

A REPORT ON  
TWENTY-TWO DAYS ON THE CHAIN GANG  
AT ROXBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

by  
Bayard Rustin

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  - b. No publicity should be given until this report has reached the proper state authorities.
- (2) The material in this report is tentative and is being sent to you for your recommendations and suggestions. Will you give us the benefit of your experience and make any corrections, suggestions, or additions that you feel will improve or make this report more useful.

## PREFACE

In the past there has been much criticism directed against judges, wardens, and governors by former prisoners and social reformers in their commentaries on the injustices of our penal system. Generally this seems not only a grave misunderstanding of the basic factors involved but also a great waste of energy. The fault does not lie primarily in officials and judges, who are themselves the creatures of their environment and upbringing, and whose importance in this matter, compared with that of the man in the street, lies mainly in the power they wield to implement those injustices. The essential causes are spiritual and psychological.

Institutions are the outer reflection of society's inner attitudes and basic assumptions. Each of us is in part responsible for the injustices of our penal system. Any sound attempt to bring about changes must begin, therefore, with the recognition of a collective guilt. If such a concept is accepted, there is then no room left for irresponsible accusations, bitterness or name calling. The acceptance of this theory on the other hand should encourage us to accept fully our responsibility to work with enlightened goodwill for basic as well as remedial changes in the penal system.

In this report I therefore desire, first of all, to present facts and to do so with perspective, objectivity and sincerity; then, to analyze these facts in the light of my experiences. I trust that the facts and interpretations will help to further the already growing movement to improve prison life.

I believe that I am not alone. I believe that many persons, some officially connected with the prison camps, also welcome the publication of facts on life in the camps. With me they believe that the presentation of factual data to the citizen is perhaps the most valuable method of helping the public reach a desire to transform our methods of dealing with offenders so as to restore them to society.

Late in the afternoon of Monday, March 21, 1949, I surrendered to the Orange County court at Hillsboro, North Carolina, to begin serving a 30-day sentence imposed two years before for sitting in a bus seat out of the jimcrow section.<sup>1</sup>

As afternoon waned into evening, I waited alone in a small cell of the county jail across the street. I had not eaten since morning, but no supper was forthcoming, and eventually I lay down on the mattress-less iron bed and tried to sleep. Next morning I learned from another inmate that only two meals were served daily--breakfast at 7:00 a.m. and lunch at noon.

That morning I spent reading one of the books I had brought with me, and wondering where I would be sent to "do my time." About 2:00 p.m. I was ordered to prepare to leave for a prison camp, but the guard professed ignorance of my destination, and I still could not send my mother an address. As it turned out, more than a week was to pass before I could get a letter off to her.

Along with two other men I got into the "dog car"--a small, brown enclosed truck with a locked screen in the rear--and began to travel through the rain. An hour later we slowed in front of the state prison camp at Roxboro, and through the screen I could see the long low building circled by barbed wire, where I was to spend the next 22 days.

1.

On June 3, 1946, the Supreme Court of the United States announced its decision in the case of Irene Morgan versus the Commonwealth of Virginia. State laws demanding segregation of interstate passengers on motor carriers are now unconstitutional, for segregation of passengers crossing state lines was declared an "undue burden on interstate commerce." Thus it was decided that state jimcrow laws do not affect interstate travelers. In a later decision in the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, the Morgan decision was interpreted to apply to interstate train travel as well as bus travel.

In 1947, after repeated reports that the various states were ignoring the Morgan decision, the Fellowship of Reconciliation set out to discover the degree to which such illegal separation patterns were enforced. In what since has become known as the Journey of Reconciliation, sixteen white and Negro young men, in groups ranging in size from two to four traveled through North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee making test cases. It was on one of these cases that I was arrested. Finally after the North Carolina Supreme Court upheld my 30-day sentence, I surrendered and spent 22 days at Roxboro. I was released eight days early on good behavior.

Physically the camp was very unattractive. There were no trees, grass only near the entrance and to one side. There was not one picture on the walls and no drawer, box, or container supplied for storing the few items one owned. While an effort was made to keep the place clean, there was always mud caked on the floor as soon as the men got in from work, since there was no change of shoes. Roaches were everywhere. While there, however, I never saw a bedbug. Once a week the mattresses were aired.

In the receiving room, under close supervision, I went through the routine of the new inmate: receiving a book of rules, change of clothing, fingerprinting and then—"You'll have to have all your hair cut off."

An inmate barber gleefully shaved my head and, with an expression of mock sadness, surveyed me from various angles. Finally he brought a small mirror and ceremoniously held it up for me. The final touch was his solemn pretense of brushing some hairs from my shirt. Then he told me to go out to the corridor where an officer would show me to my bed. As I left, the three inmates who were in the room doubled up with laughter. Apparently they had discovered the reason for my schoolboy nickname of "pinhead"!

The officer outside wordlessly unlocked the dormitory door, and motioned for me to go through.

Inside I found myself in one of two rooms into which a hundred men were crowded. Double-decker beds stood so close together that to pass between them one had to turn sidewise. Lights bright enough to read by remained on all night. The rule book states: "No inmate may get out of bed after lights are dimmed without asking permission of the guard," and so all night long men were crying out to a guard many yards away: "Gettin' up, Cap'n," "Closing the window, Cap'n," "Goin' to the toilet, Cap'n." I did not sleep soundly one night during my whole stay at Roxboro, though I went to bed night after night tireder than I had ever been in my life before!

The camp schedule at Roxboro began with the rising bell at 5:30. By 7 o'clock beds had been made, faces washed, breakfast served and the lines formed for leaving the camp for the 10-hour day's work. We worked from 7 a.m. until noon, then had a half-hour for lunch, resumed work at 12:30 and worked until 5:30. Then we were counted in and left immediately for supper, without so much as a chance to wash hands

and face. From six o'clock we were locked in the dormitory until lights were dimmed at 8:30. From 8:30 until 5:30 a.m. we were expected to sleep.

On the morning of March 23, my second day at camp, as the lights were turned up a voice boomed out the first of the many impromptu verses I was to hear:

"No rain, no snow,

Get up, let's go!

Come on boys, don't be late

Meet the pretty-coat man<sup>2</sup> at the gate."

When I had finished a hurried shave, "Easy Life," an inmate who had a near-by bed, apologetically asked if he might borrow my razor. He had a week's growth of hair on his face.

"Most of us ain't got no razors and can't buy none," he said.

"But don't they give you razors if you can't afford one?" I asked.

He looked at me and smiled. "We don't get nothing but the clothes we got on and a towel and soap--no comb, no brush, no toothbrush, no razor, no blades, no stamps, no writing paper, no pencils, nothing." Then he looked up and said thoughtfully, "They say, 'another day, another dollar,' but all we gets for our week's work is one bag of stud."

I suppose my deep concern must have been reflected in my face for he added, "But don't look so sad. T'ain't nothin! The boys say 'So round, so firm, so fully packed when you roll your own."

The guard swung open the doors for breakfast and as Easy Life rushed to the front of the line he yelled back, "But the damn stuff sure does burn your tongue--that's why I like my tailor mades."<sup>3</sup> He winked, laughed heartily and was gone. I picked up my toothbrush and razor, and slowly walked to my bed to put them away.

A week later I was to remember the conversation. The one towel I had been given was already turning a reddish-gray (like the earth of Persons County) despite the fact that I washed it every day. That towel was not changed as long as I

2. The superintendent -- so-called as the result of his wearing a rather colorful sports jacket.

3. Factory-made cigarettes.

stayed at Roxboro! Some of the men washed their towels but once a week, just after they bathed on Saturday.

Each week we were given one suit of underclothing, one pair of pants, a shirt, and a pair of socks. Even though we worked in the mud and rain, this was the only clothing we would get until the next week. By Tuesday, the stench in the dormitory from sweating feet and encrusted underclothing was thick enough to cut. As one fellow said, "Don't do no good to wash and put this sweat-soaked stuff on again."

