A
SELF-GUIDED
TOUR OF

OLD MONTANA
PRISON
WELCOME

Bands of outlaws and Vigilantes roamed early Montana Territory leaving a path of destruction and death. In an attempt to tame the Wild West, a prison was established in Deer Lodge in 1871. Constructed primarily with convict labor, Old Montana Prison was an active prison until 1979, when it was moved to a new site four miles west of town.

The Old Montana Prison
Is preserved and presented to you by Powell County Museum and Arts Foundation and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

- This tour will take 45 to 60 minutes to complete.
- This site is over 130 years old and some of the grounds are uneven, so please watch your step.
- Please stay on the tour route.
- Do not mark or remove any property under penalty of law.

You are standing next to the entrance just inside the prison yard. Turn right and follow the sidewalk along the Wall. Numbered markers will indicate the attraction that is described in this booklet.
1. Location of 1896 Cell House

An enormous red brick cell house with rounded towers loomed over the city of Deer Lodge until 1959 when it was damaged by an earthquake and torn down. In 1960, this slab was poured as a foundation for a gymnasium and classroom buildings. Both buildings were moved to the new prison.

The 1896 Cell House was divided into two sections by a two-foot thick wall, which ran from the roof to the floor. The smaller section held up to 32 youths, while the larger section held 258 men.

The Cell House did not have running water or sewer facilities. Each cell had two buckets, one for sewage and one for water.

Continue to follow the sidewalk and turn left around the slab.
2. The Wall-1893

The oldest existing structure is the massive sandstone wall, built with convict labor and locally quarried stone. The wall replaced a twelve-foot-high wooden fence.

The wall is twenty-four feet high, three feet thick at the top, and four and a half feet thick at the bottom.

The wall extends four feet underground. No inmate was ever successful at tunneling under the wall, although quite a few tried.
Convict Labor

The Depression of 1893 left the Territory of Montana without the necessary funds to make essential improvements on the prison. Facing overcrowded conditions and discipline problems, Warden Frank Conley instituted a program of convict labor for prison expansion.

Existing structures that were built with convict labor under Conley include the Wall, the 1912 Cell House, the Maximum Security Building, and the W.A. Clark Theater.

By contracting inmates for construction projects throughout the state, Conley provided income to run the prison and alleviated the overcrowded conditions by housing inmates at the job sites.

Prison crews built 500 miles of road at Flathead Lade, MacDonald Pass, most of the roads around Deer Lodge, and roads in other counties throughout the state.

Inmates also built eleven buildings at Warm Springs (Montana State Hospital) and four buildings at Galen (Montana Tuberculosis Sanitarium).

Conley leased or owned eleven ranches, operated by inmates. He also provided inmates to local farms and ranches.

In 1916, 50% of all inmates worked and lived outside the prison wall.

Continue to follow the sidewalk through the first chain link fence and turn right into Tower 7.
3. Out of Bounds
Inmates were not allowed to proceed beyond this area without a pass or being accompanied by a guard. If inmates crossed this line without authorization the guard posted at Tower 7 could shoot them.

4. Tower 7
When the Wall was extended north in 1911, Tower 7 became the main entrance of the prison. All inmates, guards, and visitors entered and departed through these doors. Directly above this room is the guard’s station.
These doors were opened with a key, which was lowered on a rope from the tower above. After unlocking and entering the tower and locking the door, the key was returned on a rope that was lowered through a hole in the ceiling. Then a second key was lowered to open the second door. (All three doors had separate keys.)

In 1969, the rope and the key system was replaced by an electronic system.

The trap door in the floor of the room closest to the street leads to a surveillance. These tunnels provide access to gun ports overlooking the kitchen, shower area, dining hall, and provide the only access to the catwalks in the Cell House. You will be able to enter the tunnel at stop #26.

Exit the tower and go up the stairs into the Administration Building.
5. Federal Building  1871
The Territory’s first prison building was constructed on the site of the current Administration Building. The original three-story brick and granite structure had fourteen cells and no perimeter fence.

Two wings were added in the late 1800’s to increase the capacity to 98.

In 1908, a failed escape attempt from the Federal Building left Deputy Warden John Robinson dead, and Warden Frank Conley with 103 stitches on his back and neck. The two inmates involved were George Rock and William Hayes. They were hung in the prison yard. There is a sign marking the spot between stops #8 and #9.

