My Town, by Karl Menninger

Broadcast by NBC, December 5, 1953

My name is Karl Menninger. I'm a doctor. I'm here in New York attending a medical meeting. I live in Kansas, but I have also lived in Wisconsin, in Boston, in New York, and in Chicago. For a long time now I have lived in the Kansas town in which I was born. It's my town. I would like to tell you about it.

My town is Topeka. It's the capital of a great state. Topeka was founded 99 years ago this very day by a shivering group of ten idealistic young men who had spent the night in a crude log cabin on prairie grass beds. After they had viewed, as they recorded, "The beautiful conformation of the land spread out before us," their chairman sat down upon a sack of flour and they drew up the Articles of Association. That night their cabin caught fire and burned to the ground.

The young Pennsylvania engineer who sat on the sack of flour had previously surveyed Minnesota and Missouri before deciding that Topeka was the most beautiful and promising area for the development of his dreams. He planned the city of Topeka, and he planned a railroad to run north to Atchison, and west across Kansas, maybe as far as Santa Fe, New Mexico. His friends laughed at this, and considered him a visionary fool. But Cyrus K. Holliday was a genius, and his railroad and his city have outgrown even his vision.

Topeka isn't a very big town. When I was a boy, we used to watch the census figures and look forward to the time when we would pass 30,000 population and be a big city! It is more than triple that now, but it is still not a big city! I hope it never will be. Sometimes I wish it were only 30,000 again.

My parents were pioneers in Kansas, and in Topeka. They came west because of certain ideals. This part of the country was really developed by idealists, you may remember. It was tough going then . . . pretty primitive. Lots of hard work. Not many amusements. But lots of hope.

Not many streets were paved in my town when I was born. I can remember the mud. My father was a real horse and buggy doctor, and I often rode along with him on his calls. I can remember the horse cars, too . . . and the buggies and gigs and phaetons and carriages. The pioneers planned wide streets for Topeka, and planted lots of trees along them. They seemed big to me, even when I was a boy, playing under them or climbing them. And lots of trouble to trim around when we mowed the lawn.

In those days, our town was a publishing center. The State Capitol was here and the headquarters of a great railroad. But printing and publishing and education—they were our local pride. I have forgotten how many millions of copies of our papers and magazines go out all over the world every month.

We still publish and we still have the Santa Fe, and the Rock Island and Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific, too. We have an airport and some factories and a county lake and a big air base and a supply depot and a municipal university. Several insurance companies head up in Topeka. It is surrounded by beautiful countryside of fertile farms and ranches. (And, by the way, we do not raise wheat or pump oil—that's further west and south. We grow alfalfa and apples and beef and chickens.) Pretty country. Hillier than you think. Out of my office windows I see trees and meadows and hills in the distance; summer and winter, there are birds flitting about near the window. I like that kind of an office. When I was a boy, my brothers Edwin and Will and I used to dream of organizing a sight-seeing bus for Topeka such as we had seen in San Francisco and Salt Lake City. We thought we could meet people at the railroad stations and give them quite an interesting tour. We knew about some sights that most visitors never saw. Interesting too. We could show 'em where they trained Dan Patch, the great race horse. We could show them an oak tree all twisted around with a hackberry. We could show them an elm tree that reached out nearly 300 feet in all directions. Biggest elm in the world, we thought.

We could show them a haunted; house and several Indian graves and the Mound where old Jim Burnett used to live; he was an Indian that weighed 400 pounds and had a pony that pulled him in a cart without reins. We could show them the old Underground Railway stations— two of them. We might even take them by the insane asylum. That was a mysterious place where most people never ventured. It had a big wooded park around it, and some of us fellows had been in there, hunting walnuts or just peeking at the wild men. We had seen the great stone castles with the barred windows. Occasionally we actually saw some of the "crazy people," marching along in groups with guards beside them who motioned to us to stay back. It was scary. But quite a sight.

That was a long time ago.

I sometimes feel as if my boyhood dream about running a sightseeing bus had almost come true. Hundreds of visitors come to Topeka today; I guess I should say thousands. People come to consult our great historical library and museum and they come to speak at our university and they come on business and to conventions. But perhaps most of them come to visit our hospitals, especially our psychiatric hospitals. Several of our people do little else but show visitors around, every day. We might go with them for a few minutes tonight, if you like.

