



Kings Park is still an ominous and alluring destination for curiosity seekers.

Institutionalized

URBAN EXPLORERS REVIVE L.I.'S FORGOTTEN WARDS

BY JESSE SERWER

On an early October afternoon, in a portion of Nissequogue State Park that borders the Kings Park Psychiatric Hospital and contains several buildings from its old veterans wing, Selden's John Leita, Webmaster and editor of *Long Island Oddities* and www.lioddities.com, is relentlessly tailed by a parks maintenance worker.

"This guy thinks that my site is the cause of anybody who comes here looking for trouble, which it isn't," the self-professed urban explorer insists. "Urban explorers are into the preservation of these places. A lot of people don't understand that."

At another point, two men in suits emerge from a black BMW after arriving near the park's edge on a hospital road closed to the public. "It's probably the developer," Leita suggests with frustration, referencing a plan to build a closed senior-only housing development on the hospital site.

While authorities may view all visitors to Kings Park, long the home of LI folklore, as vandals, these days many of them come with an academic interest in the site's history. The hospital is the Island's ground zero for urban exploration, a hobby and, in some cases, a lifestyle, enjoyed by history- and photography-minded adventurers who get a thrill out of infiltrating man-made ruins and places the general public is not supposed to go.

"You don't have to be Indiana Jones taking expeditions around the world to see rare, historical things—you can do it right near your house," says Leita. "People think it is about breaking into buildings and taking things, but it's not. It's about making people

aware of histories that they might not want to be aware of."

And few places stir the imagination like an old, abandoned mental hospital. The massive, often maze-like structures, gothic architecture and the remnants frequently left behind make perfect fodder



"Urban explorer" John Leita outside Kings Park Psychiatric Hospital

for urban legend.

There are also few places where this phenomenon is apparent like western Suffolk County, where no less than four behemoth state-operated mental facilities have been located in close proximity to each other, each with its own unique history and all, except one, closed for good.

Kings Park is the oldest, opened in 1892 to ease overcrowding at the Kings Park Flatbush asylum in Brooklyn. Manhattan followed suit several years later, opening a farm colony for the insane that eventually became Central Islip Psychiatric Hospital. The two would become the largest mental health facilities in the country during the early part of the 20th century, before overcrowding at both led to the creation of Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood.

Now a fraction of its former self, Pilgrim remains open to approximately 600 patients, most of its premises sold off to developer Jerry Wolkoff. But with 15,000 patients during its peak years in the '40s and '50s, it was the largest mental health facility in the world.

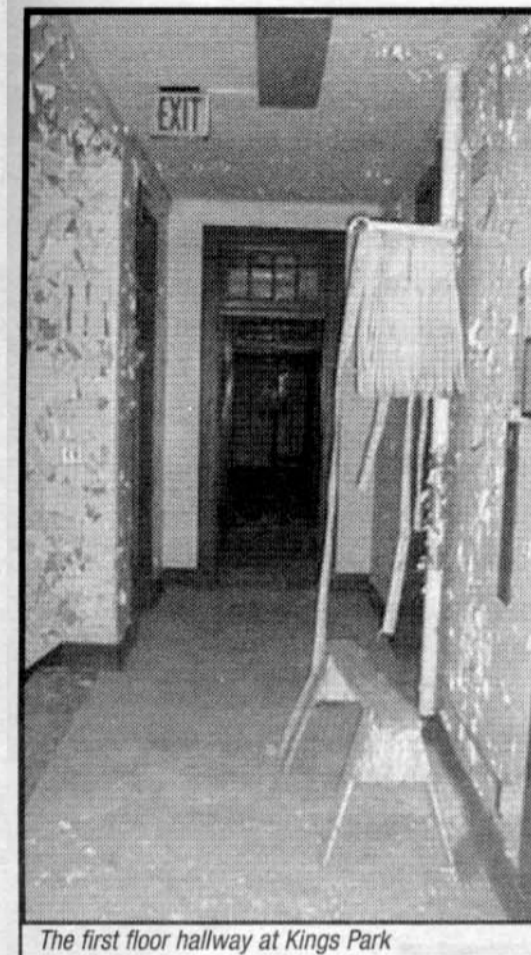
Nearby Edgewood Hospital in Deer Park was supposed to be just as big, but funds ran out on the project during World War II. Nonetheless, its main building, razed nearly 20 years after its closure in 1989, stood for decades as Long Island's tallest structure.

