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F. Emory Lyon

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## EDITORIAL

### JOHN L. WHITMAN—DREAMER AND DOER

The life of John L. Whitman is a good example of one who made the best possible use of limited advantages and only those opportunities which he created by his own faithful service.

Untrained in the schools of higher learning, he was possessed of an uncommon amount of common-sense and native ability. Unlike most self-made men, however, he did not worship his maker. While sure of the things he had learned by experience and hard work, he did not parade this knowledge in a boastful manner. While modest, he did crave public acknowledgment and credit for accomplishments of which he had a right to be proud.

Born at Sterling, Illinois, July 23, 1862, Mr. Whitman was brought up in the Baptist Church, where his grandfather had been a deacon. Like most youths in small towns who have ambitions and dream dreams, he migrated to the great city of Chicago in early manhood. Accepting any work that offered an honest living, he was employed for a time as a street car conductor and as decorator.

Then he was appointed as a guard in the Cook County Jail. Here his qualities of leadership were early manifested, as he was soon made clerk of the institution, then Assistant Jailer and finally Superintendent. His service in these positions covered a period of eighteen years. While always mindful that he was serving under the direction of his superior officer, the Sheriff, yet, in his quiet way, he gave the impression of being the master in his own realm. Giving strict attention to physical conditions in the jail and the material health of the prison inmates, much of his thought was occupied with the greater and more difficult task of insuring a wholesome mental and moral atmosphere. To him the human element was always of paramount importance.

It was this point of view, together with his keen insight as to human nature, that enabled him to control the worst men in the institution by commanding the loyalty of the best. He once told the writer he considered it essential to have at least fifty per cent of the jail population that he could count on, to control the situation in any outbreak or crisis. As a matter of fact, he usually had a very great majority, and there were always many who would have defended his orders at their peril, or protected his life with their own.

One of the instrumentalities he used at that time, not only to maintain discipline, but to bring ordered planning for the future into the lives of many who had little foresight, was the organization known as the John L. Whitman Improvement Association. This was utilized both to occupy the idle time of prisoners by providing wholesome diversion, and also to plan for employment and after care for the many who would be acquitted or discharged after serving sentence. Among the many benefits that came from this organization, was a separation of the youths of the jail into a Boy's Department, and the starting of a school for their improvement during the idle hours. This school is still operating usefully, and might well serve as an example to all metropolitan jails.

When Mr. Whitman was appointed by the Mayor as Superintendent of the Chicago House of Correction, he came for the first time into full charge of the administration of an institution. That is, he had complete control of the discipline of prisoners, all of whom were under sentence. The same principles were applied as at the jail, with equal success. His experience, however, led him to say: "I never realized until now, how much of a tyrant a man may be when in charge of a penal institution, if he is so disposed. He can deny he is cruel, and there is no one to dispute him except the prisoners, and no one will believe them."

The greatest achievement at The House of Correction was to organize the industries on an efficient and self-supporting basis. This Mr. Whitman did, regardless of the indifference of the public and in spite of the opposition of his own Board of Inspectors. His tact, tenacity, and fighting spirit finally won, through ten years of service under three or more mayors of both parties and numerous Boards of Inspectors.

The question of the after care of the released prisoner was a vital one to this Warden. He had been a Director of the Central Howard Association since its beginning in 1900. But he recognized that one organization could hardly care for all of the thirty or forty men discharged each day from The House of Correction, in addition to hundreds of others it was helping each year from all state prisons and reformatories. Besides, there were many old men and others physically handicapped who seemed to need temporary quarters of an institutional character. Hence, Mr. Whitman joined with others in starting The Parting of the Ways Home, a haven and lodging place for many of these men, which operated effectively for several years. Mr. Whitman's connection with The Central Howard Association was

always highly valued, and its President, Mr. George W. Dixon, was among the many prominent citizens who were his good friends.

