

PODCAST SCRIPT—SIBERIA U.S.A.

Opening Music—20 seconds (?)—Fade

Actor [GE Tom]: “Bill HR 6376 has the effect of preserving a vast tract of arctic wilderness to which any citizen of the United States may be sent. Once in Alaska, the ‘patient’ may be detained incommunicado, indefinitely. Soviet Russia, as we understand, has vast areas in Siberia to which, on the whim of the right bureaucrat, any person may be sent. The machinery for this brand of exile is contained in Mrs. Green’s bill.”

Mary: These words sound like a political conspiracy theory that might currently be exploding across Twitter. That’s not the case, though. They actually appeared in 1956 in the newsletter for the right-wing American Public Relations Forum and they refer to a huge controversy that flared up that year in response to the introduction in Congress of HR 6376, otherwise known as the Alaska Mental Health Act. The Alaska Mental Health Act was a bill designed to transfer care of Alaska’s psychiatric patients back to Alaska, where they and their families lived and belonged. Opponents of the Act insisted it was a cover for a communist-backed conspiracy to create what they called Siberia U.S.A.

I’m Mary Wood...

Kristin: And I’m Kristin Yarris.

Mary: We’re working on a research project on the history of the Alaska Mental Health Act and its strange connection to Morningside Hospital in Portland, Oregon.

Kristin: Well, it’s no longer in Portland. Where it used to be, there’s now a highway and a strip mall.

[Highway sound effects—a second or two]

But from 1883 to 1968, it operated as a private psychiatric hospital in Portland and from 1904 to about 1960, the family who owned the hospital, the Coe family, contracted with the U.S. Department of the Interior to transport, house, and treat mental patients from the Territory of Alaska.

Mary: So what does Morningside Hospital have to do with the Alaska Mental Health Act and a conspiracy theory about Siberia, U.S.A.? Who latched on to this theory and why? How did it spread all the way to Washington, D.C.?

Kristin: And then who tried to expose it for what it was—a conspiracy theory—so that the Alaska Mental Health Act could be passed by Congress?

Music—3-4 seconds.

Mary: Well a lot of people were upset about the fact that mental patients from Alaska were being sent down to Oregon for treatment. It was a long, hard journey—sometimes begun by sled from remote villages— and family members in Alaska, many of whom were in Native Alaskan communities, never heard again from their daughters, and sons, husbands, wives, and even children who were sent away to Morningside Hospital. So legislators started getting involved and eventually Edith Green, a Congresswoman from Oregon, along with Bob Bartlett, the delegate from Alaska, drafted the Alaska Mental health Act. Would you say that's when the conspiracy theory started to pop up, Kristin?

Kristin: Yes, pretty much around that time. In 1956. The Alaska Mental Health Act—let's just call it the AMHA—proposed that a good way to fund the care of the mentally ill in Alaska would be through a land grant system, which had already been used elsewhere in the U.S. for schools and hospitals. The idea was that a million acres of Alaska land would be allocated towards funding of mental health care. In other words revenue produced from that land, most likely from oil, gas, and mineral extraction, would be used to fund psychiatric hospitals in the more populated areas of Alaska.

Mary: Exactly! So you can start to see where the conspiracy theory comes in. Instead of seeing that the million acres would go to fund psychiatric hospitals in, say, Anchorage, some people convinced themselves—and others—that mental hospitals, paid for by American taxpayers, were going to be built in the distant, frozen Alaska wildernesses.

Kristin: Just like the Siberian gulags that had been in the news! People couldn't see the reality of what the AMHA was trying to do because of the Cold War narratives that were shaping their thinking. Add to that the fact that they knew almost nothing about Alaska. The Alaska in their imaginations was frighteningly close to Russia and full of frozen wastelands where dissidents once declared insane could be declared insane and put away for life without a trial.

[Gate slamming shut and getting locked]

Mary: Yes! And the conspiracy theorists insisted that there were dangerous elements in the AMHA, aside from the land grant proposal, that made the commitment of

perfectly sane people way too easy. Congresswoman Green and other legislators started getting letters from all over the U.S. urging them to vote down this terrifying bill! Here's a letter to Green from a man named Will Foster Rogers of Gainesville, Florida, who mentions that he had already written to Senator Pat McNamara to denounce "the Alaska Mental Health Bill as a project for a U.S. Siberia." Rogers tells Congresswoman Green a cautionary tale about Lucille Miller of Bethel, Vermont, who was arrested for protesting the draft:

Actor: The Federal Judge halted her public trial when she started to make her defense. She was "railroaded" off to St. Elizabeths Federal Mental Hospital in Washington, D.C. on May 3, 1955. The judge had her examined by psychiatrists of HIS OWN choosing. Dr. Overholser held her in this hospital—most of the time in the violent ward—from May 3 to June 22... Only mounting public sentiment forced the Justice Department to release her. This is a glaring case of UNWARRANTED HOSPITALIZATION through conspiracy of public officials...If the government can transfer a political prisoner from Vermont to Washington, D.C. as Lucille Miller was transferred, without her consent or the consent of her family then why not to Alaska?"

