

L.A.'s Giant Jails



by William Hart

It is size — sheer immensity — that is the first and the last principle of the Los Angeles County Central Jail. It is this simple, stunning fact that sparks both the pride of the men and women who run it and the problems that today beseege what is said to be the largest jail in the world.

The operation of the Central Jail's morn-

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ing "court line," in which up to 1,000 inmates are awakened, fed, given civilian clothes, chained and shepherded into 30 buses during a two-hour period, has been called "the daily miracle" by Art Stoyanoff, chief of the Custody Division of the L.A. Sheriff's Department.

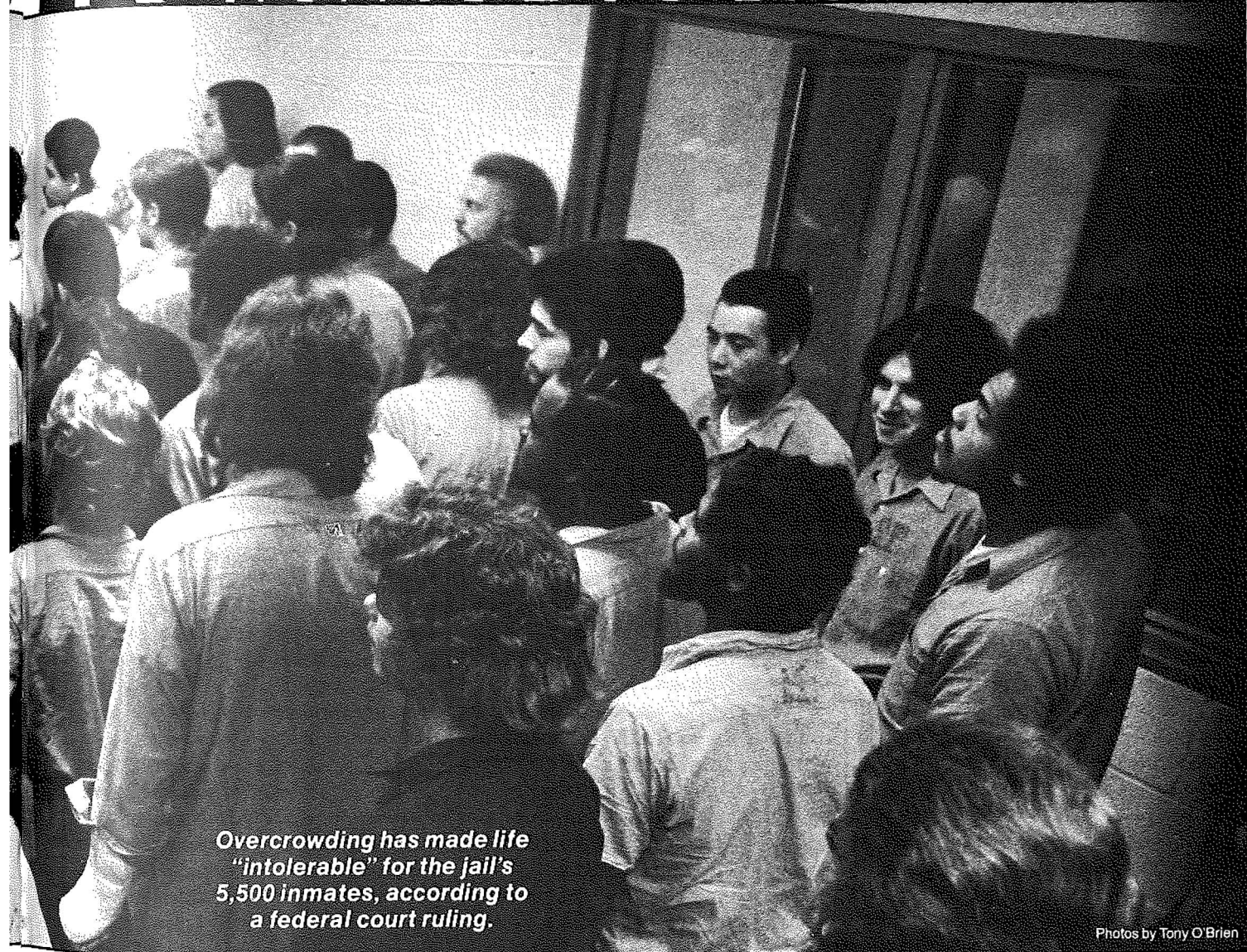
But the huge concrete bunker squatting near the center of L.A., is an unlikely setting for a supernatural event. The jail dwarfs every other pretrial facility and almost every prison in the country. Its count in November of about 5,100 inmates was under its design capacity of 5,580. The vast majority of its charges are pretrial detainees, many of whom must be bused

daily to some 30 separate courts located from one to 75 miles away.