This structure was demolished in 1931 and replaced with the current Administration Building.
The Administration Building-1931
The Administration Building, served as the hub of security and the heart of prison operations.

Offices, visiting rooms, library, classrooms, mailroom, and infirmary were on the main floor.

The basement originally contained the dining area and kitchen, later became a dormitory and showers, and finally became the chapel, hobby shop and recreation area.

You are just inside the doorway of the Administration Building. Turn left into the medium/minimum security visiting room.

6. Visiting Room
This area was used as a close-custody visiting area. Notice how the bottom of the partition is solid to prevent the passing of contraband.

Proceed through the door at the far end of the visiting room and continue into the open office area.
7. Secretarial Pool

This central area was used by the secretaries for the social services staff, psychologist, chaplain and job placement officer.

Besides providing counseling for the inmates, the social service staff was responsible for the reception, evaluation and classification of inmates.

Soon to be released inmates were aided in finding jobs by the job placement officer.

Proceed through the door to the right of the Chaplain office, turn right and go down the corridor. The cases in the corridor contain contraband and inmate art. Notice the functional tattoo machines and radios fashioned by inmates from contraband materials. Continue through the barred doors into the lobby.

To see more artwork made by prisoners, which is for sale, please visit the Montana State Prison Hobby Shop. This is located across the street from the Visitors Center.
8. **Deputy Warden’s Office**

For security reasons the Warden’s Office was located across the street from the prison. The Deputy Warden was in charge of the daily operations of the prison.

Deputy Warden Ted Rothe was shot and killed in this office by rioting inmates during the 1959 riot.

A painting of Frank Conley hangs on the far wall. He came to the community in 1886, transporting two convicted criminals to the Territorial Prison from Miles City. Conley stayed on at the prison as a guard. In 1890-1909 he became the Acting Warden. Conley was Warden until 1921. Conley also served as mayor of Deer Lodge for 31-years from 1892 to 1929.

In the 1970’s this room was also used for sentence review hearings.

9. **Non-Contact Security Visiting**

This area was used for non-contact visiting. Inmates were strip-searched before and after visits. More and more wire mesh was added over the years in an attempt to prevent the passing of contraband.

Exit the building through the same door in which you entered. Proceed left down the sidewalk to the far end of the red Cell House.
10. East Siberia

These cells in the northeast corner of the Cell House were used to isolate continually troublesome inmates from the general population.

In 1960, the rooms in the tower above these cells and above West Siberia were converted into educational facilities, which included six classrooms, a library and a teachers' office.

Proceed left around the corner of the Cell House to the far corner just before the second chain link fence.
11. West Siberia

Difficult prisoners were placed in these cells to isolate them from the rest of the prison population. After breakfast, the doors were unlocked and the inmates were allowed into the enclosed exercise yard for the entire day.

Proceed through the gate in the chain link fence, turn left and follow the sidewalk to the Prison Life Exhibit on the right.
12. Prison Life Exhibit
This photographic exhibit documents the daily activities and experiences of prison life during the 1960’s.

Return to the spot where you turned to come into the Prison Life Exhibit and take a right along the west side of the cell house. Follow the sidewalk to the cell house. Please watch your step as the sidewalk is irregular.

Recreation activities in the yard
Tag Plant/Hospital Building-1935
This building provided the prison with a modern medical facility that included an infirmary, surgical hospital, dental and psychiatric care. Located at the west end of the building, the tag plant contained the auto license plate factory.
In the mid-sixties, the license plate factory was moved to its present location at the prison ranch.

Eight cells were constructed in the center of the building, including psychiatric cells, padded cells and four cells one time used as death row.

Continue on the sidewalk to the entrance to Eitner Field.
13. Eitner Field
Inmates played baseball here at Eitner field. Games between the prison team and community teams were regularly scheduled.

Continue on the sidewalk to the entrance to the cell house.

14. Cell House-1912
Built in only eleven months using convict labor, the 1912 Cell House was a model facility in its day. Each cell had running water, flush toilets and good ventilation.

The Cell House contains eight galleries, four per side. Each gallery contains twenty-five cells, for a total of 200 cells. Single confinement to a cell was common practice during this era. Overcrowding eventually made it necessary to house two men per cell.
Enter the building and proceed into the lobby. Walk toward the guard’s cage and turn left down the far corridor.

