



Fading into the twilight years

The television was showing a battle from "The Fall of the Roman Empire," but no one was watching.

The residents were in various stages of collapse around the room: disheveled, limp, distracted.

One woman massaged her face. Another with sullen eyes had turned her

Story by Jock Hatfield
Photos by Jimmi Harris

wheelchair to the wall, where she was preoccupied with shaking. A man whose pole legs were entwined with green, ivy-like veins, sat rearranging his knees and playing with a spoon. It looked as though the Romans had laid waste the television room before moving on to the next battlefield.

It was 10 a.m., the beginning of another day's activities at Pleasant Valley Nursing Home.

Life in a nursing home is not full of gusto. Nursing home residents are people who spent their lives posturing, and in the end found the only posture left was the slump. They have drifted from role to role until emptiness finally cornered them.

Nursing homes lose 7 percent of their residents every year, mostly by death. "This is their home," says Pleasant Valley's activity director Mary Jo Hogun, a small, pert woman with a voice like a P.E. whistle.

"It isn't a question of returning them to the world. We try to make their stay as stimulating and active as possible."

A hundred years ago, nursing homes did not exist. Families kept their elders around the house, while insane asylums offered the only public form of personal care. Today the nursing home has been accepted as a necessary institution. Nursing home chains have sprung up, offering a 4 to 5 percent return on investment.

Oregon's Roderic Nursing Homes runs a chain of 23 care facilities. "We're also in construction and travel agencies," says corporation Vice Pres. Ralph Bellande.

"It doesn't return the profit of our other interests, but it is a legitimate investment." As corporations moved into the old

folks home business, government has begun regulating nursing home administration.

Now laws require all nursing homes to employ full-time activity directors, who have formed the Life Enrichment Specialists association to spice up institution life.

The most popular activity in a nursing home is sleep, and can be accomplished in any position, in any activity. Activity directors see it as their responsibility to provide sleep alternatives. This can be done through sewing, flower arranging, cooking, television viewing, book reading, bingo and movies.

Movies in particular provide a popular diversion. Hogun says public relations films are particularly enjoyable because of their scenery. Dog food companies, Shell Oil, and Weyerhaeuser put out some of these hits.

Ivoren Nursing Home residents fill out an "Activities Assessment" card, choosing from a hobby list that includes "sewing, gardening, flower arranging, newspaper reading, bingo, movies and cards."

Other activities include the "Coffee Klatch," "Gardening with Cathy" and "Fun, Food and Fast Living," explains Ivoren activity director Jo Ann Gillespie. "We make their life as full as possible without giving them false hopes about leaving. We help them accept reality."

Ivoren also offers hard drinks once a week. In addition, there is a laundry program, in which residents mend each others' clothes. "It gives them a sense of being useful," Gillespie says. "They feel as though they are doing something worthwhile."

Though the hobby sheets, activity outings and television room provide a wide choice of entertainment, some nursing home residents aren't satisfied.

"I'll be frank," Ruth Gerris says. "I'd rather be somewhere else. In a two-room house somewhere. They have two, sometimes three to a room here. I have no privacy. It isn't fair."

Gerris came to the home by choice. "I lived with my daughter for a while, but we didn't get along well. 'I'll live here 'til I die' she says. 'I won't inflict myself on my family.'"

A man at Pleasant Valley says he enjoys the home, but when Hogun goes out of

earshot, he admits his daily schedule consists mostly of "walking around."

"I watch what's going on and that's about all," he says.

"I hate it here," admits another resident, who is recovering from a hip injury. "It's not home."

Hogun cautions that not much credence should be given to the residents' words. "Don't listen to them," she says. "They'll feed you a line."

The activity director at Twilight Acres, one of Eugene's few independent homes, has a different approach to activities.

"I'm closer to the residents' age than most directors," Agnes Whitaker says. "I understand their views better than younger people. We try to make them stand on their own here." The woman who owns Twilight Acres, Hazel Stebbets, has installed her own mother in one of the rooms.

"Sure I have faith in the home," she says. "We're not a big corporation; we deal with what's needed, not what's required by law."

"We help them put the pieces together," Whitaker says. But some residents are permanently dismantled, she says, and seldom does anyone leave without dying first.

Sensing a need, several nursing homes have created a program called "Reality Orientation." It is a memorization process in which a teacher encourages the patient to memorize time, date, location and name, the reality most nursing home residents have discarded as if it were an old souvenir. Even those who want to remember reality have difficulty doing so in a nursing home.

At Pleasant Valley, for example, several clocks have stopped. The residents at Ivoren had to form a council to plea bargain for a clock in their dining room.

Pleasant Valley has put up a chart on which reality statistics can be hung for easy reference. But today someone had forgotten to hang up the cards. It now read:

"Day: "

"Month: "

"Place: "

It is impossible to enter a nursing home without losing a sense of direction. Twilight Acres, Pleasant Valley and Ivoren all have the same floorplan. Each home has four wings radiating from a central nursing station. From the air they would resemble swastikas. Once inside, visitors find it im-

possible to determine how they got there.