Mary: So one thing that confuses me, Kristin, is that maybe Lucille Miller WAS wrongly imprisoned for political reasons. I mean, this is the era, or on the verge of the era, of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, right? It was published only a few years later, in 1962. Kesey and other writers of the time made us think about the misuses of psychiatry.

Kristin: That's true. And psychiatrists had been used during WWII, and they continued to be used during the Cold War, for interrogating political prisoners and coming up with propaganda. That's why at first we thought the Siberia U.S.A. conspiracy theorists might be aligned with someone like Kesey, who was concerned about right-wing conservatives repressing left-wing political dissidents by calling them insane. But that's not, it, right? The Siberia U.S.A. people were in line with McCarthy and other right-wing anti-Communist players of the 1950s. They were afraid that there was an international Communist conspiracy working in league with psychiatry and other mental health professions to take over the U.S. and that Siberia U.S.A. would be an American Gulag where anti-Communist defenders of the American Way would be sent, never to be heard from again.

Mary: Exactly. A woman member of the American Public Relations Forum in Van Nuys, California, that right-wing group we heard about in the beginning, coined the phrase Siberia U.S.A., and it was soon being used by groups across the U.S. and in debates before Congress.

Kristin: So who was that woman anyway?

Mary: While the archival record isn't totally clear on that, I think it's likely she was Florence Fowler Lyons, whose warnings about the dangerous alliances between communists and mental health workers appeared in the American Public Relations Forum newsletters. The women's branch of the Forum, which met at the Hollywood Women's Club, was extremely active in conservative politics and sent delegates to the national meetings of the anti-Communist Congress of Freedom. The April 1956 Bulletin of the American Public Relations Forum reports,

Actor: In the past few weeks Miss Florence Fowler Lyons has been documenting the mental health people and has found it to be completely infested with communists and fellow travelers SHE NAMES NAMES AND PEOPLE and doesn't spare a single person. You will be astounded, as we were, at the people in high places whose names are mud splattered with RED.

Kristin: This wasn't just a little local group raising their voices against the AMHA. There were people shouting out about Siberia U.S.A. from all over the U.S.--from California to Illinois; from Florida to Texas. And how were people in Alaska responding to all this controversy? They were just trying to get mental health care into their communities, right? And they had managed to get the Oregon Congressional Delegation on their side supporting the AMHA. And then this whole conspiracy business erupted!

Mary: Exactly. But the AMHA supporters didn't take it lying down. They fought back, with their own letters and articles and also on the floor of Congress. For example, the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a Chicago group that bought into the conspiracy theory whole hog, published a vehement outcry in their regular bulletin against the AMHA. Dr. Milo Fritz of the Alaska Territorial Medical Association responded from Anchorage with dripping contempt:

Actor: Gentlemen: Your fantastic "Emergency Bulletin No. 4-56 of February 25, 1956, is without question the most shocking piece of mail we have ever received. The shock is all the more severe when we consider that you have doubtless air mailed this bulletin to every medical society in the country plus countless other influential organizations and persons...It is one of the most unbelievable irresponsible actions every to come from your organization, or from any other. Your bulletin literally throbs with a palpable ignorance on the subject of the care of the mentally in in Alaska and the proposed legislation.

You might have contacted the Alaska Department of Health, the Alaska Mental Health Association, or practicing psychiatrists in the Territory, but you did not. The

content of your bulletin indicates that you made no attempt to get any facts on the situation.

In your bulletin, you state that the proposed legislation, among other things, “means the creation of a potential ‘American Siberia,’ “ to which people could be sent. Had you bothered to investigate, you would have discovered that for more than fifty years, all Alaskans committed for mental illness have been sent to an “American Siberia” in the form of Morningside Hospital in Portland, Oregon.

Kristin: That was the reality, wasn't it? These conspiracy theorists weren't thinking about the people from Alaska exiled to Oregon, so many of them who never saw their families again. The Cold War narrative of Communist takeover overshadowed the actual situation and the real needs of which patients from Alaska were not getting the care they needed, close to home and family.

Mary: Though the AMHA did pass, right?

[Gavel pounding]

Kristin: Yes, it finally passed the Senate on July 10th, 1956, with a few revisions, after being the subject of more correspondence than any bill of the prior twenty-five years.

Music