(The rule book instructs guards to be examples to the prisoners: "They (the guards) shall keep themselves physically and mentally fit; and personally neat and clean. They shall conduct themselves at all times in such a manner as to command the respect of the prisoners as well as the public at large.")

Two weeks later I saw Easy Life borrow a toothbrush, too. "My old lady's coming to visit today and I gotta shine my pearls somehow," he apologized.

I offered him thirty-five cents for a toothbrush. He accepted the money, thanked me and said, "But if you don't mind I'll buy stamps with it. I can write my old lady ten letters with this. I can borrow Snake's toothbrush if I wanna, but he ain't never got no stamps, and I ain't never got no money."

I started from the camp for my first day's work on the road with anything but an easy mind. Our crew of 15 men was met at the back gate by the walking boss, who directed the day's work, and by a guard who carried both a revolver and a shotgun. We were herded into the rear of a truck where we were under constant scrutiny by the armed guard, who rode in a small glass-enclosed trailer behind. In that way we rode each day to whatever part of Persons County we were to work in. We would leave the truck when we were ordered to. At all times we had to be within sight of the guard, but at no time closer than thirty feet to him.

On this first day I got down from the truck with the rest of the crew. There were several moments of complete silence that seemed to leave everyone uneasy. Then the walking boss, whom I shall call Captain Jones, looked directly at me.

"Hey you, tall boy! How much time you got?"

"Thirty days," I said politely.

"Thirty days, Sir."

"Thirty days, Sir," I said.

He took a newsclipping from his pocket and waved it up and down.

"You're the one who thinks he's smart. Ain't got no respect. Tries to be up-pity. Well, we'll learn you. You'll learn that you got to respect us down here. You ain't in Yankeeland now. We don't like no Yankee ways."

He was getting angrier by the moment, his face flushed and his breath short.

"I would as lief step on the head of a damyankee as I would on the head of a rattlesnake," he barked. "Now you git this here thing straight," and he walked closer to me, his face quivering and the veins standing out in his neck. "You do what you're told. You respect us or—," He raised his hand threateningly, but instead of striking me, brought the back of his hand down across the mouth of the man on my left. There was a pause; then he thrust a pick at me and ordered me to get to work.

I had never handled a pick in my life, but I tried. Captain Jones watched me sardonically for a few minutes. Then he grabbed the pick from me, raised it over his head and sank it deep into the earth several times.

"There now," he shouted, "let's see you do it."

I took the pick and tried to duplicate his method and his vigor. For about ten minutes I succeeded in breaking the ground. My arms and back began to give out, but I was determined to continue. Just as I was beginning to feel faint, a chain-ganger called "Purple"<sup>4</sup> walked over to me and said quietly, "O.K. Let me use dat pick for a while. You take the shovel and no matter what they say or do, keep workin', keep tryin' and keep yo' mouth shut."

I took the shovel and began to throw the loose dirt into the truck. My arms pained so badly that for a while I thought each shovelful would be the last. Then

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<sup>4</sup>. "Purple" said he was so black he wasn't black anymore—he was purple.

I found that gradually my strength seemed to return.

As Purple walked over and began to pick again he whispered to me, "Now you'se learnin'. Sometimes you'll give out, but you can't never give up--dat's chain-gangin!"

But I still had much "learnin'" to do. An hour later we moved to another job. As I sat in the truck I racked my mind for some way to convince Captain Jones that I was not "uppity" and yet at the same time to maintain self-respect. I hit upon two ideas. I should try to work more willingly and harder than anyone in the crew, and I should be as polite and as considerate of all persons in our small prison community as possible.

When the truck stopped and we were ordered out I made an effort to carry through my resolution by beginning work immediately. In my haste, I came within twenty feet of the guard.

"Stop you bastard!" he screamed, and pointed his revolver squarely toward my head. "Git back, git back. Don't rush me or I'll shoot the goddamned life out of you."

With heart pounding I moved across the road. Purple walked up to me, put a shovel into my hand and said simply, "Follow me and do what I do."

We worked together spading heavy clay mud and throwing it into the truck. When an hour later the walking boss went down the road for a coca-cola, I turned to Purple and complained of severe aching in my arms. It was then for the first time that I heard the verse chain-gangers recited whenever a fellow prisoner complained. Purple smiled, patted me on the back, and said as he continued to work:

"Quit cryin'

Quit dyin'

Give dat white boss

Sum'pin' on your time."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. Work hard for the white people and they will reduce the time you are required to serve.

"Man born of black woman is born to see black days," Purple said.

But my first black day was not yet over. Just after lunch we had begun to do what the chain-gangers call 'jumpin' shoulders,' which means cutting the top from the shoulders of the road when they have grown too high. Usually the crew works with two trucks. There is scarcely a moment of delay and the work is extremely hard. Captain Jones was displeased with the rate of our work, and violently urged us to greater effort. In an effort to obey one of the chain-gangers struck another with his shovel. The victim complained, instantly and profanely. The words were hardly out of his mouth before the Captain strode across the road and struck the cursing chain-ganger in the face with his fist, again and again. Then, as everyone watched apprehensively, Captain Jones informed the crew, using the most violent profanity in doing so, that cursing would not be tolerated!

"Not for one goddamned moment," he repeated over and over again.

No one spoke; every man tried to work harder yet remain inconspicuous. The silence seemed to infuriate the Captain. He glared angrily at the toiling men, then yelled to the armed guard.

"Shoot hell out of the next one you find cursin'. Shoot straight for his feet. Cripple 'em up. That will learn 'em."

The guard lifted his rifle and aimed it at the chest of the man nearest him.

"Hell, no!" he drawled, "I ain't aimin' fer no feet. I like hearts and livers. That's what really learns 'em."

Everyone spaded faster.

On the ride back to camp that evening, I wondered aloud if this were average behavior for Captain Jones.

"Well," said Easy Life, "that depends on how many headache powders and coca-colas he takes. Must of had a heap today."

Back in camp Easy Life continued the conversation.

"Dat was nothin', really," he said. "Cap'n might have done them up like the

Durham police did that old man over there."

He pointed to a small, thin man, in his middle fifties, dragging himself slowly toward the washroom. His head was covered with bandages and one eye was greatly discolored and bruised.

"Dad," as the men already were calling him, had come up from the country to Durham a few days before for a holiday. He had got drunk, and when police tried to arrest him he had resisted, and they had beaten him with blackjacks. After three days in jail he was sentenced to Roxboro. When he got to the prison camp he complained that he was ill, but was ordered nonetheless to go out on the job. After working an hour Dad told the walking boss that he was too sick to continue and asked if he could be brought in. He was brought in and the doctor summoned, but he had no temperature and the doctor pronounced him able to work. When he refused to go back to his pick and shovel he was ordered "hung on the bars" for 72 hours.

When a man is hung on the bars he is stood facing his cell, with his arms chained to the vertical bars, and there he must stand until he is released except that he is unchained periodically to go to the toilet. After a few hours on the bars, his feet and often the glands in the groin begin to swell. If he attempts to sleep, his head falls back with a snap, or falls forward into the bars, cutting and bruising his face. (Easy Life told me how Purple had been chained up once and gone mad on the bars, so that he began to bang his head vigorously against the bars. Finally the night guard, fearing he would kill himself, unchained him.)

The old man didn't bang his head. He simply got weaker and weaker, and his feet swelled larger and larger, until the guard became alarmed and cut the old man down and carried him back to bed.

The next day the old man was ordered out to work again, but after he had worked a few minutes he collapsed and was brought back. This time the doctor permitted him to be excused from work for a week. At the end of the week, when Dad came back to work, he was still very weak and tired and his eyes had receded far into his head, but he was nevertheless expected to keep up the same rate of work as the other mem-

bers of the crew. Indeed, Captain Jones centered his attention on Dad until those of us in the crew decided to pass him from one to another as working partner and in this way to reduce the volume of work that he would be expected to do.

Purple was right. On the chain-gang one might give out but one could never give up.