The decor remains the same from room to room. The walls are covered with wallpaper, picturing redwood trees and seascapes, reminiscent of someone else's vacation. It's possible to pinpoint your location only by starting at the television room and making trial explorations from there.

Even the names of old folks homes are indistinguishable. They usually sound like funeral parlors — Pleasant Valley, Twilight Acres, Green Valley.

Other homes have names with problems. Ivor and Lorena Fish, for example, took their already inhuman names and combined them into the grotesque — Ivorena. Then they died, inflicting upon future residents a home tagged with an amputated, deceased name.

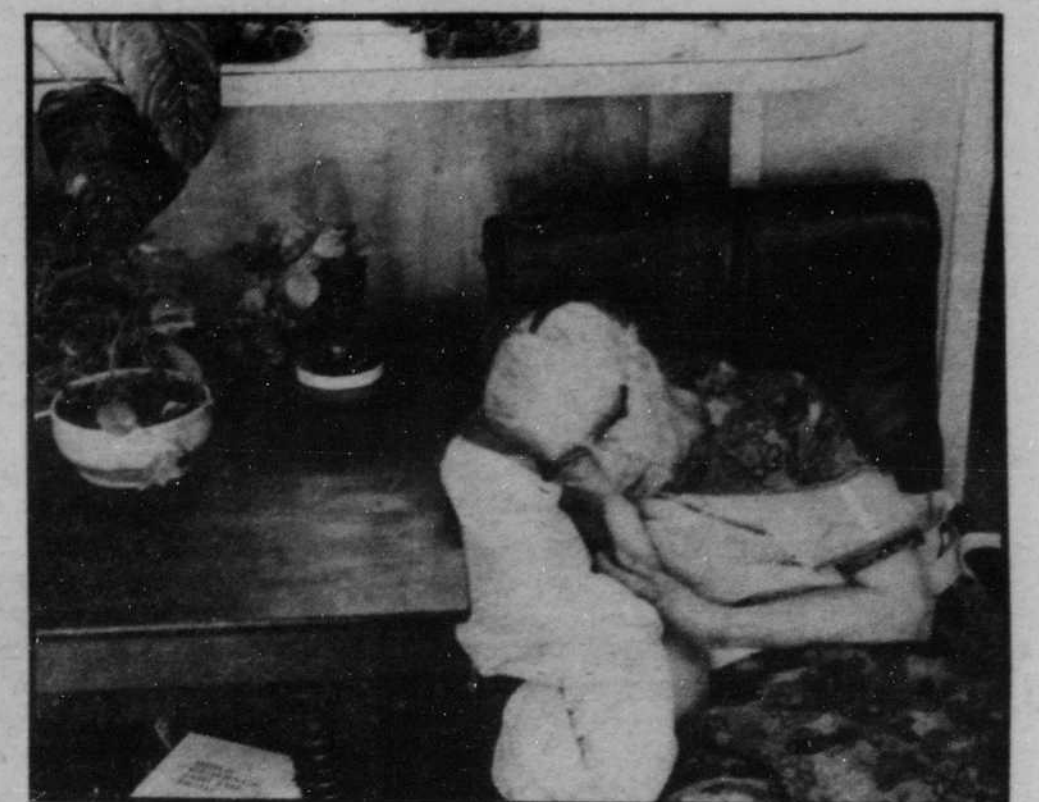
Most people ignore old folks homes, and for good reason. But for those who have faith in humanity's durability, nursing homes are the front lines, the trenches.

Good Samaritans, Rotary Clubs and church groups attack old folks homes with vehemence. One group of Christian singers has been leading an assault on Ivoren for 10 years. Every Thursday they arrive, in blue polka-dot pantsuits, to sing hymns — John Denver and other classics. They wear smiles proudly as they would medals and fire songs like high caliber weapons. When no one comes to their program in the activity room, they attack the wings. They march three abreast, smiles unwavering. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

"It's important to remember that everyone is a person just like you are," Hogun says. "You've got to have a big heart, and a lot of love to do this work."

Tuesday is film day at Pleasant Valley. Hogun herds the troops into a single room, and pours cold oil into a dirty-looking popcorn popper. The residents limp, wheel and walk in, showing mild interest. "I hope its about soldiers," one old man says. Hogun beams. "It's called 'From Yellowstone to Tomorrow.'"

As the film shows the Fifth Dimension singing on Yellowstone Park trails, the old folks pick at popcorn in paper pill cups. No one is looking at the film. One small woman in a high chair, wrapped in a placenta of sheets, gurgles softly.



Despite planned activities such as bingo and movies, residents often lose their zest for life in the anonymity of the nursing home.



"This is their home....It isn't a question of returning them to the world. We try to make their stay as stimulating and active as possible," says Mary Jo Hogun, activity director at the Pleasant Valley nursing home.

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