



INSIDE MISSOURI STATE PENITENTIARY: Observations of Number 14922

by JESSE LANG ¹

Allow me to convey to you the picture of prison life in the Missouri State Penitentiary (MSP). My analysis may be somewhat biased and unprofessional, because I'm not a psychologist, but a prisoner, lacking in formal education. (My IQ test showed that I have the equivalent of a fifth-grade education.) Forgive me when I'm wrong; my interpretations come only from close observation and personal experience.

THE UNCLE TOMS

I will begin with my observations of the "Uncle Toms." First we must ask: What makes them tick? Why are there Toms and where do they come from? Have there always been Toms and do they come from ordinary people?

I believe that the Tom is a person who has been psychologically defeated by his condition and by his surroundings in the penitentiary. There are Toms here who were at one time some of the most feared and courageous inmates in this place; not only feared and courageous, but also intelligent. Toms come in all shapes, fashions, and personalities. There are some who hide behind the veil of being tough guys, intellectuals, or revolutionaries, and, of course, there are the old stereotyped Toms who let it all hang out and have nothing to hide -- even though some of the things they do are not very pleasant to watch. To see a healthy, intelligent, and able-bodied man stoop to a position where he abandons all sense of his humanity is really a very unpleasant sight. It is disgusting, for example, to see a guard walk up to a prisoner who is flesh and blood just like he is, and abuse and control that prisoner's life. The Toms merely smile and scratch their heads, willing to be the world's flunky for these guards.

Now, what must the Tom's mental state be? He has been psychologically defeated by his conditions and surroundings. Everyday he sees a day like the day before. His life has been like

that of a robot, like a clock, a repetition of the same actions every day. He has seen many days where there was no mail, no visits for him, no hope for him; and each day he has met the face of his captors and rulers with baleful eyes. His captors come to work each day renewed with strength while every day he must bear the weight of a repetitive life. He sees the wall around him, the gun towers, and the mean-looking men in them who are just dying to pot-shot him between the eyes. He meets the captains, each of them six feet or bigger, with many men in their command. This white man wears a white shirt and cowboy boots, smokes a pipe or cigar, chews tobacco or dips snuff, and is sometimes a little drunk. . . . but he is always mean and hateful. This is the racist the inmate has to meet each new day; the person he has had to say "yes, sir" and "no, sir" to for many years; the person whose main objective is to someday turn this so-called tough guy into another Tom.

For years the Tom, the victim, resists the humiliation of lowering his manhood to the big man in the white shirt and his friends and followers. But each day the mail continues to miss him, each day that he seeks a visit and it does not come, and each year the Parole Board turns him down spells victory for the big man in the white shirt. He smiles when he sees the redness in his victim's eyes, for he knows that it is just a matter of time before he can walk up to him and say, "Hey boy, git me a cup of coffee, shun mah shoes, trim mah har, fetch mah coat." Oftentimes, the victim has fought them for many years, knocked many of them down and out, and had many guards come after him in big bunches. This is why I say Toms come in all shapes and fashions. They come from ordinary people, tough guys, revolutionaries and gangsters.

Some give up easily from the very beginning. On the other hand, some who came here as soft as lambs got to the point where they didn't give a damn and went wild. In the long run, they were

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broken down to nothing. The guards took all of their dignity and manhood, causing them to hate themselves. I have seen Toms get to the point where they hate all other prisoners. They eventually grow to hate the man in the white shirt too, but they serve his purpose and side with him. Once this happens, the once tough revolutionary is dangerous to other prisoners. He hates himself so much that when other prisoners remind him of the strong man he once was, he wants to destroy them for possessing the good qualities he once had which are now gone, never to be regained. He will do the guards' work; even attacking other prisoners for the guards and serving as a strong-arm for them for small favors and promises.

Once defeated by the men in the white shirts and their friends, the Tom will be their most faithful servant and flunky. He will do all he knows to try and convince others that his way is the best way. He'll say, "Hey man, you can't beat them; I've tried for ten years. You just can't beat them. This is the best way, man, this is the best way."

The big man in the white shirt chews his 'bacca and smiles and tells him to fetch his coat and shine his boots. The Tom, after he has been broken, will give up all morals; he possesses none. The best Tom in the world is a former rough guy. When it takes five years to break him, it takes a lifetime to remake him. He is finished. He will have spent all of his energy resisting and when they break him, he is broken to bits.

THE LOVE BUGS

This is the term used to describe the men who lay with other men as husband and wife. Some men from the very beginning come here with habits of homosexuality. Others go through a long process before falling into that bag. This is a prison. Some people don't know what that means; so the word 'prison' should be clearly defined. A prison is a place where they send some of the most normal, the most abnormal, the toughest, the most intelligent and also some of the most well-mannered men in this society. It is a place where men are treated more like gorillas than human beings. The prisoner's cage is no better than a gorilla's. It has the same thickness of bars and the same strength as the gorilla's cage. A prison is the worst place in the entire world. It is not a place of rehabilitation, but a place of

dehumanization. That is the best way I can define a prison.

Put all the characters together, locked in these cages, and see what you have: a madhouse. . . As you can imagine, there are some men who are here for rape, murder, robbery, and anything else you can think of. There are some strong men here and there are some weak ones here. But all of the people here are men. The majority of them are very healthy. They exercise regularly, eat three meals a day, get plenty of sleep, work everyday, and most are from 15 to 33 years old. Yes, 90 percent of the men behind these walls are in this age group. They have healthy bodies, bodies that are used to mating with women almost every night when they are on the street. The average prisoner here once enjoyed a healthy sex life; for he comes from that class of people who from a very early age experienced adventures with women. But what I am going to convey to you now, sparing none of the details, is the horror of sex in prison. And if there is any humanity amongst you, then you will see that there is a need for men behind bars to have sexual relations with real women...

One of the saddest sights in the world is that of a man degraded to the point where he daily contradicts nature and himself. Here in prison, men will substitute all things that they miss with anything that they can replace them with. And it is no different with their need for women. Sometimes this behavior is a long time developing, just like with the Tom. The first step that men take when they miss the sexual relations of their wives and sweethearts is masturbation. In prison, it is point-blank called "jacking off." When these healthy men get to a point where sexual desire comes down on them, the easiest and most expedient thing they can do about their passion is to jack off. But that in the long run serves no purpose for these healthy bodies.

Men are healthy here, healthier than the average man. Each morning they awake, their penises are erect. But they have no way of relieving this sexual tension. These are things that come with having a healthy body. Healthy bodies will function normally whether you want them to or not.

When men experience this organic function each morning, how are they to forget that they have this organ? The problem arises when a man knows he is healthy, has this penis and his youth -- and asks himself what to do with it. What