

May 22, 2021
Saginaw Corr. Facility

Part 11

Floating in a bowl with paper - My Time Within the MDOC by Jack S. Copeman

Spoon Raged (cont.)

In fact, the food-service privatization attempt was such a disaster that it made national news broadcasts. Stories about maggots and discarded food ^{being} retrieved out of the garbage ~~being~~ ^{and} served were reported widely. And then there were numerous incidents of Kitchen Staff caught engaging in sexual acts (a felony in Michigan) with prisoners. Which is a felony in Michigan for several reasons; the main concern being that it happens frequently around the prison system.

I have never hooked-up with a female employee, even though there were a few occasions when an opportunity to do so became available, Still... did not want to act on something that was probably just an error on my part. Mistakes like that get you sent to administrative segregation with a sexual misconduct violation and a possible criminal charge. A new case caught while in the joint. That's almost a guaranteed extension of your sentence

by the parole board. So...no thanks! I'll wait until freedom before looking for a girlfriend. Don't want the problems that come with prohibited liasons on this side of the fence.

COVID CHOW

As described previously, conditions inside prison have always been ^{from} bad to worse, but during the pandemic things managed an even lower-level of terrible, unbelievably enough. But it happened for sure.

When the coronavirus reached Michigan in March 2020, the Department of Corrections had already developed a "response plan" which they activated by immediately halting all visits and outside guests. This and other measures, issuing masks, enforcing social distancing, limiting the capacity of rooms down to 10—seemed effective at the time.

Yet, it would prove inevitable that COVID-19 eventually found its way into ALL of the state's 33 prisons. Some facilities rode the first wave hard, like summer surfers on a rip-curl, the numbers climbed exponentially! We were able to follow its progress from the

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I pay messages they (MDOC) sent on e-blast as part of their "information sharing" campaign.

Having been incarcerated all these decades, I had done time at many of those first consumed facilities; knowing the physical lay-out and difference in housing as well as the demographics of prisoners and staff—made me aware of certain facts. That most of these early prisons were open-dorm settings where residents are crammed together at literally arm's length. Or they were arranged in multi-bunkbeds within a sheetrock cubicle area; pole barns, that's what we call them. It's cramped living at its refinedest. There's no privacy. No individual desk. No window, so you're without the ability to get fresh air. Open settings are the worst type of housing in the system.

So it was no surprise to anyone ~~who~~ that's ever been there to hear of those facilities flaming-out with the virus. When an outbreak occurs, protocol demands an immediate quarantine status. Closing the chowhall and sending all ~~the~~ meals ^{over} to the housing units in styrofoam clamshell containers. And since prisoners were "laid-in" from their kitchen

worker jobs, it became necessary to shift department employees into these positions to make and prepare meals. A practice which ~~has~~ also happens during times of emergency (lockdowns, riots, etc.) and crisis anyway, so the transition was nothing much out of the ordinary. One thing I've since learned about the MDOC is this:

If they haven't already thought about it and developed a contingency plan, then they will just make shit up as they go. Impromptu problem solving. That's almost a specialty for them.

Water and electricity. They say there are ~~two~~ ^{two} things that seek the path of least resistance, but I'd add state employees' to ~~the~~ ^{that} list based on how well I know them. So when they shut down the serving line in the chow hall at the end of November, ~~they~~ without slave labor to do all the grunt-work, the G.E.D. teachers, program instructors, mental health staff, librarians, and all other "non-essential" personnel were shifted around to work in food service. After all, prisoners

* Reminder: Underlining denotes Italic font.

Still needed to be fed. That's like one of those basic duties that can't be avoided no matter how troublesome. As they reported to the kitchen and put on hairnets, plastic gloves and aprons, quickly learning just how much work goes into preparing over 1,500 servings of hot, cooked food. The sweat soaking their clothes, scorching pans burning their skin, hard drudgery torturing their minds—such manual toil was intolerable! they discovered. There just had to be an easier way!

The Fastest food.

And since this is prison and officials make all the rules according to their whims alone, they soon figured out a solution. The answer: There would no longer be adherence to the regular cycle of meals following the two-week repeating pattern. Now, Saginaw Correctional would serve what they were calling an "Emergency Menu" for the foreseeable future. The MDOC implemented the same five meals: a) Hot dog, cheese slices, 2 packages of cookies (lunch) or 1 bag of chips (dinner); b.) Turkey ham slice, cheese, cookies or chips; c.) Hamburger patty, cheese, etc.; d.) Fish patty, repeats. Feeding us a hot dog at just about

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every other meal. We were supposed to get canned fruit and some type of vegetable. ~~But~~ But since most prisoners don't eat ^{from} either one of these categories, the only complaints ~~were~~ heard were from the neglected minority that believes in dietary fiber. The rest ^{were} just fine with the notion that potato chips were an adequate substitute and indeed close enough. Although they did manage to skin carrots every so often as our standard vegetable serving. Overall, the nutritional allotment of our pandemic experience during the worst of the crisis (Dec.-Jan. 2020-21) here at SRF was surely dubious at best. Each styrofoam clamshell meal nothing more than junk food which would anger parents if served in a school, became perfectly acceptable fare for convicts in a state prison during an outbreak of COVID.

Hmm... maybe that's also why the MDOC began issuing multivitamins to us after we tested positive for the coronavirus. Maybe they were feeling a little guilty about such shoddy treatment? Or maybe not. Just wanted some form of treatment when there was none so that we would recover

faster and not have to go to one of those expensive places called "hospitals." And have to receive costly services considered "treatment!"

