We still lock up children

Every training school in Ontario has a room that's used (to strip the matter of euphemism) for the solitary confinement of children. Is this trap necessary?

By Don Weitz

My cell is my naked self.

I am immune

From the mirrored vacuum

of human betrayal

and in my presence

everything is the centre

of everything else.

My navel is the universe.

I do not serve time,

time serves me.

The turnkey cannot enter

my kingdom

Len Gasparini Solitary Confinement

Locking kids up in solitary confinement? In Ontario? In 1976? Yes, this is what has happened and is still happening to hundreds of "delinquent" young people in Ontario's training schools.

In every one of Ontario's 10 government training schools, in addition to the Regional Diagnostic and Assessment Centre in Oakville and one private training school, there is a special space in some house or building where children are locked up alone in extremely small rooms or prison-like cells for being especially "bad," "disobedient" or "unmanageable."

Training school staffers call such places "segregation," "detention" or "dissociation"; Juvenile Division officials in the Ministry of Correctional Services call them "quiet rooms" or, in one school, "the Reception Centre." So much for euphemisms. The victims, the young wards themselves, have a much simpler and earthier expression for solitary: the digger. As a young ward told me a few years ago: "You gotta dig to get out of it." Few, if any, kids have escaped from the digger.

What does the digger look like? Despite minor differences from school to school, the digger is basically a small room, a jail-like cell or bank of cells. Each is spartan in its simplicity and severity—one hard bed, a mattress (which is sometimes taken away), per-

haps a sheet and/or a blanket, a toilet, a washbasin, one very small window with or without bars and a thick door, sometimes of steel, which is kept locked day and night. Reading and writing materials, games and activities and personal possessions are usually forbidden in the digger. With the exception of those bringing in meals and administrative staffers who make frequent visits, no one is allowed to visit or talk with kids in the digger. They're alone.

What is it like? Listen to what some former inmates—the real experts—have to say about it:

Chris, who is 19, spent a total of four years in Hagersville and Bowmanville between 1970 and 1974: "In Hagersville ... there were eight cells; they were about eight feet long and six feet wide and they had a window at the end which you couldn't see out of, 'cause it was a funny glass . . . with mesh in it and it's crystallized. The window's open this much (he gestures one inch)-not enough for any air really. And on the outside, metal mesh over the window, so there's no way of getting out. And then you've got a heavy wood door with a steel plate over the lock which runs over to the wall, over the lock mechanism... There's a little, square plateglass window, about 12' x 12', with a little steel fence on one side, nothing on the other. The staff leave the light on till 11 or 12-sometimes they'd leave it on all night, really shining bright. If you don't cause no trouble, they'll turn it off. They come and look in on you once in a while . . ."

Susan (19, in Galt, 1970-73): "In detention there was one bed coming out from the wall, like in the old-time jails, and two big, steel doors, one on the inside and one on the outside. The keys were about this big (she indicates about eight inches)."

