

White, W. (2012). Book Review: Kirsten Anderberg & Wilma Wilson (2011). *They Call Them Camisoles—Revisited*. (Reprint of 1940 edition, Lymanhouse, with photographs and biography)

## **The Treatment of Alcoholism at Camarillo State Mental Hospital in 1939**

### **I**

At the time this review is being composed, the terms alcoholism and alcoholic are fading from professional and cultural use—embraced within the larger conceptual rubrics of addiction and “behavioral health disorders.” There is once again a drive to “integrate” addiction treatment programs with mental health programs. Addiction professionals and people in addiction recovery who opposed such integration are viewed as regressive obstructionists whose resistance to such integration is written off in terms of their lack of clinical sophistication or a desperate attempt to hold on to professional and institutional interests. But is there really more to it than that?

The fact is that persons with severe alcohol and other drug problems have historically not fared well when they find themselves in psychiatric and mental health service systems. They have been excluded, untreated, mistreated, exploited, and often extruded from care for confirming their diagnosis (exhibited the primary symptoms of the disorder for which they were admitted to treatment). The maltreatments (what are known in medicine as iatrogenic illnesses—injuries caused by the treatment) span prolonged sequestration, surgical sterilizations, the indiscriminate application of chemo- and electro-convulsive therapies (“shock treatment”), psychosurgery (prefrontal lobotomy), and drug insults of unending varieties. But more often than not during the early and mid-twentieth century, alcoholics and addicts (when they could get admitted to psychiatric hospitals) were simply warehoused without any active treatment specific to their disorder until some aberrant behavior got them expelled.

The memories of such maltreatment are deeply imbedded within people in recovery—passed down across generations through the storytelling traditions within American cultures of recovery. It could be said that “oldtimers” in the addictions field also carry such memories in their professional DNA and thus instinctively bristle at renewed calls for integrating addiction treatment and mental health services. There are long cycles of integration and segregation of addiction treatment services spanning the nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first centuries, but most addiction professionals are not old enough to remember why calls for integrating alcoholism and addiction treatment were rejected in the 1960s and a specialty sector for the treatment of alcoholism and other addictions was forged in the 1970s. Reminders of those reasons can be found in the autobiographical writings of alcoholics and addicts treated within psychiatric service settings. Some of the most notable among these include William Seabrook’s *Asylum* (1935) and Wilma Wilson’s *They Call Them Camisoles* (1940). The latter book has been recently edited and re-released by Kirsten Anderberg and is here reviewed.

### **II**

*They Call Them Camisoles* is the story of Wilma Wilson, a 29-year-old woman admitted to Camarillo State Mental Hospital in California in 1939 for treatment of alcoholism after being charged with stealing a horse during a raucous drinking escapade. Wilma Wilson suffered from what was then called dipsomania—explosive drinking bouts interspersed by periods of sobriety and apparent normalcy. Here are some of the insights that can be drawn from Wilson’s account of her treatment.

*On Stigma:* When Wilson expressed fear that her mother’s neighbors would know she was in a mental hospital, Wilson’s mother responded that it was okay—she had not told her neighbors her daughter was a drunk—only that she had “a little nervous breakdown” (P. 28).

*On Treatment of Alcoholism at Camarillo:* Wilma Wilson repeatedly lamented the lack of any understanding of alcoholism at Camarillo and the lack of any alcoholism-focused treatment methods:

“...alcoholic patients there are an insignificant minority and no special provisions have been made for them” (P. 54).

“...an alcoholic is given a dose of salts and a Wasserman [a test for syphilis]. And then the alcoholic is given a mop or a polishing block used for waxing floors. If these cure drinking, then commitments are not in vain.” (P. 70)

*On “Work Therapy”:* Alcoholic labor was prized within the institution because once detoxed the alcoholics were often less physically and cognitively impaired than patients there for mental illness. The alcoholics and the more functional mental patients performed most of the labor to sustain the institution, including the building maintenance, cooking and baking, sewing, and farming. While such labor was rationalized in terms of rehabilitation, inadequate staffing made patient labor a necessity.

*On the Social Segregation of Alcoholics and Mental Patients: They Call Them Camisoles* is filled with references to the subculture alcoholics created within the Camarillo institution:

We called ourselves, resignedly, “the drunks,” and the mental patients invariably called themselves cheerfully and openly “nits,” while our Alma Mater was known to everyone excluding the Staff as the “bughouse.” (P. 85)

*On Contempt and Maltreatment:* In her memoir, Wilson repeatedly returned to the disdain in which alcoholics were held and how that affected their treatment by the staff:

“Alcoholics in Camarillo quickly became accustomed to contempt [insolent and insulting treatment], for this sentiment seeps down from authority. One of the hospital’s chief doctors despises the alcoholics; and an admitted tenet of the institution, regardless

of what the alcoholic is promised by the committing board, is that an alcoholic is to receive no dental care, and no medical care unless it is a downright emergency.” (P. 110)

Wilson particularly objected to the fact that alcoholics were promised treatment but found no such treatment, but once committed, found it difficult to get out:

“It should be explained to alcoholics that there is no ‘cure’ given at these institutions beyond detention and labor.” (P. 240)

Wilma Wilson, as she had promised her fellow patients, completed a book a year after her release that described her experiences while at Camarillo State Mental Hospital. Camarillo, like most mental hospitals of its day, provided nothing that could have fundamentally altered the progression of Wilma Wilson’s alcoholism. Two years following her release, Wilma Wilson was found murdered in the bedroom of her home, which was strewn with empty bottles and cigarette butts. At the time of her death, her body had absorbed enough alcohol to have proved fatal. Her passing was little noted and would be unknown today but for a book she left entitled *They Call Them Camisoles*.

### III

Kirsten Anderberg has done a masterful job editing the newly released *They Call Them Camisoles – Revisited*. The background history of Camarillo State Mental Hospital and accompanying photographs and the postscript added to the book help place this story in its historical context and deepen the reader’s appreciation of this remarkable account of one woman’s struggle with alcoholism and her struggles with an institution ill-equipped to provide the treatment she needed. *They Call Them Camisoles – Revisited* will draw a wide and appreciative audience, particularly among people in recovery and among addiction professionals. And it will add new insights into those wondering the source of so much resistance within the addictions field to proposed service integration and organizational mergers with mental health institutions. The history of the relationships between addicts and psychiatric treatment is at its core too often a history of contempt.