

One day in Dorchester penitentiary--

Editor's Note

Larry Lamont and Tom Murphy, two UNB sociology majors were the first students ever to be admitted to Dorchester penitentiary when they made a supervised tour in November. Murphy and Lamont made the tour to research a sociology paper; the Brunswickan asked them to write the following article after their visit.

Early in November, for more than two hours, they tackled to eight members of the staff, including the entire classification staff and several psychologists. This meeting, which took place in the barred board room, was recorded on tape. They were afterwards shown the prison.

Murphy had a camera but it was confiscated before the tour began "for security reasons."

Both students had their notebooks until it was discovered that they had gained entrance to Side "A". They were immediately called back from the tour to explain the situation to the chief classification officer. They continued the tour without their notebooks.

Both Murphy and Lamont were screened by prison officials before they were admitted. (Written permission was obtained several weeks beforehand.) The prison's administration was very anxious to improve relationships with the universities.

All the staff were extremely courteous and co-operative. In many instances, they recognized the deficiencies of Dorchester, and are looking forward to the construction of a new prison within a few years.

The Brunswickan would like to express its appreciation to the staff and inmates of Dorchester penitentiary, without whose co-operation this article would not have been possible.

Prison as major source affects most of the town

As you drive through Dorchester, N.B., your attention will be drawn to the long row of regimented houses all looking much the same. High up on the hill is a big stone castle, almost enchanting from a distance. Those houses are guard houses. That castle is a maximum security penitentiary. Dorchester, a community of little more than a thousand people, is a prison town. Don't look for any cultural centers or movie theatres - there isn't even a restaurant. There seemed, however, to be an ample supply of churches. From high on the hill, one could see the Tantramar Marshes, the prairies of the east. Hardly beautiful though. Dorchester is not a tree town.

We wandered into one of the town's two general stores, looking for a bite to eat. Making do with bought cakes and pop, we struck up a conversation with the storekeeper. "The only difference," he said, "between prison and the outside is that they keep you locked up at night - that's all." His sentences were worn, and one had the distinct feeling that he was reflecting much of what the community felt.

"In prison, they take real good care of you - why, they have better meals than most people in Dorchester. If you need a doctor, he is right there on call . . . They lead a good life."

He felt that Dorchester was much the same as any other town. "No one gets excited if a prisoner escapes - he doesn't get far. Besides, why would he want to escape?" Sensing his half envy, I asked him why he didn't want to become a prisoner. "I guess

most of us have more pride than to want to be locked up. But they don't care."

We talked to the priest in the cold, damp, concrete basement of the town church. He was quite certain that Dorchester was not the same as any other town - that tensions were much higher. There was no real community or dialogue. "Without the prison, there would be a much healthier atmosphere." Since the prison is the major source of employment, everyone in the community is affected by its activities. The guards are working in an atmosphere that is very unstable, very unhealthy. The priest conceded that most took the jobs in the prison because of the money and lack of other employment. "Thus, there is frustration because of a job that is non-fulfilling." The resulting tension is carried to the home, and the "relationship of husband-wife-children is affected."

The priest expressed displeasure at the fact that after the last war, a large number of soldiers were hired on as guards. "Because you were a soldier", he said, "doesn't mean that you are fit to be a guard."

In the priest's estimation, the storekeeper was quite sincere in what he said but his own statements were based on "a deeper level of involvement and analysis."

So this is Dorchester. A quiet moody town that is not very beautiful, especially on a snowy day. It is not a town into which most people would bring their families to settle down. But then again, most towns aren't prison towns.

Stone walls and old books

It is unlikely that any of the inmates would wish to see the view today even if they could see over the twenty-three foot wall. (Wet snow fell over the bleak country side and the dark stone walls . . .)

The structure of Dorchester appears much the same now as it did in 1877. The cellblocks still converge into a central region called the "dome". It is not as well lit as the front hallway, and not as quiet either. The dome is the centre of activity - here the inmates line up for food and work details for the day.