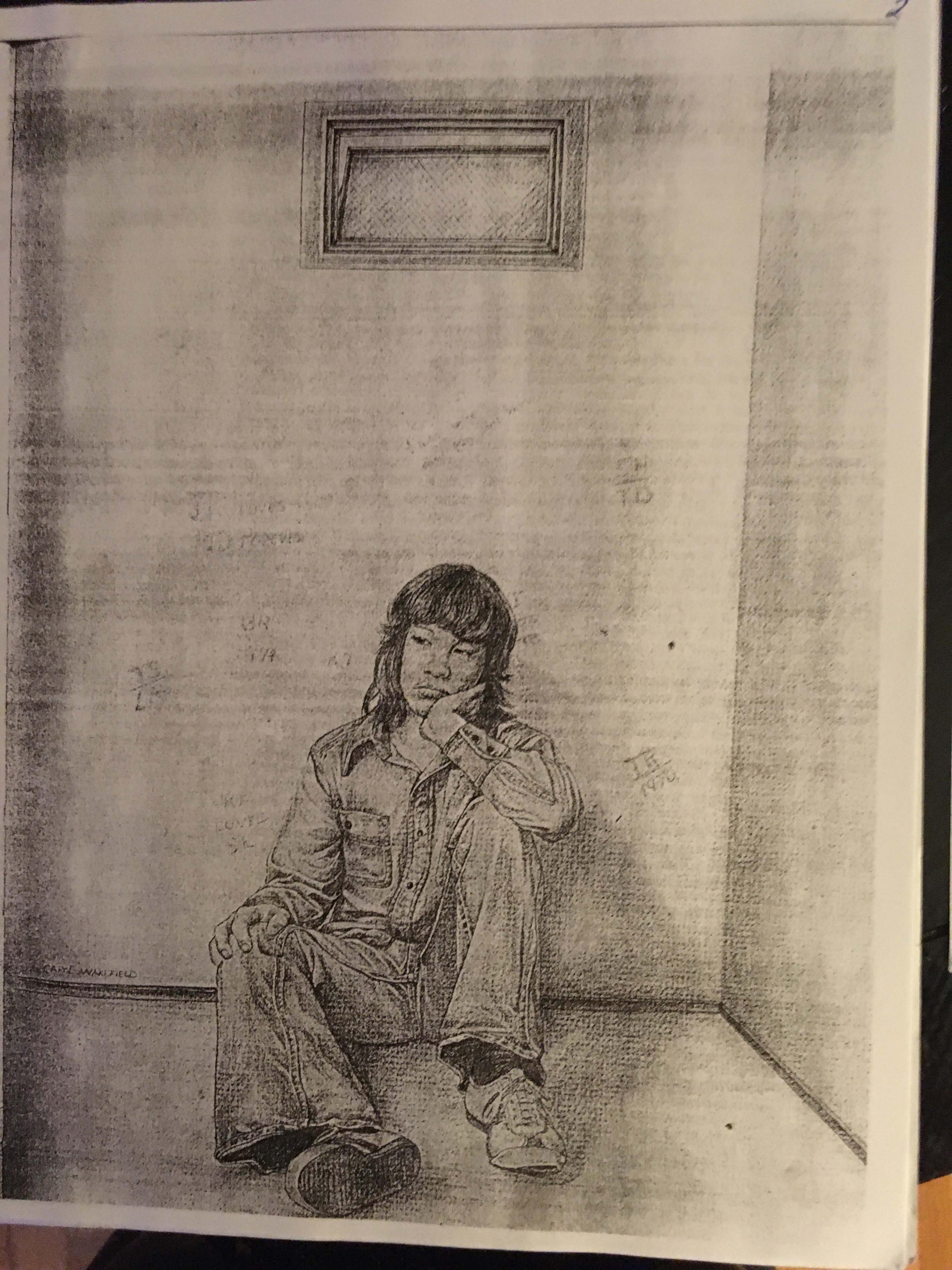
Frank (19, in Bowmanville, 1971-73): "They take your mattress away from you. You get cold food all the time. You only get one spoon and you

carve your initials on the wall. They have bars on the screen, on the windows. You're in a hole. What can you say? What d'ya got? You got nothin'..."

Ed (19, six years in Cobourg and Bowmanville, 1969-75): [In Cobourg] "... it's just a room-it has a door and a big screen on it and glass . . . it's just a 6' x 6' cell. You just sit in there by yourself. In Bowmanville, I was in that digger more than 60 times. There's four cells in Bowmanville. I was always put in Number Four, the one farthest away from the staff office. When I first went in during the day, you didn't have no mattress, just a steel bed, and there's no windows you can look out of. It's about that size (indicates one to two square feet), and if anybody's caught talkin' to you through the digger window, they're in trouble."

Diane (16, about one year in Lindsay and Galt, 1974-75): "In detention, the window's caged-like, it's the kind of window you can't see through. They have a little mattress but if you're 'bad,' they take it away from you. In Lindsay, the detention cells are a lot better than in Galt. Lindsay at least is painted—a real sick green-it's got them funny polka-dotted floors and it's got a fairsize window. But in Galt, like Churchill House, the whole place is all grey brick with big iron doors and big brass keys. They lock you in your room every night and your room's about 8' x 8', if that. It's got a sink and a toilet and a little, skinny bed. No one goes in your room but there's a window on your door. It's got a sort of a cage on it. Like, I mean, if they locked you in one of those rooms, there's no way you'd ever get out of there. That's got to be the sickest place on earth."

