

**The Narcotic Farm**

# The Narcotic Farm

The Rise and Fall of America's  
First Prison for Drug Addicts



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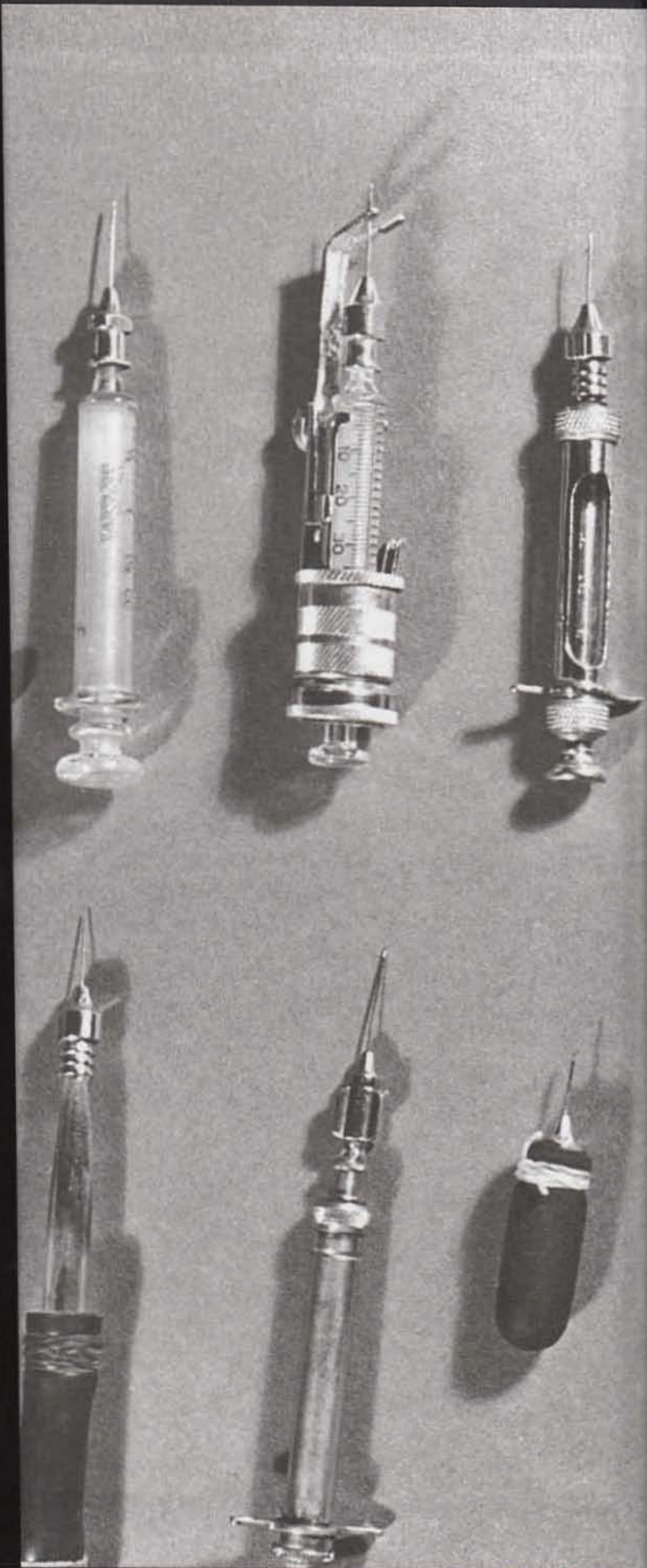
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From its opening in 1935, the United States Narcotic Farm in Lexington, Kentucky, epitomized the nation's ambivalence about how to deal with drug addiction. On the one hand, it functioned as a compassionate and humane hospital, an "asylum on the hill" on 1,000 acres of farmland where addicts could recover from their drug habits. On the other hand, it was an imposing federal prison built for the incarceration of drug addicts.

"Narco," as it was known, was a strange anomaly, a coed institution where federal convicts did time alongside volunteers who checked themselves in for rehabilitation. It became the world's epicenter for drug treatment and addiction research. For forty years it was the gathering place for this country's growing drug subculture, a rite of passage that initiated famous jazz musicians, drug-abusing MDs, street hustlers, and drugstore cowboys into the new fraternal order of the American junkie.

It began as a bold and ambitious public works project. But Narco was shut down in the 1970s amid changes in drug policy and scandal over its drug-testing program, where hundreds of federal convicts volunteered as human guinea pigs for pioneering drug experiments and were rewarded with heroin and cocaine for their efforts.

