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# *'My life is not quite useless'*

## The 1866 Diary of an Asylum Bookkeeper

by Sharon E. Wood

**O**NE MONDAY, in the summer of 1866, Rhoda Amanda Shelton reported for work in her new job as a bookkeeper. She busied herself immediately with the tasks at hand — preparing bills, making out a report for the auditor. But now and then, a surge of loneliness swept over her. At the end of that first long week, she confided her thoughts to a companion, one to which she had often turned in far more troubling times. Taking up the same diary she had used during her months as a Civil War nurse, she opened it to a section of blank pages near the back and began to write: “The shiftings of my varied life have brought me at last to be

bookkeeper in a Hospital for the Insane.”

For the next two months, from July 2 through September 11, twenty-three-year-old Amanda Shelton lived and worked at the Iowa Hospital for the Insane just outside Mount Pleasant. Though her position was officially that of bookkeeper, she spent much of her time in the wards with the patients, reading, talking, hearing their stories. By mid-August she was given her own set of keys to the women's wards. She recorded her observations in a diary now held by the Special Collections department of the University of Iowa Libraries.

Shelton's diary is remarkable. It preserves a



Left: Iowa Hospital for the Insane (Mt. Pleasant), c. 1865

rare glimpse of daily life inside a mid-nineteenth-century hospital for the insane in prose which is lucid and reflective. It also offers a portrait of Shelton herself: wryly humorous, perhaps a bit moody, but full of warmth and utterly unflappable.

Amanda Shelton was not typical of the generation of women who came of age during the Civil War. She was instead part of a vanguard. A college-educated woman, she was one of the first dietary nurses recruited by Annie Wittenmyer for Civil War service. Later she worked as a teacher and school administrator, and she may have written articles for magazines as well. Her employment did not end with her marriage to Samuel F. Stewart in December 1870. Eight years later, with two daughters under five, she was operating a private school for sixty students in Chariton.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, thousands of young middle-class women followed Shelton's path into paid employment. They created new professions like nursing and social work, and altered forever existing jobs like clerical work and teaching. The entry of women changed America's workforce; but as Shelton's diary reveals, employment changed women as well. For working-class women like seamstresses, shoebinders, and cigarmakers, employment was drudgery. But for women in jobs such as Shelton's, work offered psychological rewards, answering a powerful need to feel useful and important.

As the daughter of a Methodist minister, Shelton was brought up in a household that valued both education and service. She was born in 1843 in Coolville, Ohio, just a few miles from where the Ohio River flows past Parkersburg, West Virginia. Her parents, Lucy and O. C. Shelton, spent the early years of their marriage in that region before moving with their four oldest children to Mount Pleasant, Iowa, sometime between 1846 and 1856.

O. C. Shelton did not serve as pastor of the Methodist church in Mount Pleasant. Amanda's diary refers to his work on the "Birmingham circuit" — perhaps indicating that he was a circuit-rider, a preacher assigned to churches in several different communities who traveled a "circuit" between them. If so, he

may have chosen to establish a permanent home in Mount Pleasant because of the educational opportunities it afforded his children. Four of the five Shelton children, including Amanda, attended Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant.

Amanda Shelton and her older sister, Mary, were recent college graduates in 1864 when Annie Wittenmyer recruited them to be among the first dietary nurses of the Civil War. Before Wittenmyer began running her "light-diet kitchens," hospitalized soldiers received the same rations as those in the field. Wittenmyer solicited donations and volunteers to provide appropriate food for soldiers suffering from dysentery, smallpox, or battlefield injuries. While Mary Shelton worked as Wittenmyer's personal assistant, Amanda helped organize diet kitchens at Nashville and other army hospitals.

War service changed Amanda Shelton forever. She sometimes worked near the battlefield or arrived shortly after the fighting had ended, witnessing destruction and pain beyond imagination. Long days in the hospital made death commonplace, but the loss of her own brother in October 1864 brought grief she never forgot. Hostile and uncooperative army officers tested her patience and organizational abilities; filth, disease, and loathsome injuries tested her compassion. If she had ever been timid or squeamish, her months of war service purged these from her. She discovered the exhilaration of useful and demanding work.