One night a few days later, I went to bed early to try to think through what I could say to Captain Jones the next morning. Up to this point I had remained silent and worked hard, but I felt that the time for silence had passed. Early the next morning, I told several of the fellows that after serious consideration I had decided to talk to the Captain to see what could be done to improve relations on the job, since I was sure that the guards were taking it out on the men because of me.

The boys urged me to keep still. "Quiet does it," they said. "No need to make things worse," they admonished. "He'll kick you square in the ass," Purple warned. After reminding me several times that he knew the ropes, Easy Life added:

"Use your head

Bill your time

Forget these white folks

Ease out fine."<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, I stopped the Captain that morning and asked him if I might speak with him. He seemed startled, but I went on. I told him that I knew there were great differences in our attitudes on many questions but that nevertheless I felt that we could and should be friends. I told him that on the first morning when I had failed to address him as "Sir," I had not meant disrespect to him and that if he felt I had been disrespectful I was willing to apologize. I suggested that perhaps I was really the one who deserved to be beaten in the face, if anyone did. I said that I was willing to work as hard as I could and that if I failed again at my work I hoped he would speak to me about it and I would try to improve. I told him that I was sure

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<sup>6</sup>. Then you will get along and "ease out" of jail with no trouble.

all the men really felt this way. Finally I said that I could not help trying to act on the basis of the Christian ideals I hold about people---that I did, however, try to respect and understand people who differed with me.

He stared at me without a word. Then, after several moments he turned to the gun guard and said in an embarrassed tone, "Well, I'll be goddamned." Then he shouted, "Okay, if you can work, get to it! Talk ain't gonna git that there dirt on the truck. Fill her up."

Later I learned that the Captain had said to one of the chain-gangers that he would rather I call him a "dirty-son-of-a-bitch" than to look him in the face "and say nothin'."

That evening the Captain called us together just as the work day was coming to an end.

"This Yankee boy ain't so bad," he said. "They just ruined him up there 'cause they don't know how to train you-all. But I think he'll be all right and if you-all will help him I think we can learn him. He's got a strong back and seems to be willing."

The chain-gangers glanced at one another. As we piled into the truck one of them turned to me and said, "When he says he'll learn you, what he means is:

"When you're white you're right

When you're yellow you're mellow

When you're brown you're down

When you're black, my God, stay back!"

The chain-gangers laughed. We pulled the canvas over our heads to protect us from the rain that had begun to pour down, and headed back to the camp to eat supper.

The book of regulations said: "No talking will be permitted in the dining-hall during meals." Not until I experienced it did I realize what a meal is like with a hundred men eating in one room without a word spoken. The guards stood with clubs under their arms and watched us. I had the feeling that they too were unhappy in

the uneasy silence, and felt embarrassed and useless.

At one evening meal, I was trying by signs to make the man next to me understand that I wanted the salt. I pointed in the direction of the salt and he passed the water, which was close by. I pointed again, this time a little to the left, and he passed the syrup. I pointed again. He picked up the salt and banged it down against my plate. The uncertainty as to what I wanted and the trouble of having to pass three things had angered him. Forgetting the rule for a moment, I said quietly, "I'm sorry."

One of the guards rushed across the room to our table and with his stick raised glared at me and said, "If I catch you talking, I'll bust your head in." The spoons and forks were no longer heard against the aluminum plates. The dining room was perfectly quiet. The guard swung his club through space a couple of times and then retired to a corner to resume his frustrating vigil. The tin spoons and forks rattled again on the aluminum plates.

The morning after my conversation with Captain Jones we were instructed to go to the cement mixer, where we were to make cement pipe used in draining the roads and building bridges. We had been working twenty minutes when the Captain came to me carrying a new cap. He played with the cap on the end of his finger for a while and stared at my shaven head.

"You're gonna catch your death of cold," he said, "so I thought I'd bring you a cap. You tip it like all the other boys whenever you speak to the Captain and the guards, or whenever they speak to you."

I had noticed the way the men bowed obsequiously and lifted their hats off their heads and held them in the air whenever they spoke to the guard. I had decided I would rather be cold than behave in this servile way. I thanked the Captain for the cap and put it on my head and wore it until lunchtime. After lunch I put it in my pocket, never to wear it again in the presence of the Captain or the guards.

Some of the other men were leaving their caps in the camp rather than wear them on the job, and for good reason, too. There was a rule that when leaving for work

in the morning a man was not permitted to wear his hat until he was beyond the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. On several occasions, men going to or coming from work would rush thoughtlessly through the gates with their caps on, and be struck severely on the head with a club. As Softshoe<sup>7</sup>, a chain-ganger distinguished for his corns and bunions said, "No use courting trouble. If you don't wear no hat, you ain't got to doff it."

One day the chain-gangers were on fire with the news that one of the old prisoners had returned. Bill was slender, tall, good-looking and sang very well. Some three years before he had raped his own three-year-old daughter and been put in jail for a year. This time he was "up" for having raped his eight-year-old niece.

It was difficult to believe all the tales the men told about Bill. One evening he came to me and asked me if I had time to talk with him. We talked for almost two hours. He was quite different from the description I had heard. He had provided well for his family, he had gone to church, but, as he pathetically admitted, he had "made some terrible mistakes." It was apparent that he wanted to wipe the slate clean, but he could never discover the secret behind his unhappiness and troubles in Roxboro jail.

As I lay awake that night I wondered how ten hours a day of arduous physical labor could help this young man to become a constructive citizen. The tragedy of his being in the prison camp was highlighted by the extraordinary success that good psychiatrists and doctors are having today with men far more mixed up than Bill. I thought of the honesty with which he had discussed himself, of the light in his eyes when he had heard for the first time of the miracles modern doctors perform--and I knew that Bill deserved the best that society could offer him: a real chance to be cured, to return to his wife and children with the "devils cast out."

Just before I got to Roxboro two young men had been taken from camp to the County Court and convicted and given further prison terms for homosexual activities. They were accused of committing a "crime against nature." They had been warned, for

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7. He was called Softshoe because the boys said he had so many corns and bunions that he couldn't quite let his feet touch the ground.

in the manual, under "rules and regulations governing the management of prisoners" there appears, under section 6, the following statement: "(1) Crime against nature will not be tolerated. A prisoner found guilty of this degrading and detestable crime will be prosecuted in the Criminal Court of the State. The law provides that punishment from five to sixty years may be imposed by the court for conviction of this crime. (Prisoners are earnestly requested to report any such practices of this crime to the superintendent, warden, or steward.)"

If this statement were not tragic, it would be ridiculous. Men in the prison camp had sentences ranging up to thirty years. To be in an abnormal atmosphere for so long a period itself breeds abnormal reactions, for the law of cause and effect, stimuli and response, still are in operation. As one long-timer said: "I hated punks when I came to jail. Now I turn over myself when I get the chance. And you-all would too if you had ten years to do in this hole."

This prisoner struck a really basic problem when he said: "They make us queer, and then they give us up to sixty years when they catch us at it." He delivered a telling commentary on the deterring effect of retribution when he concluded: "So if you can't be good, do be careful."

There was a young boy who had been arrested for stealing. It was obvious from his behavior that he was a kleptomaniac. I have seen him spend half an hour going from one section of the dormitory to another, waiting, plotting, planning, and conniving to steal many small and useless items. Although he did not smoke, I saw him spend twenty minutes getting into a position to steal a box of matches, which later he threw away.

One day, after I had written a long letter for him, he began to tell me how he had stolen even as a child but that now he wanted to stop. As tears came to his eyes, he explained that he had been able to stop stealing valuable things but that he could not seem to stop stealing entirely. I asked him if he wanted to change really. He said he thought so. But he added, "It's such a thrill. Just before I get my hands on what I'm gonna take, I feel so excited."

After that as I watched him evening after evening, I wondered how many men there were throughout the world languishing in jails--burdens to society--who might be cured if only they were in hospitals where they belong. One thing was clear. Neither this boy who reluctantly stole by compulsion, nor Bill, nor the homosexuals could be helped by life on the chain gang. Nor could society be protected, for in a short time these men and thousands like them return to society not only uncured but with heightened resentment and a desire for revenge.