*The Narcotic Farm* tells the compelling story of the institution's noble rise and tumultuous fall, and includes rare and unpublished photographs, film stills, newspaper and magazine clippings, government documents, as well as recollections from the prisoners, doctors, and staff who lived and worked there.





This general view shows the inmates of the United States narcotic farm near Lexington, Ky.

# Drug Addicts Have a Future

By C. S. van Dresser

Great Narcotic Farm

Operated by United States  
Public Health Service Is  
Achieving Excellent Results

It is estimated that the United States public health service has more than 100,000 and 120,000 more addicts in America. To the average man their present means of escape from their addiction seem to be either the jail or the penitentiary, and the latter is a horrible death compared to such alternatives as being hospitalized in a public hospital, or being treated in a private hospital, or being treated in a state or county hospital. The latter two means are not only more expensive but also more likely to result in a relapse than the other two means.

There are two ways out for a man suffering from a drug addiction. One is to go to a public hospital, and the other is to go to a private hospital. The latter two means are not only more expensive but also more likely to result in a relapse than the other two means.

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Physically checks symptoms of the latest drug habit in one of the laboratories of the Lexington farm.



Recreation in one of the outdoor and is treatment of narcotic addicts at the United States farm at Lexington, Ky. Shows are the drug farms of the institution.

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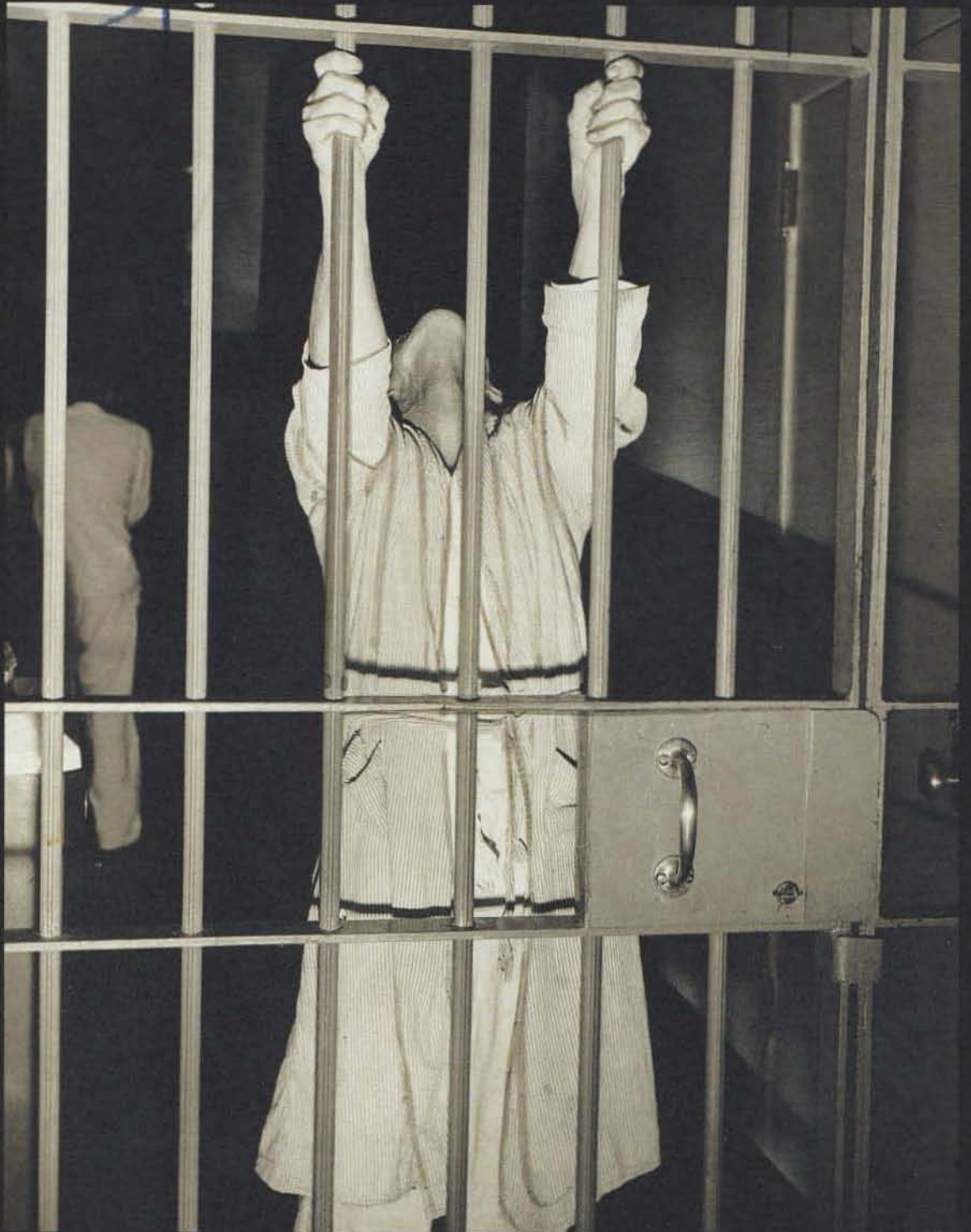
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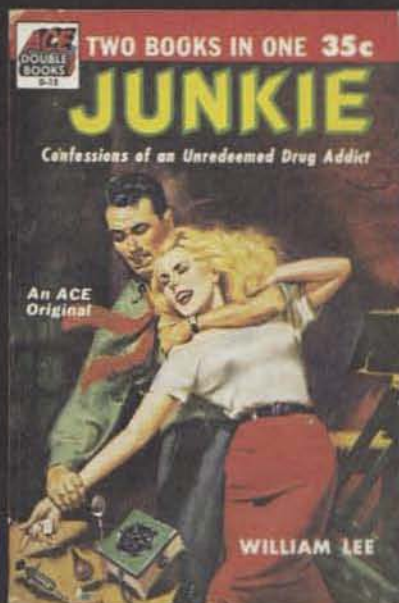
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This photo appeared in a 1951 *New York World-Telegram and Sun* series on the prison. The original caption read: "This desperate narcotics addict, caught like his

