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**Fred Clark Chaney, Hodding Carter, Jr., and the Whitfield Editorials**

This presentation focuses on Mississippi State Hospital at Whitfield, MS through the writings of Fred Clark Chaney and the editorials published by Hodding Carter, Jr. in the *Delta Democrat-Times.*

Fred Clark Chaney was born on Christmas Day 1904. He was the great-grandson of Civil War Governor General Charles Clark, a cousin to Walter Sillers, Jr., long time Speaker of the House of Representatives, and a friend of *Delta Democrat-Times* editor Hodding Carter, Jr. in Greenville, Mississippi

Chaney was a man of vision, a lawyer, a prolific writer, and crusader who spent the greater part of his adult life at Mississippi State Hospital, Whitfield, MS. From his first admission at age 22 to St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. in 1926, then to the Mississippi State Insane Asylum in 1932, and later to Mississippi State Hospital in 1939; Chaney had numerous admissions, elopements, paroles, and discharges and made Whitfield his home until his death in 1975. He died in the general hospital at Whitfield after having been institutionalized for over 40 years and with 53 years of his life. His health had been declining over the years and his letters and social causes ended in the late 1960s.

He carried with him over the years a multitude of diagnoses beginning with Dementia Praecox, Constitutional Psychopathic Irresponsible, Not Psychotic, Psychosis due to Glandular Disorder, Manic Depressive, Schizophrenia, Paranoid Type, Psychopathic Personality, and Psychosis with Cerebral Arteriosclerosis. Chaney knew of all these diagnoses, but he described himself as only “*mean as hell*.”

Hodding Carter, Jr. a native of Louisiana was the editor and publisher of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, MS. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for his editorials about racial and economic intolerance toward Japanese immigrants, and his attacks on racist Senator Theodore G. Bilbo. His stance on discrimination and voter’s rights was not popular in the Mississippi Delta. He fought against the white Citizens’ Council formed to preserve segregation with his editorials and was censured by the Mississippi House of Representatives. “He fired back with an editorial beginning, “I hereby resolve by a vote of 1 to 0 that there are 89 liars in the state legislature.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Hodding Carter, III said that his father was a “lonely white voice in opposition to Mississippi’s segregationist forces. He kept an arsenal of guns to defend himself and rallied members of his family to maintain an armed vigil at his Greenville home during the 1962 fight over the integration of the University of Mississippi.” Carter died in 1972 at 65 years of age.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Fred Chaney’s relationship with Hodding Carter, Jr. began around 1939 when he stormed the *Delta Democrat-Times* office and threatened Carter with a gun because of an article written about his father, Rife Chaney, Sr. who at that time was the sheriff of Washington County. The editorial was asking for him to resign because of an incident outside of Greenville and he would not tell Carter of his plans to shut down the county juke joints andbars. After Chaney and Carter resolved their differences with the possibility of Chaney being arrested, they became friends and corresponded frequently.

In my biography on the life of Fred Chaney I describe through his letters and manuscripts the history and stories of the Mississippi State Insane Asylum and the Mississippi State Hospital (MSH) at Whitfield. Many stories of mental hospitalization at Whitfield have been told and written about in manuscripts, books, dissertations, pamphlets, and presentations. The biography is not a retelling of the hospital’s history but delves into the issues and problems not typically discussed during the most important periods of development at MSH as seen through Chaney’s letters.

I learned of Fred Chaney while employed at Mississippi State Hospital as an institutional social worker. He was a patient on one of my assigned cottages and was bed-ridden during the brief time that I was his social worker. His only request of me during my assignment was to bring him a cigar to chew on. The charge nurse on the building told me Chaney was called the “King of Whitfield” and if I wanted to know more about his life at Whitfield, that I should research his letters and documents at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Over 45 years ago, I read with amazement a story written by a patient at Whitfield who requested that his story be told.

Chaney was known to some as the King of Whitfield because of the special chair built for him. At one time he weighed as much as 450 pounds standing 6’2. The back of the chair was nearly 5’ tall with 2-x-6 boards for arm rest. When the weather was good his chair would be brought out and placed on the front porch of his cottage. On each side of the chair were smaller chairs for his friends to sit and await his next request. Go to the patient store and get me a cigar and a soft drink. Another friend who ran errands for him had ground privileges and had permission to ride the bus into Jackson. He lost his privileges when his doctor found that he was bringing Chaney six-packs of beer.

