

**CONVICT LIFE AT THE
MINNESOTA
STATE PRISON,
STILLWATER, MINNESOTA**

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Convict Life at the Minnesota State Prison, Stillwater, Minnesota by William Casper Heilbron & Cole Younger

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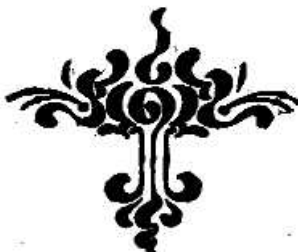
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PREFACE

FEW people have a comprehensive idea of a penitentiary, especially the daily life of the inmates and the routine work in connection therewith. We will endeavor to give an accurate account of the prisoner's mode of occupation, his ideals, hopes and aspirations and follow him from the day he entered the prison, from his initiation into the various departments, to the day of his final discharge.

One of our celebrated poets has truly said :

A prison is a house of care,
A place where few can thrive,
A touchstone true to try a friend,
But a grave for one alive.

This stanza sums up the situation very nicely, although prison life is not the horrible nightmare that many authors have depicted. Most writers seem to get their ideas from the comic papers, wherein the prisoner is absurdly cartooned with close-cropped hair, low-browed and villainous looks, dressed in striped clothing of grotesque fit, and in many cases he is pictured chained to the floor by a huge ball and chain. This may have been an authentic description of the average prisoner years ago, but is not true today. It is a far cry from the time when Diogenes walked the streets of ancient Athens with a lighted lantern in the day time looking for an honest man. There were no prisons at that period of the world's history. If a man committed a serious crime against the state or

an individual the authorities ordered the lictor to strike off his head. If the offense was a minor one the offender was sold into slavery. This mode of procedure required only a few moments to execute, for in those days there were no protracted trials or clever attorneys to seek technicalities through which to free their clients. This condition of affairs prevailed for many centuries, and it often happened that a greater injustice was done the wrongdoer than he had committed against the state.

Fortunately, however, it remained for Victor Hugo to cry a halt against the then inhuman treatment accorded prisoners. In "Les Miserables" he paints a vivid picture that profoundly awakened public conscience, which still causes the world to shudder as it thinks of the injustice society did to poor Jean Valjean for stealing two loaves of bread to keep from starving.

There is today a more broad, more tolerant and a decidedly more civilized sentiment towards the inmates of penal institutions. It is universally recognized that the prisoner of today becomes the citizen of tomorrow; this fact must be conceded. Every effort is, therefore, made to assist them who have a keen desire to lead an honest life. However, if one is inclined to go around with a "chip on his shoulder," so to speak, he will undoubtedly find as much trouble inside as he will outside of a prison. If he behaves himself, complies with the rules and performs his work in a conscientious manner he will have no more difficulty than he would anywhere else.

Modern penology has many bright laurels to its credit. What is meant by "modern penology" is that era which ushered in the good-time law, whereby a prisoner is enabled by meritorious conduct to reduce his original sen-

tence to a marked degree; the parole and grading system, which permits the release of a first offender at the expiration of half his sentence; the establishing of prison night schools, enabling him to learn a trade during imprisonment and permitting him to have books, papers, magazines, etc. In fact our modern penology, of which a striking example can be seen in the Minnesota State Prison, that has the reputation of being one of the best-managed institutions in the country, aims to develop the good in the prisoner instead of continually keeping at a white heat all his coarse and brutal instincts.

Many years ago (and in some prisons at the present time), harsh measures were employed to punish an inmate for the slightest violation of a prison rule. But experience vividly impressed upon the public mind that such policy was a vicious one. It returned the prisoner to society a hundred fold more dangerous than he was previous to his commitment. Moral suasion has now supplanted the loaded cane, the dungeon and all other drastic, coercive measures which, instead of improving, had a decided tendency to make idiots of prisoners, morally, mentally and physically. It is dangerous to permit a mad dog to roam at large, and the same is true of the prisoner whom the custodians of the state turn loose on the community, whose every fibre beats stridently for revenge upon those who have subjected him to brutal treatment. Roughly speaking, we feel safe in saying that seventy-five per cent of the prisoners are susceptible to moral suasion and any appeal made to them is taken seriously.

Our modern penology is not the effervescent dream of unbalanced minds, but the result of exhaustive research by many of the best prison authorities in America and

Europe. Long experience has proven its value, and the present century will assuredly witness as many wonderful improvements as took place in the past.

For various reasons I have refrained from mentioning the names of prisoners with sensational reputations who have been inmates of the Minnesota State Prison in the past.

I am sincerely indebted to Warden Wolfer, his employees, and many inmates of the prison, for their cooperation in assisting me to present the following pages to the public, without which this book would be impossible.

W. C. HEILBRON.

ST. PAUL, June 20, 1909.

MINNESOTA STATE PRISON

THE PRISONER'S RECEPTION AT THE PENITENTIARY

An incoming prisoner is designated by the inmates as a "fresh fish." He enters the administration building, and, as a rule, if he has the reputation of being a "slippery chap" is handcuffed to the sheriff or one of his deputies. Handcuffs, in the vernacular of the underground world, are called "come-a-longs." He now enters a room known as "between the gates." (One of these gates leads to the outer world and the other to the inside of the prison.) Here the prisoner's commitment papers are examined, the deputy warden sent for to receive the new arrival, and slips are immediately made out notifying the several heads of departments of the man's name, county from which he came, the offense for which he was committed and the time that he shall serve.

Upon the arrival of the deputy warden the prisoner is taken in charge and marched through the officers' barber shop and kitchen. Upon leaving the latter room the "fresh fish" is commanded to "turn to the right," and a short distance ahead, about twenty feet, he is told to "turn to the left." He now enters the large cellhouse—his future home, to remain for the number of years that His Honor, the Judge of the District Court, has sentenced him to serve. The cellhouse contains 664 cells (referring to Minnesota's institution, which furnishes the