fellows in the revolving door of law enforcement, will probably go back to his habit when he is free." Photo by Robert E. Stigers.

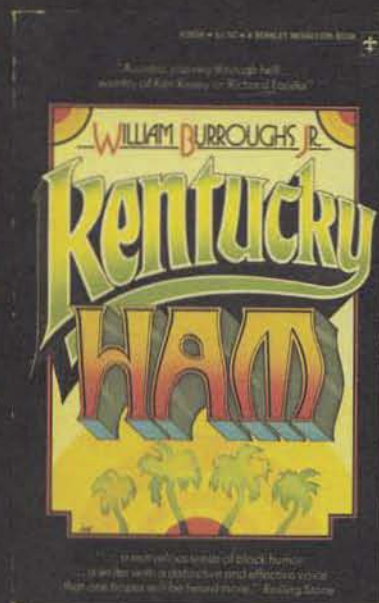


01. *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* was William S. Burroughs, Sr.'s, second book. This thinly veiled account of his life as a heroin addict in post-World War II America includes a section recounting his experience signing himself into the Narcotic Farm in 1948. The book, published in 1953, was originally credited to "William Lee," Burroughs's mother's maiden name. 1953 edition cover.



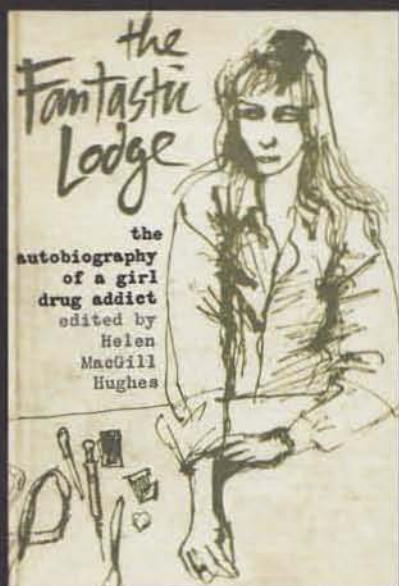
01

02. *Kentucky Ham* is a 1973 novel by William S. Burroughs, Jr., that recounts his time as a Lexington patient. Like his father, Burroughs spent time at the institution as a result of his drug addiction. An alcoholic and amphetamine addict for most of his life, Burroughs died at the age of thirty-three. 1973 edition cover.



