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THE JOLIET PRISON AND THE RIOTS OF JUNE 5th

A. L. BOWEN¹.

June 5th, Registration Day, prisoners in the Joliet Illinois State Prison revolted, started a riot of intimidation and assault upon employees, set fire to buildings and shops and were thwarted in their plans for wholesale escape by federalized state militia. The riot attracted nationwide attention. Newspaper accounts were highly colored, but their substance was in the main a true picture.

The disturbance was quelled in a very short time. Property damage was small, notwithstanding that the rioters set fire to nearly all buildings in the compound. Not a shot was fired and the only casualty was the death of an aged prisoner who jumped from a burning building and fractured his skull. The prison was under military guard for nearly a month following the riot.

PHYSICAL CONDITIONS IN AND AROUND THE PRISON.

This affair is of interest to the student of prison questions because it teaches some severe lessons regarding discipline within prison walls.

Joliet prison is one of the old penal plants of the country. It was built sixty years ago; consequently, it is obsolete and inadequate. The cell houses, two in number, contain 900 stone cells, erected in blocks, four tiers high in one house and five in the other. The male population is nearly 1,700, of whom about 200 are on the honor farm, where extensive farming and gardening are in progress and a new prison is in course of construction. The 1,500 men residing in the old prison are forced into these 900 cells, which are not provided with toilet facilities and are too small for one man. Forced draft furnishes some relief. The cell houses are dark, the windows being narrow slits in the thick stone walls, and sunlight never penetrates the cells. Located across a narrow boulevard, to the south, are the immense plants of the U. S. Steel Company. Smoke, gases and a fine black dust, composed of iron, soot and cinders pour into the cell houses when the wind is from the south, southeast or southwest. To the east, across the main highway from Joliet to Chicago—a road traversed by thousands of automobiles and interurban trains—is a rock quarry, where stone is blasted, crushed into various sizes and

¹Superintendent of Charities for the State of Illinois, Acting Warden at Joliet Prison at the time of the strike.

shipped, free of charge, except freight, to cities and towns of Illinois for road construction. Four hundred prisoners, four times daily, pass through the east gates of the prison yard and cross this busy highway going to and coming from their work in this quarry.

The honor farm where the new prison is being erected, is located four miles northwest of the old prison. Twenty-two hundred acres of land are under cultivation. One hundred acres have been reserved for the new prison and yards. One hundred of the men on this farm labor on the new prison and the other hundred on the farm and garden and in the care of the quarters. There are no fences or walls about this colony. The men live in frame barracks. They are upon their honor to remain and to make good the drastic pledges they have taken. Of this farm I shall write later.

At the old prison the entire population eat in a congregate dining hall.

There are within the walls, a three-story hospital building, a steam power plant, a foundry, a shoe factory, a furniture factory, a reed and rattan furniture factory, a library, chapel and store house, kitchen, bakery and dining room, and the roofless ruins of several shop buildings which have been destroyed by incendiary inmates during recent years.

RECENT HISTORY OF THE PRISON MANAGEMENT.

For fourteen years prior to 1913, this prison had been under the wardenship of E. J. Murphy. He had introduced a number of reforms, such as the elimination of the lockstep and the striped suit and had erected the general dining room. He had given the men the privilege of conversation among themselves. But with all these changes to his credit—in those days looked upon as radical—Mr. Murphy was regarded as one of the old school of strict disciplinarians, meeting every emergency promptly and vigorously and, no doubt, often rigorously.

When Edward F. Dunne became the chief executive in 1913, he appointed as warden at Joliet, a fine looking, popular, young man of Joliet, Edmund M. Allen, whose father, in the nineties, had rendered distinguished service as head of this prison.

Gov. Dunne was known to believe in the most advanced theories of prison management and discipline. Mr. Allen entered upon his duties with the same views and at once set to work to put them into effect. It is scarcely exaggeration to say that the prison was transformed over night from one in which old fashioned methods had prevailed, to one in which privileges and liberties advocated by the most radical modernist, were granted to all alike. I wish to emphasize

here the fact that these privileges and liberties were granted to all without respect to personal fitness to enjoy them, individual conduct, merit or record.

