels, community members were unambiguous about what Pennhurst meant to them. What the flurry of civic engagement surrounding Pennhurst memory demonstrates is exactly how and why “the Asylum” is meaningful today. Public

memory of Pennhurst in 2010 was controversial, in part, because the institution's closing had itself been controversial. Many still believed it should never have been closed and were thus resistant to the idea of sanctifying its story as an example for future change. During the 2010 controversy, many community members shared fond memories of Pennhurst. In particular, reader letters showed how important Pennhurst was as a symbol of the community's good will, service, and genuine caring. This was especially true of former employees, who struggled to assimilate their own past participation in a system they were told was unjust and harmful. Just as Alison Carey (2009) argues that the history of civil rights for people with intellectual disabilities in the United States has been incremental and marked by ambivalence, so it would seem "the Asylum" continues to be the site of an unfinished battle now fought, in part, through the politics of memory.

As others have suggested, public recognition of minority-group pasts may not be achieved until a fight for civil rights has made sufficient progress or enough group members achieve the requisite social status to claim their past publicly (Glassberg, 2001; Foote, 1997). Ghost stories may be one way that these unresolved pasts appear in public discourse, particularly when a social injustice has been done (Brogan, 1998). In this way, ghost stories can be viewed as a byproduct of rapid social change (Richardson, 2003). In addition, when places are associated with shame or when blame for a tragedy remains either unclear or lies internal to a community, the interpretation of this past may be relegated to popular culture. Foote (1997) describes this process of obliteration as resulting from neglect and the silence associated with taboo subjects. However, considering the role of historical authority in Pennhurst memory, it seems something more complex is at work.

As Tim Edensor (2005) observes, abandoned spaces are notable for the absence of traditional authorities that order and narrate other historical spaces. I observed the aftermath of this state of abandonment during my fieldwork at “Pennhurst Asylum.” When the State abandoned the Pennhurst campus, it left an authority vacuum at a site about which there was still as much public curiosity as there had been when it first opened in 1908. This allowed an opening for various community members to claim their own authority at the site, including amateur historians, urban explorers, paranormal investigators, and the haunted attraction industry. In other words, the process of commemoration associated with shameful pasts, which Foote describes as passive, in fact involves community members actively stepping in to narrate a past that has little or no official presence. While the act of abandonment suggests passive effacement, the production of folklore and legend suggests active engagement. Indeed, this easily claimed authority is part of what “Pennhurst Asylum” is selling. Its mix of fact and fiction offers visitors the pleasure of uncertainty and active detective work—something usually missing at traditional historic sites.

Importantly, the claiming of authority over Pennhurst’s past doesn’t only happen through popular culture. Interviews and archives also showed that journalists had a stake in remembering Pennhurst’s past—especially those at *The Mercury*. As appears to be the case in other locations across the United States, local newspapers are particularly well-situated to take responsibility for interpreting the story of institutional spaces in their own communities. The physical reuse of these spaces is an occasion for local journalists to take on the role of public historian in the absence of other available authorities. In the case of *The Mercury*, the editor was motivated in part by the pride she took in her paper’s

past role advocating for change at Pennhurst. The paper's editorial position lined up neatly with the tragedy and triumph narrative, also somewhat motivated by the pride of local advocates who had fought for Pennhurst's closure. But even more important than what *The Mercury* had to say about the Pennhurst story was the fact that it gave the story so much attention. In doing so, it opened up a dialogue with the community about the meaning of Pennhurst. The paper's local scope also allowed it to print almost all the reader letters and comments it received. Thus, *The Mercury* made itself a space where processes of commemoration could unfold through narrative—and, it created a record of the negotiation of meaning that could inform future public history projects on institutionalization in the United States.