Early one morning Easy Life was up talking with one of his friends, who had "done his time" for stealing and who was to be released that day. To the despair of those trying to get a few last winks Easy Life was singing:

"Boys, git up, grab your pone,  
Some to the right-a-ways<sup>8</sup>--some to the road  
This fool's made it and he's headin' home."

Easy Life's companion smiled and said for all to hear:

"Boys you stole, while I took  
Now you roll,<sup>9</sup> while I look."

"I for one can work," Easy Life said, "and I can work plenty for work don't bother me none, no sir! Boys, it's the food that gits me down," and he went to rhyming one of his spontaneous verses--

"Kick me, shout me, pull ma teet'  
But lemme go home where I can eat."

As I lay in bed for a few last minute's rest, I began to think about the food. We had beans--boiled beans, red beans, or lima beans--every day for lunch. Every day, after five long hours of hard physical labor, we had these beans, with fatback, a kind of bacon without lean meat, molasses and corn pone. Corn pone is a mixture of water and cornmeal baked into a kind of hardtack. Many of the men who had spent years on the road were no longer able to eat the beans at all, and I've seen several

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8. Going to the "right-a-ways" refers to the cutting of trees, bushes and shrubs which cover ditches and new road ways.

9. Work hard.

men, day after day, working for ten hours with nothing to eat after breakfast for the entire day, but molasses and corn pone. One of the most frequently quoted bits of folk poetry described the lunch:

"Beans and cornbread  
Every single day  
If they don't change  
I'll make my getaway.<sup>10</sup>  
How long, Oh Lord,  
How long?"

For breakfast we usually had oatmeal, without sugar or milk, a slice of fried baloney, stewed apples, and coffee. In the evening the two typical meals were cabbage and boiled white potatoes or macaroni and stewed tomatoes. On Sundays, the meal consisted of two vegetables, Argentinian corned beef and apple cobbler. Except for being struck with clubs, the thing that the men complained most about was the food. There was a bit of folk poetry that was often recited. It goes:

"The work is hard  
The boss is mean  
The food ain't done  
And the cook ain't clean."

Actually both the cooks and the dining-room were relatively clean; the protest was against the monotony of the food.

The hour was getting near for Easy Life's companion to depart. They brought in the pillow-case in which his clothes had been stored three months earlier. As he dumped his clothes out onto the bed, they made one shapeless lump, and as he opened them out and began to get into his pants there were a thousand creases in them. Then he put on the dirty shirt that he had worn when he came in, and in this way left to begin the new life. He had not a comb nor a toothbrush nor a razor nor a penny in his pocket. The "dog-cart" would come to pick him up and carry him back and

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10.

I will run toward freedom even if I get shot.

drop him somewhere near the railroad station in Durham.

I looked at him, his face aglow, happy that he would once again be "free," and I wondered how he could be so happy without a cent, with no job, and with no prospects. I wondered what he would go through to get his first meal, since he had no home. I wondered where he would sleep. He said he knew a prostitute who might put him up. "Prostitutes and fairies,"<sup>11</sup> he had said, "will always give a guy a break." I wondered where he would find a decent shirt or a pair of pants. Would he beg or borrow or steal?

I wondered if he would return. One day on the job the Captain had offered to bet 10 to 1 that he would be back before a week was up. As I saw him start forth, so ill-prepared to face life in the city, I, like the Captain, felt that the chances were 10 to 1 that he would return. I asked Easy Life what he thought his friend would do when he got to town. Easy Life said, "He'll steal for sure if they don't get him first." I asked him what he meant. He said, "If the bulls don't get him for vagrancy 'for sundown, he'll probably snatch something for to eat and some clothes to cover his ass with for night."

"For vagrancy?" I asked.

"For vagrancy! Sure enough for vagrancy!" Easy underlined. He then told me the story of a friend of his from South Carolina who had been on the chain gang. He, like all the others, was released without a penny in his pocket. While thumbing his way home, he was arrested for vagrancy soon after he crossed into South Carolina, "and was back in jail for ninety days, less than two days after he got his release," Easy Life said, shaking his head from side to side.

The hours between supper and "lights out" were the time when men really got to know one another. It was also the time they had for recreating themselves and playing together. But it was, for most of the men, not a creative period. The rules permitted "harmless games," but there was not one set of checkers or chess or domi-

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11. Homosexuals

noes available. No material was provided for the development of hobbies. There were no books, except for an occasional comic magazine. Only one newspaper came into the place, and few men had access to it. There was no library, no organized sports, no entertainment but one moving-picture a month.

Under these circumstances, recreation was limited to six forms, five of them definitely destructive. The first of these is the "dirty dozens," a game played by one or two persons before an audience. Its object is to outdo one's opponent in grossly offensive descriptions of the opponent's female relatives--mother, sister, wife or aunt. If a "player" succeeds in making a clever combination of obscene and profane words, the audience bursts into laughter, and then quiets down to await the retaliation of the opponent. He in turn sees if he can paint a still more degrading picture of the relatives of his partner. No recreational form attracted larger crowds or created more antagonisms, for often men would be sucked into the game who actually did not want to play it and who became angered in the course of it.

Another form of recreation was the telling of exaggerated stories about one's sex life. These included tales of sexual relations with members of the same sex, with animals, with children, close relatives and with each other. It was generally recognized that seventy percent of these tales were untrue, but the practice led to lying, to experimentation in abnormal sex relations, and to a general lowering of moral standards of the younger inmates, who continually were forced into a position of advocating many strange practices as a means of maintaining status with the group. (Page 12 of the rules book states: "Stealing, drinking, lying, vulgarity and profanity are forbidden.")

Stealing "for the thrill of it" is yet another way in which numbers of men entertain themselves. One of the best friends I had in the camp had stolen stamps from me, returned them and then described to me the way in which he had gone about getting hold of them. He explained how he had sent a friend to talk with me and how he had gotten the chap who slept in the bed next to mine interested in an old comic book to reduce the possibility of being detected. I asked him why he went to all the trouble, only to return my stamps. He explained that he had stamps, but

that having nothing else to do he wanted to "keep his hands warm." As I watched many men steal after this experience I discovered that for many, stealing was a way of passing time with a thrill.

Gambling was perhaps the chief form of recreation for those who had anything with which to gamble. Men gambled for an extra sock stolen on the day of clothing exchange, or a sandwich smuggled from the kitchen, or a box of matches. The three games most widely used for gambling were Tonk, Skin and dice. Tonk and Skin are games played with an ordinary deck of cards. Cheating is simple and common, and led to constant arguments.

There was little or no effort to control the gambling. When a new night guard came on duty and complained to an old hand that the boys were playing dice in the rear of the dormitory, the older guard was overheard to say, "What da hell do I care! They gotta do sumpin' and dice keep 'em quiet." (On page 11 under section 6 "General Rules for Conduct" there appears the following statement: "Gambling of any nature is prohibited. No prisoner shall have in his possession playing cards, dice or other games of chance at any time.")

Gossip and talking about one's sentence also consumed a great deal of time. Over and over again men related the story of their trial and told one another how they were "framed on bum raps." The following poem oft repeated is an artistic reflection of the "bum rap" psychology.

'Twas on a Tuesday I was 'rested  
 'Twas on a Wednesday I was tried  
 'Twas on a Thursday gave me long time sentence  
 'Twas on a Friday, laid me down and cried.  
 Took me to the station  
 Put me on Eastbound train  
 Carry me to Roxboro  
 Tied me with a ball and chain.  
 Had me charged with murder  
 But I ain't to be blamed

Got me charged with forgery  
Can't even write my name."

The chief means that the stool pigeon used for getting information to carry "up front" was the gossip session. Even though men feared talking about one another, they ended doing so because they felt that the gossip-mongers had to have something to tell the superintendent. One of the chain-gangers expressed it well when he said, "That stool pigeon has got to sing somethin' so it's better for me to give him sum'pin' good<sup>12</sup> to carry about somebody else, before somebody gives him sum'pin' bad to carry about me." This created an atmosphere of universal mistrust.