Honor road camps were established. The public was freely admitted to the yards and shops. The new regime was given wide and generally favorable publicity. Mr. Allen tried to give the place a new personal touch which would bring the men into closer relationship with himself.

Of his sincerity of purpose I never have had doubt. I know the big heart that animated every act of Governor Dunne, and I must not be understood as criticising them for what they did or tried to do. Whether there are inherent defects in the system they advocated or simply in the technique of its application, I shall not attempt to discuss, though I am inclined to believe the fault lay in the latter rather than in the system itself. I wish only to record what took place in this prison and trace out for my readers the course that events took culminating in the riot of June 5.

Mr. Allen had served almost two years when the violent tragedy occurred in June, 1915, which shocked the whole nation. Its details are still fresh and I shall not recall them. Mr. Allen resigned soon afterwards and was succeeded by Mr. Michael Zimmer, who had made a fine record as a public official in Chicago. Mr. Zimmer continued the Dunne-Allen policies with certain modifications and restrictions. Some of the most glaring faults of the two years preceding were removed.

Mr. Zimmer's work attracted attention. The tragedy which I have just mentioned naturally had thrown the prison into great confusion. Incendiary fires and the murder of one prisoner by a fellow prisoner added to the complex situation which he confronted. An unrest and agitation that even the kindly attitude of Warden Zimmer or the liberties enjoyed by the men could not calm, handicapped him at every turn. Toward the men Mr. Zimmer was kindness and consideration personified. No man could ever do more to make prisoners satisfied and comfortable. He even jeopardized personal dignity to please them; to grant their requests he went far beyond the requirements of duty.

AD INTERIM WARDENSHIP AND THE MOB SPIRIT.

Soon after the election of Mr. Lowden as Governor of Illinois, Mr. Zimmer was selected as warden of the Cook County hospital and desired to enter upon that service on May 1. For seven years I had served as Executive Secretary of the State Charities Commission—an advisory body in the conduct of State charities, and had just been

appointed Superintendent of Charities, to begin service July 1. I had had nothing to do with the prisons and had not even visited them. When Mr. Zimmer asked to be relieved on April 30, I was instructed by telegraph to take charge of the prison pending the appointment of a permanent warden. The message instructed me to maintain the *status quo*. This I tried conscientiously to do.

I informed the prisoners on my first day that their privileges would not be interfered with during my short stay, that I did not intend to inaugurate any changes because the permanent warden on his arrival would desire to put into effect his own ideas; therefore, it would be unwise for me to make changes which could have no other effect than to complicate the situation and embarrass him. I could discern nothing in the faces of those 1,500 men to indicate what effect my words had produced.

For a day or two the daily grind was peaceful and regular. Then came a strike in the quarry; then followed a stabbing affray in the quarry; then came protests from guards and foremen against the insulting language of the prisoners. Foremen complained that men would not stay in their places of employment. Old employees warned me that hundreds were congregating at the east gate as the quarry gang came and went.

Quietly I made personal investigation. What had been told me was true. My own sympathetic attitude towards the men was being interpreted as weakness. I realized that all the disquieting predictions which accompanied me to Joliet and there repeated themselves were well founded. In less than a week I understood that, before long, serious trouble would occur, no matter who the warden or how trivial the inciting cause might be. Challenge was in the air. The spirit of revolt seemed to have substance, it was so apparent. Strangers and visitors felt it and remarked about it. Manifestly conditions could not continue without serious results. Seeing trouble ahead I prepared to meet it and when it came, the plans laid weeks before, proved to be adequate and workable, thwarting the obvious objective of the men and preventing loss of life.

It required only a day or two after my arrival for me to size up the situation and I can summarize it no better than in the three words: Idleness, money, women.

