

Introduction to Death Row

It took a year of waiting to go to trial, eleven hours to pick a jury, three and a half days to hear testimony, an hour to reach a verdict, and 35 minutes to return a sentence of death. After all, it was August 29, and everybody had plans for Labor Day Weekend.

The drive was 460 miles; we made it non-stop in five hours and 32 minutes. The last two hours of the drive passed no cities or towns, just mile upon mile of fields of cotton, corn, and soybeans. Huge John Deere tractors littered the landscape.

The first hint that you are approaching Parchman is a small road sign; then you pull to a stop at a "T" intersection and there it is. After stopping to check their weapons and sign in, the sheriff's deputies take you to Receiving. After you are placed in a 6 x 3 ft. holding cell and the door is locked, off come your shackles, waist chain and handcuffs.

Deputy Lee turns and waves before going out the door and says, "Good luck, Gary," before walking out. I'd known Lee for the year I'd awaited trial, and he was a good fellow. As he walked out that door, it suddenly hit me that with his leaving went my last link with my previous life. I'd had five days to get used to the knowledge I was under sentence of death, but it didn't really sink in and touch me until just then.

And that was my first introduction to Mississippi's Department of Corrections (MDOC), I stayed in that bare, cold room for three hours until someone felt like coming to get me.

I was taken to the I.D. building and turned over to trustees, cuffed and shackled, of course, to be processed in. Fortunately, the trustees know and do their jobs faster and better than MDOC employees. One took the necessary information and typed it up. Another made three sets of fingerprints faster and smoother than any cop who'd ever printed me (in the last year, at least a dozen times). Then it was hurry up and wait for paid state employees to come and get me and transport me to the building which houses Death Row. We got there at 11:32 a.m., and six hours later, I was put in the cell which is now my "home".

Since then, I have witnessed more lazy indifference than I thought could ever exist.

There is no air-conditioning at Parchman, except in the guard stations and control rooms. Four to six guards gather in one of these stations, sit and shoot the breeze from the time they walk into the building until it is time to leave. Unless a lieutenant or higher up is around, (and you know that because they wear white shirts), then the guards scatter and get busy.

Death Row is in Unit 32, a control unit consisting of five buildings. This means that men are on 23-hour-a-day lock down. So really, there's nothing for these guards to do, is there? Nothing but showers and yard call. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, yard call means a 20 x 30 ft. room upstairs with a steel table in it. Tuesdays and Thursdays means a 15 x 15 ft. enclosure with 15 ft. high chain link and razor wire around it. The enclosure has a concrete floor and a basketball goal.

Through the bars of my cell I can just see into the control room. In the past month, there have been four medical emergencies on this tier requiring treatment. Inmates holler and get the guards' attention. The guards come to the front bars to find out what the problem is, holler O.K., and return to the control room to wait for the arrival of a sergeant or higher ranking officer.

Twenty, 30 minutes pass. Still no sergeant. Why not? There's one on every shift, for every building, so

where is he or she? Your guess would be as good as mine. Finally, an hour or more after the prisoners started hollering or beating the bars of their cells to call for attention, the medical staff arrives.

Help at last, you say? Not always. I've seen one man kicked in the side as he lay on the floor and told to get up, that he was faking. After more than 5 minutes to trying to get him up, they put him on a stretcher and wheeled him out. How did that turn out? I don't know. I haven't seen that man since or heard anything about him.

Brutality I know and am used to. Total indifference is something that takes longer to adjust to.

At one time, after the police beat your ass, they'd take you to the hospital because they really didn't want you to die. Too much paper work. Now? Paper work is just another excuse to stay under the air conditioning and not do your job.

And for those who say, "Good, it's just what you deserve," how do you know? Do you know me? Do you really pay attention to the newspaper articles that tell about a man proving his innocence after ten or more years in a living hell? You had better hope that man never moves in next door to you. Because while he might be a nice, quiet guy, you slip once and it may well be the last time.

Not everyone goes to jail for a life and a day. And it's these people more than any other who need your help.

Who knows? One day I might get my sentence overturned and get out. What kind of neighbour would I be after years of indifference, of fighting tooth and nail for every little thing? Even I don't know. But I know that after all that rage, anger, frustration, fear, and pain, I wouldn't want me in the neighbourhood. And by all accounts, I'm a nice, quiet guy. The loving father of two beautiful little girls, and a hard working man. What's worse, if things keep going like they are, you may find yourself here, writing an article like this.

Will anyone be listening to you then?

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