Educators Kit

Old Prison Museums Lesson Plans

Directions: Read the following essay then answer the questions.

Second-Class Prisoners

When the territorial prison was established at Deer Lodge in 1871, no thought was given about where women inmates would be housed. Between 1871 and 1889 only two women were incarcerated at the prison. Both women were in their 20's and from Missoula County, and had been convicted of manslaughter and murder. These women were separated from the men by housing them on the third floor of the Federal Building. Anyone under the age of 18 sent to the prison in Deer Lodge from 1871 to 1889 was also housed in this area.

The first woman to serve a prison sentence in Deer Lodge was Felicite Sanchez. She was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years. Deputy Sheriff Thomas K. Andrew was the man responsible for delivering her to the prison. According to a short column from the December 6th 1878 issue of the "New North-West" newspaper, she made quite an impression on Warden Bolkin when she arrived. Once in the office she made herself comfortable, sitting down with her feet propped up on the stove, she skillfully rolled a cigarette and "smoked with manifest enjoyment." Apparently, Warden Bolkin was so embarrassed and shocked by this behavior, that it took him about 30 minutes to compose himself to write to the deputy a recite stating that custody of the inmate was turned over to the prison.

The next mater of protocol was to search the woman for weapons and contraband. The article stated, "After mature reflection, this was not regarded as a practicable proceeding and Felicite was taken to her narrow apartment." Three guards also quit their jobs after Sanchez's arrival.

Most women that served sentences at the Deer Lodge prison from 1878 to 1910 were between 20 to 39 years old. Nine were ages 16 to 19. Five ranged in age from 40 to 59. The ages of two others were not listed. The grand total of female inmates during this 32-year period was 63, and their average sentence was 2.7 years.

From 1911 to 1943, 126 women were sent to the prison, and again most were in their 20's. However, the youngest woman at the prison during this time span was only 15 (currently, her name is unknown.) She was sentenced to life in prison for the crime of "luring a man to his death." Other crimes that were committed by females were grand larceny, assault, burglary, forgery, bigamy, robbery and arson.

The first area built to separately house the women who committed these various crimes was built in 1889 and used until 1895. This was a small 18 by 24 foot building that was inside the prison wall.

The next building that served as the women's quarters was slightly larger, and on the west side of the prison yard. This was used from 1895 until about 1907. Either in 1907 or 1908 (official records are not clear on the date) the women were moved to a building outside of the main wall. This building still exists and was used as the women's prison until 1959.

In 1931, a prison inspection committee was unsatisfied with the conditions the women were housed in. They described the building, and the smaller security walls around it, as a rotting shell. The committee recommended the prison stop using the building to house inmates, but the advice was ignored by the prison administration. The women were eventually moved out of the area, but not because of the poor conditions. The administration wanted the building to house the maximum-security inmates after a prison riot in 1959. (This area remained in use until the site closed in 1979.)

There were other areas around the prison complex that the women called home. One location was over the warden's garage (behind his house) from 1959 to 1963. The old laundry building was used from 1963 to 1966. Next on the list was the basement of the guards' quarters, utilized from 1966 to 1970. The women were also housed at Warms Springs (the site of the State mental hospital) and various out-of-State prisons between 1970 and 1977.

The women's prison was officially moved away from Deer Lodge in 1977. Between the years of 1977 and 1982, the Missoula and Billings Life Skills Training Center, out-of-State prisons in California, West Virginia, and Nebraska, and county jails in Missoula, Powell, Gallatin, and Lake counties were all used to house Montana's female inmates.

Finally, during the 1981 legislative session, funding to house 41 women offenders was budgeted for. At the time there were 37 women serving prison sentences. The State chose a vacant nurses' dormitory on the Warm Springs State Hospital campus as a temporary site. This building served as the women's prison until the mid 1990's when the women were moved to the new facility in Billings, Montana. This location still operates as the Montana Women's Prison.

Currently, the Montana Women's Prison houses about 150 adult female offenders and has partial responsibility for 245 more. There are educational, vocational and parenting programs that inmates can take part in. Volunteers staff the parenting program, where women learn prenatal skills, infant care, adolescent behavior and more.

The volunteers also assist at the hospital when inmates give birth.[1]

For over a century, women inmates were housed and cared for in an inferior manner in comparison to their male counterparts. There was no permanent facility for women other than the structure built at the location of the men's prison from 1889 to 1959. From 1907 until 1959 the women didn't have access to indoor plumbing in the women's section of the prison. Fortunately, conditions have improved and more programs are made available to women inmates. Since the construction of the women's prison in Billings, they are no longer treated as second-class prisoners.

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Old Prison Museums Lesson Plans

Second-Class Prisoners: Questions

Directions: Write a short answer to each question

1. How many buildings were specifically constructed for women prisoners on the site of the Old Prison Museum Complex?

2. List the different crimes that female inmates were convicted of.

3. Why was the women's prison moved in 1959?

4. Name the first female inmate housed at the prison in Deer Lodge?

5. What was her crime and sentence?

6. What year did the Montana Legislature pass a budget to fund a temporary women's prison, and where was it located?

7. List the different locations that women inmates were housed in from 1959 to 1982.

8. In what city is the current Montana Women's Prison located?
9. What programs are offered to women in prison?
10. Name the warden of the Territorial Prison when the first female inmate was sent to Deer Lodge.