The most creative form of recreation was rhyming and singing. There were several quartets and trios and much informal singing, both on the job and in the dormitory. The poetry was almost always a description of life in the camp or of the desire for women or of the "fear of time." Occasionally it was the poetry of the "badman." An illustration of the bragging of a tough guy follows:

I was born in a barrel of butcher knives  
Sprayed all over with a '45  
Bull constrictor bit me  
He crawled off and died  
I hoboed with lightnin'  
And rode the black thunder  
Rode through the graveyards  
And caused the dead folks to wonder  
Sixty-two inches across my chest  
Don't fear nothin' but the devil and death  
I'll kick a bear in the rear  
And dare a lion to roar.

Or there is this warm description of one's woman:

Talk about your peaches  
And your sweet cantaloupe  
My gal's sum'pin'  
Good as salty po'k.  
She's hot as kine pepper  
Sweet as July jam.  
She's an ugly old woman  
But she's got good yam yam.

Much of the best poetry is directed against those who complain. The following

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<sup>12</sup>. "Good" for the authorities to use against someone else.

is an excellent example:

Quit cryin'  
Quit cyin'  
Give dat white man  
Sum'pin' on your time.

I would 'a told you  
But I thought you knowed  
Ain't no heaven  
On the county road.

Six months ain't no sentence  
Twelve months ain't no time  
Done been to penitentiary  
Doing 99.

Quit cryin'  
Quit dyin'  
Give dat white man  
Sum'pin' on your time.

The following verses are some of the more imaginative statements of the relationship between the chain-gangers and the walking bosses and guards.

Cap'n got a pistol and he thinks he's bad  
I'll take it tomorrow if he makes me mad.

What I want for dinner, they don't serve here.  
32-30 and some cold, cold beer.

Cap'n says hurry. Walker say run.  
Got bad feet -- can't do more one.

One of the most stifling elements of life on the road gang is the authoritarianism. The prisoner's life is completely regulated. He is informed that obedience will be rewarded and disobedience punished. Section 1 of the rules and regulations makes this clear.

"All prisoners upon arrival at any prison after being sentenced by the court shall be informed of the rules and regulations of the camp, or in prison, and advised what the consequences will be if he violates these rules. He shall also be informed as to what privileges he will receive if he obeys the rules and conducts himself properly."

Such unquestioning obedience may appear to be good and logical, in theory, but in experience authoritarianism destroys the inner resourcefulness, creativity and responsibility of the prisoner and creates in the wardens and prisoners alike an

attitude that life is cheap. The following illustrations indicate the degree to which respect for personality is violated:

-----One day when we were digging ditches for draining highway 501 we were working in water about a foot deep. One of the chain-gangers who wore very large boots could not be fitted. After attempting to do as much as he could from the dry banks of the ditch, he finally tried to explain to the Captain that he could not work in water over his shoetops.

"Get the hell in that water -- I don't give a good goddamn if it is up to your ass," the Captain yelled at him. "You should have thought about that before you came here. The judge said ninety days and he didn't say nuthin' about your havin' good ones."

-----The walking boss was heard commenting on one of his ace workers who came back for the third time. "Now ain't that a shame -- and he only got a year. I sure wish he had ten or more."

-----Every day after lunch the walking bosses and armed guards would send the food remaining in their lunch kits to the chain-gangers. After the kits had been emptied, we noticed that the water boy always filled one of them with the corn pone from the prisoners meal. One day I asked the water boy why he always filled the kit. The water boy explained that the Captain told him he fed that "stinkin' pone to his pigs." For a moment no one spoke. Then Softshoe said, "Pigs and convicts."

-----The convicts recognized that everything but acts of God were controlled by the officials. One of the poems addressed to the Captain ran:

"You can hold back my dinner  
But you can't stop the sun goin' down.

I asked the Cap'n for the time of day  
Hard-hearted bastard threw his watch away."

-----Visiting days were the first and third Sundays of the month. Visiting hours were from one to four. The visiting took place in the prison yard. There were two barbed wire fences about five feet apart. The convicts stood in front of one, the visitors stood behind another. There in the yard, summer, winter, rain, snow, sleet, hail, they talked, if they could be heard. Visiting day was an event both longed

for and dreaded, because as one of the chain-gangers so aptly put it, "We gotta meet the home folks like animals in the zoo."

-----The supreme authority in a state prison camp is the superintendent. The superintendent at Roxboro was a silent man who appeared chiefly at mealtimes and his major contacts with the men were a silent observation of them as they ate, or when he directed them to work in the morning. One of the few times when I heard him speak to the men was when a newly arrived inmate violated one of the many petty rules of the dining-hall and came down the wrong aisle. The superintendent raised his club and said, "Get around there before I knock the shit out of you."

The illustrations given above deal with the relationship between the officials and the chain-gangers, but we must bear in mind that the system is such as to develop among the prisoners themselves many of the same attitudes they decry in the officials. The following rhyme, and many such were repeated, clearly indicates the failure of the average prisoner to respect his fellow convicts.

"When the Cap'n calls the water boy  
Everything's all right  
When I call the water boy  
He wants to fuss and fight."

Most of the prisoners accept the idea that punishment can be just. In fact they accept the same basic premise that most of the judges, whom they eternally criticize, accept. Many prisoners would be more severe than judges in making the punishment fit the crime. In discussing a young man who had raped two children I heard Easy Life say "the no-good bastard should have got ninety-nine years and one dark day." When a young man came into the camp who reportedly had stolen eight hundred dollars which was his mother's life savings a prisoner suggested, "they should have built a jail on top of him." To which another replied, "That's too damn good for the bastard. They should have gassed him, but quick."

The prisoners, like the judges, accept the superstition that two wrongs make a right. A chain-ganger accepts this but claims that the incarceration clears him,

since the deprivations of prison life are equal to his crime. He feels that he is doubly absolved when he gets the worse of the bargain. Any punishment that affects his body, or that causes him to fear while in prison, he looks upon as unjustified. Consequently he feels (often while in prison and certainly upon release) that he is entitled to avenge this injustice by becoming an enemy of society. Thus the theory that two wrongs make a right becomes a vicious circle, destructive to wardens, prisoners, and society.

Let us see what the punishments are on the chain-gang. Section 5 of the Rules book states:

For Minor Offenses: -- (The superintendent will be permitted to) "hand-cuff and require to remain in standing or sitting position for a reasonable period of time."

In this form of punishment, as in the case of Dad, explained above, there is often edema in feet and wrists, muscular cramps and physical fatigue. During the period, if the prisoner is standing, he does not eat but is taken down once every 12 hours for 15-20 minutes to urinate, defecate and relax.

For Major Offenses: -- "Corporal punishment, with the approval of the Chairman of the State Highway and Public Works Commission, administered with a leather strap of the approved type and by some prison officer other than the person in immediate charge of said prisoner and only after physical examination by a competent physician, and such punishment must be administered either in the presence of a prison physician or a prison chaplain."

Another section dealing with punishment and discipline in the book of rules and regulations states that the superintendent may place a prisoner on;

"Restricted diet and solitary confinement, the period of punishment to be approved by the disciplinarian."

One chain-ganger that I got to know very well had recently finished a period of such confinement in "the hole." For fourteen days James had been without any food except three soda crackers a day. "The bastards gave me all the water I could drink, and I'll be damned if I wasn't fool enough to drink a lot of it. Soon I began to get thinner but my gut got bigger and bigger till I got scared and drank less and less till I ended drinking only three glasses a day."

Although he was very weak he was forced to go to work immediately and expected to work as hard as the others, and to be respectful to the same Captain he felt was responsible for his hardships.