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) describes, the removal of certain kinds of difference from public space early in the 20th century, especially those differences understood as disability, naturally created a taboo that led to public curiosity. However, when observed at both the ground level and the level of public communication, the relationship between institutions and their communities shows itself to be more complex than this narrative about exits and entrances into public space belies. It may be true, as Jim Conroy and Greg Pirmann attest to, that at one time the general public had no knowledge of institutions that housed people understood as developmentally disabled, but the communities surrounding such institutions certainly did. In many cases, people who read their local newspaper likely knew something about such places, as did the many people who were employed by institutions. So did a variety of professionals, such as the family doctors and educators whose best practices included recommending

institutionalization for some children. And of course, if you or your family member were understood as developmentally disabled, you knew about these places, too. For better or worse, all of these relationships color the public memory of institutionalization in the United States. This is especially important because the power structures that allowed the institution to function remain mostly intact. Indeed, the “Pennhurst Asylum” relies not only on our previous knowledge of Pennhurst and the mythic figure of “the Asylum;” it also relies on our fear of medical authority, bodily difference, and most of all, our collective vulnerability to the social mechanisms that continue to define and separate the “normal” and the “abnormal.”

What stood out to me in my key-informant interviews is the way in which the act of remembering seemed to recreate the hierarchy of the institution. Some of the same people who had authority at Pennhurst continue to have the authority to tell its story today. As an aide, Ruth Himes was certainly not at the top of the ladder at Pennhurst, but as a former employee she ends up with an enormous amount of power over the story presented to visitors at the haunted attraction. Likewise, as the local expert in Pennhurst history, Greg Pirmann is the keeper of decades of stories from the inside. He was also responsible for gathering the evidence that would help the State defend itself in *Halderman v. Pennhurst*. Jim Conroy, whose career was built on his research at Pennhurst, continues to be the most prominent voice in the PMPA. In comparison, Jean Searle’s visceral reaction upon visiting Pennhurst, even though she was not a resident at this particular place, reflects an unshakable vulnerability, the result of Jean’s understanding that the system that placed her in an institution as a child remains intact today. Simultaneously, as a self-advocate, Jean is undoubtedly a storyteller. But her

ability to tell her story distinguishes her from many former Pennhurst residents, especially those who do not use verbal communication. Additionally, former Pennhurst residents continue to be shielded by a wall of administration that creates a barrier to their participation in public life and the preservation of their history. And for those traumatized at Pennhurst, remembering continues to be viewed as a potential threat to their well-being.

The eagerness of some community members to contribute to the discussion about Pennhurst also shows what is at stake in the contemporary American concept of disability—particularly for those who define themselves as *non-disabled*. Although local journalism did capture some voices of people who identified disability as a key feature of their subjectivity, there were far more individuals who defined disability as external to their own experience. The orientation of these helpers, advocates, and eyewitnesses lays bare the fact that disability has historically been most useful as a category to be used by the “non-disabled.” This separation and the nature of the relationships that form around it, particularly between human service employees and those they care for, is part of the legacy of institutionalization. As Foucault argues (2009), the birth of the Asylum had radical effects on our ability to make meaning and fundamentally changed how we see ourselves in relationship to “unintegratable” difference.

It is not unusual for historical narratives to be roundly rejected by some members of a community. Indeed, narrating sanctification may invite counter-narratives in the sense that it requires strategic storytelling that will inevitably be guided by a process of selection that seeks particular features, such as crusaders, lessons, redemption, and

closure. Although Foote (1997) warns against viewing the process of commemoration as linear, it is difficult not to see sanctification as the implied goal for minority histories that remain underrepresented in official narratives. Since the power of the interpretive community is the power to make publicly-acceptable meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), official recognition of minority history is a marker of the widening of this power. But seeking to rigidly define the meaning of past events seems like an unachievable and even undesirable goal, particularly if one views the past as a cultural resource available to be claimed and used for any number of ends. Indeed, the identification of an authentic or true past doesn't seem like the appropriate goal in light of the ease with which the real can be commodified and recontextualized beyond recognition. Instead, those willing to take responsibility for public communication about the history of institutionalization—and indeed, disability advocates and journalists should continue to be among them—might attempt to address some of the uncomfortable touchings and rifts in public memory of “the Asylum.” In other words, I’m advocating a communication perspective, a socio-cultural approach that critically engages the figure of “the Asylum” alongside the history of institutionalization. Rather than ignore the disparities in how we remember “the Asylum,” disability advocates should engage the continually fraught relationship between institutions and their communities (past and present).