Perhaps once or twice while the young prisoners are in the digger, the training school superintendent or his assistant, or the school padre, would visit the kids. But according to former digger inmates, such administrative visits are



Says a former inmate of the digger: "You get so lonely in there you start counting the holes in the screen. You get so lonely you pretty near go nuts."

carried out chiefly to find out if the kids have finally become remorseful or repentant. mended their ways or are freaking out. For some training school officials, a visit to the digger provides them with just another occasion to deliver a short and snappy lecture or sermon to their wayward wards. However, for these imprisoned kids, such visits are generally a tease, a cruel hoax, just another painful frustration.

Frank: "In Bowmanville, the assistant superintendent would come in once in a while and ask 'What do you think you're doing?' Then he'd leave and wouldn't bother you and never visit you again."

Ed: "In Bowmanville, they'd send a shrink or the reverend in to talk with you. They'd come in to see if you were nuts or not. They try to dig into your brain. Every time they came in to see me, I'd just tell them to leave. They thought I was nuts; I caused a lot of trouble. Like, Mr. H. would come and give you his social lecture; then you'd agree with him—just agree—and you got out and you're back in the next day. That's what happened to me all the time. I'd just agree with him and as soon as I got out I was causing trouble..."

Susan: "In Lindsay, every time they'd come and ask me if I was ready to come out, I'd just tell them to go fly a kite... I knew I wasn't going to give in to them and I knew they weren't ... I lasted a week-and-a-half... Mr. M. finally let me out, but that was only because my mother was coming up the next day... They didn't want my mother to know that they were keeping me in detention. I told her when she got there. But she couldn't do nothin'; she cried. That was all she could do."

How long do kids spend in the digger? That depends on how they behave, and on the discretion of the authorities at each training school. Although careful records are kept on each detention, and forwarded to the

ministry's headquarters at Queen's Park, the information is not included in the ministry's annual reports or other public documents.

An insight into how it used to be at some schools—and perhaps still is—can be found in the detention logbook kept by the staff between 1965 and 1968 at the Pine Ridge School for Boys in Bowmanville. I've seen this logbook, and the statistics it contains are disturbing.

In 1965, for instance, an average of 41 boys—18 percent of the school's average monthly population—were locked up in the digger each month. That comes to more than one boy per day in solitary. The figures are higher for 1966 and 1967. In 1966, a monthly average of 44 boys—22 percent of the school's monthly population—were locked up for an average of two days. In 1967, an average of 53 boys were locked up each month—32 percent of the school's average monthly population—spending an average of one-and-a-half days in solitary.

In the first six months of 1968, a monthly average of 55 boys did time in the digger-29 percent of the school's monthly average population-again for an average of one-and-a-half days. During 1968, 75 percent of the boys in the digger were locked up for one day or less, 25 percent for two days and longer. I was shocked to discover that in 1968 at least seven boys were locked up for one week or longer.

Ray Lazanik, assistant superintendent at Bowmanville, says there have been major changes in detention procedures at his institution since 1973. And, indeed, the entire training school system is in the process of change. There are fewer inmates in the system now than there were a few years ago; corrections authorities are beginning to recognize that training schools are seldom an appropriate setting for dealing with young offenders.

But the training schools are still very much in business, and the digger still plays a central role in their disciplinary procedures.

Chris, now 21, spent two days in the digger at Hagersville in the early 1970s: "I saw kids thrown in for two weeks. Let's say a kid gets into a fight and starts smackin' people around and he's goin' nuts. They drag him down and throw him in the digger, and if he causes trouble inside there, they keep him for a little bit longer. Then, maybe he'll get out for half a day, and he'll get into another fight. They'll throw him back in and keep him in for maybe four or five days."

However long the detention period, the time is not used constructively. If the kids were at least allowed to do something constructive or recreational while in solitary, then the digger just

might be a "corrective" or "rehablive" experience. But this is not mitted. Most training school admit trators forbid any activity—althous ome allow reading materials—pertubecause doing so would dilute punishment. Sitting, lying down, packeting, daydreaming, sleeping a counting are about the only activity available to digger inmates.

Frank: "I was put in for smok."
You get so lonely in there, you state counting the holes in the screen and he walls. There's nothing to do. You walls the guys out the window, you walls 'em walk by—that's the only thing you can do. You get so lonely, you prefix near go nuts."

