

Prison Society

By P. Edwards

(The author is one of several law students who taught a course in Springhill Penitentiary this summer).



As many as 100 inmates may be taking training courses at any one time, while another few score will be occupied in the school, in correspondence courses, in such sundry places as

the Solicitor-General's department has been pursuing a comparatively enlightened policy toward the treatment of its wards, though it is always held back to some extent by unenlightened public opinion. In the last few years numbers, shaved heads, and a number of other unnecessary rules for the cowering and regimentation of inmates have been abolished. Administrators are qualified with some sort of education.

Perhaps the most important aspect of prison reform is the gradual institution of the living unit concept, which includes having some of the staff, "un-uniformed", sharing the units with the inmates. The purpose, very briefly, is to eliminate the tense and unnatural atmosphere of continual confrontation between guards and inmates, as well as to give the inmates some human contact with people other than other inmates.

The living unit is in operation at Springhill and seems to have worked very well. It is one reason the air about Springhill is so much healthier than the creepy one at Dorchester, where both guards and inmates swagger about "playing the role", feeling and showing nothing but dislike for one another.

Springhill is certainly a far cry from the inhumane and vile prisons of the earlier part of this century, when men were made to work on chain gangs and

Many visitors to Springhill Medium Security Institution remark on the prison's similarity to a university residence. They mean this comparison as a compliment to the modern and unoppressive appearance of the prison more than as a sneering criticism of places like Howe Hall.

There is no question that the outward appearance of Springhill Institution warrants such favourable comments. Holding up to 400 inmates, it consists of a series of low, concrete buildings sitting in the middle of a site of about 100 acres, overlooking a rather pretty valley. Around the so-called "living units" are: a building housing a number of well-equipped training schools; a library, a chapel, and a hospital (all quite small); two gyms -- a little, old one and a big, unfinished one; a kitchen and two dining halls; a ballfield and a track, and a school with a few classrooms.

Surrounding the area are two high fences topped with coils of barbed wire. They look pretty formidable, but the inmates will assure you it is possible to get over them with some dexterity and a coat. For this reason there are a number of guard towers on the outside.

There used to be only one fence, but it blew over one night in a storm. Both fences are now girded with supports.

Springhill may look not unlike a university, but the way of life inside is that of a prison. The inmates sleep in cells in one of four "living units". The cells are locked at 11 p.m. and re-opened at 7 a.m.

Eight o'clock is the time to be at work and a man who is supposed to be elsewhere, if found in the unit after that hour, is liable to a conviction in the Unit Court for "sleeping in" or "being late for work". Punishment will range from a warning to two weeks "cell time" -- i.e. being locked up in one's cell for fourteen straight evenings.

the kitchen and the chapel, and driving trucks or tractors around. This leaves about half or more of the inmate population who are employed in menial and fairly useless occupations such as cleaning and gardening. The "sleeping in" laws do not seem to be enforced against these men; there is little enough for them to do anyway.

The inmates get paid about 10c an hour to pay for such things as toilet articles, which they have to supply themselves, and cigarettes. They buy these things at a canteen in their unit.

There is a recreational period in the evening, when the little gym is in full use, and sometimes there are movies to watch. Each unit has a T.V., set in its common room; a few men have them in their cells.

Springhill represents just one type in a wide spectrum of jails in Canada. It is one of the federal-run Penitentiaries, which take all people serving two years or more. These range from Half-Way Houses, situated in cities, where inmates are free to leave during the day, to the maximum-security institutions, such as the one at Dorchester, N.B.

Inmates serving less than two years and juvenile offenders go to one of a number of provincial institutions, which bear such euphemistic and hopeful names as "Industrial School", "Refuge for Girls", and "Correctional Centre".

Springhill is a medium-security Penitentiary. It was built in 1967 to eventually replace the one at Dorchester, which is now 98 years old. The difficulty with plans like these is that the inmate population keeps growing faster than expected, perhaps partly because judges are tempted to gear their sentences to the space available. Dorchester is as full as ever.

A federal Pen. is run by a chain of command going from the Solicitor-General to the Commissioner of Penitentiaries to the Director (Warden) of the Institution. In recent years