Idleness in this prison had been enforced upon it by contractors, manufacturers and labor unions. Here all these had made common cause to throw out industries which employed prisoners. And they had succeeded. A shirt factory, a broom factory, a school fixture factory and others had passed away, junking valuable machinery and cost-

ing the State large sums for equipment that was never allowed to get into full working order. Even the necessities of the prison were being purchased on the open market at retail prices when facilities and men to make them were idle within the walls. Idle hands found much to do.

Plotting and counterplotting was always in process. Incendiary fires had been frequent and oftentimes destructive; fighting and bloodshed were common. Two prisoners had been murdered in the dining room. Murder had been committed in the warden's home. Four convicts had killed themselves by drinking wood alcohol made from a combination of shallac and salt.

Combined with the evil of money in hand, this idleness brought about conditions which were intolerable. It may interest my readers to know how money came to be plentiful. First there was the traffic in contraband. There appeared to be specialized tradesmen in various kinds of junk. Iron pipe would be spirited out of the yards by one gang, brass castings and junk by another, lead junk by another. The machinery in the shops had been raided for its brass and copper. Fire extinguishers put up one day would be gone the next. Even the boilers which furnished heat were once robbed of their brass and valves. The clothes rooms suffered similar depredations; even shaving soap, razors and brushes were stolen in midnight raids. Liquor had been spirited into the compound. In all these evil practices, I have always felt the prisoners must have had, somewhere along the line, the help of employees. This theft on a heavy scale brought in much money. Friends contributed other funds.

"Tinkering" was a fruitful source. "Tinkering" had been inaugurated early in the Allen regime on a limited scale to provide the convict with a little spending money. Illustrating the convict's disposition to take his mile when allowed an inch, "tinkering" became the rage and grew beyond control by peaceful means. At first men were restricted to very small articles. But their product grew in size until it included rattan lamp stands four and five feet high, rocking chairs, settees and the like. A large room was necessary to hold and display their stock. While they were turning out poor product for the State, many convicts made delicate and exquisite inlaid boxes from scraps, and otherwise demonstrated their ability as craftsmen.

In the beginning men were allowed to tinker only after they had completed their daily task. But again they "fudged" on the State until many put in more time "tinkering" for themselves than in working for the public. It was admitted to me when I entered that this

evil had gained such a hold that it could not be eliminated by ordinary peaceful means.

With money and time at their disposal they gambled openly in the yards and shops; craps and card games were numerous. I saw them in abundance. Any effort by the guards to break them up met with a laugh and a continuation of the sport in another spot. When money ran out, the shirt on the back became the stake. Pitching horse shoes and like pastimes, guessing on the state of tomorrow's weather and similar issues formed an outlet for the gambling spirit.

Money was used also to corrupt employees and other prisoners. Men boasted to me they could buy anything they wanted and I saw enough to convince me they were telling the truth.

Then came the women. The prison was visited by hundreds of them weekly; young girls and matrons, old women, all bent on curiosity, all clothed in the sex exciting garb of the day, all parading and making a holiday for themselves within sight of men who, in their liberty, never restrained their passions, and now under duress, were forced to witness this spectacle.

Letter-writing women of the Oriental Esoteric League of Washington, D. C., had become a vicious nuisance. Hundreds of the Joliet prisoners were writing every week to women or young girls whom they had never seen or heard of and were receiving prompt replies; many of these replies were suggestive; some were vulgar; some were insidious; some were forty or fifty pages long, written on scented linen paper and tied with baby blue ribbons; some breathed languorous love, some were merely friendly with good advice; some attempted to convert the men to this, that or other creed or cult. Such letters furnished sport for the men and they speculated upon the figures and faces of the writers. Requests for photographs were numerous and many of the men had succeeded in getting pictures of their fair correspondents. The suggestive letter was highly prized and the recipient was envied, while the fellow who received the kindly advice of an elderly woman was the butt of the joke. The prison censor could not begin to scan these letters. Men were neglecting their families to pursue the unknown.