I am sure that they would show you all the things I have mentioned; and our beautiful high school and churches and pretty homes and lawns and our municipal rose garden that my father started, and the new library and the Kaw river. They would show you a lot of things.

But, finally, they would get around to showing you our hospital.

It is funny how this little publishing town, this railroad town, this State Capitol town, should have turned into such a hospital city. There is the big Santa Fe Hospital and the tuberculosis hospital and the fine Catholic hospital. We have one of the finest medium-sized general hospitals in the world, really owned by the city although it is a private hospital. The farsightedness of the Episcopalian pioneers who set aside the ground plus the generosity of one of the early doctors and the vision of Dr. Merrill Mills, our senior surgeon, were supported by the contributions of every citizen of the community. Then there is a private psychiatric hospital, too, which began 25 years ago, and is just completing a new building that has all the modern features that could be discovered anywhere in the world. We are proud of it, too, because it was contributed to us, contributed by people all over the United States.

Then I am sure that your guides would show you the Winter Veterans Administration Hospital because it is kind of special. General Omar Bradley and General Paul Hawley started a training program for young psychiatrists at this hospital right after the close of World War II, and more of those young doctors have been trained here than in any place in the world. This training is still going on, too, in spite of the fact that the old Army-hospital pavilions are just about to fall down. With nearly a section of land to build on, however, and an appropriation from Congress last year, there will be a magnificent new psychiatric hospital there to replace the old one, and it will still be the Veterans Administration's chief training hospital. Lots of people come to see it.

Your guides would probably tell you how thousands of people moved to Topeka to help operate this hospital, to take care of other thousands of people who came to Topeka to be cared for in it, or to study or attend lectures. They will probably tell you how many thousands of Topekans — businessmen, housewives, college students, store clerks, lawyers, and plumbers come out on Saturday afternoon and Sunday and evenings and mornings and holidays to do volunteer service. Some have given over 7000 hour’s service to it, and 27 organizations have regular working representatives. One of our volunteers, who has come for seven years, is blind, and one comes out in a wheel-chair.

It's the same at the State Hospital. And I'm sure our guides would take you over to see that. Because it is a part of the system. Topeka is the only city in the world, I guess, where the federal government and the state and the county and the city and private organizations all work together cooperatively and harmoniously in one integrated unit.

You will be surprised when you see our state hospital. Its buildings are pretty old but its beautiful grounds look like a college campus. You'll be welcomed and you won't see any wild men walking around with guards. You will see lots of people out on the grounds, playing baseball, sketching on easels, sitting under trees talking, mowing the lawns, making bouquets from the garden, or picking strawberries, nurses in white here and there. You would even see children playing around on the grounds, too, because there is a Children's Department. You won't believe these are patients—but most of them are.

You will have a hard time parking because there are lots of cars there now. Didn't used to be any. There is an Out-patient Department where people from all over Kansas come for psychiatric advice, without any implication of their being called "insane" or some other damning word. And relatives of patients who were once frightened away and discouraged from coming are now encouraged to come, and often. The patients give parties for their relatives right on the wards, and a good time is had by all. This makes for a good deal of popular education, too. There is a big canteen on the hospital grounds; people lunch in it and have cokes and coffee, and the Junior League girls of Topeka are the cooks and waitresses. Good food, too. There are tree clubs and bird clubs and sewing classes and art classes among the patients. A professor of music from the university comes down every weekend and supervises a staff of musicians and musical programs which have been organized in various parts of the hospital with an orchestra and a band and various choruses and quartets. Oh, it is a lively place, the state hospital! And it is a part of the community. That's the important thing.

For example, you know how at Christmastime some towns have a municipal Christmas tree. Well, in Topeka our municipal Christmas tree is located on the State Hospital grounds! It has a big Santa Claus on top, and the patients help decorate it. At the foot there is a big box and the people of the town drive thru the grounds to see the lights and the Santa Claus, and they drop gifts in the box, thousands of them. Every patient gets presents at Christmas.

