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Facts scarce on mental hospital births

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For Rodney Williamson of Fairhope, his birth and his early childhood have largely been blank spots for most of his life.

Williamson, who was adopted as a toddler, knows only the information listed on his birth certificate: born on Sept. 16, 1965, to a birth mother named Lottie Mae Cardwell, who was around 19 years old. Her hometown was listed as Enterprise.

The location of Williamson's birth, however, brings the most questions: He was born at Partlow State School for Girls in Tuscaloosa, most recently known as W.D. Partlow Developmental Center, a state-run hospital for the intellectually disabled that closed its doors for good in December.

"It's a void that been with me for a very long time," Williamson said.

Williamson is just one of possibly hundreds of babies born to patients at state mental hospitals during the past century. But the Alabama Department of Mental Health does not know exactly how many children might have been born at Bryce Hospital or Partlow. When both facilities were at their highest capacity in the mid-1960s, when Williamson was born, Bryce housed more than 5,000 patients and Partlow more than 2,000.

While there are no specific numbers, there are several stories, like the woman who showed up on the steps of Bryce seeking a tour of the place where she was told she had been born, said Alabama Department of Mental Health historian Steve Davis.

"Last year, I had a lady come here who said she was born here," Davis said. "But with (patient privacy laws) you can't even look at your own birth mother's record."

Davis couldn't confirm that the woman had been born at Bryce, nor could he give her any information about her birth, but he took her on a tour of the Bryce grounds and showed her one of the old operating rooms in an area of the hospital that is no longer used.

"I was able to show her where she may have been born," Davis said.

Bryce also has a small infant cemetery for the nine babies who were born at the hospital stillborn. It is a semi-circle of nine unmarked graves at one of Bryce's old cemeteries for patients. The graves, for which Bryce still has records, were once marked with small metal markers in the shape of a child's hand, forming a cross. But those markers were stolen years ago, Davis said. The ADMH plans to include a memorial for the stillborn babies as part of a monument that is being built at the old Bryce cemetery.

There are no babies buried at the Partlow cemetery, and it's not known how many children such as Williamson might have been born there. Because of privacy laws,



Michelle Lepianka Carter / The Tuscaloosa News

Steve Davis, department historian for Bryce Hospital, shows the site where a memorial is planned for the Bryce cemeteries, one for infants, on the Bryce Hospital campus on Friday.

Williamson cannot get any information about his birth mother from the state.

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“Basically, we can't release any information unless you have a court authorization or you are the executor of estate,” said Jeff Shackelford, spokesman for the Alabama Department of Mental Health. “Our hands are tied when it comes to things like this.”

Before 1975, female patients were largely kept separate from the men, at Bryce and at Partlow. There were strict rules about separating the sexes so pregnancies were not likely to occur after the patients arrived at the hospital, Davis said. Many of the babies were born to women who arrived already pregnant, he said.

That was largely true in recent decades, said Jim Reddoch, executive director of Indian Rivers Mental Health Center and former director of Bryce. Women sometimes are committed to Bryce while they are expecting.

“Sometimes we knew they were pregnant when they came in, sometimes not,” Reddoch said.

Often, after the babies were born, they were taken by family members until the mother recovered. Some of them may have been put up for adoption, Reddoch said.

Connie Robbins worked as a nurse practitioner at Bryce during the 1990s and early 2000s. During that time, there were a few pregnant women at Bryce a year, she said.

“I would say that we would have about two to three a year,” Robbins said.

For most of the 20th century, babies born at Bryce and Partlow were delivered in operating rooms on-site. That changed largely in the mid-1970s when the women were transferred to Druid City Hospital — now DCH Regional Medical Center — to deliver their babies, Davis said.

At Bryce, Robbins would keep track of the expecting patient's diets and medications and made sure the pregnancies went smoothly and the babies were born healthy.

“DHR was involved in all of those situations, and we were very careful about medications,” Robbins said. “We certainly wanted them stable and healthy when they delivered.”

While Williamson knows he was born at Partlow, he wasn't adopted until he was 18 months old. He knows nothing about where he was before his adoption. Williamson said he is very close to his adopted parents and doesn't want to hurt them by looking into the unusual circumstances of his birth.

But he said, he's always wondered. He searched his birth mother's name on the Internet and has considered a more formal search.

“I have no idea if she's alive,” Robinson said. “If she were, I'd want to meet her and the whole family. For the past 46 years, it's been a void in my life, an overwhelming wall I want to get past.”

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