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Chris: "You sit there for the who day. You don't do anything, you just state, maybe sleep, talk to yourself count bricks. I don't think it helps in any way. Keeping a person in the digger long enough will certainly force there into the digger inside their head. It's the most dehumanizing thing there is."

Ed: "You get really lonely. When was in there the first time, I just lay down and took it easy. I figured it was happy-go-lucky thing. It didn't bother me at first, but after a couple of days gets to you—no talking to nobody, no doin' nothing. I was just wishing one of them (staff) would come in and I'd grab him and I'd kill him. I didn't care who—any staff. I would talk to the staff, but they wouldn't listen, so I'd just lay down and go to sleep; I slept 24 hours a day. Just thought about home and stuff like that, just waiting for my chance to get out of that digger."

Susan: "I sang to myself. I used to sit in detention and sing and they (staff) used to say, 'Are you ready to come out?' and I'd say, 'Go fuck yourself!'! slept a lot. When I wasn't singing I was sleeping... counting bricks on the wall. Like there were 1,738 bricks in every detention room—I know.

"One girl, Connie, she's got scars on both arms from deep cuts. They used to put her in the digger. She had a badge habit of punching her hand through the window and cutting her arms all up, and then taking a piece of glass from the window and slashing her arms. She culher face up once and tried to slit her throat once. She laughed while she was doing it; she didn't feel nothing while she was doing it. The staff would come in, say, every 15 minutes to check only her and there'd be blood all over the place and she'd be bleeding from the throat and face and she'd just be sitting there and they'd come in and she'd smile and then they'd take her to hospital and get her stitched up. They knew she was just doing it to gell attention."

Diane: "I sat in there without a books or anything. I cut up my arms with a pin . . . It drives you a bit nuts in

58 Toronto Life May 1976

there... You don't think... you sit and scream for awhile and talk to yourself. You feel as if they're going to keep you in there forever.

"Why did I cut myself? Like I mean you figure, well, they're not going to care if you do it so why should you care? And if you cut up your arms you can—I don't know—the feelings inside you, you can see them ... they're not just something that's there and you don't know what it is. At least you can feel the pain. A lot of people don't understand that. They think you cut up your arms for attention."

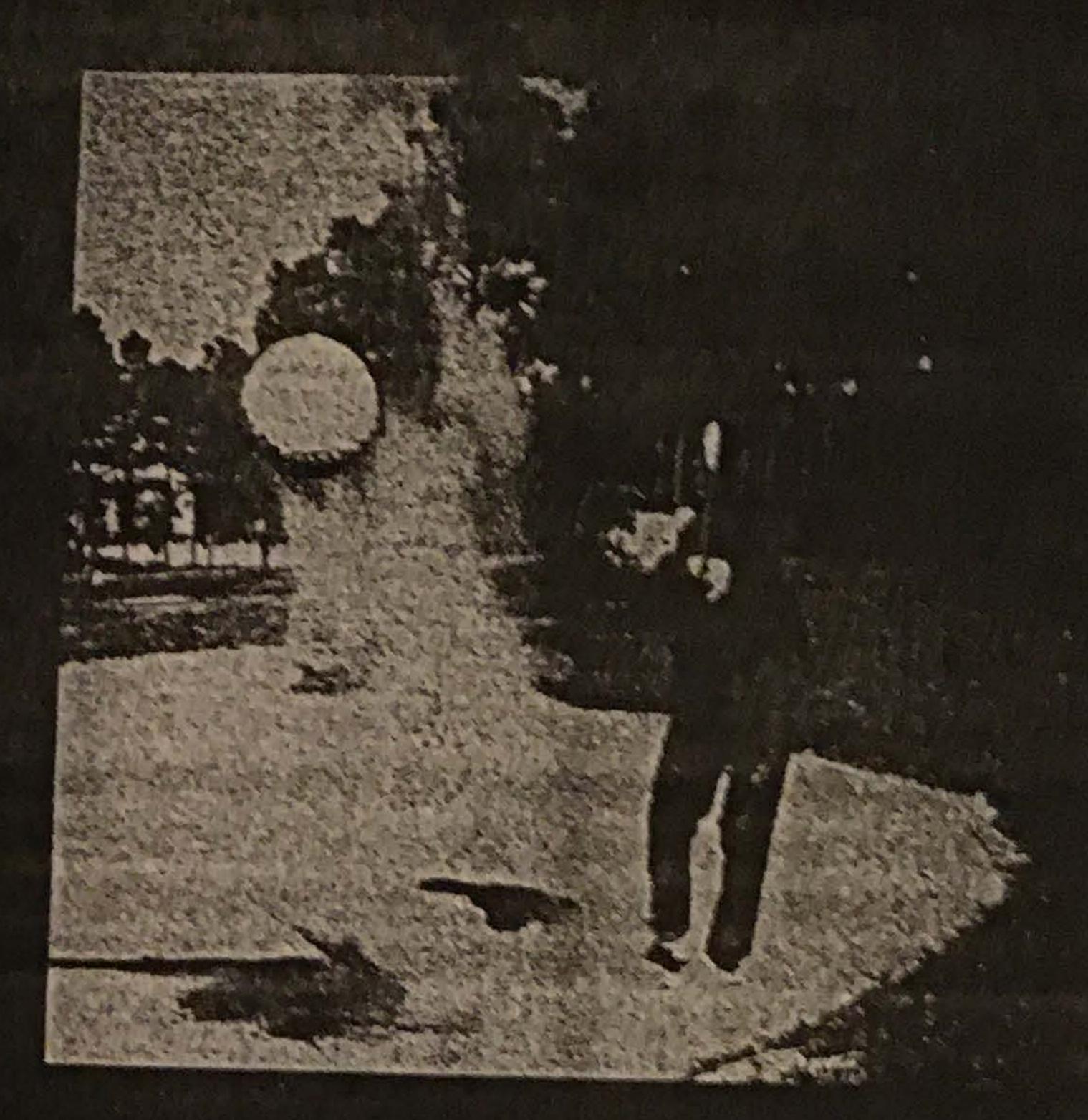
Many of the kids who get sent to the digger are defiant, disturbed and often violent. Yet there are indications that solitary confinement is used not only as a tool for cooling out uncontrollable kids, but as a routine disciplinary device. This, at least, is the impression I get from reading the Bowmanville logbook, in which the reason for each detention between 1965 and 1968 is carefully listed.