(Dec. 18, 2020) "The Dead and Those About to Die." Not only is this the title of a book I decided to read at the time, by John C. McManus, fortifying my mind for the worst if it had to happen. Wanting to remind myself that there were worse horrors ~~threatening~~ in this world than succumbing to a virus. As in the case of D-Day soldiers storming Omaha Beach in 1944, and being perforated full of machine gun holes, or likewise blown to ~~bits~~ bloody bits by mines and artillery fire. This book being more informative and super-descriptive than any movie could possibly — did prove to me that there are some situations ^{in which} ~~where~~ we are powerless to avoid. Despite seeing or knowing of the obvious danger ahead, some events must simply be endured. It's as plain as that.

Having served in the military during war, Gulf War I, and a long continuous stint in prison, I feel qualified enough to make such statements. Still, up to this point, exchanging gases and waking each morning regardless. I am

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living proof of resilience, determination, and the ever-lens washer at the Lighthouse of Hope. Watching its beam jolting the dark.

And then five days before Christmas, I caught the coronavirus. Just as all the experts had predicted that we would indeed see a surge of cases in the fall, became so terribly true for those of us locked-down.

For me, the inevitability of it all really came as no surprise. As watching the news, reading local papers, paying attention to emails all served toward staying informed. COVID stories dominating most of the news-cycle during 2020, I could actually see its progression. Showing up in various prisons around the State until it finally arrived here at Saginaw Correctional.

Starting with a few sporadic cases of officers, staff members, and then prisoners from September on into November — when infections really took off! Entire housing units (240 men) caught COVID within a matter of days. As we were (and still are, as of this writing) being tested once every week, the results became only too obvious with prisoners getting sick and reporting symptoms.

From there the plan was to isolate the ill away from general population by quarantining them in the gymnasium where row upon row bunkbeds had been arranged. Medical staff would then monitor them through a series of questions and taking of vitals, notably pulse and oxygen saturation levels. Any number less than 94 was cause for concern and many were removed and taken to the hospital.

When December arrived, the Veteran's Housing Unit (800-Bldg.), where I reside, started seeing the outbreak appear. Cases quickly spread faster than any cold or flu season I had ever witnessed before, with symptoms ranging anywhere from nothing all the way to fevers, uncontrolled coughs, and troubled breathing.

Being that it takes 10-14 days as recommended by the CDC from testing positive until a satisfactory resolution of symptom-free self-reporting, any prisoner tired of over-crowded conditions in the gym, could state that they felt fine and then be "cleared" by medical to return to a housing unit. And I say "a", meaning any housing unit because that's what became a reality with prisoners being shuffled around the compound. Convicts

OK'd to leave the gym found themselves being sent to any housing unit with open beds. ~~That~~ This turned out to be another symptom of this virus, only this one attacked the macrobody of corrections and caused confusion and chaos of the administrative brain. Actually a common occurrence.

Being that the plan was flawed to begin with: 80-90 bunk beds will only accommodate 160-180 bodies! When entire housing units with 240 were turning positive almost at the same time, the situation proved unmanageable. Too many cases all at once with ~~the~~ ^{relatively} long turn-out times meant that there was literally no where to send new ~~cases~~ positives while also some highly dubious "recovered" prisoners were sent anywhere available. It was just a mish-mash of ~~and~~ random disorganization that eventually came down to one thing: the gym was full; from there the plan was shifted to stay where you are. Nursing staff will now come to the unit and monitor the situation from there. Apparently the U.S.S. GoodHope struck an icecube and went down with all hands on board. The situation at this point had turned dire.

An Egocentric Predicament

In fact, you know things are pretty bad when the warden decides its time to retire. Making his announcement and putting the next person in charge surely proved the truth of that saying about rats knowing when to get off sinking ships. And he wasn't the only one either! At least several corrections officers and ~~even~~ ~~the person known~~ the titular person assigned ~~to~~ as the unit manager also jumped as well. Turns out it really ^{is} ~~was~~ every man for himself when a chance of death is involved. Sometimes that's just the way it goes.

I made the following entries in my Writer's Journal to document my experience with COVID:

- Sun. Night 12/20/20. Symptoms headache, light headedness. Can still smell and taste. Mild stomach queasiness
- Mon (a.m.) same. Headache. Queasy. Still have appetite. Can hold food down. Slight chills. Bloody snot
- Tue slight chills. Headache. Body and muscle aches. Nausea. Dizziness. Admin put prisoners in dayroom for 5 hours before confirming there was no where to move them ~~to~~ to. Sixty-three prisoners stranded

The rest of that week is basically the same. My symptoms never did get worse other than some really bad chills and even a fever at one point. Everything resolving (Thank goodness) after ~~a week~~ roughly eight shaky days. Just after Christmas. Suppose that could be considered a present of sort, so I'm appreciative by comparison, that's for sure.

A Finale of Seem

Now it is closing in on Memorial Day weekend 2021, and since the inception of ~~our~~ ^{our} Veteran's housing ~~unit~~ unit four-years ago, we will gather out front of the building to say a few words about comrades lost during our time in service. Standing on the basketball court as two men raise the flag all the way up and then back to half-staff, even the MDOC celebrates it with us by playing Taps over the facilities loudspeakers. Followed by our moment of silence.

This year will be especially poignant for us, however, as we also recite the names of those that died from COVID, fellow vets having worn more than one uniform, the last with an orange stripe—now both laid to rest. I write and submit this paper for those doing time at SRF, the dozen who never made it back. Peace be with you.

In Struggle,

Jack S. Copeman May 26, 2021