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APPENDIX A

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph 1. “Pennhurst Asylum” t-shirts sold as memorabilia. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2010.



Photograph 2. In a tunnel that opens out onto the campus, a message asks, “are you scared yet?” Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2010.

A bonfire, picnic tables, and strings of lights make a carnival-like atmosphere. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2011.

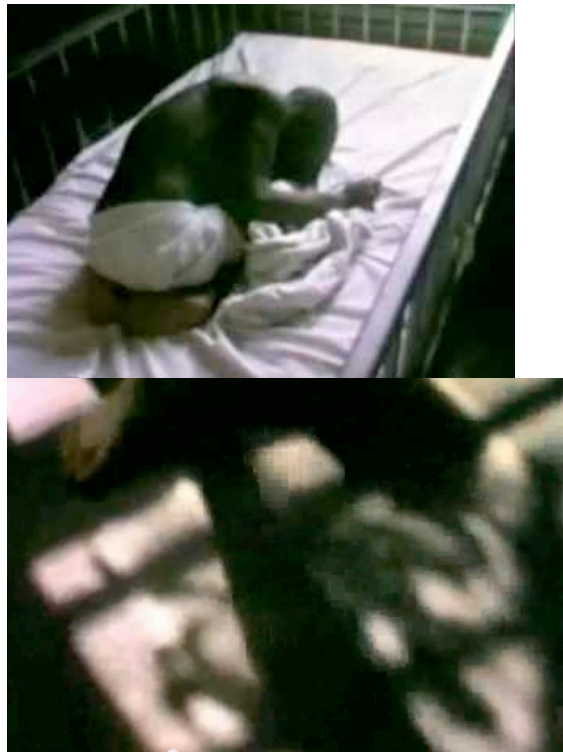


Photograph 3. The iconic cupola of Pennhurst's Administration Building. Photographed at "Pennhurst Asylum," 2010.



Photograph 4. The frame fills completely with an ankle wrapped in a leather restraint. Screen capture taken from *Suffer the Little Children*, 1968.

Men milling around a crowded day room and filmed facing sunlit windows, creating a mob of shadow figures. Screen capture taken from *Suffer the Little Children*, 1968.



Photograph 5. A man in a crib shown curled face down in the fetal position. Screen capture taken from *Suffer the Little Children*, 1968.

Pacing feet create a long shadow on the floor within the squares of light from a nearby window. Screen capture taken from *Suffer the Little Children*, 1968.



Photograph 6. Mannequins dressed in hospital gowns at “Pennhurst Asylum” sit in wheelchairs at an institutional meal time. *Philadelphia Weekly*, (Goldberg, 2010).

Actors dressed as doctors, nurses and patients at “Pennhurst Asylum.” *Philadelphia Weekly*, (Goldberg, 2010).



Photograph 7. A dentist in scrubs prepares for his patient at “Pennhurst Asylum.” *Philadelphia Weekly*, (Goldberg, 2010).



Photograph 8. In the Mayflower building, four last names are printed on cubicle walls with various additions written in graffiti. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2011.



Photograph 9. A hearse decorated with fake cobwebs and a coffin. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2011.

Crowds on line at the haunted attraction. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2011.



Photograph 10. A collection of fake gravestones with the names of other Pennsylvania institutions. Photographed at “Pennhurst Asylum,” 2011



Photograph 11. Screen capture of “Pennhurst Asylum” web site. Retrieved 2011, from www.pennhurstasylum.com.

Pennhurst State School and Hospital historical marker. Retrieved 2011, from www.preservepennhurst.com.