There were times during this period, as I happen to know, when Mr. Whitman would have been glad to become the Warden of Joliet Prison, and there were many good people who fervently wished that he might be called upon to bring that institution up to more favorable comparison with other penitentiaries of the country. These citizens were gratified, therefore, about ten years ago, when he received what seemed to be even greater advancement, in his appointment by Governor Lowden to the newly created position of State Superintendent of Prisons. This was a post which could be accepted either as a political sinecure, or as an opportunity for great public service. Needless to say, the new appointee took the matter seriously. With characteristic vigor, through long hours, he formulated a definite program, defined the scope of the office, and laid out arduous duties for himself, in the visitation and inspection of the state's correctional institutions. While commanding suitable dignity for his title and position, he tactfully avoided encroachment upon the proper prerogatives of the heads of these institutions.

In this connection, Mr. Whitman personally drew elaborate plans modifying the new prison already begun, and providing for eight circular cell houses, all exactly alike. His plan would have given much wider opportunity for the classification of prisoners, by having some dormitories, and even separate rooms, for those who had progressed nearly to the point of parole. These plans were not accepted by the Prison Building Commissioners, but it is notable that the too great uniformity of the original plan is still felt by those closest to the situation.

Mr. Whitman directed his efforts in this new field, chiefly toward planning a better future for the state's penal affairs. He saw no reason why what had been in the past, should necessarily continue to be in the future. He was an idealist, and, if you please, a reformer, but always with his feet squarely on the ground. He was not as much of a reformer as many social workers thought he was, or as idealists wished. But he was always abreast of his time, and usually much in advance of most other prison administrators.

It is well nigh impossible for any human being to be in prison work for a long period without becoming either indifferent to his charges, or else hardened and tyrannical. Mr. Whitman was one of the few exceptions to this rule. He held his characteristic human interest to the last, and he was ever alert to the newly developing movements in the field of criminology. For example, while untaught

and untrained in scientific subjects, he was quick to welcome the advent of Psychiatry as revealing to him what he had long instinctively felt to be a field for systematic study and scientific understanding.

In like manner, he was able to discriminate between the good and the weak points in the new movements in penology that arose from time to time. The movement for self-government of prisoners, and the organization of the Mutual Welfare League, by Thomas Mott Osborne is a good illustration of this. Mr. Whitman at once recognized a desirable trend in this movement, but he also saw its distinct limitations. He seldom, therefore, gave his unqualified approval to any new proposal, but proceeded to apply that part of it which he saw to be of value. Accordingly, in this instance, instead of attempting to organize a democracy among inmates, upon the basis of mere numbers, he instituted a new plan, which he named The Progressive Merit System. This plan, while it eliminates those who prove themselves wholly incapable of self-government, nevertheless gives an ever increasing degree of freedom to those who win it on merit. At the same time it holds a goal of achievement ever before them.

This very considerable contribution to penological method was well established, and in practical operation in the Illinois Reformatory and the two State Prisons, when the Warden of Joliet Prison passed away, and Mr. Whitman was asked by the Governor to take charge of the institution. This appointment would seem to have been the fulfillment of a long cherished ambition. In view of the unbroken series of successes and the well established reputation for achievement, any prophet would have said that his highly creditable career would be fittingly rounded out as a successful Warden of Joliet.

But, unfortunately, this was not to be.

Up to this point, the current of Mr. Whitman's career ran fairly smooth. He had been able to accomplish the things he set out to do in reasonable measure. He had received a gratifying measure of public praise, and very little blame. The newspapers always treated him kindly, because he knew how to take them into his confidence. Even the politicians respected his uniform efficiency, and his considerate neutrality as between factions and parties.

But from this time on, scarcely three years ago, he waged a losing battle that ended in the tragedy of his death. This fight was against unequal odds, and with weapons which, with all his experience, he was little accustomed. It was a solitary and lonely fight, of which even his closest friends knew little. It could be sensed when in his presence, by those who had a sympathetic understanding of his purposes and principles. But a question would elicit but the vaguest

hint of unsatisfactory conditions and no complaint or criticism of others.

