

THE HUNDRED YEAR FLOOD

Texas has so many prisons its motto should be "The Gulag State" instead of The Lone Star State. After the 1990s decade of massive prison building, Texas' prison system grew from 27 units to 116 by 2000. The state lost 3 small units from 2000-2005 and 3 more in 2014, reducing the population from a high of 172,000 to a measly 165,000 distributed among a mere 110 prison units.

In 1908, construction was completed on a prison in Rosharon, Brazoria County. This was the first of 2 units, nearly identical and was named the Ramsey Unit. When its near-twin was finished, it became Ramsey 2 and the first became Ramsey 1. R-1 was built on the highest ground and also has a 3 to 4 foot thick reinforced concrete foundation. Both units have cell blocks and dormitories with R-2 sporting a Chapel and dayrooms on the cellblocks, two features absent on R-1.

In the early 1970s, Ramsey 3 was built. It is a single level prison with a 24 hour medical facility and is all dorms. The units became collectively known as the Three R's, or 1 Camp, 2 Camp and 3 Camp; even though each unit has its own trustee camp. A friend of mine on the outside wrote me once, telling me he had looked at the Three R's and compared them to the 3 Nazi death camps in Poland called Auschwitz on something called GOOGLEARTH. He said he was shocked at their uncanny resemblance to each other. I have been in prison since 1987, long before the internet and GOOGLEARTH were even clouds on the far horizon, so I take his word for it. In the 1990s it became a dubious honor in Texas to have a prison named for a person. R-2 then became the

Stringfellow Unit and R-3 became the Terrell Unit. The prison system still refers to them as R-1, R-2 and R-3.

I was transferred to R-1 in 2011 to attend graduate school classes given there by the University of Houston. I earned an MA in Humanities, another in Literature and was awarded a life (Oh, boy, another life term...!) membership to the Rho Omega chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, an international honor society for English Literature majors. Quite an accomplishment to remain totally celibate for nearly 30 years and STILL acquire an S.T.D....! I then completed a one year Faith-Based Dorm program and do leather work in the craft shop when it is open. I also like to write, so I stay constructively busy.

In April of 2016 the central and southeast areas of Texas began receiving unusually heavy rainfall. Many guards and support staff of the Three R's commute from Houston. During the second half of April, because of the heavy rains north of, and in Houston itself, many prison employees were unable to make it to work. Regular operations at the Three R's were actively and continuously disrupted due to severe staff shortages.

Throughout May of 2016 these torrential rains continued from north of Dallas to south of Houston, swelling the Brazos, Colorado and Trinity rivers to, and beyond, their hundred year flood levels. Stringfellow's and Terrell's prisoners were evacuated to other prisons. Prisoners from the Three R's trustee camps were evacuated to R-1's main building, swelling R-1's population to about 1700. All activities except showers, meals and G.E.D. school were cancelled until the flood waters receded

and the trustees returned to their respective camps. No plans were made for R-1's evacuation since it was on high ground far above the hundred year flood level.

R-1 had suffered under its worst senior warden in its history from October 2010 until he retired in March 2016. Unit maintenance had been criminally neglected during his tenure to unbelievable lows. There were many windows broken since before his arrival, along with those broken since his arrival, that were NEVER replaced during his tenure; and many, many, other problems arising from and associated with, inadequate or no maintenance at all. Other administration members, following their leader, soon lost all incentive to maintain the unit so it declined even further into a state of near total disrepair. When the new senior warden took over in April, he began a crash program of repair and maintenance. However, there was just too much that needed doing, and way too little time to do it all in, to avoid what was coming.

In the early 1990s a new sewage processing plant was built to serve the Three R's. The old one, designed for just 2 units, was just not up to the demands placed on it by three. It was still useful as a lift station though, so it was left in place with a levee around it to protect it from possible flooding. But, like everything else at R-1 during the previous senior warden's tenure, the lift station's levee had also fallen into a state of total disrepair from its complete lack of maintenance.