The inmates range from maximum-security street gang leaders to overnight guests on their way to a dismissal. They are housed in 27 multi-cell "modules" stacked on four floors. The modules, which are conventional cellblocks, include 1,080 one-bed cells and hundreds of multi-bed cells each holding from four to ten inmates. Including corridors, escalators, cafeterias and other areas, the facility spreads over some 935,000 square feet within its tall, windowless walls.

The jail's medical staff make some 2,000 patient-contacts a day. Two thousand out-

A Giant Headache



Overcrowding has made life "intolerable" for the jail's 5,500 inmates, according to a federal court ruling.

Photos by Tony O'Brien

siders come daily for 20-minute social visits. The annual expense of running the jail and its adjacent Inmate Reception Center (IRC) is nearly \$30 million. It is a very big, very busy place — a fact not lost on the staff who operate it.

"How do you administer it?" Stoyanoff, a large, thickset man, was repeating a visitor's question. He shrugged and said, "It doesn't happen overnight. It takes a lot of hard work, really. But what are you going to do? We have no choice; we have to administer it."

An aide to Facility Commander Capt. Robert Grimm was less reserved. "This place is phenomenal," he said. "A lot of

people just can't relate to it, it's so big. Even law-enforcement personnel — I almost can't explain it to them."

Law-enforcement personnel are not the only ones who have had serious problems relating to the Central Jail. Over the past several years the mammoth facility has been accused of a striking range of deficiencies, from overcrowding and insufficient recreation to inadequate medical care, harassment of prisoners and brutality. The jail remains embroiled in dealing with a federal court decision that found many of the charges to be accurate; the court ordered nearly a dozen changes in the facility's operation.

Jail officials have appealed some of the orders and claim they have been working to comply with others. But last May the same federal judge accepted prisoner complaints about the jail's lack of compliance — officials acknowledged continued overcrowding — and ordered Sheriff Peter Pitchess and jail commanders to appear at a contempt hearing now scheduled for the fall.

Down at the court line on a recent day, constitutional issues were not on the agenda. Khaki-clad deputy sheriffs were preoccupied with herding their charges into and out of the 32 holding cells. They

were pushing wheeled carts draped with four-man shackles and studying clipboards and computer print-outs, the latter prepared in the early morning and sent to each module by the 6 a.m. wake-up time.

"Beverly and Culver in the middle, Santa Monica down the back!" blared one of the loudspeakers echoing sporadically through a fluorescent-lit maze of concrete passages. Its flat report sunk into the numbing din of thousands of shuffling feet, of clanking chains and slamming gates. From all directions came the calls, the cries, the slow laughter and muted chatter of more than a thousand half-awake men.

"Griswald! Are you here, Griswald?" demanded one of the dozens of clipboard-armed deputies as he peered into a cell stuffed with men in ill-fitting denim shirts and trousers. Around a corner another deputy called out, "Okay Pomona, step in, Pomona! All the way to the corner!" Another loudspeaker barked: "John Doe number 073, report to court line!"

The inmates, who had followed the signs and the multi-colored floor-lines down from their modules, were a passive army in wrinkled denim; they were lined up in the halls, bunched in the holding cells, waiting to be chained or moved. Some were changing into civilian clothes returned to them from the jail's massive dry-cleaning center. Others stood staring at nothing, perhaps reflecting on their coming day in court.

The Central Jail is the bulwark of L.A. County's 9,500-inmate jail system, which also includes two facilities for sentenced offenders, a women's jail and a work-release center. Even those who speak proudly of the central jail's operation are convinced that the facility is simply too large for comfort.

Pitchess and Stoyanoff support an existing but dormant plan to construct smaller satellite jails around the 4,300 square-mile county. Using the standard of the National Clearinghouse on Criminal Justice Planning and Architecture, the jail should hold no more than 300 to 400 inmates and should thus be broken up into at least 12 smaller facilities. These standards had

been well publicized by 1977, when Los Angeles County built a 1,500-bed annex onto the existing 4,000-bed facility. In fact, if federal funds had been involved, the law would have forbidden the new construction.

Why, then, was the annex built? "It was plain stupidity on the part of the authorizing officials," said Sheriff Pitchess, who is known for his outspokenness. "They thought that they could save money [and said], 'As long as we're building one with 500 beds, we might as well make it 1,500. As long as we're building one with 1,500, we might as well make it bigger.'" Pitchess said that when the annex was proposed he "fought it strongly, but we were finally faced with accepting this or getting no jail at all."

