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Marquette Prison Story Told

By MURL H. DEFOE
(Editor Charlotte Republican-Tribune)

Marquette.—When you finish reading this story you may go to the movie, listen to the radio or take a little motor jaunt down the road. You're going to do something that's certain, if it isn't any more than approve or criticise what you are now about to read. Readers of the Republican-Tribune but more particularly, readers of the old Republican, will recall this writer's steady opposition to the restoration of capital punishment in this state. Apropos of the opening paragraph "Gypsy Bob" Harper, the most famous of the scores of well known criminals in Marquette prison, knows what he did yesterday; what he is going to do tomorrow and every day he lives his routine will be precisely the same. Michigan's treatment of "Gypsy Bob" is the most drastic form of solitary confinement now practiced in any of the state penal institutions. We shall give you a little more of this detail later on. This form of penal servitude is more terrible, in our opinion, than capital punishment which explains the reference to this policy in the second paragraph of this article. Capital punishment would do away with the hazard of this famous prisoner making a "get away," (which he did once since he was transferred to Marquette from Jackson) the cost of feeding him, clothing, etc. There are in the "bull pen" at this date eighteen prisoners so that the item of guard expense has to be constantly maintained; his food expense is not high and "Gypsy Bob" and his two pals in the murder of Warden Catlin and the deputy warden, are in stripes, the only persons so garbed within the institution, a further handicap to their outside progress in the possible event of an escape.

* * *

In company with Warden J. P. Corgan, Judge W. E. Smith of Keweenaw county and Business Manager F. D. Fitzgerald, of the state highway department, the writer made a cursory trip through the prison he visited at regular intervals during the period he served as secretary of the old three man pardon board back in the Osborn regime. Early in the Groesbeck administration the three man board was wiped out and a parole commissioner put in charge of the work. The present commissioner is Judge Arthur D. Wood, former probate judge of Alger county and publisher of the Munising News, who is doing a splendid piece of work although the writer sincerely believes the three man system is the best plan but that is another subject. There have been many alterations, mainly caused by population expansion since the writer was a regular visitor at this prison located just at the edge of Marquette and facing Lake Superior. With water in front and dense woods for miles behind the walls the man who escapes has only two directions that he can go and survive, in fact "Gypsy Bob" when he escaped this month, back in 1921, was caught at Negaunee in this county. Marquette is fifty per cent safer than Jackson on account of strategic location. The bull pen is new in construction and is cut off by a thick wall, iron doors, etc. "Gypsy Bob" is in the second cell on the lower tier as you walk in from the cell block to which it is attached. There is no one in the first or third cell which means the famous killer has no one to speak to, a form of mental punishment that is positively agonizing. If you doubt this try it a week under the most favorable circumstances and find out for yourself. Gypsy Bob, who was originally a Detroit murderer, killed his crime pal after they reached Jackson to do seven and a half to twenty years each. He was at once transferred to Marquette and one night at a program in the prison chapel, Harper, Roberts and Perry attacked Warden Catlin, the deputy warden and the deputy warden's son with knives. The deputy died in a day or so, Catlin lived in great suffering until relieved by death about thirty days later and the deputy's son lived but is a wreck because of his experience, according to Warden Corgan, who has been in charge eight years past and followed the ill fated Catlin who was for years Warden James Russell's deputy. Russell, it will be recalled, dropped dead on a Mackinac Straits ferry returning home from Lansing. Next in the cell block is Roberts who spends his time doing mesh bead work which he showed the party. He offered a very beautiful hand made lady's bead pocket-book for $10.00. Perry, the third man, is now a mental case, hopelessly insane, in a ward above and to the north of the bull pen. Perry, when our party went in, started an incoherent talk in loud tones but his appearance told his condition had he been perfectly quiet. Warden Corgan says the state mental institutions are so over-crowded that he is forced to maintain this mental ward. There were perhaps six unfortunates in this section, even more isolated of necessity, than the bull pen inmates. Harper is weak looking with his little moustache and prison pallor complexion. He must have some friends as he discussed with the writer a mutual friend of some political prominence in Detroit. Harper is perhaps 35; has been in prison eleven years. No books were in evidence. Between the steel bars to Roberts' cell were a couple of books, suitable for about eighth grade students in school. The other sixteen in the bull pen had violated the rules. Only one was being punished in excess of the cell confinement and he was a big burly negro who refused to do his task and wanted to know who was going to make him. He was handcuffed through the bars of his cell and is obliged to stand two four hour shifts a day in this one position. This treatment plus a diet, much more restricted than the famous Hollywood diet, has the effect of convincing the offender he had better do his task cheerfully and well. No one is allowed to talk in the bull pen which is heavily guarded. Every other day bull pen prisoners are granted an hour in the yard with the other prisoners but aside from this privilege it is solitary confinement in the real sense.