Fred Chaney wanted the story of his mental illness and mental hospitalization at Whitfield told to anyone who would listen. And oftentimes they did. He brought to light the squalid conditions at Whitfield with most of his letter writing in the late 1940’s and 1950s. He smuggled letters out of the hospital about the quality and lack of food, living conditions, problems with hospital administration and employees, political interference, and patient rights. Chaney once described Whitfield as *“red brick cemeteries.”*

Hodding Carter, Jr. took a great interest in Chaney’s insightful letters about the conditions at Whitfield and published his correspondence*.* His editorials about Chaney and Whitfield brought about investigations by the legislature, Mississippi Medical Association, and the Legislative Audit Committee.

It was through his letters and manuscripts he provided not only the problems at Whitfield but his recommendations to make changes that would benefit his fellow patients. The *Delta Democrat-Times,* the *Clarion-Ledger, Tupelo Daily Journal*, and the *McComb Enterprise* routinely had editorials and articles about Whitfield especially when the hospital was suffering from lack of state funding and overcrowding. At first Chaney would end his letters as “anonymous” or as “a patient at Whitfield.” But he pushed his luck when he provided his full name and that he was a patient at Whitfield.

Many times, he was caught and punished for violating the censorship rules for trying to smuggle letters out of the hospital to Hodding Carter, Jr. For these offenses he would be transferred to the white male disturbed building as punishment and would receive tight packs, wrapped in wet sheets, cold packs, and hydrotherapy. He also received treatment in an “Electric-Light Cabinet Bath, 10 minutes a day for weeks[[3]](#endnote-3) All letters coming in and out of the hospital were opened and read by staff. Complaints, gossip, observations about life at Whitfield weretypically trashed. But he had several ways to smuggle letters out of the hospital without being caught. Chaney gave letters to discharged patients to mail for him. He wrote about the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, his great-grandfather Governor Charles Clark, and other subjects that would not arouse suspicion. It was within these letters and manuscripts were his observations of cruelty, patients dying of starvation, tight packs, and the disturbed building. The letters to his mother in Greenville were given to Hodding Carter, Jr. who published them verbatim in the *Delta Democrat-Times.*

Dr. William Jaquith, director of the state hospital told the Greenville Lions Club in 1947 that Carter’s [Hodding Carter, Jr.] expose’ of inhuman practices at the hospital were responsible for starting the re-organization of the state mental health program. He said a patient from Washington County smuggled letters to Carter describing the methods and tactics used in treating patients.

The *Delta Democrat-Times’* January 1949editorial “Mississippi’s Snake Pit” reported “We have good personal reason for believing that all is not sweetness and light at Whitfield…Unlike patients in ordinary hospitals, the patients at Whitfield cannot command an audience when they have something to say. But many of them are sound enough in mind to tell stories that should be heard.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Representative HaydenCampbell with the Mississippi House of Representatives conducted a one-man two-month investigation at Whitfield and took the testimony of some of these patients, and of others who have been discharged. ”[[5]](#endnote-5) Fred Chaney met with Campbell on his building and told him about conditions at Whitfield and that reform was needed. He said that the rubber hoses used on patients were locked away when they heard Campbell was on the hospital campus.

The Legislative Auditcommittee later to be known as the Peer Committee,reported an improvement in food and the hospital had hired a dietician. Rep. Campbell had found a lack of beds in some cottages which left the patients to sleep on the floor. The investigating committee’s report stated, “with the exception of a “few isolated cases,” patients at the hospital have been, and are, receiving good treatment and that the hospital is properly managed and run in an orderly manner.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The *Delta Democrat-Times* editorial found the report to be “another legislative white-wash”[[7]](#endnote-7) and like other mental hospitals providing only custodial care.

