

A Jail Guru Reminisces

Ken Kerle

Life sometimes changes unexpectedly. In June 1968, I had already resigned from a West Virginia college and looked forward to a job offered by the Robert F. Kennedy presidential primary campaign team. My residence in Washington, D.C., had already opened up political opportunities with jobs in Congress on Capitol Hill and a three-year stint as a volunteer with the Democratic National Committee. Much of this occurred while I was still in graduate school in Government and Public Administration at The American University. However, Kennedy's assassination in Los Angeles jolted me into reality. I needed employment, and ten minutes after I turned off the radio after hearing the news, my phone rang, and I listened to a voice offer me a position in a small community college in Hagerstown, Maryland.

Would I teach a couple of courses and spend the remainder of my time working with planners at a local power company? The challenge was to educate the citizens of Washington County, Maryland, about the need for countywide planning. At that time my acquaintance with countywide planning was limited to a course I had taken on local government, but it was an opportunity to learn something new from planning people who did this kind of work on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the five-member board of elected county commissioners expressed serious doubts about the college's involvement in something like community planning and eliminated the program several months into the project. However, it was a seller's market at that time, and I had no trouble turning this planning fiasco into a full-time faculty position.

The following summer, 1969, I flew to the U.K. and traveled more than 3,000 miles by rail in England, Scotland, and Wales. My purpose was to acquire enough information about government in the U.K. to offer a college-level course on comparative government. My experience in Washington, D.C., and living there made me aware of the possibilities of arranging visits through the foreign embassies/chancelleries also located in D.C. Staff people at the British embassy helped me contact party functionaries of the Conservative and Labour (British spelling) parties. As a result, I visited a number of communities and was hosted by members of both parties and met a number of well-informed people on the subject of both local and national government. It is no exaggeration to say that I was "wined and dined" the length and breadth of the country and I enjoyed every minute of it. Foreign travel was becoming a way of life.

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In Glasgow, Scotland, after conversations with several government officials, I revealed my intent to buy a ticket and sail across the Irish Sea to Belfast, Northern Ireland. One of the local Scottish politicians advised against it, telling me that my American accent would place me in an untenable position should either the opposition (IRA) or those loyal to the British crown ask me to choose sides. I followed his advice and did not purchase the ticket; that very week I read of a Canadian tourist who was inadvertently shot dead on the streets of Belfast when he got in the way of a stray bullet.

Travel continued to agree with me and the following summer I had a Eurorail pass and a room in Paris. The shock came when a postcard arrived from the social science chair of my school on a pleasant July day and carried the news that “ It’s your turn to teach in the prison.” This unexpected bit of information focused my attention on the fall semester in one of the two Maryland prisons located close to Hagerstown, Maryland, in Washington County a few miles from the school. Visions of weight-lifting inmates pressing two or three hundred pounds flashed in my mind and so unnerved me that I started doing pushups. On the third pushup I ceased . What were the odds of my physical prowess against 25 or 30 weight-lifting individuals who no doubt were in peak physical condition? Reason finally triumphed over this gloomy scenario, and I decided to plunge ahead and teach the course like I would on the campus. This strategy worked fine, and before long, inmate students extended to me invitations to visit their extracurricular activities such as sports activities, alcohol and drug treatment, and various inmate social clubs that had been sanctioned by the prison administration. In fact my interest increased to such an extent that the word got out that I was “pro-inmate.” This upset some prison staff to the extent that I was excluded from a faculty dinner at the end of the semester held for the college instructors who had taught in the prison. I sharpened my diplomatic skills and from a class of correctional officers held in a building in the vicinity of the prison, I received an invite to meet with some of them on Friday evenings at a nearby restaurant to eat, drink, and socialize. Covering all your bases to the extent that you can I found helpful.

One day in class in the prison, an inmate suggested that since I enjoyed traveling so much I should consider visiting foreign penal institutions and compare them with what I knew from my Maryland experience. I thought this a capital idea and proceeded to act on it. From that day on the vast majority of my travel, both at home and abroad, involved visitation to some institution or criminal justice agency in an effort to get better informed about the nature and value of criminal justice in other countries.