Shelton's tenure at the Iowa Hospital for the Insane began a little more than a year after her war service ended. How she spent the intervening time remains unrecorded, but the young woman who took up her diary again in the hot summer days of 1866 was "heart-sick" and lonely. "There is so much of sorrow and disappointment that I dare not dwell upon the past," she wrote. Two weeks later, sitting on the portico of her family home in Mount Pleasant, she recalled past evenings when she had thought "rapturously of the *future*." Now "waves of the present seemed to surge over" her.

Shelton's melancholy may have stemmed from continuing sorrow over the loss of her brother and many close friends in war. It may



have been complicated by other troubles to which she vaguely alluded in a bitter reference to those "unworthy of the name 'friend.'" The diary provides only the slightest clues on these matters. What it does reveal is how the opportunity to devote herself to useful work effected a remarkable change on Shelton's state of mind.

From her very first days at the hospital, Shelton began visiting the wards, spending time with patients and assisting the matron (Martha Ranney, wife of medical superintendent Mark Ranney) with sewing classes and other activities. Some young women might have found the company of insane residents frightening or distasteful, but the tact and composure Shelton had developed in army life served her well in this new circumstance.

Indeed, Shelton's attitude toward the patients is notable for its empathy. To her, they were not mere medical cases, nor pathetic objects of charity. As often as not, they were just interesting people — the attractive young man whose singing she found "truly charming," the poetess who was "quite a genius," and more than one old acquaintance who just happened to have gone insane. One patient even became a regular dining companion and a partner for games of croquet: Isaac Allen of Tama County, who had been elected attorney general of Iowa in 1864, then resigned his office in January 1866, "a case of mental overwork and neglect of physical health," according to Shelton. In Shelton's observation, the distance between the sane and the insane was not great at all, leading her to muse of her own condition, "What more sanity is in store for me?"

Shelton took on the duties of teacher, companion, and advocate of the patients, creating a role for herself far beyond that of bookkeeper. As her term of service drew near its close, her journal entries came to reflect an outlook quite different from that which had marked her first days. Her life no longer seemed empty; she did not spend time dwelling on the "sorrow and disappointment" of the past. Instead her entries reveal a new-found zest for her work, a feeling of belonging, and an eye toward the future. Shelton even began to note which patients might make good characters in stories she thought she might write, jotting down plot

ideas on blank pages in her diary.

The psychological rewards Amanda Shelton found in her work are reflected most clearly in one of the final entries she made in her diary, dated September 9: "When I come to write so many thoughts and incidents come crowding upon me that it is hard to choose those which may be of interest & use in the future. My visits to the wards are always a source of great pleasure to me. The patients and attendants all seem glad to see me — and the former often tell me how much they love me. This is gratifying for I feel that my life is not quite useless."

Shelton's diary ends abruptly with the September 11 entry. Having prepared the hospital's financial statements and presented her books to the visiting trustees, she may have felt that the time was right to leave. Just as with her



COURTESY MENTAL HEALTH INSTITUTE, MT. PLEASANT

Women like Amanda Shelton and this unidentified secretary at the Mt. Pleasant asylum sought satisfaction and gainful employment in the labor force. No photograph of Shelton has been uncovered.

Civil War diary, her asylum diary gives no clues about where she went next nor how she was employed. Sometime in the next few years, she worked as a teacher and school administrator. She may have been superintendent of schools in Eddyville; she certainly taught at a normal school and ran her private school in Chariton. For a while, she lived with



her husband and daughters in Des Moines.

In 1889, Amanda Shelton Stewart moved with her family to Evanston, Illinois, where her daughter Lucy attended Northwestern University. Her husband, Samuel F. Stewart, was part-owner of the *Iowa Homestead* as well as other publications; and he served as Chicago agent for the *Homestead* for many years. After the Spanish-American War, Stewart was appointed to the Spanish Treaty Claims Commission as a special examiner. This work took him to New York for a number of years, and Amanda probably accompanied him. She died in Evanston in 1914.