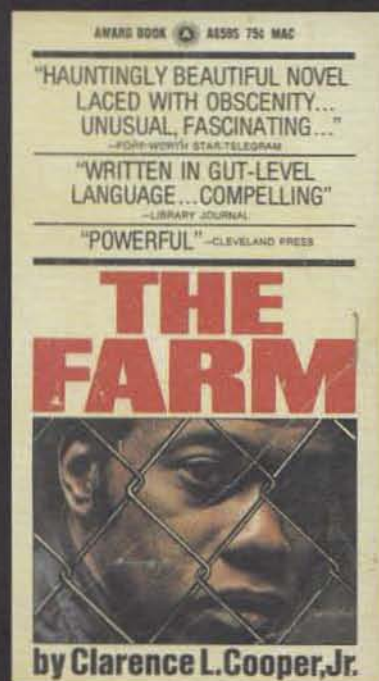
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03. *The Fantastic Lodge: The Autobiography of a Girl Drug Addict* is a devastating tale of heroin addiction in the 1950s by a young Chicago addict who spent time at the Narcotic Farm. The book would garner great acclaim, but its author died of a drug overdose shortly before the book's publication in 1961. 1963 edition cover.



03

04. First published in 1967, former inmate Clarence Cooper's memoir *The Farm* evokes a sordid picture of life inside Narco. Cooper was a patient at the hospital in the early 1960s and died a destitute heroin addict in New York in 1978. 1970 edition cover.



04



### **When Dr. Lawrence Kolb was appointed chief medical officer**

of the Narcotic Farm in 1935, he had already established himself as a leading advocate for the humane treatment of drug addicts. Kolb believed that most addicts were driven to use narcotics because of emotional difficulties and that their addictions were curable if the underlying psychological causes were addressed. Having spent years screening military recruits for mental illness, Kolb gained expertise in assessing personality disorders, which enabled him to design a classification system for sorting patients into groups that reflected the perceived severity of their psychological illness. This system, the "K Classification," was the first set of diagnostic criteria for assessing addiction and systematizing, in a scientific manner, the evaluation of patients. It was used for decades at the Narcotic Farm.

Psychotherapy—administered in individual or group sessions at Lexington—was the doctors' tool of choice to adjust the maladjusted. But Narco's treatment capacity was limited; there were never more than one or two psychiatrists per 100 patients, so group therapy, rather than individual therapy, became the norm. Psychiatrists and counselors routinely encountered resistance and bad faith in patients, who resented them for their authority, race, or class.

But even for patients committed to giving up drugs, hard-won personal insights gained through psychotherapy were rarely enough to combat their addiction. Former patient David Deitch, who later became a leading authority on drug treatment, has positive recollections of his weekly psychiatric sessions. "I felt that at last I had someone I could talk to," Deitch says. "Someone who could understand some of the things that I'd gone through." Yet as Deitch recalls, he relapsed within a day of his release from the institution: "Despite all the progress I had made toward understanding the causes of my involvement with drugs, it wasn't enough."

Lexington's approaches to therapeutic treatment evolved as time wore on. In the 1950s, for instance, a type of treatment known as "milieu therapy" took hold, whereby everyone in the prison environment—including detox specialists, guards, janitors, and health aides—contributed to reinforcing the value of the treatments being offered, which included work therapy, recreation, and living in an environment where drugs were not easily available.

In the mid-1960s, the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act prompted other changes. Between 1968 and 1973, men and women who qualified could serve six months of civil commitment for drug treatment in lieu of jail. In many cases, young people who had run afoul of the law because of drugs could have their criminal record expunged if they sought treatment. Overnight, Lexington became one of the nation's main centers for the civil commitment program, as people from all over the country opted for treatment over incarceration.

Narco cut down prison bars and let patients put up beads and curtains. "Patients" and "inmates" were now "residents" who didn't live in the "population" but rather in "therapeutic communities," which they organized inside the institution. Rules were relaxed in hopes that more freedom would lead to more open acceptance of treatment. Patient-directed rehabilitation, modeled after well-publicized therapeutic communities such as Synanon and Daytop Village, became the main treatment in what was no longer a prison but a "federal correctional institute."

Institutional support for therapeutic communities culminated in the formation of five "houses" on Narco's grounds. Three of these houses, Excelsior, Numen, and Ascension, were set up in separate wings of the main building. YOUunity House opened in a separate building, as did Matrix House, the only coed house. The most experimental and ideological of the houses, Matrix had no staff, little oversight, and was allowed to recruit members from the outside community—called "squares"—to live communally with recovering addicts. Jon Wildes, a former heroin addict who had previously spent time at the institution as a convict, was hired by the federal government to run the facility.