Central Islip has largely been redeveloped into a campus for the New York Institute of Technology. Kings Park however, while eyed by a succession of developers, has generally been deemed too costly a site, and remains mostly intact.

The first time Leita, who recently wrote, narrated and produced the DVD documentary *Forgotten Wards: The Kings Park Story*, came to the facility, it wasn't for adventure, but to visit a friend hospitalized there.

"I was already interested in these places, but the fact that some of the structures were built in 1889, you could feel this vibe," he recalls. "They had a cafeteria that was staffed by patients and open to the public. I went in there and the girl working there was badly burned because she had lit herself on fire. It left an impression."

A return trip with his wife and *Oddities* collaborator Laura after the hospital's closure in 1996 furthered his interest, and began the couple's foray into urban exploration. Using video footage donated by anonymous sources and photos and



The first floor hallway at Kings Park

documents from the Kings Park Heritage Museum, *Forgotten Wards* also features an interview with a former patient committed during the last years of the hospital's operation. The documentary is the first of a planned trilogy, with another on Central Islip near completion. A third on Pilgrim will follow.

Al Cibelli, a former Kings Park staffer who now runs a museum of NY State mental hospitals at Pilgrim State Hospital, views the urban explorers with bemused interest. "More and more, I see people in their early 20s come in here," he says. "I'll ask them what their interest is, and they don't know why. They're just interested. They are enthusiastic and they know a lot, and they tend to stay here the longest."

Much of what they've heard about the hospital's past is false, argues Leo Polaski, a seasoned urban explorer and author of *The Farm Colonies: Caring For New York's Mentally Ill in Long Island's State Hospitals*. "I enjoy the myths because they take a little bit of truth and a little bit of nonsense. But 100 percent of the stories you hear about the torture of patients are not true. It's more likely that someone will get killed now because a lot of these buildings are very dangerous."

For now however, Leita and others can continue their exploits. Two days after his near-scuffle with the ominous BMW foot soldiers, Erickson Retirement Communities backed out of its plan to establish housing for seniors on 92 acres at the site. ■

LONG ISLAND'S ODDEST PLACES

Camp Hero, Montauk

If Preston Nichols and Peter Moon are to be believed, this former Air Force base was home to some of the strangest events the world has ever seen. The pair's 1992 book, *The Montauk Project: Experiments In Time*, tells a tale of time warping, alien contact and even a ghostly Sasquatch-like beast, which launched a series of sequels, underground videotapes and lectures. But even the most open-minded paranormal believers will have a hard time swallowing things like the journey to the pyramids on Mars. Camp Hero is now a public park, casting doubt on the notion that any top-secret, time-altering experiments were conducted there; the fact that the federal government still retains what lies underground may suggest otherwise.

Mount Misery Road, Melville/West Hills

The area near the ominous-sounding Mount Misery Road is home to a wider variety of legends and stories than any other spot on the Island: hangings, mass murder sprees, UFO abductions, satanic cult rituals, cemetery-haunting ghosts and top-secret government experiments. Problem is, except for the latter, they all seem to be variations on legends from elsewhere, and none, even the existence of a lost hospital in the area, can be proven.

Reid's Ice Cream, Blue Point

While this long-abandoned warehouse was cleared last year to make room for a housing development, its ghost stories persist. It's believed that a local go-go dancer was raped and killed there in the '50s, while legend has it that a retarded boy was also killed on the premises. The ghosts of both are said to haunt the site. *Lloddities.com* has continued to receive reports of supernatural phenomenon even after the structure was demolished.

Southaven Park, Shirley

Several organizations concerned with paranormal activity on LI claim a craft was seen crashing into the woods near Sunrise Highway and William Floyd Parkway on the evening of Nov. 4, 1992 by several unrelated witnesses. Today, a cluster of trees where the crash was alleged to occur grows at a slanted angle as if they were torn out of the ground. "If you look at aerial pics you will see a bald spot in the park with no trees that almost looks like a swath was cut out," says Leita.—JS