AWOL was the most commonly cited reason. During three-and-a-half years, 1965-'68, 46 to 62 percent of boys sent to the digger were there because they ran away or tried to. Insolence (arguing, talking back to or insulting staff) was the second most common reason. During these years, 18 to 32 percent of the kids were locked up for this reason. Fighting was the third most common reason. Yet fighting accounted for only nine percent of boys in the digger in 1965, and four percent in 1968. In 1966, the third most common reason was refusing to work (that is, striking) with only five percent being sent for this offense. Incredibly, "no reason" was the reason listed in 1967 for locking up 39 boys.

However, there were many other "reasons" cited by the Bowmanville administration and staff as cause for putting boys into the digger. Some appear ambiguous, petty, arbitrary or difficult to justify. Nevertheless, they were all written down in the logbook. Here are some examples of such reasons for subjecting young, "delinquent" boys to the punishment of solitary confinement: Suicide attempt or gesture, boy's own request, smoking (which is now allowed at Bowmanville), contraband (drugs or liquor), stealing, possession of No. 1 key, drawing dirty pictures, upset, held for wrt, returnee (usually after going AWOL), B & E (breaking and) entering), Mr. H.'s orders (superintendent at the time), sex . . . sex play, rash (presumably a skin rash), tampering with window, fooling in church, lack of cooperation, observation, sniffing, no reason.

Furthermore, there have been cases where boys were sent to the digger for logical problems which the Bowmanville

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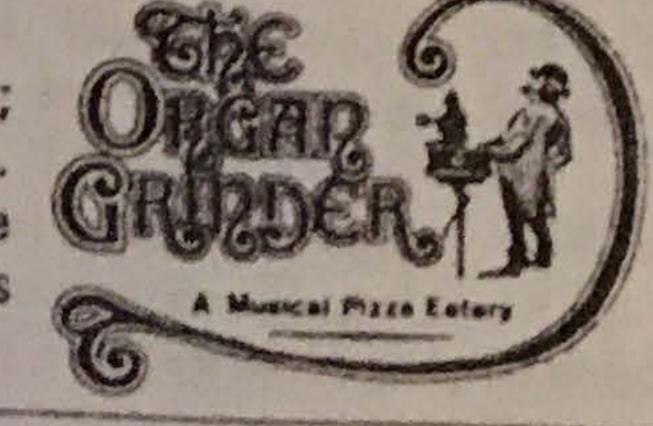


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administration could not or would not deal with, despite the presence of clinical staff.

