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VI THE COUNTY JAIL IN CONNECTICUT

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In considering the problem of the county jail in Connecticut we ought first to question ourselves as to whether we are looking at a theoretical institution or an actual fact. If theories interest us—what are they, and what are their values? If facts absorb our attention, what do they signify? The readers of this magazine are probably most eager for information as to the way in which the material conditions of our county jails carry out the best theories of modern penology, and it is from that point of view that I shall treat the subject of the county jail, from my experience in connection with the New Haven County Jail at New Haven, Connecticut.

In the state of Connecticut the county commissioners are responsible for the upkeep of jail property,¹³ the supervision of the purchase of provisions and supplies, and the buying of materials and equipment for the employment of all prisoners.¹⁴ In the county of New Haven, the jail factory is directly under the Board of County Commissioners,¹⁵ so that the problems of factory management bring us more directly in contact with the prisoners than would be true if our responsibilities at the jail were merely those of a financial board.

The New Haven County Jail is situated in the midst of a residential section in the city of New Haven, and was built some seventy-five years ago.¹⁶ When one passes through the long corridors and looks into the narrow, dark cells, he sees in the very character of the building a modern history of penology, with enough of tragedy and horror to challenge the attention of the most indifferent person, and enough of encouragement to give us hope that the present form of punishment may not long endure.

The larger county jails in Connecticut serve not only as county institutions but also as houses of detention. City and town prisoners are kept here, as well as those sentenced by the Superior and District Courts, also men and women who are bound over on continued cases,

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¹³Secs. 188, 198, 199, 200, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

¹⁴Sec. 1971, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

¹⁵Cf. Sec. 1969, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

¹⁶Sec. 1961, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

those awaiting transportation to federal prisons, and occasionally a civil prisoner.¹⁷ The men and women live in different sections of the jail and have an entirely separate existence, except for chapel services or general gatherings for any form of entertainment which may be brought to the jail by the community. In the women's side of the jail, the sentenced women and bound-over prisoners are not separated. In 1919, when the State Farm for Women was organized, it was supposed that all sentenced women prisoners would be sent to the State Farm and therefore no changes have been made in the building to provide for a classification of women prisoners. The fact that proper appropriations have not been made for either the State Farm for Women or for the School for Feeble-Minded at Mansfield, complicates the situation in all other institutions in the state.

On the men's side of the jail, it has been possible to make a better classification of prisoners, and the sentenced men live in a corridor by themselves,¹⁸ apart from those who are awaiting trial or detained as witnesses.

The women are kept busy in laundry work, sewing and the cleaning of their own side of the jail. All men who are physically able to do so are employed either in the boiler-room, kitchen, cellar, cobbling, boiler-shop, upkeep of grounds or in the factory. Because of the efficient management and supervision of the prisoners, fewer employees are hired, and much of the repair work is done by prisoners who assist the free workmen, and in return the county lessens the amount due on their own fines and costs.¹⁹ Men employed in the factory are given some payment when released from jail.

In addition to the so-called maintenance employment of men and women, the sentenced men in the various county jails are employed in other ways, according to the situation and size of the jail. In Middlesex, Tolland, Litchfield and Windham Counties, the majority of the men prisoners are engaged in farm work, either directly on county property, or on private farms in the vicinity. In the larger jails, however, provision is made for working in factories. In Fairfield County, for instance, the prisoners are engaged in two main industries, i. e., the manufacture of leather products from the by-products of leather—such as the inner lining of shoes, and small pocketbooks; to this department has recently been added the assembling of metal parts in electric fixtures. The other company hiring the labor of prisoners from the

¹⁷Sec. 5954, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

¹⁸Secs. 6595, 6596, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

¹⁹This is in addition to provisions of Secs. 1972 and 1977, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918. Cf. also Sec. 6658, Gen. Stats. of Conn. Rev. of 1918.

county of Fairfield, is one which manufactures cement blocks. Two different companies employ the prisoners, the county supplying rent, heat, and light, and the employers paying the county an average of 50c per prisoner daily. In the County of New Haven, previous to 1919, a similar system existed. The factory was at that time in the hands of the Metropolitan Chair Co., which still employs men in the Hartford County Jail. The Metropolitan Chair Co. hired the superintendent and foremen, and referred cases of discipline to the authorities at the jail. A certain amount of money was paid annually by the company to the county for the labor of prisoners. The present system instituted by a New Haven County meeting of the General Assembly of 1919 is based on the theory that the jail factory, as part of a county institution should be in charge of county authorities. It will be seen from a study of Sections 1969 and 1962 of the Gen. Statutes of Connecticut, Revision of 1918, that in all counties in Connecticut, the sheriff and deputy jailer have responsibility for the discipline of the prisoners, whether they are in the factory or the jail proper. In New Haven County the financial responsibility rests upon the county commissioners, who hire the superintendent and bookkeeper, assist in obtaining orders, and collecting money, and draw orders upon the treasurer of the county for payment of all bills incurred for the factory. The New Haven County factory is at present engaged in cabinet work, making radio and phonograph boxes, small tables, nursery chairs and other furniture.

