Prison: 'Big house' to race wars to politics

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 14th tol 15 articles on crime and justice in Manerica. The series was written for Courses by Newspaper and constitutes the text for an Oakland University course taught by Prof. Jesse Pitts.)

By JOHN IRWIN
Most of our ideas about male prisons
are mistaken because they fix on a
type of prison — the "big house" —
that has virtually disappeared during

that has virtually disappeared during the last 25 years. In the "big house," the prisoners, mostly white, lived according to the "convict code." Primarily, this meant not informing on other prisoners. "doing your own time" and not talking to guards.

Prisoner leaders — "right guys" — taught and enforced the code. A few taught and enforced the code. A few pirsoners carried on illegal activities like making "pruno" (a nasty tasting prison sex. a peculiar sexual world with "jockers" (the masculine part-ners). "punks" (prison-made homose-xuals) and "queens" (admitted homo-

sexuals).

But most prisoners stayed close to a prison friends, worked at their job assignments, took up hobbies, played sports, read and tried to stay out of trouble.

ADMINISTRATORS ran the "big house" with one overriding concern: to keep the place running smoothly and out of the public's attention.

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Guards kept the peace by striking a bargain with convicts: "Don't get too far out of line and I won't bother you, but if you cause me trouble, I'll bust you."

you."

By and large, the big house was a mean and monotonous place — but peaceful. Contrary to popular belief, most prisoners didn't learn crime there, but they didn't learn how to live outside either.

They learned how to do time, and about half came back to serve more.

TODAY'S PRISONS, in contrast, are torn by violence, with inmates assaulting both each other and their guards. Gang warfare is common. By 1973 the murder rate inside San Quentin was 20 times higher than that in the outside

world.

Meanwhile, penologists, prisoners
and the public have all come to recognize that prisons are falling to rehabilitate convicted criminals or deter
others from crime.

What has caused such turmoil? And what can be done to end the war behind walls and ensure that prisons serve their purpose?

The decline of the big house began after World War II. when many states seriously tried to "rehabilitate" prisoners.

seriously tried to "rehabilitate" prisoners.

Innovative penologists accepted the idea that criminals were sick and could be cured, and they developed elaborate classification systems to diagnose criminals' sicknesses; therapy, education and vocational training programs to cure them; and indeterminate sentence systems to release prisoners when — and not before — they were cured.

In the early years of rehabilitation, many, perhaps most, prisoners accepted the idea that they were sixed willingly participated in the new programs. Communication flower more freely between prisoners and some freely between prisoners and the gap between them narround.

staff, and the gap occurrence.

Many prisoners stopped thinking of themselves as "criminals" or "convicts," and the ties of the convict code that had held prisoners together weakened.

BY THE 196%, however, social scientists and prisoners began questioning the worth of reliabilitation. The approximation of reliabilitation and the prisoners faced with really me performed the prisoners faced with the prisoners faced with the prisoners were substantially and the prisoners faced with the prisoners were substantially prisoners were substantially prisoners were substantially prisoners were substantially prisoners. Parole boards fixed and refixed sentences for reasons that were never quite clear to the prisoners. On the average, prisoners served more time. In California, for example, the median sentence increased from 24 months in 1960. It he real beginning of the rehabilitative era — to 38 months in 1988.

of the rehabilitative earmonts in 1988.
Harshly punitive measures, such as indefinite segregation in "adjustment centers," were slipped in as "rehabilitative" devices. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality produced a sense of rage and injustice among prisoners.

AT THE SAME time, racial hostil-

AT THE SAME time, racial hostilities soared.
Prisons in the East, North and West which formerly housed predominantly white prisoners now contained half or more non-white prisoners.
Black prisoners began organizing religious, cultural and political groups. Chicanos in the West and Puerto Ricans in the East followed the lead of black prisoners. Violence between races increased drastically, and many prisons became tense battlefields with voluntary segregation by race.
In the late 1960s, outside political activists became interested in the prisons and began working to improve and

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to help prisoners organize. For a short period: a political "movement" grew mong prisoners of all races. Prisoners planned strikes, formed unions and even ran a prison in Walpole. Mass. for 11 weeks after the gards walked out in protest over the administration's lenient policies. Although the old "big house" order based on a single convict code and respected prison leaders had been torn apart, involvement in political organizations and demands for prisoners' rights temporarily created a new form of solidarily among inmates and reduced racial violence.

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PRISON ADMINISTRATIONS across the country acted swiftly to stop this new development.

They identified prison leaders as "revolutionaries" and segregated. It can be a served to the server of the s

MOST PRISONERS, as always, try to avoid trouble, but this is now more difficult.

They must obey the informal rules of racial segregation enforced by the gang and tipote or celluly around vioration of the control of the con

contemporary prisons. Despite tain about "alternatives to incarceration," the public will accept no substitutes that are more humane. Some convicted persons may be placed on probation or in half-way houses. Others may be sentenced to volunteer services or some alternative to prison. But the public will ordinarily demand that those convicted of serious crimes be imprisoned. Actually, the expansion of "community corrections" has increased the number of people in the control of the criminal justice system by adding new categories of minor offenders, as the number of offenders in prison also rises.

SINCE WE ARE stuck with prisons (Continued on page 10A)

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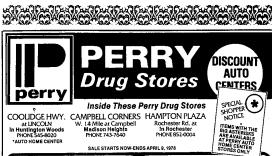




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