As the rain-swollen Brazos continued to rise to, then past its hundred year flood level near Rosharon, water began to fill

the bar ditch surrounding the lift station and the levee began to fail. When flood waters submerge a sewage lift station, a back-pressure situation occurs. Enough flood waters and raw sewage will reverse-flush from the lift station, and then from every urinal and toilet in every cell and dorm in R-1, the only unit left open at that time. This would ultimately cause a flood, not of water, but of raw sewage, to innundate R-1. So, when the levee began its inevitable failure in the early morning hours of Friday the 3rd of June; the decision was made to evacuate the 1700 or so prisoners currently housed at R-1 to prisons all over the east Texas area. My group of 421 or so prisoners were sent to the Ferguson unit.

Late that afternoon and into the evening, 10 busses, each carrying around 42 prisoners, arrived at Ferguson. In preparation for our arrival, Ferguson unit staff had installed a three place sink, a toilet and urinal with 2 televisions on the stage in an unused gym at the unit's south end. There were 9 porta potties set up just outside the gym door for use during daylight hours. Two hundred and forty six men would be located here on the floor. Six inches of space separated the sides of old, lumpy mats with 12 to 18 inches between heads and feet.

Across the hall is the unit Chapel. The seats had all been removed and 175 men would be located there to share one TV, one sink, one urinal and two toilets. Living area was cramped in both places, to say the least.

Ferguson has a reputation for being an extremely combative unit since it came on line around 1962. In fact, the unit had

been locked down over riots prior to our arrival. The staff ensured the hall was clear when we went to eat, shower and use the phones. We used phones in the dayrooms of locked down wings. We were spared the gladiator type combats Ferguson is famous for. For those who had money on their trust accounts, a fifteen dollar weekly commissary spend was allowed. The school arranged for 180 of us to take an O.S.H.A. construction safety certification course during our first week while in the library and Faith-Based dorm donated newspapers, magazines and books for us. Refugee life soon took on a surreal type of normalcy.

Being used to gangs and combative prisoner mentality, the Ferguson staff were nearly stunned to find themselves hosting a horde of prisoners, the majority of whom not only knew the meaning of, but frequently used the words please and thank you. I heard one of the building majors say he would love to keep the 421 R-1 prisoners and send 421 of his prisoners back to R-1. Still, they remained vigilant to the point of keeping an officer on the gym's observation platform, armed with a 37 millimeter breech-loading C.S. gas gun at all times.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Texas was a member of a political entity that lost a major war; one issue of which made it illegal to bring people from other countries here to do work its own citizens wouldn't. Over the last 10 years, Texas has revived that practice, bringing people here from Kenya and Nigeria to work in its prisons, jobs few other people will do at wages so low it is unbelievable. Oh, Texas also promises to sponsor these people for U.S. citizenship after a certain number

of years of service. Most of these people come here after they see a multitude of Hollywood movies depicting U.S. convicts as little more than rabid, two-legged animals. The result is hatred and fear on most of their parts, quite understandably so I guess. Most Texas prison guards seem to be Kenyans or Nigerians any more.

Being an early riser, I found toilet and sink access easiest from 5:15 to 6:00 a.m. daily. On Thursday, 9 June, I arose at 5:20 to use the restroom, brush my teeth and wash at the newly installed sinks. Earlier, when we had returned to the gym from breakfast, several of us saw the Nigerian guard on the observation platform, flipping open the gas gun at its hinged breech, then flipping it shut. As I walked to the rear of the gym later to do my business, I saw the guard aiming the gas gun at several of the sleeping prisoners and saying "Pow! Pow!" acting as though the gun was recoiling against his shoulder. When he noticed me staring at him, he held the gun diagonally across his chest, then propped it on his shoulder and walked back and forth across the platform as though he was walking guard. He stopped, aimed the gun at me, said "Pow!" and smiled. I shook my head and walked on to the restroom area, thinking to myself, "God-damn, I sure am glad that sum-bitch ain't loaded...!"

