



Life After Duty: The Early Rehabilitation of Veterans Through Involved Therapy at Riverview Hospital



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Nestled beside the soothing flow of the Coquitlam River and backed by encroaching mountains, Riverview Hospital's natural surroundings emphasize serenity and care. Between the start of World War I (1914-1918) and post-World War II (after 1945), this assuaging setting admitted and treated veterans navigating the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), offering progressive therapies ranging from occupational therapy to recreational farming. Before the American Psychiatric Association first classified PTSD as a distinct mental health condition in 1980, little was known about the condition, with military authorities and physicians prescribing a wide range of treatment plans. These programs provided veterans with meaningful work suited to their abilities and stage of recovery. Riverview Hospital became more than a centre for mental health care. It served as a place of social reintegration where veterans could rebuild confidence, develop new skills and rediscover interests that would support their return to community life.

As the Royal Hospital in Victoria and the Public Hospital for the Insane in New Westminster began to face rising demand and overcrowding, the Province of British Columbia purchased 1,000 acres in Coquitlam in 1904 for the construction of a new mental hospital and farm (later called Colony Farm and today as Ḳéxətəm Regional Park).¹ First referred to as the Hospital for the Mind at Mount Coquitlam (subsequently renamed Essondale until 1964 and Riverview, thereafter), Medical Superintendent, Dr. Charles Doherty, drew inspiration from early twentieth century mental institutions of its kind. The hospital's main mission was to "render more than custodial care," with Doherty declaring that the "straightjacketed and bed boxed" had no place under his leadership.² After the First World War, Riverview Hospital, along with hospitals across the country, experienced a significant jump in the number of veterans admitted. Facing overcrowding in the original two blocks, West Lawn and Centre Lawn, the Veterans Block was created in 1934 to treat World War I soldiers with post-traumatic stress or what was then widely referred to as "shell shock". The term, coined by British physician Charles Myers, aptly highlights the medical reasoning of PTSD at the time. It was thought that the concussive blasts of trench warfare and the physical impact of exploding artillery shells damaged the nervous system, or shell-shocked the soldier. It was widely believed that patients exhibiting symptoms of shell shock could be brought back into normality through the pressures of talk therapy and a rigorous daily routine. Later, however, the shell shock theory was discounted when military doctors observed the same mental health symptoms in soldiers who had never been near exploding shells.³



Riverview Hospital's scenic setting and work therapy were listed as the centre's primary treatments and closely followed the British rehabilitation system of medical-mechanical treatment, physical therapy, vocational training and engineering workshops. The therapeutic treatments included pharmaceutical medications, electroconvulsive therapy, insulin shock treatment and surgery.⁴ The day room in the Veterans Block was set up with recreational therapy activities. Veterans could socialize as they leaned over pool tables and played with colourful sets of wooden billiard balls, or participated in a crowd favourite game of bingo. From archived photographs of the Veterans Block, we can assume that usage of such recreational activities began in the 1930s.⁵

Routines of normalcy were simultaneously implemented at Riverview Hospital in order to restore regular schedules and personal hygiene. The barber shop was added to West Lawn around 1913, with two others subsequently opening over the war years and reports of patient labour were mentioned for the first time in Riverview Hospital's inaugural annual report from 1913.⁵ With these additions, veterans could frequent the barber shop, and were enrolled in scheduled labour programs in various facilities, including the kitchens and a shoe repair shop. During World War I, agricultural therapy was readily prescribed at Riverview Hospital and across several field hospitals with the belief that working outdoors with natural materials would rehabilitate patients either for a return to the military or reentry to civilian society.⁶ From about 1910 until the 1980s, patients were actively involved in the farming of the four hundred hectare Colony Farm, which included the harvest of cereal crops, and a major dairy and livestock operation that supplied the hospital with fresh meat, dairy and produce. In return, patients were paid a small salary.⁷ Superintendent Doherty's agricultural therapy plan was consistent with the Soldier Settlement Board's philosophy which preached working the land as an ideal therapeutic treatment. Established in 1917, the Soldier Settlement Board assisted World War I veterans in transitioning to civilian life by providing agricultural training and a land grant of up to one hundred sixty acres (primarily in provinces such as Saskatchewan and Alberta). Pursuant to this treatment regimen, the Colony Farm at Riverview Hospital acted as a transitional place where returning veterans could receive therapeutic treatment, learn new skills and effortlessly re-enter civilian society as productive citizens.⁸



By World War II, the terminology for retiring soldiers with mental health issues shifted from shell shock to “war neurosis”. Military authorities officially discouraged the terms such as “shell shock” which had social overtones and instead emphasized the injuries the veterans had suffered with commendations such as a “wound stripe” (which was a 2-inch gold braid worn vertically on the lower left uniform sleeve). The phrase war neurosis took its place and attitudes towards PTSD amongst the medical community shifted, believing the condition had been evoked by a pre-existing or latent psychological disorder.⁹ In the lead up to World War II, the Canadian government preached enlistment in the military as a way for young people to defend Canada and the British commonwealth. When war broke out in 1939, many Riverview Hospital staff felt compelled to join the armed forces which resulted in more than one hundred nurses resigning in 1942. At that same time, Riverview Hospital started to receive a new wave of injured soldiers as they were short of staff and beds for the new veterans. The East Lawn Building began to be overwhelmed with 1,450 beds when the capacity was originally only for 921 beds.¹⁰