The Roman Catholic chaplain's office and chapel are accessible from the third floor of the dome. Directly opposite is the Protestant Chapel. (Perhaps there is a symbolic significance.) There is no full time Protestant chaplain.

The chaplain's role, as he explained it, is to counsel the inmates in a different manner than the regular counselling staff. He felt that he must instil religious values, a moral outlook, a human perspective into the inmates by working with them. In his words, "We must make the image of God present to him." With this, chaplain's image of God was such that he cruelly ordered a prisoner to get this reporter a chair. The inmate obliged without question.

The chaplain may also be involved in promoting a sense of community by assisting the prisoners in the formation of service clubs, such as the Jaycees, which have a seemingly active unit at Dorchester. There are meeting rooms provided for this purpose. All clubs have administration advisors who assist in making contact with the outside.

The prison library operates on a "very limited budget". New books are rare, so much time is devoted to repairing the existing stock. That leaves much to be desired. Most books are only slightly above cheap paperback calibre - Hardy Boys and the like. ("Give them what they can read.") If an inmate wanted to read a book in psychology, he would have to receive special permission. ("A little bit of knowledge is worse than none at all.") Permission is based on an inmates education or intelligence to understand what he is reading.

Because of the amount of paperwork involved in getting out a book, (filling out a request form in the cell, getting approval by the librarian, delivering the book to the cell, returning old books on a one-for-one basis etc.) the inmate sometimes has to wait for some time before getting a new book.

There are 5,000 volumes in Dorchester.

Films are shown regularly in a special projection room. The one we caught a glimpse of was about fifteen years old, and was about a model parolee. The gymnasium is perhaps

the most impressive of all the facilities. There were several beautiful paintings decorating the walls - they were done by a former inmate. The gym is used mostly on week-ends for recreation and televisions (one English, one French).

A room just off the gym was the office of the Beacon, the prison newspaper. (See reprint.) The five staff members working on the Christmas issue, which is to be extra special. Except where pictures are included, the mimeograph machine is the printing technique used. The Beacon is heavily supervised in terms of content by the administration. Perhaps this explains the inclusion of certain spacefillers, like; "THE HIGHEST DUTY IS TO RESPECT AUTHORITY" and "FOR RESPECT TO HAVE VALUE, IT MUST BE EARNED." The standard of writing is exceptionally high, otherwise.

Recreation time may be occupied by cards, checkers, T.V., radio, lectures, the odd concert, intramural sports (participation rather than competition is emphasized), and hobbies ("petit point", a type of needle work, was the most popular hobby in prisons last year with 26 participants, compared with scrapbooks with only 192).

Fifteen per cent of the Canadian prison population is illiterate or semi-illiterate. On the whole, the average educational attainment is only grade six. Therefore, some attention is given to elementary education, and a small full-time staff

is employed at Dorchester for this purpose. Those who wish to further their secondary education may do so if enough interest and capability is shown. High school courses in Maths, Science, English and History are taught, partly as a requirement for vocational training. (Some inmates do get their certificates.) Correspondence courses are used as supplements to these classes. Art and creative writing classes are sometimes held, depending on the interest.

Although the stated primary motive for vocational training is to develop the necessary skills in the prisoners, one cannot overlook the fact that in 1966-67, Dorchester brought in \$184,000 in revenue from inmate labour and production. The inmates are paid a minimum of 65 cents per day, and can get up to \$1.25 per day, depending on the nature of the work. This wage, plus additional visiting and correspondence privileges and even the promise of shortened sentences are used as incentives in the training programs. The standards are in accordance with those set by Canada Manpower.

Some would be comfortable in a prison setting with these facilities. But there is a general overcrowding in most areas, and where you are placed often depends on the advice of a classification officer. Chances are that many inmates are compelled to do something quite different than what they wanted to do. But as one of the staff remarked, "Prisons aren't designed to be training schools anyway."