Amanda Shelton's diary is remarkable not only for its portrait of Shelton herself, but also for the view it gives of the day-to-day life of the Iowa Hospital for the Insane. The mid-nineteenth century was a period of transition in the diagnosis and treatment of insanity, and the activities Shelton records in her diary hint at the way Dr. Mark Ranney, the asylum superintendent, carried out the current theories.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, alienists (physicians who specialized in treatment of the insane) emphasized what they called the "moral" causes of insanity. Moral causes were emotional disruptions, like failure in business, excessive religiosity, or "war excitement." Treatment centered on providing patients with an orderly existence, free of disturbances, and on keeping them occupied with healthful activities. As medicine and medical education became more professionalized, alienists began to look for physical causes, believing that insanity was a disease which could be treated with drugs or surgery.

In 1866 (the year Shelton worked at the asylum), diagnosis and treatment of insanity was poised between these two theories. Some of the patients hospitalized at Mount Pleasant were diagnosed as having lost their sanity to physical causes like injuries of the head, masturbation, disordered menstruation, or "general ill health." Others were allegedly driven mad by excessive study, fright, or spiritualism. Over the next few years, the proportion of cases attributed to physical causes rose gradually, then dramatically. But during Amanda Shelton's stay at the hospital, both theories of insanity were used by the staff physicians and

Right: Mark Ranney, medical superintendent at the Iowa Hospital for the Insane. Below: From the hospital's 1866/67 report.



#### ALLEGED CAUSES OF INSANITY.

Connected with general ill health.....	109
Pueperal condition.....	42
Disappointments.....	21
Sun-stroke.....	4
Epilepsy.....	99
Injuries of the head.....	15
Excessive study.....	8
Hereditary.....	32
Vaccination.....	1
Concussion.....	1
Spiritualism.....	8
Bodily injuries.....	6
Business anxieties.....	27
Jealousy.....	4
Exposure to cold.....	6
Fright.....	5
Masturbation.....	35
Political excitement.....	1
Meningeal inflammation.....	2
Domestic troubles.....	58
Religious excitement.....	45
Ill treatment.....	9
Blindness.....	1
Use of tobacco.....	5
Uterine disease.....	3
Novel-reading.....	1
War excitement.....	8
Over-exertion.....	21
Spermatorrhœa.....	1
Scarlet fever.....	2
Typhoid fever.....	7
Disordered menstruation.....	13
Change of life.....	6
Pecuniary anxieties.....	7
Intemperance.....	24
Disease of the brain.....	2
Paralysis.....	2
Hemiplegia.....	5
Apoplexy.....	2
Hysteria.....	3
Measles.....	4
Senile dementia.....	4
Original defect.....	6
Disappointment in love.....	5
Loss of health in military service.....	13
No satisfactory cause assigned.....	345

1025



by physicians who referred patients to the state hospital.

Shelton's diary is most revealing of the "moral" treatment practiced at the asylum. Bells rang to call residents to the assigned activity of the hour. Every Wednesday evening, patients, attendants, and guests from town mingled at the hospital dance. The practice of holding dances was common at most "modern" asylums. Dancing was considered good exercise and a healthful way of working off nervous energy, but as Shelton's diary reveals, not all patients were permitted to participate. Asylum directors were cautious about activities which might tend to excite rather than calm the patients. Shelton was therefore cautious when conversing with patients, sometimes changing the subject abruptly when she feared the topic might become distressing.

Farm and garden work occupied the days of many of the male patients. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of the men had been farmers before being sent to the hospital. Their work not only produced food for the asylum, it functioned as therapy, providing regular, familiar activity. The flowers Shelton gathered so often, and the blackberries Mr. Clark brought her, probably came from gardens cultivated by the patients.

Women, in turn, spent time sewing, weaving mats, and performing other kinds of domestic work considered appropriate to their sex. Biennial reports from later periods list the hundreds of articles produced each year by the patients and hired seamstresses: shirts, aprons, bed linens, even straitjackets — though in theory a well-run asylum would resort to such restraints only rarely. For exercise, women patients strolled the asylum grounds.

The role Amanda Shelton created for herself at the hospital was anomalous. The asylum employed many women, but none had duties like those Shelton assumed. The medical staff consisted of Dr. Mark Ranney, the superintendent, and two assistant physicians, Dr. H. M. Bassett and Dr. George W. Dudley. In addition to patient care, Ranney had charge of the hospital's physical plant. His wife, Martha Ranney, who was employed as matron, oversaw the "domestic" side of running the hospital. She directed the staff of laundresses, kitchen



Dining Room, Ward No. 2 West (at Mt. Pleasant)

workers, and maids, as well as keeping track of foodstuffs and household supplies. The two supervisors, L. E. Schofield and Mary Barney, were in charge of the attendants, men and women who had direct physical supervision and care of the patients.