One prisoner on his release promptly blackmailed the young woman he had been writing to and got \$450 of her money. Another rented quarters in the same building with his correspondent, who was a married woman. These women had commenced to visit the prisoners to whom they had been writing. Such correspondence was bound to create a desire to see each other. They were coming from Florida and Philadelphia and other far distant points.

Meanwhile the prison was disrupted on certain days by the visits of alleged sweethearts who had known the prisoners before their incarceration. One woman came to see a man whose name she had seen in a Chicago paper.

I was well aware that nearly all the men were armed with some sort of deadly weapon, some for offense and some for defense. A favorite was the stiletto made from a rat tail file. Another was a bludgeon, another a slug shot. After the riot, prisoners testified that practically all men in the place had from one to half a dozen weapons. I was informed that guns had been planted in the yards and that dynamite had been secreted in the cells. When the cells and shops were searched weapons were hauled away by the barrel full. Nearly all had been made from shop tools and materials. They ranged in size from a small razor to a meat cleaver and from a blackjack to a coupling pin. Guns were found several months after the riot. The dynamite was taken from the cells in the clean-up. Yet some have tried to convince me that these weapons were made in the shops and cells without the knowledge of employees. Some may have been, but others could not have been.

I held to my determination to do nothing which could be construed as a denial of any of their liberties, a repudiation of my promises, a change of policy or as a challenge. Yet I knew all the while that the day of reckoning was approaching.

IMMEDIATE CAUSES.

The hour came when something had to be done to prevent a wholesale delivery. Five weeks after my arrival I was forced to depart from my policy to issue no orders. Instructions were posted that all men must remain in their places of work during working hours and keep in line when going to their meals and to their cells. Many tried to secure modification of this rule, but I made no exceptions. The enticing of a negro prisoner from the Honor Farm by a woman, not related to him in any manner, caused the second order; namely, that no woman, not a wife, mother, sister or daughter of a prisoner would be permitted to enter the prison to make a personal visit.

These were the only rules issued during my six weeks' stay; they were the only modifications made in prisoners' privileges and liberties. Yet what was the result? They were made the excuse for an uprising, having for its object the destruction of the plant, the liberation of all who would go and death of any who might get in the way. I was given the alternative of a riot and a fight or an abject surrender and revocation of these reasonable and just regulations which in no man-

ner restricted any liberty to which men in prison walls could, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered entitled.

PRISON DISCIPLINE CREED.

After my experience of June 5 and succeeding days, I am supposed to be an advocate of the old rigorous system of discipline. I am not. I am decidedly in favor of privileges and liberties of every character within the prison walls. I believe in base ball, in all forms of athletic sports and games. I believe in a gymnasium and a big athletic field. I believe in an athletic director to teach men and to direct wholesome recreation. I believe in military discipline and in a crack band to furnish music on every possible occasion. I would have setting up drills for all the men, marches before breakfast and supper, squad, company, battalion and regimental drills. I believe in conversation at meals, but complete silence in the shops during working hours.

There should be liberal opportunity for letter writing. Relatives, bona fide friends of prisoners and others who may have good reason to visit a prison should be admitted freely, but indiscriminate curiosity seeking crowds should be prohibited.

Men should have the right of appeal to the warden and to address him in courteous and respectful manner.

Employment should be assigned with a view to the individual's future. Card games under strict supervision are permissible at the right time. There should be wholesome entertainment within the prison; music, lectures, motion pictures and the like. A reading room should be provided for the men of the first class. The men should be encouraged to work out their own home entertainments. Schools, vocational and manual classes, are essential.

But every one of these privileges should be a reward for good conduct and personal merit. Those who do not earn even the least of them should not be permitted to enjoy it. The model prisoner should have them all. This means classification. Classification is the first aid to discipline in any institution. This is difficult in Joliet, but it is not impossible. It requires ingenuity, alertness and co-operation on the part of the guards and foremen.

