

Local Prisons and our National Pastime

Origins

In prison – a place not associated with fun or games – baseball has become a much needed force for recreation and rehabilitation in a dark world. But that certainly was not the case in 19th century American prisons. Although it's not widely known, the seeds of a change in attitude were first planted in Joliet.

Prison life was legendary for its harsh conditions in the 1800's and the famous Collins Street Prison in Joliet was no exception. The first inmates were relocated to Joliet from Alton Penitentiary in 1858, and construction was completed on the facility in 1869. Prisoners were not allowed to talk to each other. Recreation was not allowed.

But on July 4, 1875, a seemingly innocuous gesture by the Joliet Prison was the first ripple in what would

become a national prison reform movement. While young male reformatories had moved towards allowing prisoners to participate in athletic events, the adult penitentiaries were still stuck in their old ways. According to the book, *Baseball: The People's Game*, the Joliet Prison did an unprecedented thing on that Independence Day: they allowed freedom of the yard for a few hours. During this time, "the prisoners laughed, talked, sang, and engaged in athletic sports."

Soon it became common practice around the country to grant freedom of the yard on national holidays. It was not until the early 1900's that a key appointment made at Joliet Prison truly had revolutionary repercussions. The Progressive Era in American politics, and the changing philosophy nationally about the purpose of penitentiaries, had a direct impact on Joliet Prison. Illinois governor Edward Dunne, formerly a lawyer, a judge, and at one point mayor of Chicago, had spent years studying prisons around the country. Dunne's beliefs centered on the idea that "prisons should help men, not destroy them." This was very liberal for his time. In 1913, he put those liberal beliefs to practice when he appointed Edmund Allen as the Warden of the Illinois State Penitentiary.

Allen shared many of Dunne's beliefs and was a big promoter of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." He instituted an honor system, where inmates were evaluated based on their behavior. By earning

points, inmates could get more privileges within the prison. Photos from that time show the first baseball team assembled at the Joliet Prison. The Honor Farm team was made up of the nine most well-behaved prisoners. Unlike professional teams of that era, the Honor Farm squad was racially integrated. It was managed by Warden Allen himself and it was allowed to schedule games with outside clubs. The team's uniforms were made in the prison clothing shop and the team won most of its games during its first season. The women's prison on the other side of Collins Street also got in on the act as they were allowed to play softball games.

Warden Allen's legacy would be profound as the newly built Stateville Prison, which he helped design, opened in 1925 to relieve crowding at the old Joliet facility. Baseball continued at both facilities but truly emerged as a force at Stateville in the mid-20th century.

The Stateville Trojans

The first thing former prison guard Donald "Duke" Cartwright says to me is "your shoes are untied." As I walked into his quiet, suburban home in Crest Hill, I couldn't help but notice how his current lifestyle is in sharp contrast with his past. After all, Cartwright's autobiography is called *Tough*.

"I was born in the little town of Hillsboro, we couldn't own a car, couldn't vote, we walked everywhere we went, we were what you would call nowadays, poor people," Cartwright, 74, said. "We didn't have much."



What was only supposed to be a job to tide him over until he could work for the state police became a 33-year career. The year was 1960 and baseball was thriving at Stateville Prison.

“Warden [Frank] Pate would bring in baseball teams on Saturdays during the summer,” Cartwright said. “Mr. Pate, he didn’t like losers, so he had a scheme. He would bring in that team and take them on a long tour, feed them a good, hot, heavy meal for lunch, then go out there on the baseball diamond and beat them up.”

Warden Pate’s strategy wasn’t new; his predecessor, the venerable Warden Joseph Ragen, who reigned over the two prisons from 1936-1960, had deployed the same method. Cartwright has a small bat he shows me; it’s emblazoned with the words “Stateville Trojans.” “We would give one of these bats to the other team if they beat us,” Cartwright said. “But they didn’t beat us very often.”

