

Penitentiary at Laramie City

The building of which the north wing was built in 1872, is situated on the Laramie River, West of Laramie on the Snowy Range interchange of the Interstate 80 highway. It housed both the Territorial and Federal prisoners in the early days when Wyoming was a Territory for 18 years and 14 more years when Wyoming became a State, a total of 32 years in Laramie.

This building had many varied prisoners, some of which were confined for murders, horse and cattle thieves, grand larceny, petty thievery, mail robbery, assaults with intent to murder, etc. Some were as young as 16 years of age, and as old as 53 years, serving their time in the building, usually just for several years, but did have some that were to serve life terms.

On January 22, 1867, Congress passed an Act by which the proceeds of the Internal Revenue in certain territories to the amount of \$40,000 were set aside for the purpose of erecting Penitentiaries at such places in the several territories as might be selected by their respective Legislatures and approved by Congress.

At the first Legislature of October of 1869, Governor Campbell proposed that the Territory take advantage of this Act to build a Penitentiary and asked the Legislature to select a site. All the Territory's prisoners were taken to Detroit House of Correction at a cost of \$1.25 per man per week, plus transportation. So, on December 8, 1869, Governor Campbell approved the "memorial" to Congress and the Legislature selected Laramie City for the site. However, it wasn't until July of 1872 when the construction of the building began, because of charges of fraud and misrepresentation with the contract bids of which ended up in court; the re-letting of bids and finally awarding the contract to a Colorado firm which

began work on the ground in the early part of July.

The stone was quarried with local men in the rock quarry East of town, and the bricks were built by a local company using local men and some Chinese laborers. It was dedicated to "evil doers of all classes and kinds" on July 15th, in a quick and spur of the moment ceremony with some businessmen in attendance, and deposited in the stone cavity of the corner-stone, is a bottle of "Old Bourbon." The cause, of which was to send many to the Penitentiary as result of whiskey for their crimes.

This wing was to be part of the proposed building of which was to be added on later. It was 70'2" x 40'4" in size; the walls were two feet thick of solid masonry of limestone with red sandstone for trimmings. There were 13 windows, 13 feet high and 13½ inches wide; two chimneys on the north end for heat, and one iron door, facing west. A wing attached the main building was the kitchen and dining hall with a chimney for the brick bake oven. There were heating and ventilating appartus in the building with a partial basement; water was pumped by a large force-pump from a well to a tank up near the roof, from there to pipes into every part of the building.

In the center of the building, was a solid block of cells made of bricks; three tiers high with 7 cells facing east and 7 facing west, back to back, making 14 cells to a tier with iron balconies running along side of the two upper tiers to a stairway at the south end of the corridor. At each landing, ascending from the floor of the corridor are guard stands, so situated that the guards upon them could not be approached by the prisoners in the south end. The cell walls were 26 inches thick, 6 feet wide, 8 feet deep and 8 feet high. Making a total of 42 cells. One cell on each tier had running water with a cast iron tub and water closets. Each cell can hold two prisoners sleeping on canvas hammochs hung from leatherstraps. Total capacity was 78, although when 50 were confined, it was considered over-crowded conditions.

The corridor floor was of brick, although the bricks were removed within five years for being worn down; the corridor being 8 feet wide around the block of cells. Three years later, the warden built a brick structure in the north end of the building, the lower story which was used as a tailor and shoe shop for which shoes were repaired. Above this story, was the night guard's room in which the armory was kept. Another addition to the kitchen was built to enlarge the dining hall and a storeroom. The warden also, built a double board fence, 10 inches thick and 12 feet high which enclosed the 150'x 300' yard proper with three guard lookout towers on top.

On October 21, 1872, it was inspected and turned over to the U. S. Marshal Frank Wolcott, and Governor Campbell issued a Proclamation, "that all Territorial prisoners were to be brought here" but, at a cost of \$1 per day per man to the United States Government.

The building was the most massive stone structure to have been built in Wyoming at the time. It was by far, the largest and most elaborate jail in the State and it dominated the view to the West of Laramie City - "The Stone House Across the River."