Therefore, he had succeeded because he had been master of the situation, and his principles had been given full sway and fruition. This important and essential requirement of any executive was denied Mr. Whitman soon after he became Warden of Joliet Prison. The position required the almost superhuman task of administering three institutions in one—the old prison with 1,500 inmates; the new prison, in process of construction four miles away, with 1,200 men, and the Honor Farm with 150 trusted prisoners. Even this gigantic task might have been mastered by this man's indomitable energy, had he been given a free hand. But this was early taken away from him by those in higher authority.

The case at this point was described by Dr. Graham Taylor in the Chicago Daily News, after Mr. Whitman's death, as follows:

"Then, we thought, he should have resigned. Though offered the appointment of warden at the Atlanta penitentiary, with the prospect of promotion to the superintendency of all the federal prisons, he held on at Joliet. He did so in the hope that the measures which he had successfully administered, and which succeed everywhere a fair chance is given them, would yet win their right of way in Illinois. But this was not in the program.

"So John L. Whitman was discharged without even a fair hearing or any recourse, which were unjustly denied him even by the grand jury that more justly demanded of the governor the dismissal of the head of the department of public welfare.

"Heartbreak quickly followed the depression of spirit over such an unjust aspersion which seemed to close and overshadow John L. Whitman's thirty years of honorable service. From this deadly blow so wantonly inflicted his gentle, trustful spirit sank and so enfeebled his heart that he died literally 'broken-hearted,' as his physician said, and 'under the stripes of the scourge he died a martyr to the ingratitude of fellowmen,' as his pastor priest declared."

But the spirit of John L. Whitman lives. His reputation in the field of penal administration will survive long after his few critics are dead and forgotten.

On the rare occasions when he could be induced to leave his work to address the American Prison Congress, his message was listened to like that of an inspired prophet, and even indifferent and reactionary Wardens paid tribute to his manifest sincerity and earnestness. As to the prisoners, keenest of all critics, and rarest in characteristic attitude toward their keepers, few could be found who had anything but good to say of him.

To quote again from Dr. Taylor and from Mr. Whitman himself to his prisoners:

"Many are the men who have come out from the jail, the Bridewell and Joliet who will gratefully remember this man who turned them from the error of their ways never to return to court or confinement. From wrong to right they were turned by such words as these, which Warden Whitman addressed to new inmates at Joliet in explaining his 'progressive merit system,' whereby he meant to discipline and encourage his 2,000 prisoners: 'The great majority of men who come here are sensible enough to want to go out and do well and not come back to this or any other prison. Fully 85 per cent do so. These rules are made to be helpful in carrying out the kind of discipline under which men can do well if they want to. No man ever amounted to anything unless he has been disciplined by himself or by somebody else. We want men in here to practice disciplining themselves, but if they won't discipline themselves, then we will have to step in and enforce discipline. Look forward to the time when you will appear for parole. Try to realize that it will mean much to you if you make such a record for yourselves as will show your future good intentions.'"

Much interest in Mr. Whitman's work and ambitions, was always manifested by Mrs. Whitman. It is believed he relied greatly upon her advice and council in all his important decisions. It was doubtless due to her influence and example that he frankly announced, late in life, that he had joined the Catholic Church. She was known as a good angel to the prisoners, many of whom profited by her advice and help.

Mr. Whitman was highly sensitive to public opinion. He sometimes asked me, as a friend, to tell him what was being said about his work, in which he was so deeply engrossed that he craved appreciation. In talking with him the last time he was downtown, before taking to his bed the next day, and again at his home, just before he went to the hospital, it was apparent that he more sick in mind than ill in body. When assured that he had plenty of friends and years of usefulness ahead of him, his face lighted up, but he evidently only half believed. His spirit was crushed and he could not rally his old time fire and courage.

It was a high privilege then to give him even the temporary stimulant of revived faith, even as it is now a sacred pleasure to render, in behalf of his multitude of friends, this inadequate but well deserved tribute to his memory.

F. EMORY LYON.