Staff members at the jail, from deputy on up, remark upon the strain of moving, feeding, searching, and guarding 5,000 prisoners — including what one called "the baddest dudes in the world" — with an average shift complement of some 180 officers, most of them young, inexperienced deputy sheriffs. "It seems like it should be impossible," said a transportation officer in a typical comment. He grinned. "Thank God the inmates let us do it."

That's the staff speaking. Some outsiders are more indignant. A local ACLU attorney referred to the jail as "the ugly stepsister of the [sheriff's] department." An official of the California Board of Corrections, a standard-setting body generally supportive of the jail's operation, called its size a "fatal error" in jail planning.

By far the most telling critique, however, came in February 1979 from U.S. District Court Judge William Gray, who found conditions within the facility "intolerable" and unconstitutional in ruling for inmate plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit. Gray's sweeping order sustained the plaintiffs' allegations that inmates were awakened too early, were not given enough time to eat, were crammed into holding tanks with nowhere to sit for long periods, were forced to sleep on mattresses on corridor and dayroom floors, and did not get adequate recreation, access to telephones, or changes of clothing. Many of these prob-

lems stemmed from overcrowding. While the jail population has recently been below its 5,580-bed design capacity, the population frequently exceeds that number after a spate of new admissions.

In addition to ordering remedies for these deficiencies, Judge Gray also directed officials to allow contact visits, to permit inmates to be present during cell-searches, and to remove the steel sheets bolted over jail windows in 1972 so that inmates would be able to see "the sun, the sky, or the outside world."

These last three orders are currently being appealed by the department.

A related lawsuit charges the jail with having inadequate resources for handling the large numbers of mentally disturbed inmates who pass through the facility. The federal trial on that issue has been postponed; the plaintiffs' attorney acknowledged that psychiatric care at the jail has improved since the suit was filed.

In response to the first suit, Stoyanoff and other officials last May blamed continued overcrowding on a "sudden and unforeseen" increase in admissions beginning last January. They admitted at the time that because of overcrowding, compounded by the need to separate inmates of varying security classifications, some were still sleeping in dayrooms and on "freeways" (corridors in front of cells), that inmates were missing recreation and were being forced to wait in overcrowded holding tanks on the way to court.

Last August, officials acknowledged to a visitor the obvious fact that many holding cells — each of which is reserved for a separate court or security level — were still overcrowded, although they did contain new stainless-steel stools and benches. But Stoyanoff and Grimm claimed that most of the court's directives were being complied with; they said the jail was not, at the time, too crowded to permit adequate sleeping arrangements for all inmates.

But ACLU attorney Terry Smerling, who has directed the federal lawsuit for several years, expressed a strongly different view. "There's no question in my mind that the jail is continuing to violate the court's orders in many or most of the areas," he



Inmates are bused daily to the 30 courts the jail serves, some as far as 75 miles away.

said. "From what inmates tell us, this includes recreation and TV time, changes of clothing and access to telephones. I believe inmates are still not getting enough time for meals in some areas, and the violations concerning numbers of men and length of time in the holding tanks are actually quite open."

Smerling added that "the place is so big that it brings on a callous, impersonal atmosphere; nobody has the opportunity or incentive to get to know anyone else." The result, he claimed, is that inmates' access to court-ordered services frequently depends on the personality or mood of the deputy in charge of a module or group of cells. "The deputies' job there is a terribly difficult one. When they get pressed — which they often are — they just cut out what they consider optional."

Smerling further charged that the deputies' efforts "to enforce unenforceable rules" leads to even more serious consequences. "Brutality is rampant in that place," he said. "The deputies' basic rule is that they run it on fear. It's a very hard thing to document, but I've been interviewing inmates there for eight years and I hear the same stories over and over again."

Smerling's accusation, which was included in his lawsuit but not in Judge

Gray's findings, was seconded by Brian Hudson, coordinator of the National Lawyer's Guild Prison Project in Los Angeles. "We have documented just under 30 beatings since early May," he said, adding that he had filed notice with the county that lawsuits were imminent.

"Everybody's skeptical about inmate complaints," he said. "We're skeptical, too. But I know that every day in there you have men slammed against the bars, you have racism, verbal abuse, and so on. And of course you have 'flashlight therapy.' [Deputies carry heavy flashlights.] I'm convinced that the disciplinary procedure they have in there is arbitrary. The deputies are really fearless; they just don't care."

Custody Chief Stoyanoff, however, categorically denies these allegations. "You can't say there's absolutely none, but I don't think we have a problem with brutality," he said. "We've never tolerated it in the department. There are confrontations, but they're not one-sided, and we've suspended deputies just for not reporting even minor incidents." Stoyanoff added that he could remember two deputies having been fired for using excessive force.