James had been sentenced to sixty days for larceny, which good behavior would have reduced to forty-four days. Because of one surly remark he was forced not only to spend fourteen days in an unlighted hole on crackers and water but also to lose the sixteen days of good time. Actually James had begun to hate himself as much as he hated the Captain. "A man," he said, "who tips his hat to a son of a bitch he hates the way I hate him ain't no man at all. If I'd a been a man, I'd a split his head wide open the minute I got half a chance."

(Page 10, section h of the rule book states: "A", "B", and "C" grade prisoners shall be under the supervision of an armed guard at all times. "C" grade prisoners may be shackled or chained, if in the discretion of the superintendent or warden it is deemed necessary.)

There are punishments administered that are not listed in the book on Rules and Regulations. Many officers were reported to have kicked, punched or clubbed inmates. Here are two incidents of such irregular punishment I saw myself:

One day we were working at the cement mixer when I heard the Captain yelling to one of the elderly men that he had better increase his rate and do more work. The old man attempted to work faster. "Cap'n says I'm lazy but I'm plumb wore out," he complained. As I turned to get oil to cover the steel forms in which the cement pipes are made I noticed the Captain rushing toward the old man. "You goddamn lazy bastard," the Captain shouted, "I told you to get to

work. When I work a man I expect a man's work." As the old fellow turned to the Captain and began to explain that he was tired the Captain kicked him heavily and said, "Don't talk, work." When the Captain had gone away the old man said, over and over, in mixed fear and resignation, "The Captain says I'm lazy, but I'm plumb wore out."

There was one chain-ganger--they called him Joe, age about fifty-two--who was at the camp for thirty days. This was his fifth or sixth time to have served thirty days for drunkenness. He said he was tired all the time, that he had pains in his back. Some of the chain-gangers said he was "damn lazy." For two days the Captain urged him to work harder. "Get some earth on that spade," the Captain said. "I'm getting tired of you, Joe. You'd better give me some work." All of the second day the Captain kept his eye on Joe. Mid-afternoon the Captain walked over to Tom and said, "You're not going to do no work till I knock hell out of you." He calmly struck Tom several times vigorously in the face. "Now maybe that will learn you," the Captain said as he walked away. Joe took off his cap, bowed obsequiously, and said "Yessa, yessa, that sure will learn me." When the Captain had walked away Tom spat on the ground and said "He's a dirty son of a bitch and I hope he rots in hell."

The first thing a man did when he awoke in the morning was to look out the windows to the sky. It became almost instinctive. "How's the weather?" was always the first question. For the one thing that meant a day without work was a heavy rain. At first I thought the fellows "prayed for sweet rain" because the work was hard. Later I discovered that there were in addition four other reasons that had to do with working conditions:

1. The work was never done.
2. Thought and creativity were not permitted.
3. Staying "under the gun" made for crowded, tense conditions.
4. The men felt like "things" rather than people on the job.

I believe the men most disliked the feeling that no matter how hard they worked "the work on the highway ain't never done." When one job was finished there was always another. "Let's ride," the Captain would say and off we would go. One fellow complained, "If only we knew that we had so much to do in a day then I wouldn't mind the aches so much 'cause I could look to some rest at the end."

I had never realized before the importance, even to men doing the most monotonous manual labor, of knowing clearly the reasons for doing a job, and the dejection in spirit that subconsciously creeps in when men cannot see a job completed. One day when we dug out patches in the road which another crew would fill in Purple expressed this feeling well by saying, "I reckon these holes will be filled by some fool 'rrested in Durham tonight, and he'll wonder where the hell they come from."

On the job no man was permitted to use the kind of imagination that Purple and the others put into their rhymes. Skills among the men were few but what there were had no outlet. Over and again the walking boss would say, "Don't try to think. Do what I tell ya to do." Once when a resourceful chain-ganger offered a suggestion that might have improved or simplified the task, the walking boss said, "I'm paid to think; you're here to work." Softshoe used to say,

When you're wrong, you're wrong

But when you're right, you're wrong anyhow.

On two or three occasions when the Captain was away the assistant walking boss was in charge of the crew. He was quite inexperienced as compared with one of the chain-gangers, James, who knew almost as much about the job as the Captain. One day in the Captain's absence James suggested to the assistant that a ditch should be cut in a certain way. The assistant captain ordered otherwise. So fifteen men spent three and half hours (working in water and mud) digging a ditch 40 feet long, 4 feet wide and in places 5 feet deep. The next day the Captain told us that the work would have to be redone. The men looked knowingly at one another and started digging.

There was a regulation that each prisoner, excepting the trusties, must at all times be within eyeshot and gun range of the armed guard. The prisoners called this "under the gun." Another regulation was that at no time could a chain-ganger be seen to rest during his ten-hour day except during the two daily 15-minute smoking periods. These two regulations made for continuous tension.

When digging or clearing ditches, our crew, from fourteen to sixteen men, was usually divided and half assigned to each side of the road. Since the amount of work on each side was seldom equal, the logical thing would have been for the crew that finished first to move on down the road. They could not do so because then they would not have been "under the gun." Or the crew that finished first could have rested for a few minutes and then moved on with the group. But the regulation that "all must be busy at all times" precluded such a step. The solution accepted was to put all fourteen men on one side, where we were jammed in so tightly upon one another that work was dangerous, slow, and inefficient. We got on one another's nerves and often struck each other with tools.

To avoid hardship and to give the impression that they were working harder than the others, certain men in the crew indulged in hiding other men's tools, pushing, or criticizing one another's work in loud voices in order to place themselves in more favored working positions or to get in a good light with the Captain for informing. On the days we worked on ditches, tension in the evenings in the dormitory was often high.

To me the most degrading condition on the job was the feeling, "I am not a person; I am a thing to be used." The guard-prisoner relationship and the conditions and regulations were such as to create in the men who "worked" us the same attitude they had toward the tools we used. At times the walking bosses would stand around for hours as we worked, seeming to do nothing--just watching, often moving from foot to foot or walking from one side of the road to another. It was under these conditions that they would select a "plaything." One boy, Oscar, was often "it." Once the gun guard, bored with himself and the situation, ordered Oscar to take off his cap and

dance. He warned Oscar with a broad smile on his face, "I'll shoot your heart out if you don't." As the gun guard trained his rifle on Oscar's chest, Oscar took off his cap, grinned broadly and danced vigorously. The guard and the walking boss screamed with laughter. Later most of the crew told Oscar that they hated him for his pretending he had enjoyed the experience. But almost any of them would have reacted in the same way.

Or another example: One day I watched two of the Captains working their crews in the same vicinity. After an hour things began to get dull. All the usual jokes had been told. Someone got an idea--let's see whose crew can fill the truck first. So for the next half day we were pawns in that game!

The story of my relations with Captain Jones bears further examination. The Captain had learned of my case and knew I was from the North. Several chain-gangers agreed that the newsclipping he waved about on the day he lectured me was the story of my surrender from the Durham Sun. At any rate I am sure he felt that I was going to shirk and be difficult -- that I was going to try to show off and would challenge his authority.

My aims were really far different. I wanted to work hard so that I would not be a burden to other chain-gangers. I wanted to accept the imprisonment in a quiet unobtrusive manner for only in this way did I believe that the officials and guards could sympathetically be led to consider the principle on which I was convicted. I did not expect them to agree with me, but I did want them to believe that I cared enough about the ideals I was supposed to stand for so that I could accept my punishment with a sense of humor, fairness and constructive good will.

Although it would have been costly, it would have been easy to be either servile or recalcitrant. The difficulty was to be constructive, to remove tension and yet to maintain one's balance and self-respect, and at the same time, to give ample evidence of a desire to respect the Captain's personality.

I found him to be a very fine craftsman, who knew the skills of his trade well. I noted, too, that he was much more careful to leave immediately for the dormitory when it began to rain hard than were most of the other captains. Soon after our first unfortunate encounter, I mentioned these facts to him.

One morning when I saw him coming toward me with what I considered a hostile expression on his face (I was working unskillfully in making cement pipe) I decided that I should take the initiative. Before he could reach me I called over to him, "Captain Jones, I seem to need help--would you have the time to show..." I could not finish my sentence.