Today, Matrix House is remembered by some former members as a sincere attempt at creating a utopian community. Others see the group as a cult that debased its own members. The program centered on a confrontational style of group therapy called "The Game," which was developed by the California-based therapeutic community Synanon. The Game encouraged members to single out and attack, scold, or ridicule anyone perceived as being dishonest with themselves or others. In this setting, where as many as sixty recovering addicts lived together, no peccadillo went unnoticed or unpunished.

The Game sometimes went on for hours at a time. Although physical violence or threats of physical violence were not allowed, few other boundaries were observed. Screaming, crying, and hugging were embraced as therapeutic. But the lines of what constituted treatment and what constituted cruelty blurred as the group leader, John Wildes, became increasingly abusive. In 1972, amidst allegations of torture and weapons possession, five Matrix House members were arrested. Wildes was later imprisoned for possessing firearms on federal property.

Despite the spectacular failure of Matrix, the practice of addicts helping addicts is employed successfully today in twelve-step programs and therapeutic communities around the world. As the birthplace of modern addiction treatment, Lexington was home to many optimistic attempts to find a cure. Virtually every treatment now offered to those in recovery was once attempted—with both success and with failure—at the Narcotic Farm.

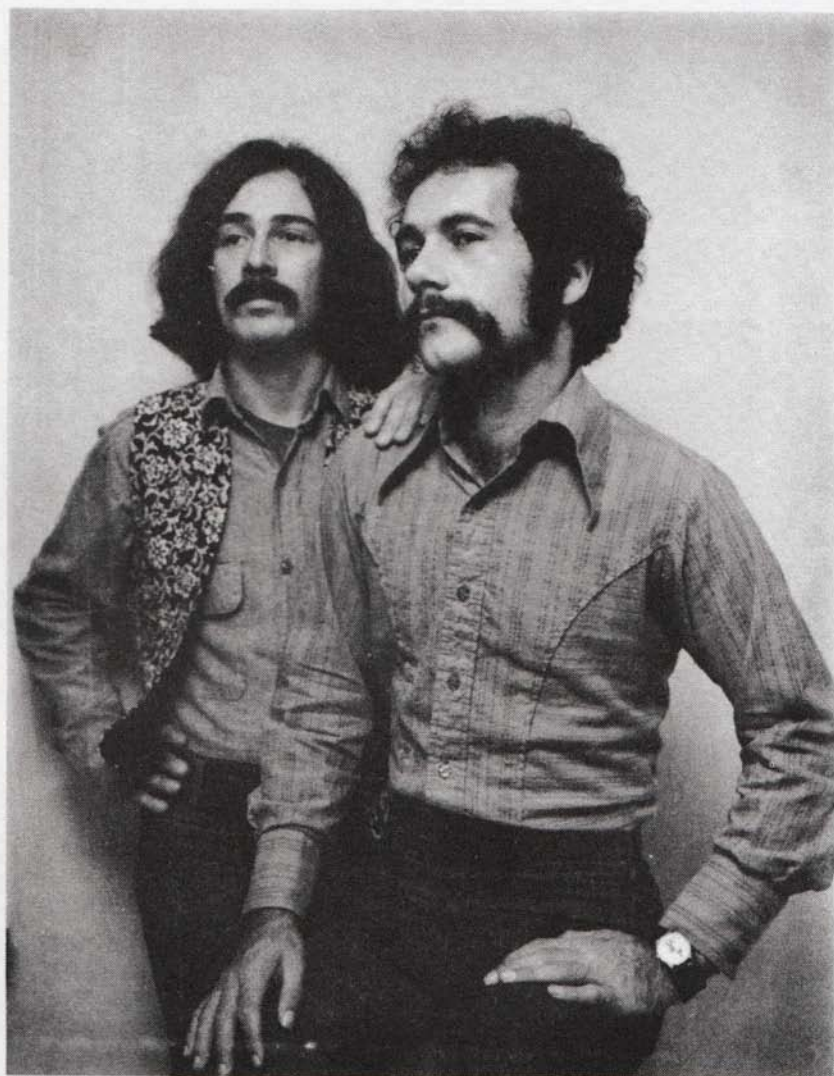


Members of Matrix House, one of the institution's new therapeutic communities, were allowed to occupy Koib Hall, the former women's building, in April 1970. It was pro-

noted by the institution as a highly successful, self-governing coed community of recovering addicts and non-addicts, but closed amid allegations of abuse in 1972.



A page from Matrix House's promotional brochure. Matrix ushered in a new era at Narco in which drug treatment was directed by patients themselves.



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