On January 21, 1949, the *Delta Democrat-Times* published Fred Chaney’s recommendations to improve Whitfield in view of all the investigations that had taken place: “Fred Chaney, the son of Mrs. R.P. Chaney and the late Sheriff Chaney has been a patient at Whitfield for a number of years. During much of this time, we have kept up a correspondence with him and have on occasion talked with him of his life at Whitfield. As his Washington county friends know, Fred has unusual analytical ability, and a power of expression that would have made an unusual newspaperman out of him.

Because of the present discussion of conditions at the Institution, we are outlining some of his observations and constructive suggestions, with his and Mrs. Chaney’s [Fred’s mother] permission, and with the conviction that the Whitfield authorities will recognize the validity of his proposals and his right to express them. Here they are as he has written them:

1. Change the admittance laws so it won’t be as easy to slip people in and forget them.
2. Guarantee all patients on the chronic service (except the “congenital idiots”) a staffing and general examination by all staff members at least once a year, to check up on their condition and possible eligibility for parole and another chance outside.
3. See that medical inspection of all chronic service wards is carried out at least four times a week, if not daily, instead of the once-a-month or once every 60 days that has often been the case heretofore. This frequency of inspection by the doctor in charge will discourage the abuse and mistreatment that lack of adequate inspection makes possible and that so often has occurred undetected upon the chronic wards.
4. See that all confined patients are taken off the stone floors and out of their cramped lock-wards for fresh air, sunshine, and exercise for at least two or three hours each day that weather conditions will permit. This period on the outside for a “breather” will mean much even to most of the patients who have no possibility for recovery. It should be provided for all confined patients here, even if a wire enclosure has to be built to serve as a sort of exercise yard from which they cannot escape.
5. Try to improve the diet and guarantee a little variety in the diet served chronic ward patients. It is certainly too monotonous, unvaried and coarse now to really build the patients toward health and a fair chance for recovery. [Fred Chaney stated “[w]hen I first came there, I saw men and women starving to death on the rations of yellow mush and wheat shorts. How many died of starvation under that unspeakably inhuman administration, no one will ever know. They called it death “from natural causes.” Dr. William Jaquith joined the Whitfield medical staff in 1947, and “found conditions so appalling and the care of the patients so poor, he was sick. He said that “he was here six weeks before seeing meat of any sort served and when it was finally served it was in the form of small lumps of salt port. The black-eyed peas were fullof weevils.” Chaney said the two things you never heard at Whitfield was a kind word and meat a fryin.’]
6. Try another basic system of pay that would seek to introduce the principle of tying together the advantage of the chronic ward workers with the welfare of the patients under their care…
7. A campaign should be started to abolish the “tight rooms” where patients are sometimes put. [In 1975 a lawsuit was filed to close the disturbed building. The suit claimed the building had mold and mildew from leaky ceilings, patients’ mail was censored, patients had no magazines, books, or an opportunity for recreational activities. The suit said that “inmates are not aware of the weather or of season,”[[8]](#endnote-8) It took 26 years to close the building after Chaney’s recommendation.]
8. More buildings should be built in the overcrowded chronic service division to relieve the terrible overcrowding there.

THE EDITORIAL CONTINUED: We think these recommendations, coming as they do from a Whitfield patient, should be closely studied by the Board of Mental Institutions and the legislative investigating committee. Certainly, they make sense, and offer workable means of improving conditions at Whitfield. And we thank our friend, Fred Chaney, for acting in the interests of the patients at Whitfield without regard for possible unfavorable action against himself.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Following Fred Chaney’s recommendations for Whitfield, the editorial on January 26, 1949, reported “We BELIEVED that the response would be favorable to our editorial which embodied the proposals for improving Whitfield, made by Fred Chaney of Greenville who is a patient there. But we didn’t know that the approval of his sound suggestions would be so widespread, or that there were as many people so keenly interested – as all of should be – in the administration of Whitfield. It took courage for Fred Chaney to make public his suggestions, as a number of editors have commented in reproducing the editorial in which they appeared. Officials and employees of institutions under criticism have not always reacted kindly to recommendations from within their confines. But it is unthinkable that any official or employee of Whitfield should take it out on Fred for making a worthwhile contribution to an understanding of the needs and the shortcomings of that institution. What he wrote was in the spirit of helpfulness and not of malice, and God help the soul of a man who would be small enough to retaliate.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Well, they did retaliate. The hospital superintendent and a half-dozen psychiatrists and physicians conducted a staff meeting with Chaney two weeks after the editorial ran and told him that he could be moved from the disturbed building back to an open building and have ground privileges if he agreed not to send letters out without them being reviewed.