No one among this large staff had duties which included the kind of "social work" Shelton performed. The matron was supposed to give special attention to the needs of female patients, but the enormous work of managing the extensive household staff probably precluded much effort in that direction. When Mark Ranney decided to give Amanda Shelton her own set of keys to the women's wards, he was acknowledging the usefulness of her work. And it may have set him thinking about ways to provide better care for female patients. A little more than five years later, Ranney became only the second asylum superintendent in the country to add a woman physician to his professional staff.

[Note: In the following transcription of the complete diary, punctuation has been changed only when needed



for clarification. Datelines have been set in italics.

Two views of asylums: Engravings are from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, "Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum" (February 1866). Interior photos, of the Iowa Hospital for the Insane (Mt. Pleasant), probably date to the 1880s, the decade during which the facility expanded.]

*Insane Hospital  
Mt. Pleasant  
July 8th*

The shiftings of my varied life have brought me at last to be bookkeeper in a Hospital for the Insane. I came here last Monday — and although I have worked hard making a report for the Auditor of State and preparing the bills for private patients and those from other states — I have been a little lonely. This is a lovely Sabbath morning. Miss Bell (who is visiting the wife of the Superintendent) and I went into the garden and gathered flowers for bouquets for the wards and our private rooms.

A *very* sweet one adorns my mantle shelf. The patients seem to realize that it is the "Lords" day. A wonderful calm pervades the whole house. My table is placed near the window which overlooks Mt. P. and as I sit here with the sound of the old college bell in my ears, memories of past years float through my mind. But there is so much of sorrow and disappointment that I dare not dwell on the past. So many of my old friends are with the dead — and so many of the living have proven unworthy of the name "friend" that I feel heart-sick to think of it.

*Afternoon*

I quit writing this morning to go to the cupola with Miss Bell and Miss Wheeler. As the day is not sunny we did not find it unpleasantly warm and the air was delightful. We looked over the vast expanse of prairie dotted with groves, villages and farmhouses — but all was hushed — save the songs of birds and the ringing of the worship commanding bells.

When we came down again Miss Bell came to my room and talked until dinner.

Just after I was seated in chapel I saw Mary, Jennie and Mary Allen at the door. I invited them in and they remained through the service. When I looked over this body of afflicted

ones I felt that I had great cause to render thanks unto our Divine Father for his loving kindness to me — and with the thought came the sweet peace which faith always brings with it. At the close of service an epileptic patient had a severe fit.

I do not intend to stay here long. But think a few months experience will do me good.

*Friday July 13th  
1866*

It is too warm to think and *vastly* too warm to write — but I must "make a few entries." The patients have been dreadfully restless all day. A Mr. Green in one of the "strong cells" has made noise enough himself to excite the whole establishment — but this evening he informed us he would like to have his ears insured as he *never* heard so much noise in his life. He stands at his window and calls out to everyone he sees.

Tonight as he stood in the door he advised Miss Bell not to wear her dresses so long as it was "wicked sinful, wasteful, nasty etc." He



also wished us to bring him a Methodist Hymn Book — promising to sing all evening for us if we would.

He has one tune for all words and sings in a yell — and we declined the entertainment he offered. One man sits at our table. His name is Allen. They inform me that he has been Attorney General of Iowa.

A case of mental overwork and neglect of physical health.

Miss Bell and I go into the wards & converse



with the patients every evening. They are always glad to see us.

*Iowa Hospital  
For the Insane  
July 22d 1866*

This is the second Sabbath I have spent at home. I walked in last evening expecting to see Mrs. Porter who was visiting Mary but they had gone to Burlington.

Jennie, Ma, Charlie were there. I enjoyed the moonlight as I sat on the old portico on which I used to sit and think rapturously of the *future* when the waves of the present seemed to surge over me. And the shade of the trees which Pa had planted when I was a school girl was inviting & I gave myself up to its enjoyment. Dr. Ranney called round for me just in time to get here to tea. I read to Miss Bell for an hour or so and then we took a long walk in the mingled moonlight & twilight.

