

DeWITT ARMY HOSPITAL

The first time I saw DeWitt was in 1968. I was doing graduate work at the University of California, Davis, at the time, and was in the midst of researching dermatoglyphic patterns (fingerprints) in Down's Syndrome cases. Since DeWitt was the closest mental hospital, I had arranged to make a series of visits there to collect samples. I had never heard of DeWitt. Indeed, I had never been to Auburn before.

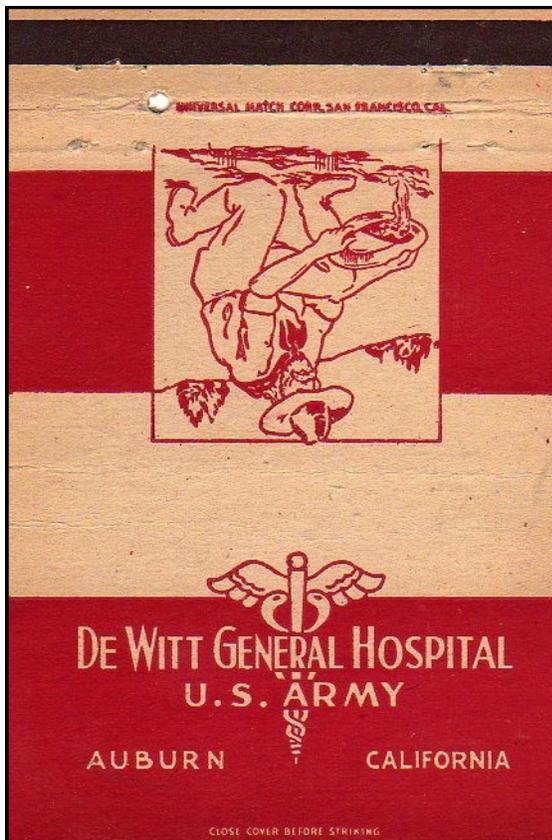
As I drove into the facility, it was obvious that this had been a military site at one time. The grounds, themselves, were huge, with buildings everywhere, mostly long, rectangular one-story structures which had once been some sort of barracks, and all with both stairs and ramps leading to the doors. The landscaping was immaculate. The scene inside the main administrative building, and later the daily living areas, was stereotypical. The floors were spotlessly polished, everything looked and smelled sterile, and orderlies escorted patients to their various destinations. It was depressing.

It wasn't until 1973, when I had settled in Auburn, that I actually learned something about the history of DeWitt. Located in Auburn, 30 miles NE of Sacramento, in the foothills of the Sierras, it was constructed in 1943 as a United States Army hospital under the command of Col. William S. Smith. The first casualties were received there on February 18, 1944.

A reflection of the spirit of the country at the time, local residents showed the DeWitt patients a generosity that was undoubtedly being reflected around the nation at similar military hospitals. They became Gray Ladies, writing countless letters, providing fresh flowers, furniture, recreation equipment and books. They hosted a variety of parties and dances for the soldiers. For Christmas, 1944, civic groups decorated 75 wards, filled 3,000 stockings, and provided a gift for each and every patient.

When a Union Pacific train derailed a few miles north of Auburn, eighteen servicemen and sixty civilians were quickly taken to DeWitt for treatment. As the DeWitt caseload grew, nearby Camp Flint was reopened as a reconditioning center, where the less seriously injured soldiers could be put back into condition for active duty. Eventually this latter facility was made into a prisoner-of-war camp in June, 1945.

A few months later, in December, 1945, DeWitt was deactivated and closed as an Army installation. The State of California then acquired DeWitt from the War Assets Administration in 1946, and at a total cost of under \$500,000 it was prepared for the



care and treatment of the mentally ill. The purpose was to reduce the overcrowding in the other state mental hospitals, whose populations were increasing in proportion to the recent great increase in the state's general population. DeWitt was activated as a California State Hospital on June 25, 1946.

Initially, 100 patients from Napa State Hospital were transferred to DeWitt, and, during its first years, patients were received only as transfers from other state institutions. After July, 1950, however, patients were committed directly from the various surrounding counties, at a rate of 200 a year. DeWitt continued as a State Hospital until 1971, a victim of then Governor Ronald Reagan's policy of "returning the mentally ill to the community."

With the closure of DeWitt as a state property, Placer county then appropriated the land for county offices, and today it houses, in the same buildings, the county's various courts, sheriff's headquarters, dog pound, administrative offices, etc. But, a wide variety of private businesses have also moved into the facilities, as well.

As we now move into 1997, the DeWitt complex enters its 54th year. As the years go by, and the local population continues to turn over, fewer and fewer remember the long career of service that DeWitt can boast of. With matchcovers, however, the clock is turned back, and DeWitt is once more...and forever...DeWitt General Hospital, U. S. Army.