Paul “Turkey Pete” Eitner

15. Turkey Pete Cell Number 1
At age forty, Paul “Turkey Pete” Eitner was sentenced to life in prison for murder in 1918. A model prisoner, he was assigned to tend the prison turkeys. As the years passed, reality slipped away from him. One day a man stopped to admire the turkeys, and Eitner sold the man the entire prison flock for 25 cents apiece. This ended Eitner’s farming days, but marked the beginning of his new fantasy career as an “entrepreneur and philanthropist”.

The prison administration humored Eitner and allowed him to have printed checks from the prison print shop.
He “purchased” the prison and proceeded to “operate” it. He “paid” all the prison expenses and wrote checks to the guards for their salaries.

Eitner Enterprises saved Brazil’s coffee crop, sold pink alligators, purchased alfalfa seed from Poncho Villa, sold grasshopper legs to Fidel Castro and sold ships to the Navy.

When Turkey Pete died in 1967 at age 89, his cell was retired and converted into a barbershop. His funeral was the only one ever held within the walls of the prison.

Continue down the corridor toward the end of the cellblock.
16. Temporary Lockup and Fish Row
The cells protected with wire mesh on the second tier were Fish Row. All new inmates are called “Fish”. New Fish were housed here until they adjusted to prison life. Once they became use to the prison system they were moved into the general population. This area was also used to segregate inmate who needed protection from other inmates.

Turn left around the corner of the cellblock.

17. Bath/Shower Area
 Originally, 15 bathtubs with multiple rings occupied this location. The area was complete with lye soap and starched linen towels.

These three showerheads later replace the tubs and served up to 400 inmates. Showers were required twice weekly. Inmates would line up and wet their bodies in the first shower, soap up in the second and rinse in the third.

In 1962, new showers were constructed, and the inmates who were in protective custody used these showers.

Notice the utility corridor running between the tiers of the cellblock. The utility corridor provided ventilation and access to plumbing. Guards occasionally eavesdropped on inmate conversations from the corridor.
18. Cell Block
The top cells were hot, while the lower cells were cold. Inmates on the top tiers would often throw objects at the windows in order to break them, allowing cold air in. The inmates who lived on the first tier were allowed to hang a drape over the lower part of the cell bars in order to keep the drafts out.

*Turn left around the corner of the cellblock and walk along the cells on the west side.*

At one time a barber shop was set up in the corner of the Cell
Return to the Cell House lobby and go down the steps into the basement of the Administration Building. Please watch your step. Turn left at the bottom of the steps.

19. Chapel
Originally the bakery, this area was last used as a chapel, classroom and meeting room. Inmates received “good time” (time off their sentences) for regularly attending church services and other self-help programs.

The gun port on the wall is connected to the surveillance tunnel, which could be entered from the trap door in Tower 7.

During the 1959 Riot, the press was brought into the surveillance tunnel where they talked to the noting inmates through the gun ports.

Exit the chapel and proceed across the hall into the shower area. Please watch your step.

20. Shower Area-1962
The guards centrally controlled the amount and temperature of water to these stalls.

Gun ports are located in a steel box overhanging the room at the far inside corner. This is part of the surveillance tunnel system.
The “Hole” was reserved for obstinate inmates after other disciplinary measures proved inadequate. There was no light in the cell except for light the peephole. The inmates’ diet in the Hole was bread and water.

There was a ten-day limit on time in the hole, after which an inmate received an examination by a doctor. If he was OK he could be returned to the hole for another ten days.

This type of incarceration was considered excessive in the late 1960’s and the practice was discontinued.
Exit the Hole, turn left and go up stairs to Cell House lobby. Located up the metal stairs on the left is the Montana Law soon After the

22. Montana Law Enforcement Museum
A public museum featuring law enforcement artifacts, memorabilia and historical accounts relative to Montana. It houses a memorial dedicated to officers slain in the Line of Duty throughout the State from as early as 1863.

The Montana Law Enforcement Museum is a non-profit organization governed and operated by Montana’s law enforcement professional associations since 1987.

The museum is supported by Powell County Museum and Arts Foundation and by donations and yearly memberships.

The prison last used this area as a library, school and teachers’ offices.

Exit the 1912 Cell House, and walk across the prison yard toward the open door in the wall. Stop about halfway across the yard.

