

MYSTERIES OF THE MIND

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ



A TYPICAL SANITARIUM TREATMENT ROOM IN THE 1900S.

It would be easy to tell the story of the sanitariums in Lake Geneva at the turn of the century by focusing on their opulent architecture. Equal parts hotel and hospital, they were grand estates with luxury at every turn. However, exploring the intricacies of imported marble doesn't tell us about the intricacies of the minds of the people who sought help here, aside from the fact that they could afford the very best mental health treatment available at the time. What hasn't been told is what life was like for the patients who came here.

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"It's a great mystery, the mind, even today, but especially at the turn of the century," says Dr. Thomas Jobe, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a leading mental health researcher and an expert on the history of psychiatric care in America. He says the majority of patients who made their way to sanitariums in Lake Geneva were likely living bleak lives. "The feelings of a fairly stable, normal mental life are so taken for granted that when it leaves, when it disappears, it's a trip that takes us out of civilization."

To the extent that history will allow, the following is a chronicle of such a trip. Specifically, a trip taken by a man whose final leg of the journey brought him to Oakwood Springs Sanitarium in Lake Geneva.

There will be holes in this story, huge holes, but time isn't returning our calls. Perhaps it's best not to think of this as a story at all; think of it more as a puzzle picked up secondhand. You'll have enough of the pieces to see an intriguing picture begin to form, but not nearly enough to see it as it really was.

When Francis R. Brooks stepped out of a 50-room, five-story brick mansion near Catholic Hill in Lake Geneva, on April 12, 1898, he was probably clad in a sweater or light overcoat, his hands tucked into his pockets for warmth, his chin low to his chest to ward off the southerly winds reported that day. As he headed down the steep slope toward the lake, the sun would have illuminated the deep scars running from his right eyebrow to his chin, the result of a chemistry accident while at Harvard. To avoid the gasps of passersby, Brooks could have made his way to the water through the dense woods that still surrounded much of the lake, steering clear of the downtown district entirely. This many years later, all we can do is speculate. But we do know that long walks didn't overwhelm the 31-year-old Chicago resident.

A few years earlier, Brooks had set out from Michigan on a 1,500-mile, mostly foot-powered journey west. Even when he developed typhoid, he pressed on. Ultimately, he marveled at the Pacific Ocean, wandered up the California coast into Oregon, and eventually tackled Washington's Mt. Rainier.

He didn't walk all that way because he didn't have money for train fare. Instead, his was a calculated decision to divorce himself from the affluence with which he'd been raised and experience the nation as most people did. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, on March 7, 1867, to Almon Brooks, a prominent physician, and Mary A. Ramsey, Brooks had every advantage in life. Brilliant, he not only obtained a law degree but went on to become a doctor and surgeon. Law and medicine never filled the void in his soul. But literature and poetry did, and his trek to the West Coast proved to be the muse he needed. During that solitary adventure, he wrote hundreds of poems and essays, immortalizing the landscape, and his moods that seemed to swing from love to hate in the blink of an eye.

In Lake Geneva on that chilly April day, Brooks seemed to be at the starting point of his true calling. His first book of poetry, *Margins*, was published the year before, receiving some critical praise, and he was at work on a second. As he walked along the shore toward Ceylon Court, an elaborate Asian-themed estate showcased at the World's Fair in Chicago and then moved to Lake Geneva, his surroundings may have caused him to pause: Waves pounding at the shore, cottonwoods in the earliest stages of bloom, migratory songbirds returning. Clearly, spring's drum roll could not have been lost on a man who, just one year earlier, published these words:

AND THE TREE BOUGH ABOVE
JUST TIPPED WITH GREEN,
SWAYED TO THE IMPULSE
OF A WARM AND VIRILE WIND,
AND SAID WITH A PASSIONATE VOICE,
"I LIVE AGAIN."

THE UNFETTERED WAVE THAT BROKE
ALONG THE SHORE IN STRICTEST CADENCE
CEASELESSLY,
SUNG BUT ONE REFRAIN,
"I LIVE AGAIN."