By January 10, 1873, the furniture finally arrived and ex-Sheriff N. K. Boswell was chosen warden and his assistant was Homer Merrill. Marshal Wolcot went to Detroit and brought back some of Wyoming's prisoners to be lodged here. Then, on January 13th, Cheyenne brought over the first two prisoners, one charged with manslaughter and another with grand larceny. The next day, Rawlins brought a murderer and Evanston brought the first federal prisoner for embezzlement. Laramie's first prisoner was one that was brought back from Detroit by the name of Harvey Shipman of which the Women Jurors had sent to prison in the 1871 court session, on a charge of manslaughter.

Millard Fillmore, part-owner of the Fillmore and Staples brick yard was

warden in June of that year and worked the convicts at his brick yard, a half mile southwest of town, and one day, while walking to the brick yard, a convict got run over by a wagon and broke his leg above the ankle, thus the first mishap of a prisoner.

Then on August 27th, 8 months later and in the summer time, a fire broke out in the roof caused by a board being too close to the chimney up near the roof, a construction error, and a \$4,000 worth of damage with the prisoners rushing back from the brick yard to help put out the difficult fire, as it was under the tin covering in the roof and with the well being dry, caused the prisoners to get the water from the river to put out the fire. Nevertheless, none of the convicts escaped, but two months later, the first escape of a convict out of the building occurred by climbing up through the roof and dropping down outside, stealing a horse and taking off. Probably through the damaged roof, as it had taken some time for the prison officials to rebuild the roof.

On March 9, 1874, the first jail break occurred when a guard, an old man named Mills was escorting a prisoner back to his cell from the water closet, when another convict indicated that he wanted to go to the bathroom too, so the guard unlocked his cell door before locking up the first one, and both convicts grabbed the guard's revolver and started beating the guard over the head with it when a third convict opened his cell door with a wooden key he had made and all three beat the old man and threw him into the cell and locked him in. They proceeded in releasing six other prisoners, ran down into the corridor and got into the tool chest, breaking off their shackles, changed clothes and left, locking the door behind. Two other convicts managed to get out and went to town and gave the alarm. The newspapers called it gross carelessness when it was learned that it was their habit in leaving the old man guard there by himself with 24 desperadoes at night, and Millard Fillmore resigned and another local man, N. F. Spicer became warden.

The prisoners worked in Fillmore's brick yard for two years when the brick making was going full steam, as the town of Laramie had at least five brick yards going. But, in 1875, "a very superior bed of clay was discovered" on the Penitentiary grounds and C. H. Bussard had the contract for the convict labor and he had three mills for grinding clay, making 10,000 bricks a day - all hand-made.

It was this year that the stratified limestone rock was found on the property in which the convicts made the warden's house. The convicts had, also built a six and a half mile irrigating ditch from the Big Laramie River up and around the property in which ran water for the 40 acres of potatoes that was planted. They built a stone ice house, and had put up ice for the Union Pacific Company for the coal they used for heat. In September, warden Spicer moved into the warden's house with his family, and it had a room for a guard and office.

For the next three years, W. H. Holliday received the contract from the Department of Justice for convict labor and he worked 20 convicts making a million and a half of bricks that one summer. Laramie was out doing itself with building construction with stores and residence houses, and Cheyenne bought their bricks from Laramie for their brick store blocks.

In the early spring of 1876, the Black Hills were opened up and the beginning of the Cheyenne and Black Hills Stage Line, and that year was filled with stories of the robberies which eventually won a lot of recruits to the Penitentiary by the end of the year. There were already 80 convicts and at the cost of \$1 a day, was a real burden on the Treasury and calls were made by the newspapers, in which the long term prisoners should be sent elsewhere and just keep the short term prisoners here. The bathroom cells on each tier were removed and fitted up for convicts and mats were given to others in the 42 cells and the bathroom was built on the north end of the building.

Efforts were made to find another Penitentiary as the road agent gangs were being rounded up and many were in County Jails both here and Cheyenne, awaiting trial. So, on January 21, 1878, the Board of Penitentiary Commissioners signed a five-year contract for those over a year at 40¢ a man per day at the Nebraska State Penitentiary at Lincoln, and they would come to the different Counties to pick them up, so by February, many of the prisoners were gone except for Cheyenne's convicts, as the re-sentencing was done at their regular term of court and that was some months away.

W. H. Holliday used 20 of these men making bricks that summer for the new school house and Sister's Hospital, while the warden used the others getting the stratified rock out that was used in the warden's house, for the foundation of the school house and hospital. While doing this, they uncovered, north of the prison building on the river bank, 8 inches below the surface, flagstone or paving stone, which was used for door and window caps, and sills for the two new buildings. This stone was also, used in replacing the brick in the corridor of the building. Merchants of Cheyenne bought this stone to pave sidewalks in front of their stores. From this rock quarry, many prisoners tried to escape by swimming the river, and some did get away, but most were captured trying.

