

## 63 The State Village—Part 2

### Dr. Dan Pullen Recalls the State Village

*By David Cochran*

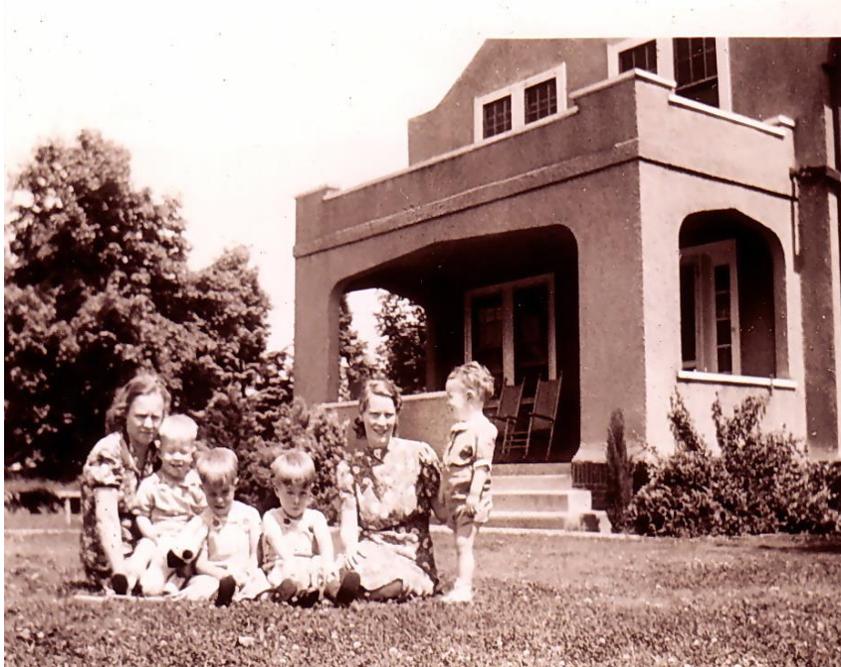
*In Part 1 of this four-blog series, we shared the story of how the State Village for Epileptics began, its transformation into other institutions, and its transition to become Skillman Park.*

*In Part 2, we learn from Dr. Dan Pullen what it was like to grow up at the State Village in the 1930s and 40s. He shared some of his memories of his early years in a recent conversation. All quotes in this blog are attributed to him.*

This story begins in Blawenburg. Dan's father, Dr. Clifford Pullen, grew up in Blawenburg on a farm on Mountain View Road and went to Blawenburg School in his early years. "He graduated from dental school in 1933 and took a job working for the State as a dentist at the New Jersey State Village for Epileptics." His father married Dorothy Calver, and Dan was born in 1936. Like most of the professional staff, Dr. Pullen was required to live on the grounds of the sprawling facility, and they lived in an apartment in the Bergen building. The professional jobs came with many amenities, so the Pullens had access to housing, food, laundry, and more.



*Young Dan with his mother and father at their Bergen building apartment*



*The Pullens moved to Elm Lodge and lived there until 1949.*

*Young Dan and his mother are on the right side of the picture.*

### **The Formal Village**

Dan remembers that the Village was very formal at the time. “There were formal dining rooms where you were waited on and a beautiful conference room where they met all the time to discuss patients. There were 1500 patients and 500 employees.”

One of the original requirements of the State Village was that it would be self-sustaining. “Self-contained grounds were mandatory, but they were maintained by the patients. Not everybody in New Jersey was allowed out in society, so they (epileptics) were confined in a place like this. The ones that had trade skills worked at their trades as shoemakers, blacksmiths, farmers, and others. They all worked with their trades.”

The original intent was to have the State Village be a farming community. “They wanted a village in a rural setting that was close to transportation, so the patients could live and function in a community.” Dan recalled that there was a large dairy farm, a piggery, and a poultry farm. “There were tremendous orchards of apples and peaches and many crops like tomatoes.”

The systems needed to house this many people were also right on the grounds. “There was a water system and wells. They had a water tower, and a water treatment plant.” In

the days before refrigeration, ice was harvested from Sylvan Lake and kept in a large ice house by the lake.



*The powerhouse, shown boarded up, before its demolition.*

Heat was also centralized in the Village. “When I was a kid, it was all run by coal. There was a railroad car that came across from the main rail line at Skillman station to the powerhouse. They would bring in coal. Everything was heated by steam with steam lines, all the buildings and the house we lived in. If you wanted heat, you went down the basement to control the steam. Everything was heated by steam.” There were other systems, too. “There was a central sewer system, water system, and telephone system. A whole functioning community.”

“There was one building called the Service Building. That was in the women’s section. It had a cannery, huge kitchen, and pharmacy. That’s where the farmers brought the produce like tomatoes and peaches.”