A Noble Experiment

At my campus office in Hagerstown, I read a short AP dispatch about a professor from Villanova University, Pennsylvania, James McKenna, now deceased, who had combined

inmates and correctional officers in a college-level Introduction to Sociology course. This was in the Graterford Prison, a maximum security prison near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A phone call to him concluded with an invitation to visit the prison, and so up to the institution I went to learn more about teaching a combined class of both prison staff and prisoners. Dr. McKenna convinced me that it wasn't a big problem if one made sure to receive the approval of the informal leadership of the officers and inmates involved in the course. Once I had their "OK" to proceed with what some considered to be an unorthodox arrangement (all students were equal in the classroom and not seen as officers and inmates), I could then take this proposal to the warden for his approval. The warden thought the idea had great possibilities and the class went off without a hitch. It's worth mentioning that the head nurse at one of the prisons, also a student at the college, asked to take the course. I told her to sign up for it and she became the first student to break the gender barrier. Keep in mind that this was in the early 1970s and equal opportunity for women in male prisons was not yet an accomplished fact in many parts of the country.

In another class of state correctional officers, I arranged for tours of two federal institutions—a federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and the Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center in Morgantown, West Virginia. At the Youth Center, the experiment of bringing both male and female prisoners into the same institution and getting them together in treatment and education program was tried and found not to be successful. The reason, we were told, was that male prisoners were younger and not mature enough to handle a coed environment in an institution. I mention this because I don't want the reader to believe that gender integration of inmates in an institution was always successful in the prison setting. As some readers know, the vast majority of jails in the United States are coed, and most American prisons have either male or female inmates.

In my situation, placing inmates and officers in the same class proved not as difficult as one might suppose. I had already had classes on the college campus where inmate students, correctional officers, police officers, and ordinary students (both male and female) already had pursued their education. No legitimately enrolled students were excluded. Though sometimes there were disagreements about issues brought up in classes about different topics under discussion, the courses went smoothly. And why not? Civilized behavior in a civilized community is the required norm in a class on campus and in a penal institution. People in education courses at the college level, whether students or faculty, are expected to behave in a mature, responsible manner. I emphasize this. These students are not in a high school classroom where juvenile behavior is sometimes known to gain the upper hand.

A Few Things Learned

When I first arrived by in Washington, D.C., at Union Station many years ago, the message etched in stone made an impression. It is attributed to British man of letters Samuel Johnson and appears in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*: "As the Spanish proverb says, 'He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him.' So it is in traveling; a man must carry knowledge with him, if he would bring home knowledge." True, my first knowledge of prison life was limited to teaching classes in Maryland institutions. Actually this is not entirely true. When I enlisted in the United States Army, one of the duties I performed when assigned to a post in Fort Worden, Washington, (now converted to a state park) was "guard duty." One post was walking around the stockade building with a carbine slung over my shoulder. The prisoners held were mostly AWOLs—absent without leave. Occasionally, I was assigned to take them out on the Fort grounds to perform some form of manual labor. My instructions were to shoot any prisoner attempting to escape. Whether I would have followed through is problematic. After all, these people were not terrorists or serial killers—just irresponsible individuals who couldn't or wouldn't accept military discipline.

American Culture and Lawsuits

The prison teaching part of my career lasted about five years. In those days, I don't recall that I paid a great deal of attention to American culture. I define culture in this instance as shared attitudes, values, and beliefs transmitted from generation to generation in one's own country. In a sense culture is invisible, but people who grow up and live in a country receive an almost unconscious indoctrination through exposure to others in home, school, church, peer groups, and other organizations and activities too numerous to mention. For example, people familiar with penal institutions from other countries who have visited both American institutions and foreign penal institutions will tell you that the lawsuit phenomenon is almost strictly American. Lawsuits in their opinions would not qualify as the chief reason for positive penal change in other countries.

People in the United States, exposed as they are to the "take 'em to court" philosophy accept suing and lawsuits as a way of life. Go to your TV program guide and see the number of popular TV programs that feature judges listening to and deciding issues brought by ordinary citizens. This phenomenon didn't just happen. Americans expect justice to be dispensed through courts and courtrooms, and literally thousands of people with justice issues often take others to court. At one time there was even a court program for pets for after all, some contend, animals have rights, too.