When we finally came to our accustomed seat on the back door step we found the two Supervisors — Miss Barney and Mr. Schofield listening to a patient in a near ward singing. We also sat & listened. It was truly charming. His voice is rich and he applies it readily to the comic or sad. Whatever he sings his voice seems made for that one piece. His cousin is in the same ward. Their name is Noland. The mother of Daniel (not the singer) dined with us

one day. Poor woman she seemed inclined to moralize saying repeatedly we did not know what we would come to before we died. She had in her youth laughed at silly & insane people — little dreaming that she would ever have a crazy son.

The one who sang was a "fast" young man & intemperance brought him here. They are both recovering. In a book which Jennie gave me to read I find that Mrs. Francis



S. Lache [?] of Ind who is a patient here is mentioned as a poetess, & friend of the authoress. I heard her singing the other morning. She made part of the words herself as she sang. I believe she is quite a genius.

*Wednesday  
July 25*

I have just come up from the dance. It was so funny to see the way in which some of the patients hopped about. The female attendants are mostly very pretty girls and dance gracefully.

Many of the patients who are not allowed to dance are permitted to look on. The man who sang so sweetly the other night was there — but did not dance. His face tells a sad history of dissipation & sin. Last night I walked home. Mary had been to B. with Mrs. Porter — had enjoyed her visit with Mrs. D. and Ella very much. Pa was at home and brought me out this A.M.

Miss Bell & I went this afternoon into the wards where the excitable patients are kept. They came round us chattering and grinning in a delighted manner. One who sometimes crows and often swears & raves politely informed us that we were nice girls and she intended to have us murdered. "Deed I do girls!" She exclaimed. I changed the subject by asking her if she would not like some red rags to put in the mat she was making.

Oh yes! she exclaimed and reached her bony hand to shake hands over it & informed me that Andy Johnson was her stepson and she would have him give us each a farm.

She invited us to come again saying she liked us very much.

*Insane Hospital  
July 31 1866*

Last Saturday I went home expecting to find my *very* dear friend Ella there. But to my disappointment she did not come. I remained until Sabbath afternoon and then came by way of Mr. Corkhills & Carrie came with me as far as the gate. Ma and Charlie have gone with Pa and we had a good quiet time at home. This P.M. Miss Bell and I went through the wards again. An old woman by the name of Margaret Shaler proposed to tell our fortunes by our



