

A Short History of the Colorado State Penitentiary

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Penitentiary Site Development

The Colorado State Penitentiary had its inception on January 7, 1868, when the Territorial Legislature declared that such an institution should be established in Colorado at Canon City for the protection of society against offenders of the law. Thomas Macon of Canon City, an attorney who had reached the west only a short time before, had been elected to the Territorial Legislature; and it was he, who spear-headed the drive to locate the prison in Canon City. His support of Denver to receive designation as the state capital instead of Golden had earned him the backing of a sufficient number of legislators from the northern part of the state to have Canon City selected as the prison site.

Federal authorities built the first cell house in the middle of a twenty-five acre site selected for this purpose. Jonathan Draper, one of the earliest settlers of Fremont County, was the donor of the land that became the prison site. The first building was constructed of native stone which was quarried on the site. It contained only forty-two cells which soon filled up with frontier ruffians.

The first prisoner received at the prison was John Shepler, who was committed to the institution on January 13, 1871, from Gilpin County for larceny. The first female prisoner, Mary Salanden, arrived at Canon City March 12, 1873. She was assigned the number "60" and was sentenced to 3 years for manslaughter committed in Boulder County.

At the close of 1871, less than six months after receiving the initial prisoner, there were twenty-three incarcerated inmates. The first escape occurred on December 15, 1871. The first wall around the prison was not built until 1875, four years after the prison was established.

The first General Assembly of the newly-created state of Colorado officially adopted the penitentiary as a state institution in 1877 and made its first appropriation of badly needed funds for buildings and maintenance. Prisoners at that time were received at an average rate of fifty per year. Improvement and enlargements were made year to year, until 1900, when three cell houses with a total of 444 cells for men and a separate prison for women comprised the prison buildings. By 1903 the three cell houses had become entirely inadequate and cells were in many instances occupied by two prisoners. In 1904 a new cell house provided quarters for an additional hundred prisoners. In 1907 a hospital with an insane ward and a new bakery plant were constructed, with the labor coming almost entirely from prisoners.

Prison Labor

Records are sketchy as to the extent of the early prison industry, however the usual institutional activities: carpentry, blacksmithing, shoe cobbling, clothing repair and general maintenance, apparently offered the principal activity and labor outlets for prisoners in the first decade or two of prison operation in Colorado. Later on, brick manufacturing and the quarrying of limestone offered both a work program as well as a revenue source for the institution. Several good stratas of building stone were found in the hill behind the prison, and extensive stone quarrying had been carried on in the past. Prisoners were also employed in building walls, repairing prison buildings, and in farm and garden work. In the biennial period of 1899 - 1900 about 2,200,000 pounds of farm produce was raised by prisoners.

Maintenance costs were held at an absolute minimum as noted in 1876 when the custodial force of the Colorado State Penitentiary numbered only four day and two night guards. Their salary was \$25.00 per month.

Another source of revenue was the contracting of prison labor. Contracts are on record that show the Colorado State Prison Commission entered into an agreement with a company to be known as the Colorado Shoe Co. This organization was to furnish the materials, machinery and supervision for the manufacture of boots and shoes. The prison was to furnish the labor, factory space, and maintenance of

labor and in return would receive thirty cents per man per day for use of convict labor. This arrangement evidently was maintained for several years.

Prison labor on an organized basis for highway construction was inaugurated in 1900 when it was given official legislative sanction. Several highways were built and improved with convict help in the next decade. The original road to the top of the Royal Gorge was built by convict labor as was the Skyline drive, a scenic excursion drive atop the hill behind the prison. It was not, however, until March 1909 when Thomas J. Tynan was appointed to the office of warden that the program took on significance. He made it possible for every man who was willing to work to have employment. Road camps were set up and unguarded prisoners worked away from prison walls for days at a time. Tynan reported that "instead of sending broken revengeful men back into the world - in no wise reformed but simply trained to greater cunning - there are being restored mended men eager and willing to be made as such use as society will permit. By removing the continual threat of arms, by eliminating oppression and brutalities, by establishing a system of graded rewards for cheerfulness and industry, the penitentiary has been given a wholesome, helpful atmosphere." (2)

The work of Thomas J. Tynan is thus epitomized by a newspaper: "Fifteen life-termers are among the 300 convicts who in khaki-clad gangs of about sixty are blasting out good roads through the Rockies. They work under unarmed overseers, with no stockades, no barbed wire, no ball and chain, no growl of guns. Nine o'clock at night sees a roll-call at each road camp. Then the gang climbs into its tented bunks and the camp's solitary rifle is shouldered by the night guard-convict, who keeps a keen lookout for coyotes. Less than one-half of one per cent of the convicts so trusted have escaped since Colorado's first road camp was pitched, May 12, 1908. Special legislation gives in addition to liberal good-behavior allowance a ten-day reduction of term for every thirty days in a road camp."