AND ALMOST FAINT WITH EMOTION,
I WHISPERED
ALONE TO MYSELF,
"I, TOO, SHALL LIVE AGAIN."

We don't know, of course, what Brooks noticed or what he felt. The only thing we know for certain is that Brooks had been in Lake Geneva for less than a month and walks along the lake were a part of his daily routine, prescribed by the physicians desperately trying to restore his sanity. When Brooks arrived at Oakwood Springs Sanitarium, sometime after March 1, he was as close to death as a mind can get.



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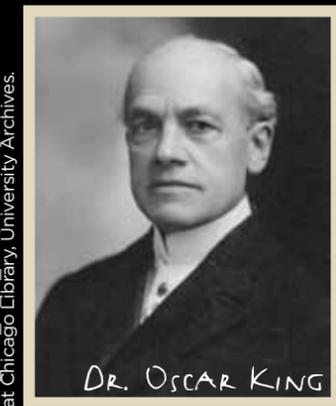
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Oakwood Springs was the brainchild of Oscar A. King, its founder, president and superintendent; King was also the vice dean of faculty for the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Chicago. Born in Peru, Indiana, on February 22, 1851, he graduated from Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York in 1878. He trained in Vienna, Austria, which would later produce the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and under-famed Wisconsin Civil War surgeon Henry Palmer of Janesville. Over the course of his career, King would become known as the first physician to use the toxin erysipelas as bacterial therapy to successfully treat 23 cases of mania and depression.



“Dr. King was essentially both a psychiatrist and a neurologist,” observes Jobe. “He was a little unusual in private asylums.”

Opened on May 13, 1885, Oakwood Springs was built at the then-astonishing cost of \$80,000. Its treatments for diseases of the brain and nervous system were, at the time, the best the world

could offer. In addition to promoting health via 63 acres of rolling hills and spectacular lake views, Oakwood’s attending physicians supervised a myriad of treatments. King would go on to acquire two other Lake Geneva properties and convert them into sanitariums. One was known as Lakeside, the other as Lakeside Cottage.

ONCE AT KING’S SANITARIUMS, WHICH COULD COST AS MUCH AS \$1,500 PER MONTH IN 1901, PATIENTS WERE FREQUENTLY DRUGGED, EVEN IF DRUGS WERE THEIR PROBLEM.

Ultimately, all would be brought under the umbrella name Lake Geneva Sanitarium. Most of the patients who sought treatment here were well-off, but struggling mightily. Respectable society ladies hooked on morphine-laced elixirs, alcoholics whose families had tried everything, the depressed, the manic, epileptics, schizophrenics, and women assigned that catch-all label of the day: hysteria.

Once at King’s sanitariums, which could cost as much as \$1,500 per month in 1901, patients were frequently drugged, even if drugs were their problem. A woman addicted to morphine might be treated with powdered cannabis. A patient with tertiary syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that ultimately spread to the brain and affected as many as one-third of all patients in state asylums, might be induced with malaria, which killed the syphilis after three or four months of agony. Once the syphilis was cured, physicians would then provide the patient with anti-malarial drugs. An alcoholic might be tightly bound in cloths as delirium tremors set in. Nearly every patient could expect significant quantities of sedatives.

Electrical therapy was also a staple in both state and private sanitariums and was likely offered by King. Not to be confused with electroshock therapy, which wasn’t introduced until the mid-

1900s, it sent charges of varying intensity to muscles or regions of the body believed to be responsible for a patient’s malady.

“This was a big deal and people paid handsomely for this,” says Jobe, “and I’m sure Dr. King had the latest European electrical therapy equipment.”

BUT FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES, KING’S LAKE GENEVA SANITARIUMS WERE NATIONALLY RENOWNED; THE LIKES OF GRETA GARBO AND LILLIAN RUSSELL ARE SAID TO HAVE SOUGHT TREATMENT HERE.