In 1949, Riverview Hospital was expanded through the construction of a new building, called Riverside, built on the Colony Farm site. The new Riverside building was built for war veterans who had been living in the Veterans Block on the Riverview Hospital site and ready for a new wave of veterans from the the Korean War. The imposing white walled Riverside building set amongst weeping willows and stately cedar trees continued the therapeutic nature of the Veterans Block. After the veterans were transferred to Riverside, the Veterans Block expanded and later reopened as the Crease Clinic of Psychological Medicine, under separate health legislation from Riverview Hospital.¹

With the implementation of Riverside, Riverview Hospital’s occupational treatment plan had also greatly expanded. Records show that on average 106 patients attended the occupational therapy shops daily where they could choose to engage in needle work, wood work, metal work, leather work, weaving, painting, pottery, and other arts and crafts.¹⁰ This occupational therapy program included *The Leader* newsletter, which was first published in the 1950s, and produced by and for patients on a printing press located in the Occupational Therapy department. By 1956, *The Leader* had grown sizably and a new editorial room was established in West Lawn in order to effectively produce the magazine.¹³



Post-World War II, the recreational therapy program also experienced substantial growth and included activities such as non-contact sports, movies, weekly dances, parlour games and a much-anticipated annual Sports Day.¹¹ A trophy from Riverview Hospital's Sports Day highlights Riverside patient involvement in community and social events. The trophy, with a base of polished mahogany and a silver cup engraved "Carnival Day Trophy First Prize", was used between 1959 to 1965 to showcase winners of both Carnival Day and Sports Day. Inaugurated around 1948, teams for both events were segregated by wards, with seven inscribed metal medallions attached along one side to highlight that year's winners, including one that reads "1964 Riverside". These events played a key role in the social calendar of Riverview Hospital's patients, staff, and family members, and would attract hundreds of people to the hospital. Participants took place in competitions, bands played, a picnic was held (produced by Riverview Hospital's kitchens) and the day ended with a big outdoor dance. Riverview Hospital's therapy program also extended to horticultural therapy. In 1951, Farm View was created by World War II Navy veteran, nurse and former logger, Art Finnie, who worked at Riverside after leaving the army due to injury. Today, an engraved sign hangs framed by sun dappled branches, declaring the spot, "Finnie's Garden". Finnie was tasked with setting up a garden for patients to enjoy and work in. Sword ferns flourish under cedar trees, colourful peonies and hydrangeas merge with throned roses, and restful nooks scatter the garden. A bench for soaking up the sun, a wooden-framed gazebo – the calming setting relieving patient tensions and feelings of isolation. "It was the best therapy for the patients that they could have had," Finnie said, looking back on the project.¹⁴ Along with Riverview Hospital, several veteran hospitals used gardening therapy as a form of treatment for soldiers, and between 1920 and 1940, almost all books related to occupational therapy mentioned gardening. After 1940, garden therapy was considered a separate treatment and the term horticultural therapy was widely recognized.¹⁵ Finnie's Garden was dual in nature – it taught patients a new pastime and work related skill and provided therapeutic gratification through the accomplishment of watching new life grow.

In 1965, the Riverside building was closed, and the site was then rebuilt as a maximum security facility for forensic patients involved in the criminal justice system. The remaining veterans who had been treated at the Riverside facility (from 1949 until 1965) were transferred to other mental health facilities throughout British Columbia.¹² Today, PTSD research is still evolving with different forms of occupational therapy remaining the favoured treatment approach. The Royal Canadian Legion in Coquitlam continues to support veterans as it marks its centennial year, building upon many of the therapeutic principles once practiced at Riverview Hospital. The Legion advocates for programs that promote social participation, community reintegration, healthy routines, and meaningful occupation, while also supporting research into PTSD, operational stress injuries and other mental health conditions affecting veterans.

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Billiard Balls

~1930, wood and paint.
Coquitlam, City Hall.



Bingo Tumbler

1920-1950, wire and
metal.
Coquitlam, City Hall.

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Barber's Set

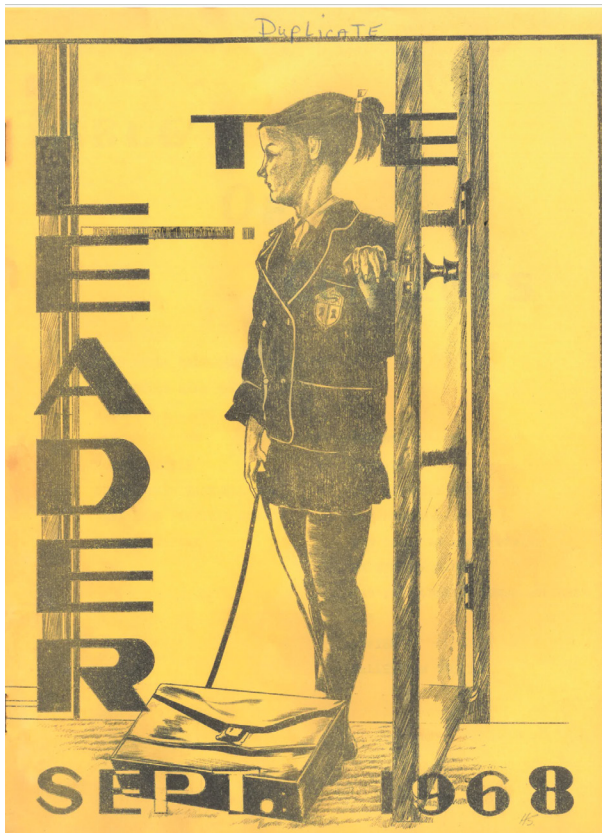
~1913, plastic, cloth,
and metal.
Coquitlam, City Hall.