The convict road building program lost some of its support after World War I, but was replaced in a measure by small scale manufacturing ventures. A factory for making license plates, highway signs, road markers and booster plates was installed in 1925. In addition to the work done for the state a number of contracts were filled for the federal government and the state of New Mexico during the first year of operation. The factory was destroyed by fire in 1929; but was later rebuilt. Work is still being done for the Transportation and Revenue departments of the state. In 1925 the penitentiary purchased a canning factory valued at \$125,000 for \$40,000, and ninety acres of full-bearing fruit trees, berry plants, vineyards and truck gardens for \$30,000. Its appraised value was \$909,000. The canning venture proved highly productive. Fruits and vegetables processed and canned included apples, apple butter, apricots, beets, green beans, catsup, cherries of all kinds, corn, peaches, Italian prunes, puree, pumpkin, plums, spinach tomatoes, and tomato juice. Not only were other state institutions well supplied with canned food stuffs, but there was also a large surplus of goods which could be disposed of to outside markets for a good profit. Other small scale manufacturing was also instituted. Additional ranches were purchased and stocked with cattle, sheep, hogs, and poultry resulting in a plentiful supply of beef, pork, bacon, ham, chicken, turkeys, milk, skim milk, cream, butter, and eggs for the Colorado State Prison, and also for other institutions. A saw mill was also operated on one of the ranches.(2)

In 1934 a sock-knitting machine was installed at a cost of \$29,000, capable of producing one thousand pairs of socks per day at a cost of four cents per pair. Prior to this time the state institutions had been paying seventy-five cents per pair. Underwear was manufactured in large quantities, and all clothing worn by the prisoners was made in the institution. Inmate clothing manufactured included undershirts, work pants, work socks, work shirts, overalls and coveralls, and poplin jackets. Civilian clothing manufacture included suits, dress pants, dress socks, and white shirts. Soaps of all kinds, scouring powder, cold cream, vanishing cream, skin softener, lotion, shampoo, furniture polish, sweeping compound, bluing, ink, and flavorings were manufactured in quantities sufficient to supply all state institutions. Likewise, the penitentiary maintained a slaughter house and packing plant with facilities of sufficient capacity to meet the cured and fresh meat needs of these institutions. In 1937 a coining press was installed to make state tax tokens. During the war, shirts for military and lend-lease programs were turned out at the rate of seven hundred per day(2). In 1955 the following prison industries were listed: canteen, cannery, tag plant, clothing manufacture, general construction, general maintenance, stewards department, soap plant,

mattress and cushion factory, plumbing, carpenter shop, heating, electrical shop, maching shop, laundry, tin shop, storeroom, garage, and print shop.

Prison Life

Before the turn of the century little was done to rehabilitate prisoners. Drastic measures of punishment were frequent and accepted. The traditional picture of men in stripes, under heavy guard, on the proverbial rock pile was not an exaggeration. The ball and chain, bread and water diets and solitary dungeon treatment, though seldom effective, were in common use. Idleness and overcrowding were doubtlessly the greatest barrier to prisoner rehabilitation. At best, the prisoners were employed in farm and garden work, in cutting and dressing stones, in making lime and brick, and in the construction and repair of walls and buildings.(2)

In 1897 a law was enacted providing that every able-bodied convict should be given work suitable, as nearly as possible, to his skills and capacities. Money earned for such labors after deducting a satisfactory amount for maintenance, was to be sent to the family or dependents of the prisoner, or be paid to him on discharge if he had no dependents.(2)

A turn of the century reporter on one of the metropolitan publications in Denver, after inspecting the institution in Canon City and commenting on the treatment the men received, made the remark that the men were "attired in white woolen suits which were handsomely decorated with black stripes." Warden Thomas J. Tynan went on the assumption that putting men in stripes for ninety days, the usual practice on entering the prison, was the wrong psychology. Beginning early in 1911 he put all new arrivals in blue and made them "convicts of the first class." If they made good and followed prison routines, they were never subjected to the wearing of striped clothing. Warden Tynan, having served for a short time as deputy warden, had already advocated vocational training and was promoting recreation such as baseball, football, handball, horseshoe pitching and boxing.

Most executions at the prison were held inside the walls. Until 1933 hanging was the method used in executions. Colorado was one of the first western prisons to utilize a lethal gas chamber in the execution of prisoners and many other states modeled similar installations after the one at Canon City. After doing service for over 20 years, the gas chamber was demolished early in 1955. The new edifice which replaced it was built atop the new maximum security building on the site of the building once occupied by the female department.(4) Colorado last executed a prisoner, Luis Jose Monge, in 1967. He was the 77th person executed in Colorado between 1890 and 1967.

During the period of 1870 to 1940 the penitentiary received 21,888 prisoners. Out of the 1940 population of 1378, seventeen were women. In 1940, the average age of all prisoners was twenty-eight. By law in 1940, a prisoner upon discharge was given \$5.00, a suit of clothes, and a railroad ticket. In 1995, a prisoner upon discharge was given \$100.00, a suit of clothes, and a bus ticket.

Bibliography

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