ForeWord Reviews

SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Narcotic Farm: The Rise and Fall of America's First Prison for Drug Addicts

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America's relationship with drugs has been marked by ambivalent attitudes, ranging from conceptualizing addiction as an illness to be treated with compassion, hard work, physical exercise and artistic expression to the current "War on Drugs" which regards addicts as criminal offenders deserving of incarceration with murderers and sex offenders.

The Narcotic Farm opened in 1935 through the joint efforts of the Public Health Service and the Bureau of Prisons. The imposing Art Deco-style building near Lexington, Kentucky, covered twelve of the thousand acres of farmland upon which it was built. It was both a hospital dedicated to the humane moral and medical rehabilitation of drug users, and a prison in which convicts of both sexes who had been arrested for drugs served their time together with voluntarily self-committed addicts from all social and economic levels.

The need for such a facility had become clear even in the 1920s, when aggressive enforcement of the Harrison Narcotics Act and other harsh legislation was beginning to fill America's prisons with addicts—by the end of that decade, a third of all inmates in federal prisons were there because of drugs. But the Narcotics Farm had another mission: the Addiction Research Center, as it was called after 1948, also sought to "understand the mysteries of addiction," and administered drugs to a "captive population" that was "able to precisely articulate the specific effects of the drugs they were given." Much of today's understanding of the effects of various drugs comes from those early and controversial tests, which were ended by scandal and changes in drug policy in the 1970s. By that time the Narcotics Farm had become "America's de facto university for educating illicit drug users," who learned from each other how to get good dope and avoid getting caught.

This lavishly illustrated historical work is the result of a project that was sponsored by the Independent Television Service, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Science Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Fund for Investigative

Journalism, the Jerome Foundation, and the Experimental Television Center. The authors, with the invaluable aid of archives across the country, have created a compelling, highly visual, and intimate account of the life and times of the Narcotic Farm and its inmates. Nancy D. Campbell specializes in writing about drug policy, science, and culture, and is an associate professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. J.P. Olsen is a journalist; both he and Luke Walden are documentary filmmakers.