Prisoners who watched the game would always root for the visiting team because they were jealous of their fellow inmates who got time off to practice for the games. Some of the heckling could be quite amusing. For instance, the umpires were also convicts. (“Why do you think we won all those games?!” Cartwright grins.) One time a prisoner yelled to the visiting team about the umpire, “Don’t worry about him – he’s in here for armed robbery!”

Once a year the guards would take on the prisoners in a game that was talked about for weeks in advance. Cartwright never participated because of his other duties, but he says it was fun for all involved. Baseball was something that made everyone in the prison happy, if only for a few hours.

“The only trouble we ever had was when we decided to open up the yard at night,” Cartwright said. “That was a disaster. We played a game against a team from Romeoville and it ended without incident. I remember we won. But afterwards, the prisoners decided to show us they were mad, I don’t know why, and started punching one of the older guards.”

Cartwright called for the guards in the towers to shoot, but they didn’t hear him since there were no radios in the towers back then. His bluff worked, though, as they were able to chase the prisoners back into their cells.

After that there was no more night yard.

The view from the outside

John Dzuris, 86, remembers the experience of his team visiting Stateville Prison well. His semi-pro Coal City baseball team played against the Stateville Trojans multiple times in the early 1950’s. He even has a play-by-play chart that a prisoner made for one particular game in 1954. Dzuris laughs at the recollection

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of the treatment his team received when they visited the prison; he confirms exactly what Cartwright had said.

“We were given a meal each time we came up, and then, of course, we played like it after that,” Dzuris said. “They took us all through the place. It was an atmosphere that at that time did not seem like we were playing in a prison. I wouldn’t say the prisoners were friendly, but they were almost friendly.”

The level of play was outstanding, and according to Dzuris, it was better than most of the teams they played on the outside.

A strong bond

Every Thursday, Cartwright has breakfast at the local Denny’s off Highway 30 with fellow ex-guards Ernie Morris and Bruce Crayne. The stories flow faster than the Des Plaines River. “We gab about whatever is on our mind,” Cartwright said. “We have a close relationship because when you’re a guard in prison, your life is in the hands of your colleagues.”





“I firmly believe that baseball was great for the prisoners,” Morris said. “It provided much-needed recreation and was a big boost to morale.”

Morris, 84, who would rise all the way to Warden during his career, remembers when White Sox owner Bill Veeck visited the Collins Street Prison in the late '50s.

“I ran clear across the yard to the storage shed and got a baseball for Mr. Veeck to sign,” Morris said. “He signed it and I wish I knew what became of that ball.”

Veeck wasn't there to scout any talent; he was just on a tour. But actor LeVar Burton did stop by the Stateville Prison in the '70s to shoot “One in a Million: The Ron LeFlore Story.” The movie tells the story of LeFlore rising from the prison ranks to the major leagues. He served time in the Jackson State Penitentiary before being discovered by Billy Martin and signing with the Detroit Tigers.

The talent level was certainly high at Joliet and Stateville but none of the ex-guards remember any particular prisoner standing out.

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“It's always good to get some of that Vitamin D,” Cartwright chimes in.

Crayne, 69, worked his entire career—from 1968 to 2000, at the Collins Street Prison. A tower guard and eventually a groundskeeper, Crayne has fond memories. But he doesn't sugarcoat things.

“If you combine the films *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile* you'll get a pretty good idea of what prison is like,” said Crayne.



For reasons none of them can identify, the tradition of bringing in outside teams began to fade as time went on. The tradition carried on at the larger Stateville until the end of Warden Pate's reign. Games of baseball between the prisoners turned into games of softball as the years passed.

Today, only the Stateville Prison is in use, and even it has been cut down to only one cell house. The Collins Street Prison closed only six months after Crayne retired.

“I was out there last week and sat in my car in the parking lot and cried,” said Crayne. Cartwright raises an eyebrow and asks Morris if he ever cries. We're not sure if Morris hears him or not, but if he did he ignores the question as he relates a story of the time he attended a White Sox game as their guest. He just wants to talk about baseball.