The brutality issue was given added impetus following a confrontation last April 19 that left both inmates and deputies injured. The fight started after some or all of a

group of 34 inmates refused to reenter their cells in the "pro-per tank," an area reserved for prisoners acting as their own attorneys in court.

Critics charge that as many as 40 deputies beat the prisoners with flashlights to force them into the tank and then continued the beatings after they were in. Stoyanoff defended the deputies use of force as "reasonable," and noted that one was still off-duty with a concussion.

Hudson noted that a local judge, after hearing evidence, dismissed the charges against several of the inmates who had been arrested for assault.

Smerling and Hudson acknowledged that "there are a lot of very professional people" among the deputies, and linked the incidents of excessive force to the pressures weighing on the youthful jail staff, and to lack of supervision. Stoyanoff, while defending his deputies' performance, stated that "overresponse [by deputies] is a concern of mine. With a large staff like this one, it's always something in the back of your mind."

A sergeant with several years' experience spoke of the difficulties some new deputies have in adjusting to the job. "A lot of young guys come in here and their first reaction is, 'Holy shit! All these bad dudes all around me!'" he said. "Maybe they're insecure because they don't really know



The jail offers almost no programs; most inmates spend their days in idleness.

how to fight, or maybe they're from middle-class backgrounds and never rubbed up against these kinds of people before."

The sergeant said that "an officer's got to be fair, but an inmate has to know that if he starts something, he's going to get his ass kicked." But he added that some confrontations are sparked inadvertently by deputies. "Some of the young guys get nervous and try to enforce the rules too strictly. The deputy might be technically correct, but he doesn't maybe take into account different ethnic groups or different situations. And he ends up with a confrontation."

Nervousness among new deputies — and also among new inmates — is not difficult for a visitor to appreciate, although a recent afternoon tour revealed a generally clean, orderly institution. From the outside, the jail is a huge concrete square with two wings pushing out on either side. Inside, it is an endless series of spacious corridors on floors joined by escalators. There are plenty of signs in English and Spanish. There are hundreds of arrows and colored lines to follow. Nevertheless, a guide is essential. One deputy told of his first day at work, when he got separated from an older

colleague on the way to lunch. "I didn't eat lunch that day," he said. "I couldn't find it."

Inmates are generally divided into four security levels. While the average inmate's stay at the jail is about six days, some stay for weeks, months or even years, depending on their fortunes in court. The modules, containing single bed or multi bed cells, usually consist of two rows of barred cells, two tiers high opening on the "freeways." The modules are themselves separated from the main corridors by a solid door and a barred gate.

Most lower-security inmates are placed in four, six, or ten-man cells that contain double-bunks, toilets and showers. Inmates acting as their own attorneys, plus those who have displayed aggressive behavior, those who are mentally disturbed, those in protective custody, and those in maximum-security are kept in single cells measuring about 5½-by-8½ feet.

The jail's maximum-security module consists of seven ground-floor rows of single cells, with the rows divided by glassed-in walkways. Capt. Grimm called it "a completely separate facility," since it contains its own cafeteria and law library, and jail trustees are skin-searched upon entering and leaving.

Maximum-security inmates, who include

suspected prison gang leaders, are escorted individually during all moves, and are let out of their cells individually for "freeway time." Grimm declined a visitor's request to enter a cell row, saying, "I wouldn't let my own men in there without back-up. A few months ago one of these inmates stabbed another one in full view of a deputy."

Outdoor recreation is provided on part of the structure's roof, a large concrete expanse that features a volleyball net, hoops for basketball, three concrete Ping-Pong tables and a small assortment of weight-training equipment. Grimm said that inmates were normally given up to three hours a week of "roof time."

Besides recreation, the jail offers inmates no programs except Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, scant counseling and some books and magazines.

The great majority of those 4,000 to 4,500 inmates who do not go to court spend their days in idleness.

One part of the jail that has benefited from the size of the facility and volume of inmates is the medical wing, according to Hospital Administrator Bonnie Norman. The hospital, which has yet to be licensed, contains 400 beds tended by about 200 civilian medical personnel. There are 50 more acute-care beds in a secure unit at the University of Southern California Medical Center. Pharmacy, X-ray and laboratory services are available 24 hours a day, Norman said. The staff includes ten full-time doctors, four part-time dentists, three full-time pharmacists and 100 practical and registered nurses.

"We're pretty self-sufficient here," Norman said, "and we report directly to the assistant sheriff, something that helps us deal with problems that always arise between medical and custody needs." Norman said she expected the facility to soon be licensed as a skilled-nursing facility.