Nearly every advertisement of the Lake Geneva Sanitarium mentions hydrotherapy. While that might sound like a luxurious spa treatment today, back then it wasn’t something most patients looked forward to as it frequently involved cold-water submersions. A full surgical suite likely performed some brain procedures, including the removal of brain abscesses, but not craniotomies or lobotomies.

King’s Lake Geneva Sanitarium was a major player in Walworth County, but not alone. Other private sanitariums dotted the region, and the county operated an asylum in Elkhorn for the insane. After King’s death in 1921, his wife, Minerva Guernsey of Janesville, a one-time actress and a champion of the mentally ill who organized classes and activities to occupy the days of King’s patients, tried to carry on his work. The stock market crash and the Great Depression, however, shut the doors of King’s facilities forever. Over the years, the properties changed hands, and all but Lakeside Cottage (now the Baker House) were eventually lost to fire or the wrecking ball. But for nearly three decades, King’s Lake Geneva Sanitariums were nationally renowned; the likes of Greta Garbo and Lillian Russell are said to have sought treatment here.

“People said that all the time, about famous people coming here when it was open,” recalls Doug Elliot, retired editor with the *Lake Geneva Regional News*. “It was talked about a lot, but nobody knows for sure.”





Sometime later that day, Brooks' body was recovered and his family notified. We are told that his body was taken to Chicago for burial, but there are no records of where his funeral was held or what words, if any, were shared in the summation of his life.

Over and over, his grief-stricken family must have wondered how a mind so brilliant could have become Brooks' very undoing. In their grief, in their search for answers, did those who loved him ever look to the pages of *Margins*, to a poem titled only with a Roman numeral four (page 42)? We don't know. Looking at it today, 113 years later, it seems to offer the best explanation of all, and from Brooks himself. An explanation as to why, even with the best help money can buy, a mind that has left civilization must sometimes take the body with it.

DEAR MOTHER

HOW IN THESE DAYS OF EARLY BUD AND LEAF,
 MY HEART, LONG LOCKED IN COLD RELENTLESS GRIEF,
 COMES FORTH TO THY EMBRACE,
 AS OF THINE OWN, THY LINEAL RACE,
 O MOTHER, MOTHER NATURE

WHAT OTHER LOVE HAVE I, WHAT SMILE BUT THINE
 CAN WOO AWAY THE MELANCHOLY LINE,
 AND LIKE A SUN UNBIND
 THE FROZEN CURRENTS OF THE MIND,
 DEAR MOTHER, MOTHER NATURE

YES, WHEN THESE AIRS, THESE FRAGRANCES, THESE TINTS
 OF GRASS AND SKY, GREEN PRESAGES AND HINTS
 OF WHAT THY TRIUMPHS BE,
 SURROUND ME THUS, I LOVE BUT THEE

BUT THEE, O MOTHER NATURE.
 BEGONE YE LUSTS FOR ALL OF ANY GAIN,
 THIS DAY AT LEAST, MY SOUL, BE FREE FROM STAIN,
 FOR THOU SHALT SACRIFICE
 TO LOVE WHATE'ER THOU HOLDST PRICE
 TO LOVE FOR THEE, MY MOTHER.

THY WOMB ONCE MORE SHALL SHIELD THY CHILD WITHIN,
 AND I SHALL BE WHAT I BEFORE HAVE BEEN,
 A PART OF THEE, BY THEE CARESSED,
 MY FIRST BELOVED, MY LAST, MY BEST,
 MY MOTHER, MOTHER NATURE.

Stories steeped in history are never reported alone. We would like to offer our gratitude to the individuals and organizations who cared about this story as much as we did. The Geneva Lake Museum, Walworth County Historical Society, Rock County Historical Society and the University of Illinois at Chicago all contributed significantly. Marty Perkins, curator of research for the Wisconsin Historical Society, and Sally Severson, meteorologist and anchor with WISN 12, led us to the weather on April 12, 1898. James R. Elkins of the West Virginia University School of Law led us to the published works of Dr. Francis R. Brooks. Thank you, everyone, for sharing your time and talent with our readers. ▲



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