23. 1959 Riot
The visible damage to the northwest corner tower of the Cell House occurred when a bazooka was fired at it by the National Guard to stun rioting inmates during a successful rescue of twenty-three hostages.
On April 16, 1959, Jerry Myles and Lee Smart led twelve inmates in a riot, which left Deputy Warden Ted Rothe dead.

They took eighteen prison employees and five stool pigeon inmates as hostages, soaked rags with flammable liquid and threatened to burn them alive.

After 36 hours of mounting tension, Warden Floyd Powell implemented a daring rescue attempt. The National Guard fired a bazooka at the tower where the ringleaders were headquartered. Meanwhile, a team of men burst through the door in the west wall, crossed the yard, and entered the Cell House, freeing the hostages.

Myles and Smart were found dead of an apparent murder-suicide at the top floor of the tower.

Although the riot focused attention on the overcrowded conditions at the prison, it was twenty years before the last prisoners were finally moved to the new prison.
24. Women’s Prison-1907/Maximum Security-1959
The first women incarcerated in Montana were housed on the third floor of the Federal Building. Men were housed on lower floors. The need for a separate women’s facility outside the walls soon became apparent. Women were housed in this facility until 1959.

The Women’s Prison consisted of two large dorm-style areas, a kitchen, dining area, laundry room and matron’s quarters. A hospital room was added in 1926.

The number of women incarcerated in Montana at any one time was usually fewer than ten.

The women were moved to a building across Main Street, now the Powell County Museum, and later to Warm Springs. Montana’s Women’s Prison is now located in Billings.

The wooden structure beside this building was used as a visiting booth for maximum security. Inmates were allowed visitor privileges for 30 minutes per month.
After the 1959 Riot, the Women’s Prison was converted into a Maximum Security facility in order to separate the riot leaders from the rest of the prison population. The Maximum Security Building contained twenty high security cells and four disciplinary cells.

Most of thecells did not have a toilet, but were equipped with a bucket for human waste. Disgruntled inmates would sometimes toss their waste buckets (called honey buckets) on the guards.
In order to control noise from disruptive inmates as well as prevent the passing of items from cell to cell and provide the guards protection from the honey buckets, mesh and wooden doors were installed on the cells.

Proceed to the back left corner of the building.

25. Restraining Cells with Slide Bars
The last two cells on the left were used as disciplinary cells, and they were also used to protect inmates who were suicidal. Inmates were handcuffed to the bar on the side of the cell.

Inmates received three slices of bread and a quart of water twice a day, and a hot meal every third day.

Proceed around the corner.

26. The Black Box Cells
Complete and total darkness earned these two cells their name, the black box. Inmates were locked in these cells for a period of one to ten days and placed on a bread and water routine. Every third day, they were given a hot meal. They were provided a mattress, a wool blanket and a honey bucket.

Exit the building and go through the doorway in the wall and back into the yard. Turn right along the inside of the wall until you reach the guard tower in the middle of the wall. Turn left past the shuffleboard courts and cross the yard going past the flagpole until you reach the entrance to the tunnel in the middle of the Administration Building. Enter the building, turn right and follow the ramp.
27. The Mess Hall
This area was the main dining room for the prison from 1932 until 1960. The entire room was on large mess hail.

The space was converted to a dormitory in 1960 when a new dining hall was built.

In the late 60’s, the space was converted to a recreation room, TV room and hobby/craft area.

You are invited to rest your feet and enjoy a short presentation of the Big House Then and Now. Then and Now contrasts life at the Old Prison with life at the New Prison located four-miles west of here. Viewings are regularly scheduled in the Old Prison Theater located at the bottom of the ramp.

*Turn right into the TV room and tunnel entrance.*
28. The Tunnel

An armed guard was posted in the tunnel to oversee the inmate population during meals. From 1932, when this building was constructed, until 1960, when a new dining hall was constructed next to the theater, all meals at the prison were served in this basement.

The guard was armed with tear gas canisters, which fired into the in the event of a general disturbance. Unarmed personnel inside the dining room provided regular supervision. The design of the gun ports would not allow inmates to overpower guards and take their weapons.

The tunnel provided secure access to the catwalks around both the 1912 cell house and the 1896 cell house. Armed guards patrolled the catwalks. During the 1959 Riot, the catwalk security was breached. The security of the tunnel was never breached.

