



DESOLATION ROW

Growing up in New Jersey, alumnus Phillip Buehler developed his lifelong interest in photographing ruins of all sorts, among them the Greystone Park State Hospital outside Morristown. Its most famous patient, he discovered, was Woody Guthrie who, in the 1950s, was suffering from little-understood Huntington's disease. Buehler's new book, *Woody Guthrie's Wardy Forty*, documents the decline of a psychiatric hospital and America's most famous folksinger.

By Christopher Hann

As a teenager, Phillip Buehler loved taking pictures of abandoned places. When he was a high school senior in New Milford, New Jersey, Buehler RC'78 and a friend hopped aboard a 12-foot aluminum rowboat and paddled to Ellis Island, a 16mm camera in tow. In the decades since, Buehler has photographed forsaken factories, retired subway cars, and shuttered military bases. He photographed a former power plant in Yonkers, New York, a military airplane graveyard in



Phillip Buehler first entered the abandoned admissions building at Greystone Park State Hospital through a broken window. He returned two dozen times to snap hundreds of photographs, everything from the barber shop to the spartan rooms for patients to the endless corridors, their walls shaggy with peeling paint. It's all captured in *Woody Guthrie's Wards Forty: Greystone Park State Hospital Revisited* (Woody Guthrie Publications, 2013). The 162-page hardcover book contains 70 of Buehler's color photographs, which capture both Greystone's grandeur and its decay. Plans are afoot to raze the sprawling facility, which is an example of Second Empire Baroque architecture. To learn about preservation efforts, visit preservegreystone.org.

Arizona's Sonora Desert, and public housing projects in New Brunswick. "When you're young, all you've got is a bicycle, or a bus to New York City," Buehler says. "The most interesting things to see are abandoned places."

Buehler's thirst for such places eventually took him to Greystone Park State Hospital, an enormous psychiatric institution north of Morristown, New Jersey. The hospital, originally called the State Lunatic Asylum at Morris Plains, was built on 700 acres and opened in 1876. It represented

an adaptation of doctor Thomas Story Kirkbride's model that was widely copied in 19th-century America. The Kirkbride Plan featured a long structure that had pavilions set back from one another to form a shallow-V pattern, giving patients good views of the landscape and plentiful ventilation, according to Carla Yarni, a professor in the Department of Art History at the School of Arts and Sciences and the author of *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

By the middle of the 20th century, Greystone's population peaked at more than 7,600 patients.

Yet by the time Buehler arrived in 2001, Greystone had long been in decline, most of its patients having been transferred and many of its buildings having already met the wrecking ball. Clutching his camera, Buehler entered the abandoned admissions building through a broken window. He would return to



Clockwise from upper left: Nora Guthrie shared her story of what it was like to visit her father, Woody Guthrie, at Greystone with alumnus Phillip Buehler, the author of *Woody Guthrie's Wards Forty*. A T-shirt was issued to patients upon their arrival. This doorway leads into one of the patient rooms. The author has made a career photographing ruins and long-forgotten locations. Buehler took artistic license to create this montage, depicting images of Woody Guthrie with his family when they visited him in the late 1950s, and how Greystone looks today.

Greystone two dozen times to snap hundreds of photographs—of the woodworking shop, the barber shop, the beauty parlor, the cafeteria building, their walls shaggy with peeling paint, and the rooms on Ward 40 with slots cut out of the bottom of the doors to allow meal trays to be served to the patients inside.

Buehler's fascination with Greystone took on a higher calling when he learned of the hospital's most famous patient, Woody Guthrie, the folk legend and author of the seminal ballad *This Land Is*

Your Land. Beginning in 1956, Guthrie spent five years at Greystone, where he was eventually treated for Huntington's disease, a hereditary and degenerative brain disorder for which, half a century later, there remains no cure. When Guthrie was admitted to Greystone, on May 29, 1956, appearing disheveled and at times delusional—"untidy and unkempt," according to the hospital's records—the doctors really had no clue what ailed him. Nor did they believe him when he insisted he was a famous

folksinger who had written 8,000 songs and received \$10,000 for his labors. ("There is a question in the mind of the examiner whether all this is fantasy.") When Buehler met Nora Guthrie, the singer's daughter and the administrator of the Woody Guthrie Archives, they embarked on a 12-year collaboration that culminated in last year's publication of *Woody Guthrie's Wards Forty: Greystone Park State Hospital Revisited* (Woody Guthrie Publications, 2013). The 162-page hardcover book contains 70 of Buehler's

color photographs, which capture both Greystone's grandeur and decay. (The title comes from Guthrie's nickname for Ward 40, where his room was located.)