Norman said that the jail has also made recent progress in psychiatric care, the subject of the most recent federal lawsuit. "Psychiatric care is a growing problem in jails," Norman said, "and there's still not much money available for it. We have about 40 psychiatric staff here now, and

the [county] mental health department also has counselors here."

Norman said inmates are screened out at intake if they seem to have mental problems or display "bizarre behavior" and are referred to the jail's outpatient unit. Acute psychotics can be sent to a nearby state hospital, but Norman said "they are often sent back to us." The most recent development was the establishment of a 35-bed acute psychiatric ward within the jail, which Norman said was fully staffed and met state standards. "It's a pilot program, and I think we're the only jail in the country to have it," she said. Norman added that some inmates do have to wait "several days" for beds, but that the situation has improved greatly over past years.

Outside the medical wing, it is difficult to find anyone with anything good to say about the size of the Central Jail. Indeed, officials noted that the problems of scale have been compounded in recent years as greater numbers of violent and unstable inmates have been brought in. Constructed in two stages, in 1963 and 1977, at a total cost of some \$51 million, the jail "was designed as a place primarily for drunks, wife-beaters and penny-ante offenders," said Stoyanoff. "We get few drunks in here now, and 70 percent of misdemeanants never make it here either. Today, this jail is a felony facility."

There are those who give the jail staff high marks for its operation. "If you consider that we do not like the size of the place, we would say that the [jail] administration gives a very high priority to meeting standards, and does comply with all of them except for overcrowding," said Ed Smith of the California Board of Corrections. "The staff there is head-and-shoulders above most in its level of professionalism. The size of it and the overcrowding certainly do affect all of its operations, but the administration seems very concerned about responding to our comments and recommendations."

Some critics charge that the problems spawned by size are compounded by the preponderance of young, inexperienced deputies who would rather be out in a pa-

trol car. All deputies graduating from the 16-week Sheriff's Academy must go to the Custody Division for their first tour. While Stoyanoff said their average stay was three to four years, he acknowledged that it could be longer. One deputy said some can wait up to eight years for a police job to open in a particular patrol area. (The sheriff's department employs 7,500 deputies, most of them in police work in the suburbs of Los Angeles County.)

Smerling, Hudson and others are convinced that deputies should be replaced by officers whose primary interest is in corrections. But Stoyanoff disagrees. "I



wouldn't have it any other way," he said. "Our men are sworn, selected, professional personnel who want a career in law enforcement. In my talks with people throughout the country, I hear a lot about the difficulties in recruiting top personnel for corrections positions, about the need to lower standards. We don't have that problem."

Grimm said deputies receive 80 hours of custody training plus additional instruction while on the job. "Sure, most [deputies] would rather be in a radio car," he said. "They came to the department to be policemen. But if we analyze it, we find that the average deputy comes from a different environment than the one he's going to be working in. We think it's a maturing experience for them to get used to dealing with

different types of people in here, instead of going straight from the academy to patrol." Grimm also noted that jail deputies can be used by the department during natural disasters and other emergencies. "We can go to 12-and-12 shifts here and put 500 deputies out in the field on very short notice."

Smith of the Corrections Board said he and his colleagues were themselves undecided on the question. "We've been arguing among ourselves as to the validity of career correction officers versus the rotation of deputies," he said. "Some California counties do have civilian correction officers manning their jails, but we have seen a fairly high turnover among them, since few people come to the job with the thought of making it a career. In general, I think the turnover at the [Central] Jail is not too bad, and that they have a pretty good professional core there."

The consensus is that the L.A. Central Jail works because it has to, and because it is staffed from a department known for its emphasis on training and discipline. But it also works because the prisoners permit it to, officials said. "There are a lot of very bad people in here," one sergeant said in a typical comment. "But most of them pretty much go along with the program. Most of them don't expect to be here very long, or are hoping to get a break in court, so they think twice about messing up."

The inmates are mostly black and Hispanic defendants unable to make bail, and they are everywhere, trudging along the halls in single or double file, lying on bunks or hanging around on the "freeways," manning the food lines, the medical lines, the court lines, peering at the signs, listening to the loudspeakers, or just following whoever is ahead of them.

"We do it every day, and after a few times they [inmates] learn the system," said Lt. Grant Johnson. "Once they do, they'll tell you if you're trying to put them in the wrong line or holding cell."

"The surprising thing was that when I first came here, I heard all the [loudspeaker] announcements and wondered who they were aimed at," Johnson said with a smile. "I found out that it's not the deputies they're talking to, it's the inmates." □