

'Shame of County'

Degradation in Stinking Cells

Last year, more than 600,000 Californians were locked up in city or county jails. This could mean that, barring repeaters, one out of every 18 men, women and children in the State was behind bars for some time.

A Chronicle staff writer, under an assumed name—Peter Emil Flick—and unknown to his jailers as a reporter, did time in two of these jails. He found filth, degradation and sordid conditions. Today, he tells about the jail which has earned the title of the "worst county jail in California."



By PIERRE SALINGER (Alias Peter Emil Flick)

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A long line of dungaree-clad prisoners filed out of the large tank cell at the Santa Clara County Jail at San Jose and headed into the courtyard for dinner.

As they filed past the food tables, trustees piled fish, potatoes, vegetables, jello and bread on their aluminum trays.

Lieutenant Jim Gibbons, who is in charge of the jail, turned to me and said:

"One thing we do here is feed well. There's about nothing else you can say for the place."

The Santa Clara County Jail, built in 1875, has won the title of the "worst jail in California" on more than one occasion. Once it was labeled "the shame of Santa Clara county."

Only last year a transient laborer serving a 30-day sentence for petty theft was badly beaten by 20 prisoners and then forced to submit to abnormal acts by the prisoners.

When he finally fell asleep due to exhaustion, two prisoners set fire to his mattress.

Fights in the jail are common because of the overcrowded conditions and the sordid atmosphere of the cells.

On the main floor are two cell blocks.

One is the dungeon-type block that was constructed in 1875.

In a square, concrete-walled room with no windows, are a number of brick cells. Their doors are solid iron. Each has a small slit for communication and a minimum amount of ventilation. The men in this block are locked in these cells at 4 p. m. They are not let out until 8 a. m. There are no toilets in the smaller cells.

During the day, the men are allowed to roam around the corridor that surrounds the brick cells. The walls are painted coal black, but during the long years prisoners with nothing else to do have etched their names and epithets against society, like "To Hell with the Bulls," all over the wall.

In the other cell block, the small brick cells have been removed and the floor is covered by 48 double bunks—room for 96 men. These

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The Santa Clara County Jail

Lockup in San Jose

'Worst' in the State

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men are locked up in this block the entire day—coming out only for meals.

The men eat outdoors in the jail courtyard—in a section covered over by a corrugated iron roof.

The quality of the food has been improved since an Assembly committee visited the jail in 1947. Prisoners told me the food at the jail is very good. There are three meals a day and the diet varies.

But the by-product of such overcrowding and idleness is inevitably violence and sex perversion.

The San Jose City Jail, a few blocks from the county jail, is also overcrowded.

Two weeks ago a man previously described as a "psychopath" was put in the drunk tank with three other men. Two of the three men were asleep. Five minutes after the psychopath arrived, he went berserk. He started kicking one of the sleeping men in the face, blinding him in one eye. He kicked in the ribs of the other sleeping man.

The third prisoner had the good fortune to have an illegal knife in his possession. He held off the berserk man for five minutes, while banging on the bars and shouting wildly for the guards.

INDUSTRIAL FARM

Santa Clara is attempting a novel penological experiment. The county has set up a "Department of Corrections," the first such county body in the State, and has turned over to this department the County Industrial Farm near Milpitas.

At this farm 120 county prisoners serving sentences are kept in quonset huts and old Civilian Conservation Corps buildings and work on county roads, at the County Hospital and on farm projects.

The farm is under the direction of Max Watson, former chief probation officer of Santa Clara county and now the head of the Department of Corrections.

"Corky" Ortega, one of the prisoners at the Farm, who has been in and out of county jails some 350 times in the past 26 years, told me he considered the farm the best county jail he had ever served in.

RADICAL DEPARTURE

Other county jail authorities are watching the Santa Clara Industrial Farm with interest to see how the Correction Department makes out.

It is a radical departure to turn over what is considered the vested interest of the Sheriff—the handling of jails and prisoners—to an outside body completely divorced from the Sheriff's office.

But the farm is now full to capacity—and the overcrowded conditions remain at the downtown jail.

The ancient structure has been the subject of scathing Grand Jury reports since 1917—but it still stands as a living monument to our outmoded penal concepts.

In June of 1952 a group of women who live in Santa Clara county got up in arms about the jail situation.

The, descended on the institu-



MAX WATSON
He heads Santa Clara farm

tion on a hot June day and in their words. "We were horrified!"

"The jail was so crowded you could smell the place as far away as Palo Alto," Nellie M. Broderson of Menlo Park, chairman of the committee, said.

The Palo Alto women's clubs and a group of other women's organizations passed a resolution aimed at the Santa Clara County Supervisors:

"We urge the Supervisors to allow no more appropriations for Fair ground purposes until the proposed jail farm is a reality. We do not want a costly new jail building, but we do want a jail farm where the inmates can be rehabilitated and restored to society."

LETTER TO SUPERVISORS

Mrs. Broderson followed this up with a letter to the Supervisors.

"We the church women of Palo Alto (representing 18 Protestant churches) feel that we can no longer be self-respecting citizens and allow this disgrace to our county to continue. Dr. Austin McCormick, professor of criminology at the University of California, in a talk last December in San Jose declared: 'This Santa Clara County Jail is one of the worst in the entire Nation. It compares with concentration camps in Germany during the war years.'

"We have been told that huge sums of money have been spent on buildings to house livestock at the county fair grounds and that more money is being appropriated. These are used, as you know, only two weeks of the entire year.

"We urge you to consider the welfare of our delinquent youth and adults above the welfare of our thoroughbred stock. We want no more spending of money on fair grounds buildings until human needs are adequately met," Mrs. Broderson wrote.

The County Board of Supervisors met this demand squarely.

Eight seconds before the old board went out of existence two weeks ago it passed appropriations for more than \$350,000 worth of livestock barns and exhibit buildings for the county fair.