In June of 1879, the Board of Penitentiary Commissioners arranged that the short term convicts were to go to Lincoln also, at a cost of 60¢ per man per day, so by 1880, only Federal convicts remained and those of short terms of less than three months were confined when Marshal Schnitger moved into the warden's house and took control of the prison. In August, he had the first woman prisoner, a Nettie Stewart of Fort Fetterman, charged with the stealing of government arms and ammunition for two weeks and for safe-keeping while waiting for trial. Nothing more was learned of the out-come of her trial.

The legality of the Wyoming's law of sending prisoners to Lincoln was questioned and the Supreme Court ruled that the contract was unconstitutional

and void, but later, Congress passed an act by which Wyoming could send her prisoners abroad, but not under the contract with Lincoln, so the Board sought another Penitentiary to send her convicts and in 1882, signed a five-year contract with Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, free of charge, Wyoming was to pay the transportation. Thereafter, all Territorial prisoners went to Joliet.

By the time the Special Agent of the Department of Justice arrived in December of 1884, to investigate the Penitentiary, Marshal Schnitger only had about 12 federal convicts, but records showed that 7 had escaped and not reported, and he was removed in 1885 by President Cleveland. Whenever this Penitentiary stories were written even to this day, one hundred years later, they would relate to his four-year reign which created the fact that this Penitentiary was not a prison, but a resort for the federal prisoners, and named it "The Halfway House Across The River."

In 1886, Marshal Carr was notified by U. S. Attorney-General that all United States convicts West of the Trans-Missouri country would be confined here, he wrote back saying, the facilities had deteriorated for lack of maintenance of the buildings and grounds and that the building was in want of repairs. So, when rumors were circulating that the prison would be closed, Congress appropriated money for the construction of the original proposed building to be added and for the repairs to the building.

In getting ready for Statehood, Wyoming's 1888 Legislature appropriated \$30,000 for the purchase of land and the making of plans for a State Penitentiary to be built at Rawlins.

Finally, in February of 1889, bids went to Paul Jail Company with W. H. Holliday as builder and Leroy Grant as Superintendent of Construction, the additions began that summer and completed on October 21st, with floors of concrete, 28 guarded windows, electric lights, City water, steam heat with a boiler room. On the ground floor of the center section was the kitchen and

~~dining hall, an office and a storeroom.~~ Upstairs were the three guard's sleeping quarters and a large room used as a Chapel.

In the south wing, which was laid out similar to the north wing, with 42 cells on three tiers, smaller cells being 5'x7'7' of cast iron. Five cells were set aside for female prisoners. On the top tier was one dark cell used for solitary confinement. The cell doors were heavily plated with a small plate feed door near the center which was secured with hinges and padlock. A total of 84 cells - capacity of 168. In this wing, in addition to the cell block, spaces for a laundry and communal baths on the ground floor and a hospital on the floor above, and a room fitted up into a tailoring shop. When it was completed, there were only 12 prisoners confined. The building was 183 feet long, fronting town - "An imposing and respectable appearance" to the City.

When Wyoming became a State on July 10, 1890, the buildings and grounds became the property of the State of Wyoming, whereby all prisoners came here. In the summer of 1891, the Board of Charities and Reform signed a 15-year contract with James Marsh of Nebraska, to take care of the prisoners. While employing them, he built the Broom Factory that summer, making brooms which were sold and distributed throughout Wyoming, Denver, Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Minnesota. The Federal convicts continued to be confined here of which the government paid Wyoming 70¢ a day per man.

It was in January of 1893, that the prison revolt occurred of which six convicts attacked Warden Briggs with his own cane, while he was escorting them back to their cells from the Broom Factory and two guards started shooting at them, hitting one in the body of which wounds, he died three days later, thus, the first death at this Penitentiary. One was wounded in the thigh and another escaped being hit, "unfortunately!" This was the year that Butch Cassidy was sent here from Lander for horse stealing, but whether he

worked in the Broom Factory or not, is not known. There were about 100 men confined of this year, and only about 20 worked in the Broom Factory and they had 10 guards employed. A local newspaper charged the prison officials of "inhumane treatment" of convicts this year, and an investigation was made, but nothing could be proven and concluded that it was a false charge.