The privileges here endorsed can be granted only under strict discipline. A prison must be a place of discipline and order. It must teach discipline and order because these are the two main things which the prisoner's life in the open has lacked.

Prisoners must not be permitted to translate them into license. Some degree of self-government, to be extended as the men show capacity and self-restraint is advisable.

Changes in discipline which permit greater liberties to the men should be made slowly and gradually. This is a matter of evolution, so slow in its operation as to appear to be stationary. It must never be revolutionary. The men should not be conscious that it is taking place. It took fifteen years to eliminate mechanical restraint from the hospitals for the insane in Illinois, because the straps were dropped from patients one at a time. Freedom in the prisons must come in the same quiet, unobtrusive manner.

For the idleness the public is responsible. It should not tolerate interference with the authorities' efforts to find employment for these men. To confine them in idleness is vicious. It works a hardship upon the prisoner, by depriving him of a chance to occupy his time and mind, and to earn something for his dependents, and it reacts against the public by turning loose upon it men who are worse criminals than when they entered. A campaign of publicity to inform the public of the dire consequences of idleness in the prisons and exposures of the insidious and secret influences which enforce it upon the prisoner would correct conditions.

The public is responsible also for the evil results which flow in continuous stream from the old Joliet plant and must be charged with this responsibility. Because of its crowding, its lack of classification, its archaic plan, I cannot understand how it is possible for any man to live within its walls a year and emerge better for his experience. One is not surprised at insanity or the spread of tuberculosis and venereal infection. Sexual perversions are forced upon normal men by their cramped quarters. Every semblance of an ethical character is rudely snatched from them as soon as they enter their cells. Every avenue of descent in physical and moral being stands wide open. In such a place who would look for the upgrade?

As it stands today, the old Joliet prison is itself the pre-eminent criminal in Illinois; it violates all of society's and nature's laws in health, sanitation and morals; it breeds a class and a type that even the slums cannot furnish. Whatever of decency and spirit the prisoner may take in with him must soon dissolve in the miasma that permeates this place.

HONOR SYSTEM.

I must not close this article without a word about the honor system. In all fairness to the past, it should be explained that the term "honor system" applied only to the activities of the prisoners outside the prison walls upon the road camps and the farm. There was no honor system within the walls. There all men enjoyed equal rights and privileges, and frequently conduct, behavior and merit were not the decid-

ing considerations in picking men for the roads and farm; hence some of the failures which have been cited against the honor plan.

But the honor system as exemplified on the honor farm appeared to me to be practical and successful. Some disparaging things have been said against it, but with all that, I consider it possible of great development. Causes for all these criticisms are easily removed; in fact, had been removed before I left. The honor farm was opened in February, 1914. Up to the first of May this year, 580 men had been transferred from the prison to this farm, and only thirty-four of them had violated their pledges. The pledge is one of the severest tests to which a man might be put, and I doubt that so large a per cent of men under normal circumstances would succeed in living up to similar voluntarily assumed exactions in personal conduct.

At the farm there are temptations all about the honor man. A highway cuts through the farm within a few feet of the barracks. The avenues of escape toward Chicago are numerous and easy; they beckon, no doubt, with alluring temptations. As the technique of picking men and of interesting them in their work and their future improves, and as the proper contract between the administration and the prisoners is established, the number of mistakes and failures at the farm will grow less and less.

The men of this prison are going to return to free life. Why not afford them, on some such honor basis, a vestibule between prison and the free world. In this place they try their wings, they battle with their temptations, they grow strong, resourceful and resistive. They build up in strength and health. They fit themselves under these conditions for the next step.

With proper discipline, with visiting regulated, with women denied admission, who are not genuinely interested in the men by reason of blood or marital relations, with kindly yet firm men as employers and instructors, the honor farm scheme is certain to justify itself. In my opinion a place should be left for it in the scheme of the new prison where it may be developed and enlarged to the very limit.