On February 24, 1949, a progress note in his medical record said: “In accordance with recent medical staff patient was presented with a statement for signature which signature was to be witnessed by two witnesses which stated as follows:

***“It is my understanding that I am to have an opportunity to make a satisfactory adjustment outside the White Male Disturbed building.* [*underlining added for emphasis*] *I therefore agree to completely refrain from writing letters to be mailed and sent out of the institution uncensored and agree to make no effort to have letters sent out of the institution without first having them properly censored.* I further agree to refrain from making demands for ground privileges and other privileges, to go to bed regularly every night at the time other patients go to bed and in every way to conform to the rules and regulations of the institution pertaining to closed ward patients while I am on a closed ward and pertaining to open ward patients in the event that I am transferred to an open ward. I particularly agree to make no effort whatever to leave the institution without permission from the proper authorities of the institution. I further agree to sincerely apply my best efforts toward rehabilitation of myself at all times. I further agree to promptly inform both my staff physician here at the institution and attendant employee in the event that I find myself unable to conform to the agreements indicated herein.”[[11]](#endnote-11)**

Fred Chaney signed the agreement and said he was told that if he remained a patient, he would send nothing more to “outsiders” about his ideas (or any patient’s idea) as to how the hospital should function.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The response to Fred Chaney’s proposals became more immediate and widespread said the *Delta Democrat-Times* in a subsequent editorial.Chaney’s description of the conditions at the hospital and his recommendations to correct those problems were published not only in the Greenville paper but in newspapers across the state which led to investigations and mental health reform at the Mississippi State Hospital. “The public was also fired into a mood of shame and indignation by the disclosures of the [Representative Hayden] Campbell investigation and the condemnation made by the State Medical Association.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Through his stubbornness and writing Chaney continued to advocate better care of the patients at Whitfield inspiring investigations that prompted state legislative investigations and re-organization. Dr. Jaquith said it was Fred Chaney who brought to light the problems at Whitfield through the letters he smuggled to Hodding Carter, Jr. with the *Delta Democrat-Times*.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Fred Chaney was a prolific writer and covered a variety of subjects in his letters and his unpublished manuscripts written between 1940 and the late 1960’s.Healso edited a one-page newsletter distributed to patients in the hospital. He described himself as “the man who writes interesting stuff about Whitfield.” He attended to everyone’s business and on more than one occasion staff told Chaney that he had little regard for authority or anything that authority represents, and that he couldn’t run the hospital. His punishment would be the loss of ground privileges or transferred to the white male disturbed building.

Chaney wrote lengthy epistles, manuscripts and letters about projects and reforms he thought were needed at Whitfield. His “patients’ work-for-pay” proposal would ensure patients who supplied free labor at the hospital would be paid for their work. The hospital said patient labor was therapeutic and economical. And that “Work Is a Balm and Cure for Mental Ills.” The hospital needed this unpaid labor to run the farm, dairy, kitchens, laundry, and workshops. [[15]](#endnote-15) He sent his proposal not only to Carter, but to the director of the hospital, members of the Legislature, and the A & I Board.

Chaney sent the same work-for-pay program proposal to the superintendent of Parchman Penitentiary with the hope of inmates being paid for the work on the farm with part of the wages going to their dependents back home or those innocent victims of the crime.

He also proposed developing patient work programs such as a garment plant to supply Whitfield and other Mississippi institutions with institute made pants, shirts, and dresses. And to employ patient workers with the possibility of having outside jobs through vocational rehabilitation upon discharge. [1957][[16]](#endnote-16)

He wrote at length about the issue surrounding maximum security for the criminally insane in 1956, the admission laws to Whitfield, segregation at Whitfield, and supportingHodding Carter, Jr. in his fight with the white Citizens Council. Chaney also proposed and supported harnessing Mississippi’s waterways for power supply, transportation, and commerce. He corresponded with Representative Karl Wiesenburg of Pascagoula about using the state’s natural inland waterways for industrial use and having state-owned and operated permanent hydro-electric power.