Some of our patients at the State Hospital only sleep there; in the day time they work in various stores and factories and hospital kitchens and other places. This is often the first step in their moving out of the hospital and returning to normal life. For from that institution, formerly called the insane asylum, now the great majority of our new patients leave within 12 months to return to their homes or to useful work. And the people of Topeka know this, now. They know that most mentally ill patients get well if they are treated right—treated with kindness and patience and love and skill, not only by doctors and nurses and aides and therapists but by the whole community. The people in my town are no longer afraid of patients. They know too many of them. And they feel responsible for them.

Some of our patients have been in the hospital for quite a while, so long that they have almost forgotten how to live outside. So, when they do get well, they are a little shy about various social amenities. A group of women in our town started a club for patients who were soon to leave the hospital, to kind of retrain them in social living. The club meets at the homes of various women about town for teas and luncheons and little parties. They have lots of fun re-learning how to be with people in the outside world. Its originator, Mrs. George Bishop, was written up in the Ladies Home Journal.

But she is only one of many citizens who have discovered that it is not only the sick people who are benefited when a town gets interested in psychiatric illness. There is something about work with sick minds and hearts that makes ordinary people more sensitive to suffering, more tolerant, more human—even to each other. They discover that love cures people, the ones who receive love and the ones who can give it, too.

I don't mean to say that the people in my town are better than the people in your town, but I think we are better than we used to be, partly because of living so close to our sick people, and seeing them get well, with such a little help from us.

The thing I am trying to emphasize here is that it is a two-way process. There is a woman in our town who for years led the life of an invalid, although she wasn't any one's patient. She never went out socially but stayed at home, lonely, frightened, and depressed. She heard about the club I was describing and somehow they managed to get her to invite them to her home. She was so amazed that these nice people were actually mental patients that she became one of the regular sponsors of the club, and went everywhere with it. Well, in the course of things she regained her own mental health completely and has a real zest for life now and takes part in lots of other things. The patients themselves catch onto this phenomenon, and feel proud to think that the ones that are helping them are also being helped by it.

At Winter Hospital we have a nationally known artist who gave up her personal career in favor of teaching painting to our patients. The chef of one of our hotels was badly burned one day thru the clumsiness of one of our patients who was working as his helper, but before he was taken to the doctor for treatment, he took time to comfort the patient and assure her that he knew it was only an accident and could happen to anyone and for her not to feel bad.

I was buying a suit recently and noticed one of our patients sitting in the corner of the store, doing nothing. I asked the manager about him, and he said, "Oh, yes, I hired him; most of the time he is a pretty good clerk, but the last few days he has been a little depressed and hasn't done much. But we'll carry him along, and he'll be back on the job shortly."

There is a leading banker in our town who is now one of the officers of the Menninger Foundation. I have often heard him confess, in his earnest appeals to audiences in other cities, how he used to scoff at the whole psychiatric business. He tells his listeners that they will wake up some day, like he did, and realize that the stone rejected by the builders has become the head of the corner.

Just before I came here I was walking thru the state hospital and I saw one of our local store owners helping a group of patients make Christmas decorations. His downtown store was jammed with shoppers, I am sure, right then, but that didn't interfere with his regular weekly visit to his group at the state hospital.

I can't prove it but I am pretty sure that when people overcome their fear and prejudice against mental illness, they become healthier-minded, and hence, more tolerant in other ways. None of our hospitals make any differentiation with respect to race or sex or color among patients or employees or volunteers. This came about very naturally. It rubbed some people the wrong way at first, but no one stopped coming and I think everyone likes it better now. They are even proud of themselves.

I am proud of them, too. I am proud of all this, and grateful, too. Because, as you see, the people in my, town have been very good to me. I mean they listened to what we told them a long time ago, and there is nothing so nice as to have people listen to you! Oh, there were some skeptics and scoffers; it was kind of tough sometimes in the early days. And, to tell the truth, we didn't think of ourselves as missionaries. It was a good town and my brother and I wanted to come back here to it, after living in the East a while. We have been as surprised as anyone else at the result. We didn't start out to convert anyone.

We just started out with an ideal. It was mostly my father's. He celebrated his 91st birthday last summer, and everyone loves him. They've named a street after him in Topeka, and talk of naming other things for him. Long ago he had the ideal of doctors working together. He said if we would work together and strive for the highest standards, people would be, grateful and come here from everywhere. He used to be a general practitioner, but way back before 1918, he had been especially interested in psychiatry. He greatly admired the wonderful Ernest Southard of Harvard. Southard believed that people who recognized their own mental problems tried to do something about it were often the finest and wisest people in the world. Something can be done, for them.