"Damn well you need help," he said, but already I could notice a great difference in the expression on his face. He showed me how to scrape the steel forms and how to oil them. I thanked him politely and told him I hoped if he saw me doing poorly that he would speak to me. I wanted to use the rest of my sentence to pick up as much knowledge as possible. He said, "Well, I can learn you," and walked away.

An hour later he returned and looked over my work, found it satisfactory and said, "Well, Rusty, you're learnin'." That was the first time he had not called me "tall boy" or "hey-you-there."

For three days there was general improvement in our relations, but on the fourth day when I reported for work he seemed very agitated. It turned out that an informer, known as a singer or stool-pigeon among the prisoners, had told him I was urging the men not to wear caps as then they would not have to tip them.

The fact is that I did look upon the tipping of caps as degrading; for it was a fact that most of the men did it as if it were a mark of respect when inwardly they not only cursed the captains but also lost self-respect. When the men had asked me about it I told them my attitude but in discussing it with them I had made it clear that my first concern was what the tipping did to them inside.

Later that day I had another talk with the Captain. He seemed very impatient but he did listen to me as I explained my position on wearing the cap. Although he did not say anything more to me at the time I later heard that he informed several of

the men who recently had begun to go bare-headed that they would wear caps the year round or not at all. One of the prisoners said, "There is goin' to be some cold-headed spooks<sup>13</sup> 'round here next January!"

After this there was no further discussion of the caps and no effort to get men to wear them.

The morning following our talk the Captain offered us cigarettes during smoking period. Since I did not smoke, I felt I should not take any and attempted to return them. "Rusty", he said, "they're for you whether you smoke or not." I accepted the cigarettes and gave them to Dad. This seemed to me a logical way to behave but the Captain attached a real significance to my having offered to return the cigarettes. That afternoon he told one of the men that I was filled with a lot of bad ideas but at least I was polite. Later he said to the armed guard in the presence of Easy Life that it was probably not my fault that I was "mixed up about so many things." He concluded "Everything those damyankees touch the bastards spoil."

The Captain and I continued to disagree at many points but I feel certain that as time went on we came to recognize that given quite different attitudes on many subjects we could nonetheless work together and, I believe, learn from one another.

One day toward the end of my sentence the Captain stopped me.

"Well, how are you getting along, Rusty?" he said.

"Quite all right, Captain," I answered, "but I feel that some of the fellows need things and I hope to send some toothbrushes, combs, and razors in when I get home."

"Well, you got a surprise, didn't ya?" he asked.

"A surprise?" I said.

"Yes, indeed. You thought we was going to mistreat ya -- but bad, didn't ya?"

"I did not know quite what to expect," I said, "but I have learned a good deal here."

"Well, we can all learn something," he said, and walked away.

That afternoon the Captain treated the crew to a bottle of Royal Crown Cola.

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13. A term of derision or amusement Negroes variously use in describing themselves.

On April 10, I decided that I would write the Captain a letter. The prisoners were astounded. "You can't write the Captain." "What do you think you're doin'?" "They ain't goin' to do nothin' but throw it in the shitpot."

I explained to the men that I was sure they could write anyone connected with the camp or the Prison Bureau. But even the more enlightened were skeptical. "I bet the Captain don't never get it," Purple said.

At any rate, I sat down and wrote the following letter to Captain Jones.

Camp # 508  
Roxboro, North Carolina  
Sunday, April 10, 1949

Dear Captain Jones:

If all goes well, I understand that I may be released this coming Wednesday morning. But before I go I want to say that I am pleased to have been placed in your work crew.

Never having done similar work before, I am afraid I was not very apt, so all the more I want to thank you for all the help you gave me on the job. I feel that I learned a great deal.

I want to thank you and Captain Duncan for the treats to cigarettes and soft drinks. As you probably know better than I do, life has not always been easy for most of the men who come to this camp. And such kindnesses mean more to us than words can express.

I trust that your cold will have cleared up soon.

Sincerely,

Bayard Rustin

The Captain's reaction to the letter was very interesting. He was seen passing it about to the other Captains and to several guards. He never mentioned the letter to me. But he did seem to show a real and friendly feeling to me during my last days at the camp.

Now most of the inmates were pleased that I had written the letter. On my last night in camp one of the chain-gangers asked me if I would help him compose a letter to an official.

"Your letter sure done some good," he said. "Guess it won't hurt me none to try."

Too much weight should not be given this one attempt, however. In analyzing the progress possible in such a situation, many factors, such as the length of one's sentence, the attitude of the other men in the crew, and many forces working outside the camp itself, would need carefully to be weighed. The fact that many persons outside wrote and visited me, that people outside sent packages to the community kit, the fact that I had a short sentence and that I got on well with the other chain-gangers--these are a few of the factors that made it easier for me to approach the Captain and to do so with some degree of confidence.

While one must recognize the real limitations for basic change in an authoritarian set-up such as the guard-inmate relationship, it is fair, it seems to me, to point out that our experiences do indicate that even in trying circumstances (for both the Captain and for me) it was possible to reach a working solution without losing one's self-respect or submitting completely to outside authority. And any discomfort that I experienced in the twenty-two days on the chain-gang was more than offset by the feeling of exhilaration that came when Captain Jones and I parted on far more friendly terms than had at first seemed possible.

There are three methods of dealing with offenders against society once they are apprehended. Prison officials and men generally lay claim more or less to advocating all three. They are retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation.

Generally it is admitted by criminologists that at present the public believes that offenders should be punished. There are many different reasons why this is so. Certainly one reason is the belief that the average criminal responds to nothing but fear and penalties. However, there is some real evidence that only through the application of the opposite of fear and punishment--intelligent good will--can men be reached and challenged and changes brought about.

I should like to share with you three examples from my experience at Roxboro that indicate the meaning of Auden's statement that "What can be loved can be cured." These experiences bear witness that we can expect true rehabilitation when we have rejected punishment, which is revenge, and have begun to utilize the terrific

healing and therapeutic power of forgiveness and non-violence.

I have already described how stifling were working conditions on the chain-gang. On the final Saturday of my stay the Captain was away and his assistant directed the work. While the assistant was not so skillful as the Captain he was more gentle, more considerate, and was willing on occasion to consult the crew on procedure. Before beginning work he explained clearly what was to be done. For five hours on that Saturday morning, in the presence of a director who was not tense, who did not curse, and who permitted the men the right to help in planning the work, many constructive things occurred. The men were cooperative; they worked cheerfully; tension was reduced; and the time passed more quickly than usual.

Early Saturday morning I had wondered if anyone would use the occasion for loafing. Only one man did so. When we returned to the dormitory Purple, who had a way with turning phrases, referred to the morning's work as "half day of heaven."

Stealing was the chief problem in the dormitory. The night I arrived my fountain pen, stamps, razor and twenty blades were stolen. The next morning my writing paper disappeared. All of these things had been locked away in a box. I decided then that I would follow the policy of not locking up my belongings. I announced that in future all the stamps, money, food, writing paper, etc., that I had were to be used for the community, but that in order to divide things really according to need, I hoped that before anyone took anything he would consult me. As small boxes of food and other things were sent to me they were added to the community kit. Gradually the following changes occurred:

1. After a week, except for four candy bars, stealing from the community kit did not occur.
2. Other men made contributions to the community kit.
3. Inmates began to unlock their unsafe strong boxes and bring things to the open community kit for safe-keeping.

for as one of the fellows said, "if anyone is caught snatching from that box the boys won't think much of him."

4. When two packages of cigarettes were stolen from a chain-ganger and it was announced that unless they turned up money would be taken from the community kit to pay for them, the cigarettes were found on the floor the next morning.

Finally there is the example of our party. When near the end of my second week in camp several boxes of candy, cookies, cakes, dates, peanuts and fruit juice were sent in to be added to the community kit, it was suggested that we have a party. Practically all of the inmates were against it. They said, "The fellows will behave like pigs. It would be impossible to keep order. A few strong people would get all the food."