* * *

Marquette prison with a cell capacity of 666 had a population today of 889 of which an average of 250 are lifers, which gives the reader some idea of the heavy responsibility of Warden Corgan and his chief deputy, J. J. Cowling, a Canadian lumberjack who has come up through the ranks to his present station supported by sixteen years service. Next to Gypsy Bob in Marquette crime prominence comes Hotelling, the Owosso wretch whose crime shocked the nation. He is usually assigned, so Warden Corgan said, to the carpenter shop where he was both interested and efficient. Recently he has been employed as an operator in the box factory matching lumber. Hotelling is sub-normal physically as well as mentally but thrives apparently on prison life. He is much heavier than when he was received; his box factory job requires constant attention as the machine he operates is geered up to a point that commands close and observing application. Hotelling barely had time to look up from his work which is a constant grind. We could recall a dozen others here, the mention of whose names would bring up crimes famous in state circles but Harper and Hotelling are so outstanding in fiendishness that we must confine our story to this pair. Hotelling wouldn't leave if the doors were opened, without permission, he doesn't know enough to escape and beyond that he doesn't think about such things.

Gypsy Bob on the other hand would kill a man every foot if the killing brought him that much nearer to freedom. Harper is vicious, Hotelling is simple, that's the intellectual difference between these two arch criminals.

* * *

Hotelling, in other words, has every privilege of the prison. Every man regardless of his crime or sentence enters the prison on the same level. "We treat every prisoner as near like a man as his own conduct permits," said Warden Corgan. "We make no classification between prisoners when they walk through that door," and the warden pointed in the direction of the first door of steel bars going into the prison proper, "they write their own ticket, so to speak. We have lifers here who have never given us a single worry and short termers who had to be taught that discipline knows no discrimination. Shortly after I came here," said Warden Corgan, "I made a set of rules, my predecessors had some such regulations so I thought a set of fixed policies was necessary. If I had it to do over again I wouldn't have a rule of any kind. There is nothing above common sense in prison management. Rules are probably essential but circumstances call for common sense."

* * *

It was a pleasure to see again and in such splendid health, James L. Deagon, who has been steward of the prison for the past thirty-five years. Coming to the north country originally from Saginaw to serve as steward for the Huron Mountain Club, near here, Mr. Deagon has been here all these years. Mr. Deagon inquired at once after Dr. James B. Bradley of Eaton Rapids, a former member of the old three man pardon board and the writer would be coarse indeed not to add that Dr. Bradley brought to this public service a sympathy and understanding, personally as well as professionally that he must look back upon with both pride and satisfaction. It is to be hoped that the state of Michigan has plans in keeping with its culture and resources to provide a suitable old age competence for such faithful and efficient employees as Mr. Deagon.

* * *

Only one Marquette prisoner is credited to Eaton county and he is a transient, Harold Lee, 28, one of the Bellevue bank robbers who was sentenced May 3, 1927, by Judge R. R. McPeek to 20 to 40 years at Jackson. There were three in the job and all drew trips to Jackson. Lee, whose Marquette number is 4745, was transferred here April 11, 1929. The record in this office fails to show whether or not he had been sent here as an additional penalty for misbehavior at Jackson. This is usually the case. The writer didn't call on Lee as he is unknown in Eaton county except perhaps to the officers through his confinement in the Charlotte jail awaiting trial. It was Lee's sweetheart, as we recall, who gave the officers the first clue that resulted in his arrest and conviction. The girl was held at the Charlotte jail for a week or more but finally released. She was working in Detroit at the time of her arrest.

* * *

In conclusion just a paragraph to introduce you to Warden James P. Corgan. He is much on the William Hodge type physically and in dry humor. He in no way reflects the warden you have in mind; the movie warden you recall is a big six footer and everything to match the bulk. Corgan was born in Lake Superior not literally but an actual accomplishment. His father for years was light keeper off Gull Rock lighthouse off Copper Harbor sixteen miles out in Superior. His mother started for the shore to be delivered of child but the event took place in open sea. That's the beginning. As a young man the family moved over Iron yet to Ontonagon and he was county treasurer when Warden Catlin died from injuries, already related. They were several candidates, naturally, and Corgan was proposed as a darkhorse and was finally named. He never had had a day's police or criminal experience but his success as a warden is beyond the hope of his closest friends who knew him as a man of firmness, sincerity and ability. This, in a few words is a sketch of the man who is successfully handling the hardest bunch of criminals under lock and key in the state.

* * *

Misses Violet, Lily and May Austin, sisters, whose ages range from 16 to 20, perform all the manual labor incident to the operation of a 100-acre farm and a dairy with 40 cows near Turlock, Calif.

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STATE OF MICHIGAN—
Order of the Conservation Commission.
RACCOON—

The Director of Conservation, having made a thorough investigation of conditions relative to raccoon in the State, recommends certain regulations.

THEREFORE, the Conservation Commission by authority of Act 230, P. A. 1925, hereby orders that for a period of one year it shall be unlawful to hunt, take or kill or attempt to hunt, take, or kill any raccoon in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; and to hunt, take, or kill or attempt to hunt, take or kill any raccoon in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, excepting that it shall be lawful to hunt raccoon in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan from November 1st to November 30th, and it shall be lawful to trap raccoon in the lower Peninsula north of the north line of Township 16 north and west of Saginaw Bay from November 15th to December 15th; and South of the north line of Township 16 North and east of Saginaw Bay from December 1st to December 15th.

Signed, sealed, and ordered published this 16th day of August, 1929.

GEORGE R. HOGARTH,
Director,
Department of Conservation.
Conservation Commission by:
WM. H. LOUTIT,
Chairman.
RAY E. COTTON,
Secretary.

33-35

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