*Carnival Day Trophy
First Prize*

1959-1965, metal and
wood.
Coquitlam, City Hall.

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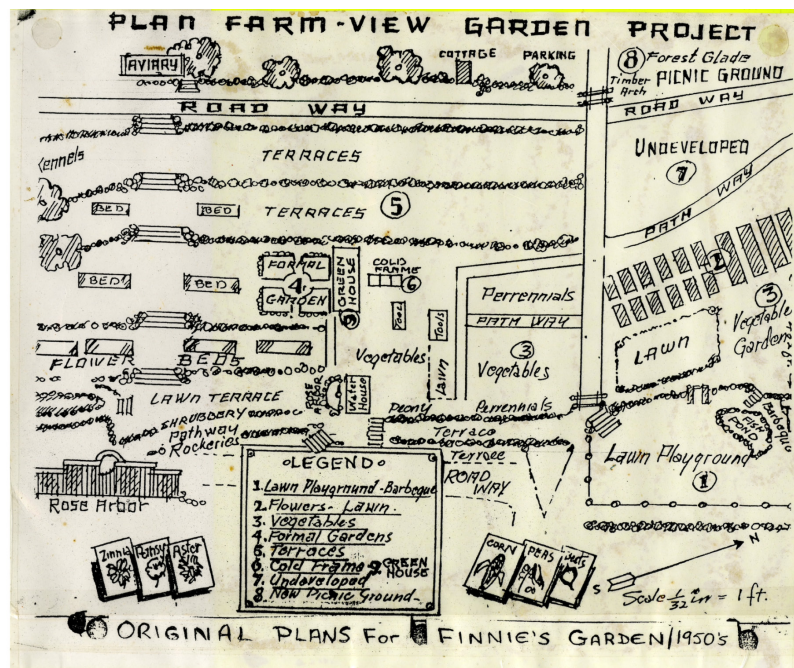
The Leader

1968.

Coquitlam, Coquitlam
City Archives.

Art Finnie, *Plan Farm - View Garden Project*

1950's.
Coquitlam, Coquitlam
City Archives.



Notes:

1. Collection C5: Riverview Hospital Historical Society Collection. Coquitlam, BC: City of Coquitlam Archives.
2. Karen Speirs, Riverview Hospital: A Legacy of Care and Compassion (Coquitlam, BC: City of Coquitlam, January 9, 2009), 16.
3. Terry Copp et al., *Combat Stress in the 20th Century: The Commonwealth Perspective* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 447.
4. Judith Pettigrew et al., "The Bluebirds: World War I Soldiers' Experiences of Occupational Therapy," *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71, no. 1 (2017): 1.
5. "Riverview Hospital Artifacts." City of Coquitlam, June 9, 2009. <https://www.riverviewhospitalartifacts.ca/list?q=trophy&p=1&ps=20>.
6. Micky Lee et al., *Disability in Law, Media and History: Intersectional, Embodied and Socially Constructed* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 60–62.
7. "Legen-Dairy Holstein Herd of Colony Farm." City of Coquitlam, 2026. <https://www.coquitlam.ca/719/Legen-dairy-Holstein-Herd-of-Colony-Farm>.
8. Kyle Pritchard, "Soldier-Citizens: Industrial and Agricultural Rehabilitation Programs in the First World War," The Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada, February 10, 2020. <https://studyofcanada.ca/soldier-citizens-industrial-and-agricultural-rehabilitation-programs-in-the-first-world-war/>.
9. Copp et al., *Combat Stress in the 20th Century: The Commonwealth Perspective*, 410–11.
10. Speirs, Riverview Hospital: A Legacy of Care and Compassion, 40–43.
11. Speirs, Riverview Hospital: A Legacy of Care and Compassion, 32.
12. Speirs, Riverview Hospital: A Legacy of Care and Compassion, 59.
13. Lisa Codd, *Collecting Riverview: A Visual History of Photographs and Objects* (Coquitlam, BC: City of Coquitlam, 2021), 32.
14. "Archives in Bloom: The Organic Nature of the Fonds." City of Coquitlam, 2010. <https://www.coquitlam.ca/1264/Archives-in-Bloom-The-Organic-Nature-of->.
15. George Tereshkovich, "Horticultural Therapy: A Review," *HortScience* 8, no. 6 (1973): 460.

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