 The ones to worry about are those who don't ever suspect themselves of any mental infirmity but are always sure that it is all the other people in the world who are crazy or wicked or disloyal. Some of these people whom no one calls crazy might well be locked up somewhere for life; it might prevent a few kidnappings and other crimes. But a long ways from Topeka, if you please; because our conception of psychiatric hospitals here is not confinement; we think they are places to get well in, places in which to be treated, places in which to learn to understand one's self, to learn how to live.

It may strike you as odd for me to call psychiatry learning how to live, but all you have to do to realize how many people don't know how to live is to look about you. And a good many of them do come to us. One out of every twelve children born in this country goes to a mental hospital some time during his life. That's about 250,000 people a year somewhere in our country. One out of every two patients going to a doctor or to a general hospital for what he calls a physical illness is suffering from a condition which is at least partly mental. It costs us more than a billion dollars a year in tax funds just to take care of these patients as inadequately as we do now. All this is to say nothing about crime and vandalism and juvenile delinquency and industrial sabotage and absenteeism and drunkenness and divorce, all of which we psychiatrists regard as evidence of not knowing how to live very well.

It is an awareness of these problems that has sustained the members, governors and trustees of the Menninger Foundation in their efforts to develop in Topeka a center of psychiatric work—treatment, education and research in the field of mental illness. I have said a good deal about the help my fellow townsmen have given me. I haven't said much about how the people of Milwaukee and Chicago and Los Angeles and San Francisco and Dallas and Houston and Minneapolis and Wilmington and New York and Washington have helped us. I haven't described how our governors and trustees come to Topeka regularly for our meetings, sending their money ahead of them and after them. And I haven't said much about the visitors from Canada and Peru and Baghdad and Siam and Calcutta and Copenhagen that keep coming all the time to see what we are doing or to join us for a time in Topeka. I haven't said much about my father who inspired all this, or about my brother Will who has always been my partner. He has devoted himself for the last few years to the national community—trying to show perceptive men and women in business, industry, medicine and the home that psychiatry is their business—not the esoteric specialty of a few doctors, but the proper study of all of us by all of us.

I haven't mentioned our American psychiatric colleagues who have given us so much help by visits and lectures and counsel. Nearly five hundred of them are members of the Menninger Foundation. I haven't said much about the professional men and women on the staffs of our clinics and hospitals in Topeka, who carry on all this work. When they are not working, they are playing in our Civic Orchestra or acting in our Civic Theater or teaching in our Sunday schools or working in our Art Institute and our Audubon Club and our Parent-Teacher Associations, and all the rest.

What I have been talking about has been the joint and united effort of all these people. There are over ten thousand of us in Topeka directly connected with psychiatry, either as patients or relatives or as doctors or nurses or aides or secretaries or gardeners or something! There are ten thousand more who are indirectly connected with us in helping people to learn to live and indirectly learning to live themselves.

So you see Topeka has changed since I was a boy. It has become rather psychiatric. But I don't believe even our worst enemies would call it a "crazy" town. No, it is a pretty nice town. It is a friendly town. It is a busy town. It is an intelligent town. I love it. When I finish with this broadcast, I'll get on the train and go back to it. It's where I belong, there with those kind hearts and gentle people, the folks in my home town.'

My father had an idea and an ideal; my brother and I worked at it, but everybody helped develop it. We're all proud, together. I couldn't begin to tell you how many people helped. Still do. I'd like to call out some of their names over the radio right now, and say, "Hello, Dave! Hello, Laird! Are you listening to this? Have I told the story right? This is the way we did it, isn't it?"

But I can't call all the names; there are so many. Some of them are asleep now; some of them are lying in our Mount Hope Cemetery. That includes my mother; she helped, too; still does.

And, since last Monday, it includes my wonderful father.

It includes some of the fellows with whom I picked up walnuts out there on the grounds of the "insane asylum," a long, long time ago.

Well—that's our town. I am proud of it. This is my tribute to it. We grew up together. It has changed in half a century—so have I. Psychiatry has changed Topeka, and perhaps Topeka has helped to change psychiatry. We have no "insane asylum" any more. We have a psychiatric community, in a wonderful American town. Come out and see it sometime!