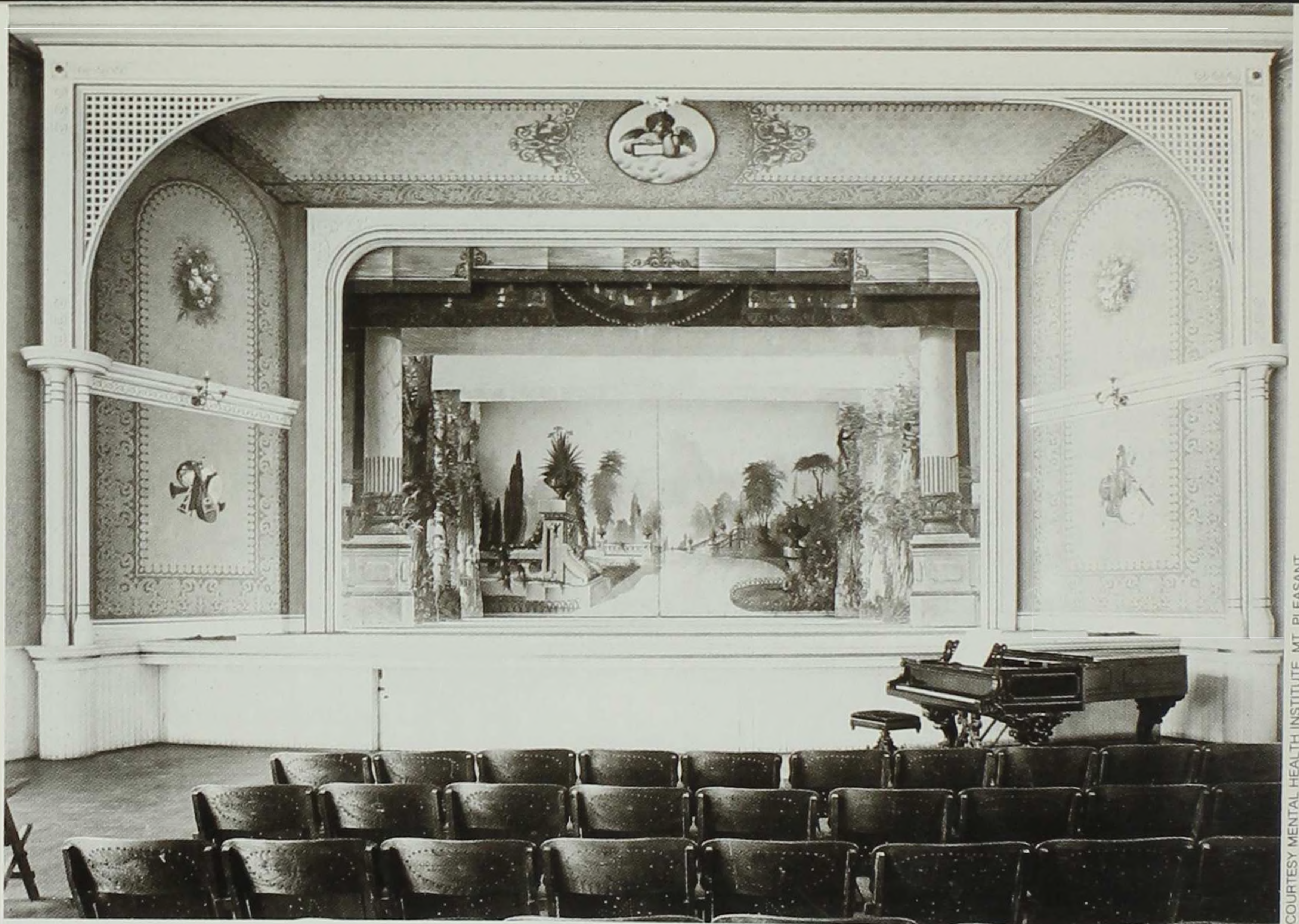


hands. It was very funny. Her history is strange — she has never been married but has had two children. She says she thinks God will forgive her as she was never more than half witted. One by the name of “Joe” who thinks herself a man amused us exceedingly. Poor creature she is scrofulous and a bone an inch long is sticking out of her cheek. However she does not seem to feel pain but runs after and teases a cross woman who amuses herself by swearing, and trying to open the doors and when she fails kicking them until her feet are bruised & bleeding. There is one horrible creature in one of the strong cells. The Attendant opened the door to let us take a peep at her. She was perfectly naked and had wallowed in her own

**Ward No. 1 West (at Mt. Pleasant)**

filth until she was horrible to behold. When the door was closed she beat the floor with her limbs and roared like an enraged animal. I asked if they allowed her to have sticks — not thinking it possible for a human being to use flesh & bone in such a way. But they say she has worn the skin off her joints. Oh! it is dreadful. One woman wants us to stop and hear her tell the truth. When I have time I propose to do it. Miss Bell just came in & asked me to read a little from my journal. I did so and then went to the window and looked up into the “starry deep” and thought of the concentrated agony in this house. Amid what strange scenes have I stopped and looked into the dark sky thickly





COURTESY MENTAL HEALTH INSTITUTE, MT. PLEASANT

studded with stars! What more sanity is in store for me?

I am learning to play croquet — play chess with Miss Bell quite frequently.

*Wednesday Aug. 1*

At last the hot days and nights have been succeeded by moderately cool weather. The patients are more quiet and cheerful and the languor which we all felt has given place to a lively interest in life and its duties. This morning as I sat in my Office writing Mr. Clark — the patient who brings me flowers so often — came in with a bouquet and a paper basket that would hold a quart, full of blackberries.

“Will you accept some fruit and flowers?” he asked as he laid them on the table. I am very grateful to him and wish for some way of showing it, beside the simple “thank you.”