Graphic designer Steven Brower juxtaposed Buehler's photographs with letters written by Guthrie while a patient at Greystone and with recollections of his time there by Nora, her brother Arlo, their mother, Marjorie (Woody's second wife), and Guthrie's musical compatriots, among them Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Harold Leventhal, Guthrie's manager. In a 1956 letter to his son Ioady, Guthrie recalled his own mother's struggle with Huntington's. "God is just giving me here my real perfect kind of a chance to just see and to just feel exactly how my own mother saw and felt," he wrote.

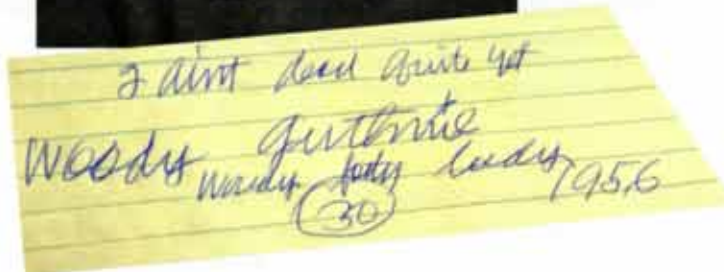
For Nora Guthrie, who never knew her father when he was healthy and who never felt truly safe in his presence, *Wardy Forty* helps to fill a critical gap in her father's biography. Although he was out of public view, she says, he was very much alive, even writing "tons of songs" while at Greystone. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Greenbriar Boys, and other young singers representing the revival of folk music at the time visited Woody to play their guitars and sing songs with him. "There was a life happening, day to day to day," says Nora, who with her mother and brother frequently made the long car trip from Queens, New York, to visit her father at Greystone, which usually terrified her. "And I thought there are not too many people who know what

that life was like, and it was up to me to show it, to put it out there."

Buehler knew next to nothing about Woody Guthrie when he first encountered Greystone (like every other teenage boy in New Jersey in the 1970s, he'd grown up a Bruce Springsteen fan). But he was



"I remember his smile," recalls Dr. Vincent Cocilovo in *Woody Guthrie's Wardy Forty*. "It was not a big smile. He had a nice quiet smile." Below, Guthrie asked his wife Marjorie Guthrie to keep him flush in yellow legal pads on which he wrote his musings, even as his writing and handwriting deteriorated. "I ain't dead quite yet," he declared shortly after his arrival at Greystone in 1956. "Woody Guthrie, Wardy Forty lordy," was his reference to the number of the ward where he lived for five years and the inspiration for the title of Phillip Buehler's moving book.



curious enough to visit the Woody Guthrie Archives, then in New York City, where he met Nora Guthrie. "He said, 'I've been out to Greystone. I took pictures,'" Nora recalls of their first meeting. "He said, 'Have you seen it? Have you been out there?'" I said, "Not in many years." It was not my happiest place."

Among the trove of papers that Nora Guthrie showed Buehler were hospital

records and the letters her father had written from Greystone. "Nora's mother saved everything," Buehler says, including, to his good fortune, her husband's case number at Greystone.

Buehler had already come across the dark room, in the basement of the admissions building, where patients were photographed upon their admission and again upon their release. "There were big file cabinets, with tens of thousands of photos," Buehler says. When he returned to Greystone, armed with Guthrie's case number, he found the singer's intake and discharge photos, with the negatives, and turned them over to Nora Guthrie.

"She kind of welled up," Buehler says. "It's tough. In one picture, her father looks like a riding-the-rails rugged guy. In the next picture, he looks 25 years older. He's obviously dying. At that point, it was pretty clear this was going to turn into something more than photographs of the hospital."

It was not an easy process. For Nora Guthrie, the photographs brought back painful memories. Yet in viewing the wasting of the buildings captured in Buehler's images, she saw parallels to her father's inexorable decimation. "When I saw the pictures of paint peeling off the walls and the abandoned barber chairs, they touched something in me," she says. "My dad was in exactly the same state. Here was the building, and here was my dad with, metaphorically speaking, the paint falling off the wall." •