Take the case of Charlie, for instance. I saw Charlie in 1968, when I was on the Bowmanville staff as a consulting psychologist. We felt that Charlie was an extremely disturbed boy who, like many others, didn't belong intraining school. He'd already slashed his wrists and had made other suicidal or self-destructive threats.

The next thing I heard, Charlie was in the digger-sent there, presumably, for his own protection. When I visited him with another staff member, he was lying on the concrete floor underneath the bed, tightly curled up in a fetal position, occasionally whimpering like a scared puppy. He was obviously more upset than when we'd seen him in our office; he refused to talk with us. He was frightened, almost totally mute and unresponsive to our efforts to reach out to him.

Immediately after seeing Charlie, a letter was sent to both the super-intendent and assistant superintendent stating that Charlie was "in immediate need of psychiatric treatment in a protective and secure therapeutic environment, e.g. Brown Camps, Warrendale or another residential treatment centre for psychologically disturbed adolescents." There was no reply to our letter from the administration or from the psychiatrist who knew Charlie. Instead, the administration kept Charlie in the digger for three days.

Such treatment was not unusual. Consider the case of John, a mildly retarded boy of 14. John was routinely put into the digger for "his own protection" whenever he got into trouble, which was often. Like Charlie, and probably hundreds of other "delinquent" kids, John just couldn't adapt to the stresses of training school life. In John's case, these included being taunted, teased or ridiculed by other boys and staff—being called a "goof," "idiot," or "stupid." John frequently went AWOL, was always caught, and was automatically put in the digger.

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Sometimes John would become very impulsive and angry and lash out against other boys, the staff or himself. He once seriously injured his arm by smashing a window, and threatened to do it again. Three members of the clinical staff believed John was very disturbed, probably suicidal and should never have been sent to training school in the first place—let alone to the digger. Collectively, we wrote a letter to the school psychiatrist urging him to "set up a "case conference"... as soon as possible." We hoped the psychiatrist would recommend transferring John to a

60 Toronto Life May 1976

humane, therapeutic setting. The letter went unanswered. The next day we learned that John was in the digger under 24-hour surveillance.

It's common knowledge that forced solitary confinement can drive people crazy, or at least seriously threaten their mental health. During the recent inquest into the death of Edward Nalon, who committed suicide in August, 1974, after many months of solitary in Millhaven Penitentiary, prison psychiatrist Michael Heaton stated: "Most people would crack under the pressure of total isolation," which Nalon was forced to experience. Joe Wydryk, one of Nalon's fellow inmates, told the inquest jury: "The system killed Eddie Nalon-the lockup system. I have seen people swallow nails, wire and require about 75 stiches just to try and get out of there."

Almost 20 years ago, in a classic psychological study entitled The Pathology of Boredom, Dr. W. Heron, together with other Canadian investigators, found that relatively severe but temporary sensory deprivation and a monotonous environment quickly produced Esychotic-like disturbances (hallucinations) in most normal subjects. (None of Dr. Heron's college student subjects could tolerate being locked up in this boring environment for more than 48 hours, even though they were paid \$25 a day.) In addition, Dr. Harry Harlow, an internationally renowned psychologist, discovered about 20 years ago that you can drive young monkeys crazy, or seriously retard their sexual and social development, simply by depriving them of physical contact with their peers or siblings.

In Canada, very few lawyers or judges have publicly criticized solitary confinement. One notable exception is Toronto lawyer Paul Copeland, who represented Mrs. Nalon and some Millhaven prisoners during the Nalon inquest. For all those correctional staff and administrators sanctioning solitary for institutionalized youth, Copeland makes this strong recommendation: Every person who causes a juvenile to be placed in solitary confinement should be required to have either experienced a similar term in solitary, or in the near future to undergo same. Only by such a requirement will the persons imposing such punishment adequately understand the very damaging effects that solitary may have." In other words, the punishers should get a good dose of their own medicine. Correcappointed ombudsman for prisoners' complaints, thinks solitary confinement recruel and unusual punishment," and so last March in her second annual

If solitary is so degrading and dehumanizing for adult prisoners, just think how much more devastating it must be for child prisoners in our training schools. Bill Brewer, a juvenile probation and aftercare officer fired by the ministry last year because he dared to expose brutalities in Ontario training schools, is also strongly opposed to solitary confinement. After talking with a dozen kids about their experiences in the digger, Brewer says: "Children don't talk to me about just how hellish it is to be in there. You know, it's not the same as a kid at home being sent to his room for an hour or so-incidentally, I'm against that, too.