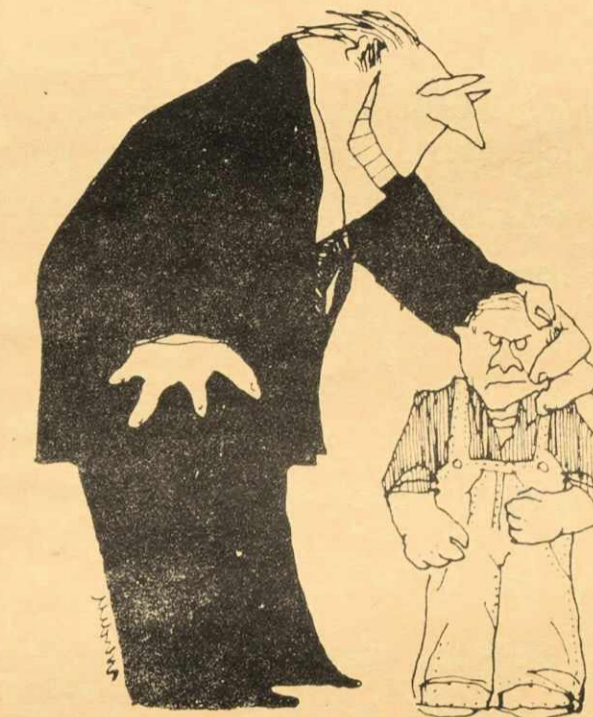
- Home Sweet Home

the notorious "silent rule" was enforced all day. As far as prisons go, Springhill is o.k. And yet the question has at least to be posed whether any prison, by its nature, can accomplish the substantial part of the task delegated to it by the legal system.

People are sent to prison partly in order to discourage other people from breaking the law. But a prison sentence is also given as a treatment for the offender himself -- to make him less likely to continue to take part in criminal activity. One belief is that prison will show the person that crime doesn't pay. Another is that the rehabilitative programme at the institution will direct him, when released, onto happier trails.

But it is well known that a person who goes to prison once is more than likely to go back again. Most of the inmates in the Pen. have a history of convictions and prison sentences, often going back to childhood. Far from deterring people from crime, prisons seem to ferment it. Why is this?

For one thing, the prison brings the first offender into contact with the experts in his field. The place abounds with stories about heists of one sort or another, and each man is given much constructive criticism of his prior methodology. It is not inappropriate that the Penitentiary used to be called the "school".



This is a rather extreme case, but is a good illustration of a common phenomenon that is difficult to understand for those who are unacquainted with it. It may help explain why many ex-cons subconsciously, even consciously, want back in.

No one would ever admit this, but in some cases it is very obvious. One man, drunk, will break a window of the police station and just stand there, waiting to be taken in. Another will commit a series of burglaries, scratching his initials somewhere before leaving.

These people want to go back home to the prison -- not because the prison is a particularly nice place to stay or because, objectively, it is the best place for them, but because they conceive, in their frustrations, that there is no other place for them. This is what prison has done for them.

Few people seem to question the need for the ever-increasing number of prisons. Most of the people in them are not violent by nature or physically dangerous, but are in for offences involving property. Most of them clearly need sentences which are geared not to punishment, or even to temporary removal, but to rehabilitation. The prison does not do much to rehabilitate, but probably only encourages more criminal activity.

More important than the actual instruction are the values and friendships that each fellow is bound to acquire after a period in the joint. He meets all sorts of other birds who he finds have a lot in common with him. When he gets out after two years or so, these may be the best, or even the only, friends he has.

The prison community is of necessity close-knit and is filled with all kinds of fellowship and personal loyalty that are no longer easy to find in our vast, impersonal society on the outside. Like any society, the inmates need bugbears and high on the list are the law and any kind of authority, with which everybody has had bad experiences. The inmate sub-culture is also cynical, poetic, and entirely unrealistic.

It is this interesting but dangerous inmate sub-culture which the living unit concept and various measures taken by the administration to increase contact with the outside are aimed at infiltrating and subverting. But to a certain extent it is impossible to manipulate and will retain certain features as long as the prison is a prison.

One final reason why the prison fails to discourage inmates from breaking laws is that it institutionalizes them. Inside, everything is done for you -- you don't have to make your own meals or buy your own furniture, work for your living, look after your family, or fill out your tax forms. There are no important decisions you have to make.

You spend a lot of your time just rapping with other inmates or figuring out how you're going to present your case to (pull one over on?) the Parole Board. There is nothing for you to be responsible about.

Accordingly, when you get out -- quite aside from the difficulties you will have as an ex-con, getting a job and so on -- you may have difficulty coping with the most ordinary things. One parole officer told us of a man he took out of Dorchester after a long spell. For some time this fellow was unable to do things as simple as going into a store and ordering a package of cigarettes.



We need to be looking at alternatives to prison such as have been instituted in certain European countries. One idea which has apparently worked effectively in Holland is to bring property-offenders face-to-face with the owners of the property violated and to have both parties negotiate a remedy. This policy not only offers victims of crime some compensation which they do not get from our present criminal procedures, but will save the convict and the state the great expense of a prison term. (It costs some \$18,000 a year to keep one man locked up in Penitentiary.) Furthermore, this practice would encourage the offender to look at his position in a more responsible manner than he is now wont to do.

The above is just one of a number of possible suggestions which deserve attention. Solicitor-General Allmand has made some remarks to the effect that he is looking for alternatives to prison. No doubt a Royal Commission to study the possibilities would be welcomed.