Several minutes later I was done with the toilet and was in the middle of brushing my teeth when I heard the unmistakable CRACK of a 40 mm grenade launcher, a sound from my army days I will never forget. Seems like that sum-bitch WAS loaded, after all! The round hit a wall, then the back of a sleeping prisoner, then bounced behind a four foot floor fan which aided in gassing

240 or so sleeping men. I yelled "GAS, GAS!" 2 or 3 times while the Nigerian floor guard began beating on the door, begging to be let out. Getting no response to my yells, I began yelling "FIRE, FIRE, FIRE; EVERYONE OUT OF THE GYM! FIRE, FIRE, FIRE!" until I began to be overcome by the gas myself. Everyone exited the gym and we were seated against the hall walls. The platform guard was the last man to be let out of the gym. We never heard anything about what may have happened to him for gassing us.

We were given an ultra-quick sham of a medical exam by a nurse, then showered in groups of 25. My group and 2 others were taken to a small recreation yard, then moved to a larger one. On the way, a white female sergeant with a huge plug of chewing tobacco in her cheek accompanied the guard at the head of our group. She had a gas gun on a sling around her neck, resting on her back. One of the men in our group said, "Oh no, not another gas gun..."

Hearing this, the sergeant spun around 180 degrees, whipped the gas gun off of her shoulder in an obviously often-practiced move, pointed it at us and chanted, cheerleader style:

"Are ya'll men worried about this gun?
Cause I'll gas you bastards just for fun!
So gimme an excuse, gimme an excuse;
just one, just one, just one!"

accented by brown tobacco spittle flying from her mouth.

At this point, I uttered (silently) a slightly blasphemous prayer, "Oh, God-damn; don't let this sum-bitch be loaded...!" Whether it was loaded or not I'll never know, but at least this one did not go off. After several long hours of sitting in the hot sun, we were finally escorted back to the gym. There was

never another guard on that platform for the rest of our stay.

Another thing there never was for the rest of our stay was our commissary-purchased T-shirts, boxer shorts and socks some of us wore to Ferguson, and the commissary items purchased from the commissary at Ferguson the previous Monday. While we baked on the recreation yards for hours, prison guards went through the gym, taking sheets to be washed and returned to us. We had been given brand new sheets when we arrived. Tattered rags and pieces of cloth called sheets were returned to us and we never got any of our personally-owned underclothing back.

On Saturday morning of 11 June, the refugees in the Chapel and 40 from the gym were bussed to another unit. Half of the refugees from the gym were then moved to the Chapel. This greatly relieved the building stress from the severely overcrowded conditions in both areas. We would remain for another week, finally boarding busses for the return trip to R-1 early the next Saturday morning on 18 June.

To say that seeing our own unit again was a sight for sore eyes is like saying the Pope has a slight interest in Catholicism! It was worth sitting in hot busses in the hot sun (even for those who succumbed to heat strokes) just to be back. But then, we had not made it back to our cells and dorms just yet...

The Huntsville and R-1 units have no dayrooms. Because of that, Texas entered into a consent decree with a Federal Court to allow us to open and close our own cells and use commissary purchased locks to secure our cells. While we were at Ferguson, prison guards used pass-keys to enter our cells at R-1 to do

contraband searches. They neglected to re-lock our cell doors, leaving them all wide open. To no one's surprise, many of us came up missing fans, radios, headphones, water heaters, boots, tennis shoes and even typewriters. Whether the guards or inmates from the first bus unloaded for each wing stole all of that property would never be known. One man from my wing was found to be in possession of another man's T-shirt, but no other items have yet to be discovered by anyone. And, quite predictably, the unit's administration vehemently denies that any of our doors were left open by the guards who performed the cell searches.

I am in my 30th straight year of imprisonment. At 61 years of age, I figure I should have another 20 years left in me. At any rate, I find myself praying, "God-DAMN, I hope the next hundred year flood is at least 30 years from now." But, for the time being, even having to suffer through a southeast Texas summer without a fan, and as trite as it may sound, "Be it EVER so humble, there really IS, NO place like HOME."