"Isolation is a completely vengeful act. It has no lasting rehabilitating effect on the kids in terms of 'behavior modification.' For most of the individuals we're talking about, no punishment has any positive value. Something far less drastic would have worked better for them in the first place. The concept of punishment in "rehabilitating" those we label as criminals-adult or juvenileis now bankrupt. A good place to start readjusting our thinking would be to totally abolish isolation in any institution."

But solitary confinement continues to flourish in our training schools for juvenile offenders. Apparently it's not enough that we expose them to the intimidating and traumatic experiences of juvenile court; it's not enough that we stigmatize them by labelling them as "juvenile delinquents" or "young offenders"; it's not enough that we sentence them to authoritarian and punitive environments where they're separated from their homes, parents, friends and communities. We then throw some of them into solitary confinement after we send them to our punishment parks. And then we wonder why so many kids run away from training school and graduate to "the big joint." My best guess is that about 75 percent of adult prisoners in Canada are training school "graduates."

Solitary confinement, whether in the training school digger or in the prison "hole," should be totally and immediately abolished. Of course, it won't happen until many more Canadians speak out against this torture. To my knowledge, only one training school or juvenile detention centre in Canada has abolished solitary confinement—the Notre Dame de Laval detention centre for girls in Montreal. This institution abolished solitary for its young girl tional investigator Inger Hansen, who cry that resulted from newspaper exposés of the harsh punishments and lack of rehabilitative resources at institution.

In recent years, Ontario's training schools have changed their style and their role in the corrections system. The

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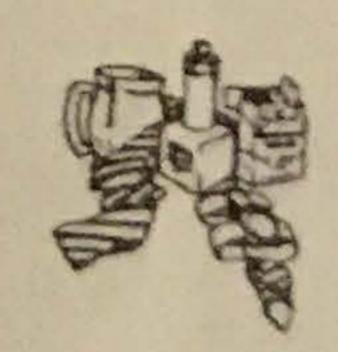
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emphasis, says Glenn Carter, executive director of the ministry's juvenile program, "is refocused away from residential care, and toward community care. The philosophy we had in 1968 is not the philosophy we have today." The training school population has shrunk from as many as 1,500 in the 1960s to about 700 today. Most of the 8,000 juveniles under ministry supervision, for offenses ranging from truancy to murder, are directed to other forms of care: probation or close supervision in the community.

Most of the training schools themselves look and function more like community colleges than jails. Barrackslike sleeping quarters are being phased out in favor of a small group atmosphere. Some sexually segregated institutions, including Bowmanville, are going coed. Hundreds of outside volunteers work with the kids on a regular basis, doing everything from teaching photography to taking kids home for weekends. Don Kerr, the ministry's PR man, likes to point out that the strap has been outlawed in Ontario training schools since 1959-long before it was banned in the public-school system.

Why don't they use the Warrendale approach, of holding and hugging violent kids until they cool down? "We can't," says Lazanik. "A ministry directive forbids physical confrontations unless it's for your own protection. This is to prevent the cuff-on-the-ear approach. A lot has changed in training schools. Hell, until three years ago, the kids here were being marched around military style."

In the context of a system that is rapidly modernizing itself, the survival of the digger seems a strange anomaly. But Glenn Carter doesn't believe the digger will ever be phased out. "When a kid goes out of control," he says, "there's got to be a place for his own protection, and for the protection of the rest of the community. But we always try personal intervention first."

That's borne out by the current statistics from Bowmanville, where Deputy Superintendent Ray Lazanik says that, in 1975, the digger was used 101 times, never for longer than 48 hours; and in 47 instances, it was used because a child had gone AWOL. "In those cases," says Lazanik, "we have to use detention; it's a ministry practice whereby a boy is held until he's been examined by a nurse to make sure he hasn't acquired any hidden injuries

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