A BOARD OF VISITORS TAKES ITSELF SERIOUSLY*  
BY MRS. FRANK M. WHITEHALL

Our Commissioner feels that during my long years of service with the State hospitals, somehow, or somewhere, I must have had experiences that might be of benefit to those of you who still carry on the work.

I feel honored at the confidence he reposes in my ability to add to your knowledge, and trust I may be able to justify his belief in my powers.

I am really obliged to go back—so far that many of you will probably think that I belong to the ranks of those who, passing in, two by two, to seek for safety, finally rested upon Mt. Ararat. But it is the only way I can demonstrate to you the tremendous strides that have been made by the New York State hospitals during the last 30 years.

I found myself on my first day of service at the Brooklyn State Hospital in front of a tall, many-storied, imposing-looking building which had for many years been the almshouse of the city. It had been taken over by the State, and alterations made to fit it for its future use. Two very steep flights of steps led up to a central doorway. I hesitated at the climb and finally turned to the lower door leading into the basement quarters. "What is this part of the building used for?" I asked. "This is where we dine," was the reply. I was interested. The floor was laid with timbers at least 12 inches wide. In the long years, these had parted company so that broad spaces, one-half to three-quarters of an inch wide, showed between them. The dust and droppings of years had entirely filled these yawning gaps with a sort of sponge-like material, which—as the floors were brushed and swabbed every day—proved a magnificent absorbent for all excess moisture.

Suspended from the ceiling, were all the pipes that supplied the steam heat that was sent to all parts of the building. When these were doing the work for which they were intended, the stench arising from the floors could not, I believe, be exceeded in the Chicago stockyards! I gasped, choked, and fled up the stairs, worn by the tread of many feet, to the upper hall, where our meeting was to be held. Dine in such an atmosphere? I think I would have starved to death rather than touch a morsel of food. "Poor wretches!" I thought, "Is this what is meant by State care?" I was converted then and there, into a driving force that has led us on to better and better accomplishments.

I found a splendid corps of workers awaiting my coming. There was a board of visitors of so fine a character that it proved conclusively that

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Brooklyn was on its toes to give the State the best talent that lay in its power of selection. As constituted, we possessed: (1) A federal judge whose philanthropies and deep interest in the under-privileged, were widely known; (2) Our legal luminary, the dean of the Brooklyn bar, whose name appeared upon the board of directors of every federated charity and Jewish hospital in the city; (3) A widely-known engineer and builder who later became commissioner of buildings of the city; (4) An authority of the real estate world, whose social, political and charitable contacts would give us a broad knowledge of the community interests; (5) A bank president of wide repute; (6) The wife of a noted physician who at that time controlled one of the finest hospitals in the city. Through the years, as some of these passed on to other civic work, men and women of equal distinction were selected to fill their places.

I learned then how true the statement is, that if you wish work done and well done, seek out the busiest men you know to perform the task; work with them is a kind of religion.

Though we obeyed the law by visiting as a body at least once a month in order to investigate conditions, I am sure that we all, more or less, concentrated on the work for a new building to replace one which we knew to be thoroughly inadequate. To that end we begged, pleaded, coaxed, cajoled and "commanded," month after month, year after year; but, alas, in spite of the efforts of the Mental Hygiene Department, the Legislature yearly turned thumbs down on our request. New building seemed anathema to the Legislature. Money, we were granted to have our faces lifted or to buy paint enough to cover the defacing marks of old age. Nothing but elbow grease and slavish toil was left to accomplish miracles.

Although we made our monthly inspections in a body as required by law, perhaps we had concentrated too much upon one aspect of our work. About 25 years ago, we received complaints in communications from our Brooklyn citizens that to us seemed startling. We were more than shocked. If these charges were true, there must be something radically wrong, either with our powers of observation or with our method of procedure. We took ourselves seriously to task. A meeting was called at the office of our president, Hugo Hirsh, then the dean of the Brooklyn bar. We decided unanimously that visiting in a body as heretofore practised, was definitely out; that all future visits were to be made individually, at unexpected times, and unheralded, in order that an exhaustive and searching investigation might be made and findings reported.

Suffice to say that evidence accumulated rapidly, and the charges were proved to the hilt. The board took prompt, if heroic and drastic action, and the situation was immediately remedied. This was done without the