APPENDIX B

NOTES

¹ Approaching the data on institutionalization by diagnosis paints yet another picture. The resident population in *public mental hospitals* fell from 559,000 in 1955 to 154,000 in 1980 (Koyanagi & Bazelon, 2007). The population at *large state institutions for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD)* fell from 154,638 people in 1977 to 50,034 in 1998 (Prouty & Lakin, 2000). Reflecting the move toward community-based care in group homes during the same time, the population receiving support in homes with six or fewer people with I/DD rose from 20,400 in 1977 to 225,318 in 1999. In 2011, the population residing in public and private I/DD institutions, plus nursing facilities residents with I/DD totaled 84,000 (Braddock et al, 2013).

² While most of the 34 million Americans with disabilities live in “household units,” 6.4 % continue to live in institutional group quarters (She & Sapleton, 2006).

³ Shifts in terminology continue into the present. For example, in Virginia effective July 1, 2009, the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services (DMHMRSAS) became the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) in order “to more broadly reflect the department’s mission, to be flexible enough for the department to grow into other service areas, like autism spectrum disorders, and to move away from the stigma associated with the term ‘mental retardation’” (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, n.d.). In 2013, the Social Security Administration dropped the term “mental retardation” in favor of “intellectual disability” (Diamant, 2013). The same year, the updated terminology was included in the new fifth edition of psychiatry’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

⁴ The web site for this upscale waterfront residence does have a “history” page, but mentions only its use under the name “Metropolitan Hospital,” and not the far more prominent connection to journalist Nellie Bly’s 1887 book *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, originally published as a series of articles for the *New York World*.

⁵ The “old site” of Western State Hospital was closed in the 1970s, but relocated to a smaller, modern building under the same name. It was briefly converted into the Staunton Correctional Center, but has since been redeveloped as a retail and condominium project (University of Virginia Library, 2012).

⁶ Though the last of the buildings on the old site of Greystone closed in 2003, a new 450-bed psychiatric facility going by the same name opened in a new location in 2008 (Division of Mental Health Services, 2008).

⁷ Historic prisons are also frequently featured on such shows. The following is a partial list: Eastern State Penitentiary, PA; Burlington County Prison, NJ; Essex County Jail, NJ; Alcatraz Island, CA; Missouri State Penitentiary, MO.

⁸ Foxborough State Hospital was intended for the treatment of “inebriates,” or alcoholics, but was later used to provide psychological treatment to World War One soldiers.

⁹ Numerous historic prisons are also being similarly reused as tourist attractions including West Virginia State Penitentiary (historical and paranormal tours and the “Dungeon of Horrors” haunted attraction), Burlington County Prison in New Jersey (tours and “The Haunted Prison” attraction), Old Charleston Jail in South Carolina (haunted history tours), Ohio State Reformatory (two haunted attractions: “Prison of the Evil Dead” and “Supernatural”).

¹⁰ The sample included both traditional “letters” and shorter “comments,” which could be as little as a paragraph. Comments appeared as part of what is in one newspaper called the “sound off” section, which allows readers to call in to the newspaper with their comments, rather than write. Another newspaper gathered and printed reader comments on the controversy from the paper’s Facebook page.

¹¹ Of the 84 news articles, 20 had originally appeared elsewhere.

¹² Foote intends to refer to the kind of official or public visibility associated with commemorative events, plaques, the naming of buildings, etc. While the haunted attraction made Pennhurst publicly visible again in the local news, one could argue that the Pennhurst story never really vanished from the community’s consciousness. As a perennial spot for vandals, urban explorers, and curious teens, the Pennhurst campus was subject to a visibility that Foote largely discounts. He suggests that obliteration does not come with ceremonies or rights of remembering by definition because it happens spontaneously, but it would be easy to imagine that those who visited the campus illegally over its decades long “abandonment” had ceremonies and rights of their own and under their own authority, if not under an authority deemed “public.” I argue in Chapter 3 that the haunted attraction is only a more visible, public, and monetized version of the ceremonies and rights of obliteration that had already been happening at Pennhurst prior to the state’s sale of the property in 2008.

