

How Tribune investigator was hired

"LOOKS LIKE we've got a live one," a large, bearded man said with delight as I filled out an application to become a prison guard at Pontiac.

"If you're interested in working, we want to hire," he promised.

I returned to the state employment office in Champaign an hour later and was ushered into an office for an interview.

A man in a lieutenant's uniform said, "Are you aware that on the 22d of July there was a riot at Pontiac that left three men dead?"

I told him I knew of the riot but didn't suppose that was a regular occurrence.

HE SAID IT wasn't, then confided to me that when he worked on the "inside" he often felt safer than he did outside prisons.

The bearded man entered the room and immediately began to ask, "Are you aware that on the 22d of July—"

The lieutenant cut him off, saying we'd been through that.

They asked if I was afraid of black people.

I said I wasn't.

They asked if I was a leader or a follower.

I said, "I'd rather be an engine than a caboose."

They asked what I could do for them.

I said, "I'm big, and people usually do what I say."

THEY ASKED what I did in high school.

I said, "Hung out on the street corner and chased girls."

"Just girls, right?" the bearded man wanted to know.

"Yeah," I assured him. "I don't have any other hangups."

The questioning lasted about 20 minutes, after which I was told that they

expected me to work every day and report on time.

"No problem," I said.

"You start Oct. 10, 1978, at 8 a.m.," I was told. "Just report to the gatehouse."

THAT WAS IT. No identification check. No tests. A background check wasn't initiated until a week later, when I was already working in Pontiac.

As I prepared to leave the interview, one of the men advised me to get some comfortable shoes. "Otherwise," he said, "you'll get so tired you can't even make it to the bar after work."

The work pays \$915 a month to start, \$1,179 at top grade. Most guards have to hold two jobs, I was to learn, and being a guard is usually the "extra" one.

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