It was finally suggested that I should select the committee to conduct the party. I purposely selected the three men known to be the "biggest thieves" in the camp. They accepted. The men were disheartened. "Now we know the party is wrecked. Those guys will eat half the stuff themselves before the party!" they groaned.

Nevertheless the boxes were turned over to them to be kept for two days until the party. It is significant that except for the disappearance of the four candy bars already mentioned that:

1. All the food was well-kept.
2. Six candy bars were donated to replace the four stolen.
3. The party was well-organized and orderly, and the food left over was returned to the community kit.
4. One man known before only for stealing, became known as one of the most capable men in the camp. He was so thorough that he appointed a sergeant-at-arms for the party whose business it was to patrol the floor to watch for

stealing or disorder. Fortunately the sergeant-at-arms had no business and so gave up his job before the party was yet half over.

I certainly do not want to imply that we had in any real sense dealt with the problem of stealing in the camp. However, it was clear for all to see that the stimuli of expectancy, trust and responsibility had for the moment at least brought about the positive responses of faithfulness to duty, imagination and sharing. The question arises -- would more such gentle stimuli over longer periods of time accompanied by proper diet, medical care, music education, good quarters, and respectful treatment be more effective finally than retribution and punishments. If the law of cause and effect still operates in human relations the answer seems clear.

SURVEY OF FORTY-FOUR MEN<sup>14</sup>  
AT ROXBORO PRISON CAMP

In these additional notes, I have attempted to give a factual description of the life of the prisoners at Roxboro State Prison camps. In trying to discover some of the causes for the sordidness and misery which engulfs these men, I interviewed at length some forty-four "under the gun" prisoners as to their education, family background, general attitude to life, etc. Each man gave me permission to recheck factual information which he gave me with his friends in the camp, which in most cases I was able to do. I, therefore, am convinced that the material given is relatively accurate.

While I recognize the danger in drawing too many generalizations from such a partial survey and such limited data, I present the results and what I believe are objective comments upon them:

1. Education

The average inmate has 5.9 years<sup>15</sup> of schooling.

22.6% have been to school three years or less.

4.5% have had no schooling. Only 4.6% beyond the ninth grade. There is ample evidence that lack of education results in a general inability to cope with life and a predisposition to crime. Yet at Roxboro there is no educational program; there is no library.

2. Occupation

70.5% of those interviewed are unskilled laborers.

13.6% are semi-skilled. All are poor, work long hours and few have had a chance to live decently.

Yet at Roxboro there is no vocational training, no vocational placement bureau

- <sup>14</sup>. The forty-four men were those, myself excepted, who were living in the dormitory in which I slept. They include only "men under the gun." That is to say no trustees. Trustees are permitted to work without an armed guard.
- <sup>15</sup>. The tables from which this and the following figures are taken is appended.

and even thinking constructively on the job is actually implicitly and explicitly discouraged. Men leave the prison camp in the clothes in which they came no matter how worn or dirty. No money is given them to tide them over while looking for work or even to get them home.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Recidivism<sup>17</sup>

The men interviewed have been in prison an average of 4.2 times. 15.9% have been in five times. 4.5% have been in ten times. The range is from one to twenty times.

It is not surprising when one realizes how ill-prepared these men are to face the world when they leave. No greater argument is needed to show how prison fails to rehabilitate men than these facts. It is also clear that men apparently are not deterred from committing further crime by fear of incarceration.

### 4. Nature of Crime

The majority of the crimes committed are those resulting from continual frustration in life outside. For example, 43.2% of the men interviewed were convicted of larceny, 25% convicted of assault and battery, 13.6% convicted of drunkenness.

At best prison is a frustrating, uncreative experience. At Roxboro there is no real attempt to reduce the frustration. Nothing is offered in the way of sports, organized or unorganized. There is no effort to develop the abundant, latent musical talents. There is not even a real effort on weekends to let prisoners "under the gun" get into the sunshine or to use the yard. Already I have pointed out the vulgarity that is inherent in the situation when men are locked in together without access to books, games, or such common necessities as toothbrushes, razors, combs, or change or socks.

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<sup>16</sup>. Men are usually taken to where they surrendered, were sentenced, or picked up.

<sup>17</sup>. Recidivism means criminals returning to jail for subsequent offenses.

### 5. Age Grouping

I discovered that 54.5% of those interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 30. These men still have a chance to make some sort of adjustment to living outside of prison but not if they are debilitated physically by poor food, over-long hours of work and if they are crushed spiritually by a system which does not permit them to respect themselves as men.

### 6. Length of Sentence<sup>18</sup>

The average length of sentence for the forty-four men interviewed is 22 months.

It is clear that many of the men are at Roxboro ample time to permit changes to take place if only the proper stimuli could be found and opportunities for more normal expression and living were made possible.

Yet at Roxboro there are no psychiatric or psychological examinations, no psychiatric treatment, no remedial diet, no training in useful and money-making crafts, no reading and writing, no separation of juvenile delinquents.

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<sup>18.</sup> Certain men are not included in this survey have up to 20 and 30 year sentences.

APPENDIXTABLE 1

## Education

<u>Number of years</u>	<u>Number of persons</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0	2	4.5
2	6	13.6
3	2	4.5
4	4	9.1
5	5	11.4
6	5	11.4
7	4	9.1
8	6	13.6
9	8	18.2
10	1	2.3
11	1	2.3
<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTALS 65	44	100.0

5.9 average years of schooling.

22.6% have 3 or less years of schooling.

5.5 median years of schooling.

4.6% have gone beyond the ninth year of school.

TABLE 2  
Occupations

<u>Nature of Occupation</u>	<u>Number of Men</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Unskilled	31	70.5
Semi-skilled	6	13.6
Cement finishers	2	
Brick Mason	1	
Truck driver	1	
Tobacconist	1	
Mortician	1	
Farm	2	4.5
Domestic	4	9.1
None	1	2.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTALS	44	100.0

TABLE 3  
Recidivism

<u>Number times in prison</u>	<u>Number of men</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1	7	15.9
2	6	13.6
3	8	18.2
4	8	18.2
5	7	15.9
6	2	4.5
7	1	2.3
8	2	4.5
10	2	4.5
20	1	2.3
<hr/>		
TOTALS	66	44
		99.9 *

Average number of imprisonments per man is 4.2

\* These percentage figures were rounded off, and this would account for the slight discrepancy between the actual total and 100.0%.

TABLE 4  
Nature of Crimes

<u>Nature of Crime</u>	<u>Number of Men</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Larceny	19	43.2
Assault and Battery	11	25.0
Drunkenness	6	13.6
Non-Support	2	4.5
Manslaughter	1	2.3
Sex Crimes	2	4.5
Forgery	1	2.3
Auto Accident	1	2.3
Selling Whiskey	1	2.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTALS	44	100.0

TABLE 5  
Age Grouping

<u>Ages</u>	<u>Number of Men</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
18-20	2	4.5
21-25	10	22.7
26-30	12	27.3
31-35	5	11.4
36-40	8	18.2
41-45	4	9.1
46-50	2	4.5
51-55	1	2.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTALS	44	100.0

Age spread ..... 18-55

Offenders between 18-30 ... 54.5%

TABLE 6

## Length of Sentence

<u>Length of Sentence in months</u>	<u>Number of Men</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1 (30 days)	8	18.19
2 (60 days)	2	4.54
3 (90 days)	3	6.80
7	1	2.27
12 (1 yr.)	9	20.45
15	1	2.27
18 (1½ yrs.)	4	9.09
24 (2 yrs.)	8	18.19
36 (3 yrs.)	1	2.27
41	1	2.27
48 (4 yrs.)	1	2.27
54 (4½ yrs.)	1	2.27
72 (6 yrs.)	1	2.27
96 (8 yrs.)	1	2.27
108 (9 yrs.)	1	2.27
102 (10 yrs.)	<u>1</u>	<u>2.27</u>
TOTALS	44	99.96

Average length of sentence in months ... 22