¹³ The focus on abuse in the Pennhurst story is a delicate balance. On the one hand, demonstrating that there had been abuse at Pennhurst was central to the initial court case. On the other, isolated instances of abuse are less important to an overall attack on the practice of institutionalization, which is more often the focus of advocates seeking global deinstitutionalization. Even if conditions were humane and abuse-free, institutionalization can still be described as state-sponsored segregation or incarceration without legal cause. And as a method for treatment and education for people identified as intellectually disabled, institutionalization is inferior to community-based programs. Still, abuse and

poor conditions were the focus of many news exposés on Pennhurst in the past and continue to be a large part of how it is remembered.

¹⁴ There was one exception to the generally supportive comments about former employees. One reader suggested, “The criminals in the Pennhurst situation are those who turned a blind eye while it was running as a facility for special needs — the administration, caregivers and anyone else who turned a blind eye — not the current owner who is maintaining the building and providing tax revenue and you want him to give money back” (“The criminals,” 2011, p. 2). While this comment is an anomaly in the local newspapers, it is possible that it is representative of some section of public sentiment felt and heard by former employees still living in the community.

¹⁵ One source of evidence for this are the frequent human interest stories that appeared in local newspapers throughout Pennhurst’s operation, which described donations, fundraisers, and charitable events at Pennhurst.

¹⁶ In my interview with Ruth Himes, she made a similar point of reminding me that Pennhurst’s closure was not universally applauded. Ruth is similarly outspoken about her belief that institutional care is superior to community care. She also mentioned several stories about the dangers of community living including accidental death and exploitation (Interview, October 19, 2011).

¹⁷ Myer’s perspective also reflects a common lack of clarity about the distinction between the history of deinstitutionalization as it has been implemented in cases of mental illness versus cases of developmental disability. This distinction requires some subtlety because, as has been mentioned, people do not always fit neatly into diagnostic categories such as “mentally ill” or “mentally retarded.” However, in the wake of deinstitutionalization, the community supports available for mental illness differ from those available for developmental disability. The high rate of homelessness and incarceration in people classified as mentally ill is a threat to developmental disability advocates who support community living and claim that the provision of community services for developmental disability has been a success. Understandably, the suggestion that Pennhurst residents became homeless enrages PMPA co-president Jim Conroy, who led the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study designed to measure the impacts of community-based living on residents after Pennhurst’s closing. “Do you know how many Pennhurst residents ended up on the street?” Conroy has said, “Not one!” (personal communication, 2011).

¹⁸ It may be that advocates realized that the impact of such vivid accounts of inhuman conditions could indirectly fuel the aura of fear on which the haunted attraction relies. During fieldwork, I spent many hours with members of the PMPA who were frequently quoted by local papers. While I often heard them share their personal memories of inhuman conditions at Pennhurst, they all seemed to refrain from sharing these potentially sensationalistic details with the local press during this time.

¹⁹ In my interview with Greg Pirmann, he also mentioned giving tours to high school health classes, calling it a “right of passage.” He noted the tours were a testament to the transparency of what was happening at Pennhurst, they included every part, he says, the best and the worst (Interview, June 10, 2013).

²⁰ As has been cited earlier, advocates have described Pennhurst as a place where lives were wasted, and also as the burial site of countless unnamed residents. Framing *Halderman v. Pennhurst* as a civil rights victory also makes it possible to redeem Pennhurst as a site of patriotism. The historical marker defines the site as important to Americans, but the PMPA’s web presence goes even further to define Pennhurst as an American treasure.

²¹ While the extermination of institutionalized Germans and other people with disabilities by the Nazis is well-documented, there is no evidence in the text being analyzed here that the narrators intend to refer to this connection. While there has been a recent interest in the relationship between American eugenicists and the scientists who legitimated the extermination of undesirables in Europe (Black, 2003), as well as medical experimentation in the United States on institutionalized populations (Hornblum, Newman, & Dober, 2013), the analogies used to evaluate the sacredness of Pennhurst are not used to make such connections.