Fred Chaney was well known for writing letters that would sometimes number 90 typed pages or more. It is most likely that the individuals he communicated with were familiar with his long and often flighty letters and could have very well pushed them aside. However sometimes the letters would as, Chaney would say, “hit the mark.”

“The Underworld of the Soul” is Fred Chaney’s autobiographical manuscript about madness and those who dwell in “mad-houses.” It is his personal journey of living with a mental illness through his hospitalizations. He describes his own ideas about the condition of the insane mind from a life spent among people with and without mental illness, how insane people live, and the way they think, feel, and suffer.

The existence of his manuscript was first documented in a 1943 medical record note that he had been working on this “book” and his intent was to have it published. He sent it to a publisher in New York who wrote back that he could not use the material as it was too unpleasant. Chaney replied that he could not write a bedtime story about insanity. He believed that a story written by someone who has lived in a place like Whitfield would have more weight than if it were written by a psychiatrist because the psychiatrist would have a theoretical viewpoint.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The impact of Chaney’s observations as a patient at Mississippi State Hospital and the changes he recommended to anyone who would listen served as a litmus test to the current treatment of mental illness in Mississippi. His manuscript “Mental Hospitalization in Mississippi as Known to a Patient” [1957 ND] was sent to Ms. Charlotte Capers at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History “with a letter requesting that it be held to check by its date against the future course of mental hospitalization as it develops not in vision but in fact.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Mr. Chaney noted in a letter to his mother in 1957, “Perhaps these things will lie a long time in the Archives without much interest or particular worth to anyone. Perhaps they will in the future be much used as more and more for public interest of all kinds centers upon the problem of mental health and mental hospitalization in Mississippi and elsewhere. At any rate they will be publicly available.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

*End*

*This manuscript includes information that mentions and/or references Mississippi State Hospital, however, neither Mississippi State Hospital or the Mississippi Department of Mental Health and/or its employees actively engaged in the development of this document. Further, views expressed and/or information contained within this book do not represent the opinions of Mississippi State Hospital or the Mississippi Department of Mental Health.*

1. *Mississippi Encyclopedia,* Curtis Wilke. <http://Mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/hodding-carter-jr/>. Accessed August 23, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Fred Chaney, Progress Note, August 9, 1943, Fred Chaney Medical Record, MSH. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Mississippi’s Snake Pit,” *Delta Democrat-Times,* January 16, 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Whitfield Up Again-Report Partly Shown,” *Enterprise-Journal*, April 22, 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Appointment Trouble,” *Delta Democrat-Times,* November 22, 1940. “Whitfield Brush Off,” *Delta Democrat-Times,* April 20, 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Linda Buford, *Clarion-Ledger* Staff Writer,“Suit Attacks Whitfield Conditions,” *Clarion-Ledger,* p. 1, 14a, June 18, 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “A Whitfield Patient’s Recommendations,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, January 21, 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Fred Chaney’s Proposals,” Editorial, *Delta Democrat-Times,* January 26, 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Fred Chaney, Progress Note, February 24, 1949, Fred Chaney Medical Record, MSH. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Fred Chaney, “Mental Hospitalization As Known To A Patient,” Fred Chaney Papers, Unpublished Manuscript ©1953, MDAH. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hodding Carter, Jr., “Conditions Still Subhuman, But Jaquith Has Made Whitfield Better Place,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, January 13, 1950 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. “Lions Club Told, State Mental Hospitals Play Vital Role But Could Do More,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, p12, April 20, 1961. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Fred Chaney, “The Great Need for Work-For-Pay Opportunities at Whitfield,” Fred Chaney Papers, May 12, 1957, MS Dept. of Archives and History, Jackson, MS. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Fred Chaney, Medical Record, History, August 6, 1943, Mississippi State Hospital [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Fred Chaney, “Mental Hospitalization as Known to A Patient,” ND, Fred Chaney Papers, MDAH. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Fred Chaney, Letter to his mother, February 5, 1957, Fred Chaney Papers, MS Dept. of Archives and History, Jackson, MS. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)