

A Quick Look at U.S.A. Prisons

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CASTING AROUND after taking up my appointment as tutor organiser I was quite shattered to find how little was known (at least at local level, by *all* ranks within the Service) of other prison services or their equivalents; of experiments in process; of methods in or out of vogue elsewhere. There were, it is true, a number of vast generalisations about "what happened in X-land", but they were but very occasionally (coincidentally?) true. I was therefore determined to find out something of the wider implications of the aims of the task which now confronted me. Even the fairly few academic establishments dealing in any way with "criminology" were not especially helpful. What remained was thus a personal do-it-yourself study. I read books and theses and pamphlets.

I wrote personally to all European countries having embassies in London—the result of the latter was at once heartening and soul-searing. They were helpful . . .

could scarcely have been more so: but many wrote in terms that "this is the first enquiry we have had on this subject (treatment in penal establishment of males in age group 15–21) that we have received in x years".

The next step was to "see for oneself". What help was available? None. No, this was not quite true: a tutor organiser has since been to Russia with *some* aid: but it was nearly true. Where should one visit first? U.S.A.

A teaching organisation helped to arrange the travel within a charter group—thus virtually halving the fare return to New York City. I gave up my leave (and thereby my wife and children gave up a year's holidays!) . . . I wrote to friends, and to friends of friends in U.S.A., and in July 1965 flew out of Gatwick still scarcely able to believe my good fortune.

It is not a part of this note to describe the U.S.A., far, far better pens than mine have produced

travelogues—whilst there, one covered by road (bus and car), rail and plane, well over 8,000 miles; a tiring performance in itself, *but* never has travel proved more worthwhile. The soft North American intonation “thank you for travelling Greyhound” and the response of “you’re welcome” to “thank you” became a part not only of speech but of life. The more lurid patterns of American life etched by television and cinema were not in most instances apparent. Although I did, for a short while, become a kind of unlucky mascot, arriving in Watts (Los Angeles), Chicago and Washington D.C. on each occasion to coincide with the renewal of racial strife.

Visits included San Quentin, Salt Lake City Prison, Alcatraz (now mercifully closed), Tracey Vocational Institution, Cook County Gaol (Chicago), New York City Gaol, the Magistrates’ Night Court in New York City, the great campus prison north of Los Angeles, F.B.I. Headquarters in Washington D.C.

San Quentin—reputed to have its origins in the wreck of a prison hulk drifting from its moorings in San Francisco harbour 110 years ago—presents a granite front to the newly completed Richmond motorway bridge itself pointing an accusing finger from the mainland to the gaol. Four thousand-plus prisoners—an approach through rose gardens to a waiting-cum-visiting room (manned by prisoners) . . . airy and full of works of

art and the famed *San Quentin News*. Selling these items provides virtually the prisoners’ only income. Cigarettes on issue in an endeavour to defeat the tobacco barons; superb vocational training shops and classrooms, *not* circumscribed by fixed-period courses and frequent follow-up by placement in industry on release. Union and management alike represented on the allotment board to give the parolee a “card” and a job.

Eighty or more men in Death Row . . . the State Governor against the capital sentence but the State Legislature not ready to repeal the legislation; the men thus political pawns, possibly still to die if the Governor were not re-elected. The men at long bench tables facing a “stage” in two massive dining halls, and afterwards mooching around, sullenly like caged animals, in the great exercise yard featured in so many films—armed guards watching from on high.

Tracey Vocational Establishment (known generally as D.V.I.—a joint venture between the youth authority and the adult authority . . . and this obviously leads to some friction because of the two types of sentence imposed). Some 1,600 inmates work and train within a full security regime, thus producing the nearest U.S. equivalent to our borstal system.

Elementary and academic courses run side by side with

vocational training, the latter being on a continuous belt system rather like that in Ministry of Labour re-training establishments in U.K. There is thus irregular entry to fill vacancies and the possibility of students remaining on the course sufficiently long to benefit at either end of the scale; because they are slow learners but have the enthusiasm to see them through, or because they progress well and ought to remain participants long enough to take external examinations!

An organised counselling system within the establishment includes a reception/guidance centre within which the twin aims are of vocational alignment and purposeful training. Job placement for release on parole is dealt with by a 100-strong trade advisory council—with management, union, and parole representation.

Strong counselling has been part of the programme for many years. Recently, however, new approaches through this treatment have been added by the inauguration of special group counselling for narcotics users, for those with persistent adjustment problems and for those (inmates) who volunteer and show serious intent towards better self-adjustment and improvement in living.

The inmates with the more serious problems of maladjustment may spend part of their time in the adjustment centre. This unit provides segregation—but also treatment programmes—for those

inmates who for various reasons do not fit into the general inmate population.

Some two dozen different trades are taught, and some courses (e.g. aeroplane engines and aeroframe maintenance) are empowered to issue Federal Board licences.

F.B.I. Headquarters in Washington D.C. is familiar to all who have watched the T V programme based on F.B.I. records. A great queue of visitors stretches along the entrance corridors awaiting "the tour".

The F.B.I. was formed in 1908 to oversee criminal investigations throughout the U.S.A.—as a federal rather than state agency: in 1924 the then Attorney-General appointed a young unknown to be director, J. Edgar Hoover.

Now the "G-men" have the largest collection of fingerprints in the world—modern laboratories of all types; a training school for special agents with courses in law, in accounting, in searches, in interview techniques, in firearms, etc.

There is a hair and fibres unit; one specialising in spectography; another for petrography and metallurgy; one for firearms technology; and so on.

The "night court" in New York City is listed as one of the tourist attractions (free!); every weekday evening the law is administered almost within sight of the Statue of Liberty and it is administered at breakneck speed. A single

magistrate and a harrassed desk sergeant consult on charges, give (free) advice on pleas, tell the accused of his/her rights—and the magistrate then either passes sentence or remands in custody or on bail to a higher court. In any single evening an unbelievable stream of human flotsam and bewildered inadequates pass from the waiting room, before the court, and then either out to be lost again in the great city or to be incarcerated in the adjacent City Gaol.

I was fortunate enough to be invited jointly by the New York Correctional Association and the Osborne Association of America to the 95th Annual Congress of Correction held in Boston, Mass., at the Statler Hilton! During the six-day conference (I attended two) over 100 meetings and lectures took place and the 26 major sponsoring bodies (federal, state and voluntary) represented some hundreds of local organisations and thus *in toto* many thousands of police, prison staffs, probation and parole officers, churchmen of all denominations, educationalists, psychologists and doctors.

At the end of a brief note such as this one ought perhaps to tie together all loose ends and produce a conclusion. This I find myself unable to do. All that I would wish to say is:

- (i) (obviously!) it is a large area of the globe, and thus quite impossible to cover, even inadequately, in six weeks;

- (ii) without an overall pattern and standards, or even a salary and recruiting patterns, the *men* used in correctional services vary from place to place (presumably at least in part because of the economic call of widely differing scales of pay) in attainment and in potential;
- (iii) *But* a great many people in the U.S.A. do care;
- (iv) and all to whom I spoke were conscious only of shortcomings (as were all pleased that Alcatraz, the last of the federal establishments, had been closed and was to be demolished to allow a memorial to the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco Harbour); no one spoke with pride but rather with humility—all sought information.

May I end with two postscripts?

P.S.1. One could write a book about the attitudes to, and endeavours to fight, drug addiction. It is a cruel problem, stemming from the under-privileged negroes, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, but spilling over into the teenage cults.

P.S.2. The various "help-the-family" booklets, sent to next of kin or others nominated for prisoners who have longer than six months to serve, are a very real attempt to *involve* the family.