²² In my interview with Randy Bates, who wrote the “Legend” page, he confirmed that the fictional story was intended as a concession to advocates and that he hoped details like the character name “Dr. Chakejian” and the relocation of the story to Eastern Europe would help separate the fictional story from the real one (Interview, June 13, 2013).

²³ Several PMPA members expressed to me in interviews that they had no objection to paranormal investigation, or ghost hunting, as a way for the public to interact with the Pennhurst story or property. I am unclear about what accounts for this distinction when it seems to me that both a haunted attraction and a ghost hunt rely on creating fear in the audience by dehumanizing the subject. It may be that the concept of haunting is such a good fit with the narrative of historical injustice embraced by the PMPA that the association with fear (and the popular) can be overlooked.

²⁴ Randy Bates claimed in my interview with him that the idea to create a “legend” to distinguish fact from fiction originated from his conversations with the PMPA. Randy created a story about “the criminally insane,” thinking this would make it clear that the attraction was not about “the mentally retarded” (Interview, June 13, 2013).

²⁵ The practice of hosting Pennhurst tours for high school students resurfaced in reader letters during the attraction controversy as storied memories told from the perspective of adults looking back on the experience and trying to evaluate the ethics of reuse. Again, the dominant mode of these memories is fear and pity.

²⁶ I reviewed clippings at The Chester County Historical Society and Temple University's Urban Archives in order to identify general themes contained in stories on Pennhurst.

²⁷ Other statistical data about the population at this time is listed in the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study as follows:

The people of primary interest in all aspects of the Pennhurst Study were the 1154 people who lived at Pennhurst Center on the date of Judge Broderick's original order, which was March 17, 1978. Their ages ranged from nine to 82 years with an average of 39, and they had lived at Pennhurst for an average of 24 years. Sixty-four per cent of the people were male. Thirty-three per cent had some history of seizures, 13% had visual impairments, 4% had hearing impairments, and 18% were unable to walk. Medical problems of a severe, life-threatening nature were reported for only eight individuals, or under 1%.

In terms of level of functioning, 54% were labeled profoundly retarded, 31% severely, 11% moderately, and 4% mildly retarded. For 9%, I.Q. was reported as unmeasurable; for the others, the range was from 3 to 87, with an average of 23. Just over 50% were completely or nearly nonverbal, 47% were less than fully toilet trained, and 40% were reported to threaten or do physical violence toward others" (Conroy & Bradley, 1985, p. 53).

²⁸ For example, *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972) and others which lead congress to pass the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and later the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990).

²⁹ I thought I recognized the photos as similar to a brochure posted on the PMPA web site. Randy Bates confirmed that the photos used were found in a brochure purchased on Ebay and then copied and mounted for the exhibit.

³⁰ In my interview with Randy Bates, he described the rooms of the museum proceeding in distinct time-periods. The intent of the design as he described it was to show the rise and fall of the institution by making the first museum room appear clean and orderly while subsequent rooms would gradually show signs of deterioration.

³¹ Randy Bates was able to confirm that the attraction originally featured the entire STLC video, but it was causing a hold-up in the line because too many people stopped for long periods to watch it. He couldn't confirm which sections of the video had been clipped to make the new two-minute loop since he didn't personally edit it. He agreed that, like me, what sticks in his memory were the most disturbing images. Randy also recounted that the footage plays with sound, although it is possible I don't remember it that way because the haunted attraction soundtrack was playing more loudly. Also, STLC contains a great deal of silence as it is originally recorded, particularly during the sections that are the most visually arresting. Again, this original production choice, possibly intended to elevate the images to evidence that would speak for itself, produced a particular kind of resource for the attraction.

³² Randy Bates described his intent in using STLC was “to get a little of the history in there.”