Mr. Pratt came out after tea and we played “croquet” until called in to the dance. A pretty little girl that I have often noticed as I passed through the wards came & sat down by me and entered into conversation by saying simply “I think you are *very* pretty.” I was amused by the child’s idea of that which is pretty — but thanked her and let her talk. She went on to say

**Amusement hall, Iowa Hospital for the Insane**

she had often noticed me and thought I looked so kind — she would like to live with me when she got over the fits for which she was being treated. Her Mother is poor and cannot support her. Our “tete a tete” was interrupted by a patient asking me to join him in the march with which they close the dance. I accepted and he asked me if my name was Shelton. He said he used to know Pa when he preached on Birmingham circuit and he recognized me from my resemblance to Pa. His name is Wm. Smith. He said with tears in his eyes that trouble brought him here and that he was nearly well now. I changed the subject lest it might do him harm — but shall learn his history as far as I can.

*Hospital Aug 3/66*

I find my life here almost as full of incidents as army life. I walked home last night and found Mary & Jennie alone. Came out here before breakfast this A.M. Did nothing this fore noon but read in “Bleak house” and gather a basket of flowers.

After dinner Miss Bell and Dr. Bassett sat in my office for an hour chatting — Just as



Dr. Dudley did after breakfast — and then Miss B & I went into the wards. The first person we visited was a Mrs. Hilton. I found that she was as I had expected an old acquaintance of mine. The history of my meeting her would fill the rest of the book and I must deny myself the pleasure of writing it. Although it has been nearly eight years since I have seen her — as soon as I said “my name is Shelton” She replied “Miss Amanda Shelton. I remember you — you taught my Anna to be kind to me.” I talked with her a long time and she seemed sane except when she spoke of her children. She thinks they are in the building and badly treated. I assured her they were not here — and she said she would believe anything I told her as she knew I would not tell her a falsehood. I do not know that there is hope of her recovery — but will do all I can for her. I have told her history and all seem to take an interest in her. Yesterday while the patients (female) were sitting under a tree in the back yard one — a Miss Regna — ran round the corner of the house and was not missed until she had secreted herself in the grove. They searched for her until late at night and left a description of her at the depot. She wandered about all night and found the depot this morning. They told her the train did not leave until two o'clock on which she wanted to go — and sent word here that she was there. I saw her when she was brought in, and again on our tour through the wards. She was excited. She fears her children are starving. Her home was burnt

down & all she had with it which caused her insanity. She said to us “I am a feeble woman but I must work for my children.”

She has one of the saddest faces I ever saw. She has tried to kill herself by cutting at the *back* of her neck with a *case* knife.

Played croquet after tea with Mr. Allen & the rest of our table full.



#### Aug. 4th

Did not wake this morning until the second bell rang. Spent the morning reading until eleven — then went to Mrs. Ranneys room and helped prepare sewing for “the class” until the dinner bell rang. As I went down stairs I heard a strange noise in the hall and saw a young man in a terrible fit. His mother — a widow — and he her only son — had brought him to consult with the Dr. As are all epileptics — his case is hopeless. After dinner Miss Bell & I went to see Mrs. Hilton again and found her a little better than yesterday. Miss Session [?] tells me that her husband married again and he and Mrs. H. No. 2 have parted. The family are in Agency. I had not been long in my office after my return from the wards when Miss Hardenbrook came. I went over the building with her. After tea I was anxious to go home but was disappointed — we (Dr. R & I) had business to attend to which kept us until nearly ten (it is now *after* 10). While Mrs. R and I were gathering flowers the Moulsons came out. I did not see them — or rather anyone but Mrs. McFarland. Gathered flowers instead of croquet.

#### Saturday Aug 11

I have not written for a week because my time has been mostly occupied. Last Sabbath morning I went home and found Ella there. I returned to the Hospital in the evening & then went home again on Monday night. Jennie & Ella walked out in the afternoon — so I had





company. Miss Hardenbrook was with Mary. It rained on Tuesday so that I could not come out until after dinner. Ella came with me and remained until Thursday.

She seemed to enjoy the visit very much. On Wednesday night Mrs. Pratt came out to the dance.

Ella loves dancing as well as I & we enjoyed the evening very much. Thursday P.M. Jennie sent Frank Gibson out for Miss Bell & me to go in & spend the afternoon & evening. Of course we went. Our melodeon had come and we had plenty of music & a nice time generally.