We should like to write enthusiastically of our venture in running the factory, but truth compels us to state that thus far, we have not been able to market our goods successfully in having only one product, and now when we are manufacturing various different articles, the matter of instruction to a changing population is so difficult, that our output does not even cover our overhead expense. Were the terms of prisoners at the county jail longer, some sort of educational work might be attempted. But the number of prisoners who are sentenced for three or more months is so few that this is not feasible. The county commissioners feel that there is a perceptible improvement in the atmosphere of the factory in that the prisoners are not driven as they were under the former contract system. But the present hand-to-mouth attempt to fill small orders is a venture which is aimless and disheartening for officials and prisoners alike, for it is neither business-like nor for the greater welfare of the prisoner. The bonus given to the prisoner is based upon his record for good behavior and length of service, but has no direct connection with the hours of labor, nor

actual results achieved. A change in the type of work at the New Haven County factory is now under consideration, and a careful study has been made of unavoidable overhead expense, with a view to learning the amount of money necessary to be earned, before a fair profit can be gained. It is evident that the solution lies in confining the attention of the factory to one well-made product, which shall have sufficient variety in it, to furnish interesting employment to the men of varying ages, literacy and manual or mental ability.

When we think of some of the jails in our land, with their filth and vermin, their inadequate food and cruelty, we have reason to be thankful that progress has been made in the care of prisoners since the New Haven County Jail was erected, in 1858, for there is no doubt that physical conditions are good, and that the treatment is fair and just, sheriff, jailer and guards being of good standards.

But when we compare our care of prisoners with modern sanitariums and hospitals we are horrified and discouraged at the long distance yet to be traveled before even fairly modern treatment may be given to men and women prisoners, who are often mentally, morally and physically sick and impoverished.

There are two main reasons for the imprisonment of human beings. One is for the protection of the community, that those who are a menace to the lives of others may be restrained from doing them harm. The other is that those who have broken the law of the land may have opportunity to realize that they cannot live unsocial lives, and that by being apart from the community for a while they may gain a new perspective and receive intelligent expert assistance in a new life.

We see, in the physical construction of the jails, that emphasis is laid largely on restraint, with the purpose of punishing prisoners by depriving them of luxuries, and by forcing them to live a life of submission and discipline.

That the general public is temporarily protected by the brief incarceration of these men and women there is no doubt, but that either the general public or the prisoners are permanently helped by the present county jail system, no one believes. If a bride and groom should secure a new house, furnish it, lay the carpets, hang the shades and keep everything in perfect tidiness, we might call the bride a good housekeeper but not a home-maker. We must have pictures, books, magazines, table covers, pillows, all sorts of dainty touches and expression of personalities and loving family life. So in the county jail of Connecticut today, much has been done by the establishment of

high standards of cleanliness, elimination of the damp dungeons, of corporal punishment, the abolishment of the system of silence, and the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance rather than hatred, but we need, first of all, rooms in which the sunlight enters directly, so that bedding and clothes may be freshened by the sun. Cleanliness, through washing and the constant use of disinfectants, is commendable, and especially so in the conquest over the dirt and vermin of the incoming jail population, but no anti-dirt agencies can compare with the invigorating power of sun and fresh air.

That the statutes of the state give the right to the county commissioners to employ the prisoners is a step forward, but a real problem is presented in the number of men and women who are detained at the jail for weeks at a time, sometimes as long as three months, awaiting trial, yet without employment. Men who desire to do so may work, and some men who are industrious and who have a natural liking for dabbling in paint have helped in decorating the interior of the jail. But for the majority of the continued and bound-over prisoners, there is only idleness, worry and waiting. This makes for discontent, unhappiness and further crime. A small library has been started in the New Haven County Jail, and it is to be hoped that this will grow and that reading under direction may be encouraged; also that through the assistance of men and women interested in education, those who would benefit by study may take up some sort of classes.

Many men and women who are now sentenced to jail should be placed under a probation officer and taught how to live in a community. For those who need to be removed from community life for a time, there should be some sort of special care and study such as would prevent a return to the jail.²⁰ Such social studies as are now being made at the Cheshire Reformatory might well be made for those who come to our jails, in order that we might learn the cause of the downfall and treat causes rather than effects and thus give more preventive and less palliative treatment.

Had I the power of a doctor or a surgeon, I should say that with such and such changes the diseases will be cured if you give nature a chance, but in the study of jail questions, we are to face with the problems of government in the holding of office by elective officials, changing according to the chance will of the people. We are trying to think out a system which is rigid enough to administer firm discipline yet flexible enough to meet the need of every man. We are striving

²⁰An interesting study of chosen cases at N. H. Co. Jail is the subject of a thesis by a graduate at Yale Divinity School, Rev. J. P. Reed.

to give to discouraged, disheartened and unprivileged men and women an opportunity for healing and a chance to express the best that is in them.

The public is yet to be fully aroused to the needs of men and women prisoners, but the public is awakening and we hope may soon demand more modern treatment of the population of our county jails.