³³ His account of a sudden closure doesn’t match up with accounts in newspapers and legal documents. Pennhurst residents started being transferred out of the institution immediately after *Halderman v. Pennhurst* was heard in 1977. Even though the state immediately appealed the case, their request for a stay of the decision, which would have halted the relocation of residents called for by the Pennhurst Decree, was denied. Even though it was ten more years and several more appeals before the case was settled and before all of Pennhurst’s residents were relocated, I can think of no reason why staff members would think they were coming to work one day to find Pennhurst closed.

³⁴ I’ve never heard Jean describe herself as a person with a particular disability. In other words, I don’t think she identifies as “intellectually disabled” per se, or at least if she does she more often chooses the broader term “person with a disability” to describe herself and the people she helps as an advocate. Furthermore, given the story she tells of how she came to be institutionalized, it is not clear to me just why or in what way she was perceived as disabled, and for better or worse, I don’t ask.

³⁵ First Jean was at Allied Services in Scranton, and then a place called Still Meadows. She unwaveringly describes these places as institutions, but I have heard some object to this characterization on the basis that the places she lived more closely mimicked community life than a place like Pennhurst would have.

³⁶ In retrospect, I feel suspicious of my own approach. I didn’t want to interview Jean in a way that defined her as a victim. Given that Jean’s life’s work is in sharing stories about her experience in the institution, it probably wasn’t necessary for me to limit her response in the way that I did.

³⁷ Greg also notes that in other cases, social services had split families apart because they had four or five children and the parents, too, may have had mental disabilities. There were several siblings at Pennhurst, all with the diagnosis “cultural/familial retardation.”

³⁸ The term “institutionally retarded” implies a somewhat false distinction. Anyone living in the context of total dependence and without the normalizing forces of integrated social life suffers from a lack of normal development—this is universally the case whether one enters the institution with perceived “normal” or “abnormal” intelligence.

³⁹ I also use the term “crusaders” to describe the many advocate characters that appear in contemporary news and letters about Pennhurst—a term I settled on prior to my discovering the 50th Anniversary issue that uses the same language. I take this as a suggestive validation that “the crusade” was a narrative theme associated with Pennhurst prior to our contemporary memory of it.

⁴⁰ The “sound off” section, Nancy says, is a favorite among readers. She further describes it as having a “sharing over the back fence” quality to it. Just about all the papers with the same owner as *The Mercury*—many of which are represented in chapter 4—have a similar section.

⁴¹ C.E.O. John Patten has led digital First Media since February 1, 2010. Known as something of a digital pioneer, Patten put together a notable advisory board for JRC, including journalism scholars Jay Rosen of New York University and Emily Bell of Columbia University.

⁴² Today, there are sixty-seven UCEDDs funded by the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. After I began working on this project, I was hired by Temple University’s UCEDD.

⁴³ This is also the case for PMPA board members Jean and Greg. After Pennhurst closed, Greg became a Program Specialist in Incident Management for the State, but also the Pennhurst “go-to” guy. Tracking class members was part of his job description as part of the settlement of the Pennhurst case.

⁴⁴ As I learned from speaking with Greg, since he was an administrator at Pennhurst during the case, part of his job was to provide the documentation for the defense. He also supervised a few hundred staff members, so it was natural that he would also be interested in defending their work to the extent that it was defensible. To this day, Greg sees some of the charges in the Pennhurst case as somewhat overblown, despite the fact that he is now a staunch advocate for community-based living.

⁴⁵ Though prominent in the public discussion of Pennhurst during 2010 and 2011, former owner Richard Chakejian is no longer involved with the project, according to collaborator Randy Bates, who says he left on bad terms.

⁴⁶ The Pennhurst transmission study is described in *Against Their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation on Children in Cold War America* (Hornblum, Newman, & Dober, 2013). Tainted hepatitis “stool serum” was given to children at Pennhurst in order to further the medical community’s knowledge of the disease (p. 59). No mention of gaining permission from parents is mentioned in the study report, “Hepatitis Studies—Pennhurst: Result, Tissue Culture Experiment #2.”