In the evening Mr. Maxfield, the McDonell girls & Miss Billings called and remained until after we left. I was to have gone home tonight but there was such a promise of rain and we played "croquet" so long that I deemed it best to wait until tomorrow. I am glad it happened so — as I thus witnessed something new and



strange to me. A woman was brought here on Wednesday and died Thursday night. It is necessary to bury those who die, after night, as it excites most of the patients to see signs of a burial. Just after dark I was sitting on the portico watching the storm which has just now burst upon us coming up, when I saw a coffin carried into the office. Dr. Dudley asked me to go in. I did so and found that the coffin had been placed upon the centre table & three or four of the attendants from each side of the house, the surgeons and Supervisors were standing solemnly & respectfully about the room. Dr. Ranney read the Funeral service of the Episcopal Church — repeated the Lords prayer and all that is left on earth of Mrs. Hulley was carried to the cemetery. The turf is hardly placed over her yet — but from

the darkened heavens comes upon her last resting place a heavy shower. I am reminded of a verse Lou Johnson repeated as she looked out upon the rain which was falling on the newly made grave of her mother.

"Happy is the bride the sun shines on,  
Happy the corpse the rain falls on."

God grant that in the other world to which Mrs. Hulley has gone, she may enjoy the fulness of a Saviours love.

Aug. 23 1866

Two deaths today. One old lady who has been insane 20 years & a middle aged woman who has only been deranged a few months. Mrs. Mickerson the old lady was laid out in Miss Barneys parlor — the other woman in her room — on the floor. I am becoming acquainted with the patients & attendants of the "west-wing." Spent the evening in No. 5 reading aloud to the ladies. They thanked me & asked me to come again. Have had some confidential chats with Dr. Dudley — also Miss Barney. I have keys to the Ladies side of the house. Dance did not come off tonight because the musicians did not come.

Iowa Hospital  
Sept 9 1866

No day *could* be more appropriate for writing in my journal than a rainy Sabbath. But when I come to write so many thoughts & incidents come crowding upon me that it is hard to choose those which may be of interest & use in the future. My visits to the wards are always a source of great pleasure to me. The patients and attendants all seem glad to see me — and the former often tell me how much they love me. This is gratifying for I feel that my life is not quite useless. This week the Trustees were here and I was kept very busy making out the statement of the financial standing of the Institution.

No fault was found with my books — though I myself know them to be very far below my standard. One of the patients by the name of Knowland escaped the night before last. He was nearly well.

He was a "fast" man & his insanity was temporary — resulting from drinking to excess. He





danced beautifully. While dancing the “Spanish dance” he proposed to Mrs. Ream to run away with him. He said he would make keys out of tin. *He* got away but she did not. Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Pratt called to see me on Friday & remained over night with us. The lady Supervisor is to be married soon. Her history is a strange one and will make a good story. Her husbands *first* wife is a patient here.

Jennie is not attending school now but is preparing for a teacher of music & painting.

Sept. 11th 1866

This gloomy weather unfits me for *everything*. I cannot write or read to my own satisfaction.

Last evening I went into No. 5 and gave Melissa a lesson in chess. She in return tried to teach me to waltz. While we were trying one of the patients, a Miss Newberry, came out in her chemise and sailed gracefully (?) up and down the long hall. Finally she caught me and tried to whirl me in the “dizzy mazes” but there was too much of the corporeal — then too my skirts hampered me while her *one* garment left her

limbs free. When I went in I found Miss Lache sitting in the lounge in the recess looking out while she sang sweet old fashioned airs playing an imaginary accompaniment on the window. I remarked that her piano was rather low toned — that I could not hear it. Yes she replied and I do not understand tuning it. At the sewing class in the afternoon she insisted that she was the mother of 14 children. Oh! How it storms! □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The primary source for this article was the diary of Rhoda Amanda Shelton, Shelton Family Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries. Additional sources include the *Iowa Wesleyan University History and Alumni Record* for 1905 and 1942; *Iowa School Report, 1878-79*; the 1860 manuscript census for Henry Co., Iowa; Obituary for Samuel F. Stewart, *Evanston Review*, 22 Jan. 1931; Obituary for Lucy Shelton Stewart, undated, Evanston (Ill.) Historical Society; and the *Fourth Biennial Report, Iowa Hospital for the Insane, Mount Pleasant*. Useful secondary sources on the care of the insane in the nineteenth century are Gerald N. Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971). The author wishes to thank Terry Ofner, State Historical Society of Iowa, and Patricia Kelly, Evanston Historical Society, for their assistance in researching this article.