

1958

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Donald P. Jewell

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### Recommended Citation

Donald P. Jewell, Mexico's Tres Marias Penal Colony, 48 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 410 (1957-1958)

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## MEXICO'S TRES MARIAS PENAL COLONY

DONALD P. JEWELL

The author is a member of the teaching staff in the American River Junior College at Sacramento, California. Heretofore he has been a probation officer in San Bernadino County in that state. While serving in that capacity he took advantage of an opportunity to study the Tres Marias Colony. Professor Jewell acknowledges the assistance of Srs. Manuel Zatarain, Luis Pena, Adalberto Melendez, and Mr. Mike Ceris.—  
EDITOR.

### INTRODUCTION

Mexico shows her rehabilitative philosophy particularly at Tres Marias. Professor Negley K. Teeters has commended her in these words: "She . . . has had the courage to experiment with bold new ideas."<sup>1</sup>

The "Three Marys" are actually four islands, grouped about ninety miles off the west coast of Mexico. Only the largest island, Maria Madre, is currently under development. It is rich with tropical vegetation.

Maria Madre was purchased from private owners in 1905. It was first used as virtually a slave labor camp for Mexico's worst offenders. Today, the island has evolved as probably one of the world's most humane corrective institutions. Its neat community, complete to lofty palms, plaza and bandstand, appears as a typical Mexican pueblo. A difference is that the merchants, venders, musicians, and most of the patrons are federal prisoners or their spouses.

### ADMINISTRATION OF TRES MARIAS

The administrator of Tres Marias is Sr. Adalberto Melendez, appointed by the President of the Republic. His executives are the Director and a General of the Army, who commands the island's garrison of 136 soldiers by whom the prisoners are supervised.

A federal judge resides on the island to serve chiefly in matters of parole.

On the mainland, in Mazatlan, is the island's commercial agency. This supplies all the island's needs ("from pins to tools") that cannot be indigenously met, and sells the colony's products. Employing four people, the agency maintains the ship, also, a converted LST, which commutes about weekly to the island.

### THE PRISONERS OF TRES MARIAS

The prisoners come from federal penitentiaries throughout Mexico. At this writing there are eight hundred there, including nearly six hundred from Mexico City.

Generally the various penitentiaries accumulate several prisoners whom they have designated for Tres Marias before embarking them for the island. They select prisoners with long records of previous offences, or who are convicted of killing, assaults, or other serious crimes; and nearly always with sentences of twenty or more years.

<sup>1</sup> NEGLEY K. TEETERS, *WORLD PENAL SYSTEMS*, Penn. Prison Society, Phil., 1944, p. 176.

Exceptions are cases sentenced directly to Tres Marias by a court, or those who are security risks. Many who ultimately go to Tres Marias may serve several years of their sentence before being transported there. Following psychological and physical screening they are transported under military escort to the coast and transferred to a small ship, the "Nayar," which was built by prison labor on the island.

Women prisoners are also accepted at Tres Marias. Twenty are there at present.

#### THE TRES MARIAS PROGRAM

Upon his arrival at Maria Madre, the prisoner is temporarily assigned to a barracks. He may live there until he wishes to select a site for his home in anticipation of his family's arrival. They will be permitted to join him after he has shown six months of good behavior.

At the present time one hundred fifty prisoners have their families at Maria Madre.

The prisoner has complete freedom on the island's thirty-four thousand acres. He is free to pursue an occupation of his choice. The only requirement is to observe regular working hours. He may farm or establish himself in business, tax free.

The prisoner is free also to accept employment with the Henequin Enterprise of the Pacific, a private industry of the island. Thirty percent of his wages will be discounted and returned upon his parole or discharge.

On his own time the prisoner may hunt in the forest, fish, manufacture approved furniture or curios (of shell, silver, or gold), participate in sports, or other recreation. The island supports a moving picture theater, athletic fields, and a boxing ring. Games are often played against teams from schools on the mainland.