The public access hole into the tunnel was cut in 2002. It took the contractor, with modern equipment, three times longer to cut through than he anticipated.
Prison Yard
Throughout the 108-year history of this institution, the prison yard had many uses and supported a number of different buildings.

The yard area was used as an exercise area and garden. Notice the various courts and horseshoe pits. Joggers would run along the west wall.

During World War I, Conley trained a unit of inmates in the yard in preparation for combat. The War Department rejected Conley’s offer of assistance.

A victory garden in the prison yard
Using money donated by W. A. Clark, Jr., son of the Butte copper king, the construction of the theater was Warden Conley’s last great project. Since the privilege of going to the theater had to be earned, the theater became the center of the work incentive and prison discipline system.

The 600-seat theater was used for a variety of events including boxing, traveling theater troupes, movies, plays, concerts, meetings, prison band performances and religious services.

A library was located in the basement. The W.A. Clark Theater was gutted by fire in 1975. The fire was deliberately set, but no suspects were ever charged.
Sally Port

In the southwest corner of the prison wall (to the right of the theater) is the Sally Port. The double door, double lock system provided the only vehicle entrance to the prison.

A vehicle would enter the first door and be locked inside the Sally Port where the vehicle was searched before it was allowed in or out of the prison. Only one door was open at a time.
A steel I beam swung across the inside door to prevent a vehicle from ramming through it.

Dining Room Gun Cage
In front of the Sally Port, a large concrete box with a black top stands on a slab foundation. This is what remains of the metal kitchen/dining room building, which was moved to the new prison.
Flat Bar Cell
Flat Bar Cells, such as this, were not used at this prison. These cells were built for brigs of shops. When those ships were scrapped out after World War I, various city and county lockups around the United States used these cells. This set came from the Powell County Jail.

Visitor Center and Montana Auto Museum
The buildings where the Visitor Center and Montana Auto Museum are located were originally part of the prison complex as were the red brick buildings across the street from the prison.
From the early 1900’s until 1960, the Visitor Center and some of the buildings, which house the Montana Auto Museum, had a variety of different uses. Some of the uses included trustee bunkhouse, carpenter and electrical shop, garage, storeroom, property controller’s office, inmate waiting room and trustee visiting room.

When the 1959 earthquake damaged the 1896 Cell House, the Visitor Center building was converted into a dormitory. Later it became the laundry building.

A view down Main Street in front of the Old Montana Prison
Daily Schedule at the Prison Circa 1970

6:00 a.m.  Count and short line was run for breakfast. When all men were accounted for, short line was run. New inmates, protective custody inmates and the cell housecleaners (swampers) went to breakfast. Main line ran next. The remainder of the inmates went to breakfast.
8:30  Supervisors would arrive to pick up work crews. Cell House Sergeant was responsible for cell shakedowns (searches).
10:30  Shore line was run for lunch.
11:00  Work crews came in.
11:30  Count and main line was run for lunch. Mail and medication were distributed to the cells after lunch.
12:30 p.m.  Work crews went out.
2:00  Change of shifts for guards. Count.
3:00  Short line ran for dinner.
3:15  Work crews return.
3:30  Afternoon yard (outside Recreation).
4:30  Inmates return to cells.
4:45  Count and main line ran for dinner.
5:30  Mail call and medication.
6:00  Outside recreation, television, hobby shop, self-help groups (AA, etc.).
8:00  Showers when inmates cam in from recreation. Clean clothes, cigarettes, etc., were issued.
9:00  Count.
10-12 a.m.  Everyone back in their cells, cells locked. Shift change.
2:00 a.m.  Count.
4:00  Count
6:00  Shift change and count.

Short line consisted of new inmates, protective custody inmates and the kitchen crew. Main line consisted of the main prison population.
There are more informational items about the prison on sale in the gift shop:

- Montana State Prison History
- MSP # 6235: Turkey Pete
- Vengeance Is Mine: The 1908 Escape Attempt
- Someone to Love Me: The 1959 Riot
- A History of the Old Montana Prison (DVD or Video)
- Powell County: Were it all Began

We hope you have enjoyed your tour. Thank you for visiting the Old Montana Prison

Please enjoy our other attractions across the street from the visitor center.

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Document editing and layout design
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July 2004