James Marsh died in 1896 and his heirs ran the prison for a time, but in May of 1897, N. K. Boswell was given the contract and he continued making brooms for a company in San Francisco and Denver, and they had their own printing machine to make labels on their brooms. There was some trouble at this time, with the "free labor" question, and a Labor Union group of Denver stopped the unloading of a carload of Wyoming's brooms there.

Again, the all the newspapers began carrying ex-convicts stories of inhumane treatment and of torture of being done to those in the "dungeon" and a cry for another investigation was made, but nothing was done.

The Penitentiary had the distinction of having the first woman Chaplain in 1899, being Mrs. May Preston Slosson, wife of the Professor of Chemistry at the University of Wyoming. Using the Chapel room on the second story of the center section, she would hold services, not missing very many Sundays for the next two and a half years. A Monograph was sent by Warden McDonald to the International Congress of Prison Superintendents at Brussels in 1900, telling that Conference of her achievements, thus honoring her as the world's first Lady Chaplain.

The Legislature passed an Act by which the prisoners were to be removed by December 31, 1900, but because Rawlin's Penitentiary wasn't ready to receive them, as they were having trouble getting good water and none of the workshops were built yet, so it was delayed a year. Therefore, it is believed that it was in 1901, that Boswell employed some convicts in the making of

furniture to be sold, and of which 11 pieces can now be found in the Laramie Ivinson's Museum made out of Oak and several of them were carved. Today, they are considered valuable and priceless pieces of solid Oak.

Finally, on December 13, 1901, when there were about 192 prisoners, 50 of the worst ones were loaded on wagons, shackled together and taken to the train No. 3, with guards with rifles on the lookout, loaded on the train with their bedding and sent on to Rawlins, going through a blizzard outside of that town. All the prisoners were sent in this fashion that month, so that by the end of the year of 1901, all were confined at Rawlins. The only request the prisoners made after arriving was that they wished to have the Baker here make their bread, of which Boswell supplied them their bread for a time from Laramie City.

The Board of Charities and Reform gave the University of Wyoming access to the land and the north wing in which the Agricultural Department used that summer, but by July 1902, convicts were returning who were considered as Trustees and those with short terms, the capacity at Rawlins being 194. Two women who were sent here from Rawlins for shop-lifting were confined here, working in the Tailoring Shop. The prison officials used the center section and the south wing for their prisoners.

The last escape occurred on a Saturday morning of June 2, 1903, when a Trustee with only 8 months to serve, while cleaning out the chicken house, took off. The guard had gathered the convicts up that morning to take them back to their cells, but letting this Trustee continue cleaning. The guard was to take some saddle horses into town which were to be used in President Roosevelt's "Ride Over The Hill" and when he came back, found the convict had escaped.

By 1904, the State Prison at Rawlins could accommodate all their prisoners, so the Board of Charities turned the land and buildings officially in 1907, although the University used it as a Stock Farm since 1901. So

ended the Penitentiary at Laramie City for the 32 years.

It is one of the oldest building still standing in the State of Wyoming as a non-military government building. The Penitentiary is exceeded in age by only one other remaining structure by two years, the Sweetwater County Jail in South Pass City, built in 1870.

The north wing as of 2019 is 147 years old, (in three more years its 150th year) with the center and south wing being 129 years old, and the broom factory or sheep barn is about 126 years old.

In the late 1980's the City Fathers and friends of Laramie formed a local committee of "Pen Pals" and requested the Wyoming Legislature to transfer the land and buildings of the University of Wyoming Agricultural Stock Farm to form a historical site; the transfer was completed in 1991, thus ending the 87 years of continuous historical story of the property of both the United States and Wyoming State Penitentiary and the University of Wyoming.

The Wyoming Territorial Prison State Historic Site was born with the help of Wyoming Territorial Park Historic Association of six to eight members on its board.

The doors of this site have been open to the public for 28 years and today by the State of Wyoming under the leadership and guidance of Superintendent Mrs. Deborah Cease and the Association Board Members of President Glenn Halsey, Bertha Ward, Elnora Frye, Dave Weston, Dan Boddicker, Tom Slider and Harrison Welshimer, with Sharon Breitweiser, secretary.

Submitted:

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