Most prisoners pursue a limited part time business and dedicate their working hours to the learning of trades. Facilities include a tannery, a ship yard, tailor and shoe shop, furnaces for making brick, tile, pottery and lime, a brass and steel foundry a diesel-electric plant, carpentry and sheet metal shops, and any other trades or crafts which prisoners themselves may elect to teach.

A modern school, constructed of course by prison labor, is also accessible to the prisoners as well as all others of the island. From 1950 to 1955, 653 persons, under tutelage of the school's five teachers, passed through its first six grades. There are currently one hundred fifty students of all ages enrolled.

A modern, beautiful concrete three story hospital is now under construction.

Prisoner supervision is kept at a minimum. They are expected to retire at nine o'clock taps, and must appear for review once a month. It is only on review day that they wear the characteristic uniform.

Discipline consists generally of deprivation of privileges and assignment to the salt mine. The latter, in earlier days particularly, was a particularly severe punishment because the prisoners were not allowed to wear shoes.

Morale is reported to be relatively high, and has been confirmed in the writer's interviews with ex-prisoners in Mexico and the United States. The greatest tension area appears to be related to the female prisoners. Violent fights sometimes occur among men who would marry them.

Prostitution is strictly forbidden on the island, and conjugal relationships rigidly moralized.

There have been no successful escapes from Tres Marias, and only three attempts. The mainland's great distance, combined with fear of sharks discourages swimming. Two of the attempts were discovered in the planning, and the third, which occurred ten years ago when six men stole a small boat for the purpose. The effort led to capture upon landing on the mainland.

Prisoners can serve "good time," which will allow them eligibility for parole after serving two thirds of their sentence. Many, of course, serve life sentences and are buried in the island's cemetery.

Upon leaving the islands the inmate must give up his properties and business and take with him all members of the family. If, however, he had married a prisoner, the spouse must remain behind and is free to marry another prisoner.

From prisoners and staff the following rehabilitative influences seemed to have been realized.

1. Removal from criminally oriented environment and influences making for criminal behavior.
2. A gaining of self-respect and dignity by being treated with respect and without suspicion.
3. The learning of a trade and satisfaction from doing constructive and creative work.
4. Obtaining an academic education with subsequent feelings of confidence and status.
5. The learning of new values and morals from the priests, teachers, and other staff members.
6. New insights gained through meditation.

There appear to be no statistics indicating the degree of rehabilitative success. Many of those who leave Tres Marias are not followed up for various reasons, and only a few who get into further difficulty are returned to the island.

#### PROBLEMS AND PLANS

Tres Marias, through its salt, Henequin and lumber, strives toward economic independence of the Government. This endeavor is greatly handicapped by the extreme fluctuations in prisoner population. This may shift in a brief time from a thousand to five hundred prisoners. It is consequently difficult to make and meet contracts or otherwise to establish a stable economy. Being thus unable to develop the resources of the islands, the rehabilitative program must be pursued with a limited budget.

It is planned, therefore, that Tres Marias be the only institution in Mexico for the prolonged confinement of federal prisoners. This would stabilize the population at about two thousand and, with increased development of natural resources, should see the island prospering. It would then be possible to establish more and better facilities, and to employ more professional corrective workers.

#### CONCLUSION

Although any corrective institution must ultimately measure its success by the degree to which its released inmates avoid further crimes, this is probably for the

present an unrealistic and unfair criterion. Many institutions are too greatly handicapped by insufficient funds to be able to apply corrective methods which are known to be lacking.

Evaluation must consequently be made in a more subjective manner, based upon what is being done with what is available. There can be little doubt that in this regard Tres Marias is demonstrating outstanding resourcefulness, ingenuity, and originality.

Tres Marias shows many evidences of being a progressive and enlightened institution. Few corrective facilities, if any, allow such a degree of freedom to its prisoners with the concomitant opportunities for pursuing normal life.

Morale is high, self-confidence is instilled and, in the words of one recently paroled after thirteen years at Tres Marias, "They teach you the value of a free, decent life."