## **The Transition**

Dan was still at the State Village as it began its transition to become NJ Neuropsychiatric Institute. He reported that the changing attitude toward epileptics and the use of successful drugs accelerated the transition. “The treatment before the new drugs was maintenance and care of people with epilepsy, no matter what else they had. Once they didn't have to care for that group, then the patient population deteriorated from very intelligent, manageable to unmanageable. It became a psychiatric hospital.”

Because the epileptic patients were otherwise normal except for their seizures, the kids at the State Village were always interacting with them. Dan said people took their seizures in stride, and they could happen at any time. “If they had a convulsion, you just got out of the way and let it go.”

The prevailing belief at that time was that epileptics should be kept from reproducing because they thought that epilepsy could be inherited by subsequent generations. “One of the places I liked to go was the pathology lab near my father’s office. I liked to look at all the test tubes and stuff. One of the things there were all those embryos. I'm pretty sure they were from patients. They didn’t want women to reproduce because they thought they were going to produce more epilepsy. Well, they didn't know as much then as we know today.”

One of the other things that changed was the mandate that people live on the grounds. In 1949, the Pullens were allowed to move off the property. In the early 50s, Dan graduated from Franklin and Marshall and then the University of Pennsylvania Dental School. He enlisted in the Navy and served for two years in the U.S. Navy Dental Corps stationed at the Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois. In 1961, “I joined my father’s part-time private practice in Belle Mead, using his home office in the day while Dad still worked full time at the Neuropsychiatric Institute.”

“The State Village was a very interesting place to be as a child. I got exposed to a lot. I probably was in places I normally shouldn't have gone. I would wander around the buildings.” Perhaps foreshadowing his dental career to come, he said, “I never could get into the operating room, but I was in most other places. I got to watch Dr. Krish use an electroencephalogram when they were first developed. That's where they measure the electrical activity of the brain.”

“It was an acute care hospital. They took care of all the patients, but it was staffed by a lot of surgeons from the area, who would come in there as needed. When dental x-ray machines first came out in the forties, my father had a portable dental x-ray machine, and he would spend a lot of time in the operating room when they were developing techniques for doing hips. He would be the guy taking x-rays. It was quite an experimental thing. I guess the whole place was, to a degree, experimental if they were trying to improve conditions for these patients.”

Back then, they still had horses that delivered milk and other products, and they picked up the garbage within the village. “They had two or three teams of horses going all the time. They were housed in the barn which is still standing between the high school and the old Van Zandt home. I liked to go to the blacksmith's shop and watch the blacksmith. There was a telephone system in the State Village, and all the professional staff had telephones in their homes. In the treatment buildings there was one telephone. But the blacksmith shop also had a telephone. I never could understand that. And the blacksmith was always on the phone and always making notes in this book. So, I asked my father once and he said not to worry about that. I guess the blacksmith was the village bookie.”

### **A Rich Environment**

This was a rich environment for a kid to grow up in. “It was fantastic. I got to ride on balers in the field and help them out on the farm, hooking up tractors or wagons. The farmer said to me once, ‘you know, you really shouldn't be doing this.’”

“I said, ‘They haven't kicked me out yet.’”

At the time, Montgomery Township Schools were still neighborhood schools in Blawenburg, Harlingen, and Skillman. Students attended K-8 and then went to Princeton High School. The transportation to school from the Village was unique. “We went to Montgomery schools on the State Village school bus. They had one vehicle back in the forties during the war, and it was the ambulance, the paddy wagon (police van), hearse, and the school bus. It was painted black and had bars on the windows. That bus is what they used for all those things.”

The experiences that Dan Pullen had in his formative years stayed with him all these years. He obviously learned a lot about life that you learn best from real experiences. “It was like having your whole town right in your thousand acres.”

## **Hope**

Things have changed. That contained village where Dan grew up is gone, and epileptics are able to control their seizures and live much more normal lives. But those who lived at the Institute and NPDC have been decentralized. One can only hope that they are receiving treatment that they need, but when you see the actions of some obviously disturbed people on TV, you can't help but wonder if some of the most disturbed wouldn't have better lives in a more controlled environment rather than being on the street or affecting the lives of innocent people.



*Dr. Clifford Pullen in his office at the State Village*

*Dan Pullen, D.D.S, is the owner and manager of Hillsborough Dentistry.*

## **Interesting Facts**

1. Those centralized heating pipes that went to every building on the State Village campus became a big issue in cleaning up the property after Montgomery Township bought it. They were covered with the preferred insulation of the early era – asbestos!

2. When the State Village was at its peak population, it was Blawenburg's largest employer.

3. For more information on the State Village/NJNPI/NPDC view the video, *A History of the New Jersey Village for Epileptics at Skillman*. It features a walking tour of the village with the late Blawenburg historian Walter Baker.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBkL5N8pq-4>

## **Sources**

### **Information**

The information for this article came from a discussion with Dr. Dan Pullen.

### **Pictures**

All pictures, Bergen building, Elm Lodge, the Powerhouse, and the dentist office, came from a PowerPoint presentation entitled *Growing Up in Montgomery Township* by Dr. Dan Pullen.