Even I remember taking action in a Washington, D. C., court of small claims against a real-estate corporation that refused to refund my security deposit after I moved out of an

apartment in Washington, D.C. On the day of the scheduled hearing, the corporation representative failed to appear and the judge awarded me a judgment by default. This, of course, vindicated my belief that bringing a lawsuit was an American's way to achieve justice.

As this country developed, the idea of having your day in court became as American as apple pie. Once the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that inmates incarcerated in jail or prison did not lose all of their constitutional rights after incarceration, the door opened to the deluge of inmate lawsuits. Inmates brought thousands of cases for various reasons too lengthy to list, many of them frivolous. This suing phenomenon grew like a giant weed in American culture.

I contend that a country's culture defines certain norms in regard to the way people are treated—in this instance, people who find themselves locked up because of criminal charges brought against them and those who have been found guilty either by judge or jury. Because of court action less than a half a century ago, suddenly inmates learned that they did not lose all their civil or constitutional rights due to incarceration. When I visited prisons in Europe and Asia, people found it strange that such large numbers of American inmates would seek justice through lawsuits brought into our courts. One can explain it to them as a fact, but it is difficult for those who did not grow up in the United States to understand why prisoners would threaten authorities with lawsuits.

Remembered Stories from Prison Travels

When I looked at prisons in Sweden and New Zealand, I was astounded to hear correctional officers tell me that they would take some inmates home over the weekends to meet and stay with the officers' families. One officer in Sweden related that he planned to take the inmate on a fishing trip. It never occurred to me that this kind of socialization was possible. I was never aware that it was done in prisons in United States.

In Denmark, I was surprised to learn that one of the prisons made it possible for a sentenced male to live with his girlfriend in the institution, and several articles in the foreign coverage section of *American Jails* magazine described the admittance of families into Mexican and South American institutions where families were allowed to cohabit with their incarcerated inmate relatives. Yet, the year that another story appeared about corrections in Brazil (*American Jails*, Jan./Feb. 1993), *The New York Times* the previous October (1992) had published an article about the police entering a Sao Paulo prison during a riot and shooting prisoners in their cells. A good friend of mine, Joe Rowan, now deceased, wrote a series of articles about his visits to foreign institutions. One was entitled "Criminal Justice (or a Lack of It) in Venezuela," *American Jails*, Sep./Oct. 1998. On the other hand, criminal justice authorities shot both inmates and officers during a

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hostage situation in Attica prison in New York state in September 1971. It would appear that many countries are not yet free of the taint of penal violence.

I was told when I visited Taiwan that the government broadcast on television prison executions by firing squads to educate the public about what might be in store for individuals who committed capital crimes. In Hong Kong, I toured a prison where all incarcerated inmates addicted to drugs were compelled to go “cold turkey.” In a prison dormitory I saw hundreds of sick people lying in bed in a most distressed state. When I later published an article about it in *Corrections Today*, a staff person wrote a letter to the magazine denying that this was the case.

American embassy staff in Singapore reported that the use of the rattan (a stick used to inflict corporal punishment in prisons) was successfully used against inmates by lashing their buttocks to teach them the “error of their ways.” This apparently was a disciplinary procedure adopted from the British when they colonized that area of the world. On a visit to Changi Prison, formerly used as a Japanese concentration camp, I asked the prison administrator about it. A lot of his inmates were members of the 14K Triad, easily identifiable because of the huge tattoos that covered large portions of their backs and shoulders. He indicated to me that the attitude of the gang members was that they would rather do eight weeks in a hospital than eight weeks in prisons. So much for the claimed efficacy of corporal punishment.

Countries That Excluded Me From Prison Tours

I'll make it plain. I was persona non grata when it came to prison tours or visits in Russia (then called the U.S.S.R), Mongolia, and China. The closest I got in Russia was to an English-speaking authority in Moscow who told me absolutely nothing. On a three-week trip through a large part of China from east to west and from north to south, the answer was always, “If you want to visit prisons, you have to be part of a group.” Mongolians were not interested in having an American visit their institutions.

On one of three trips to Russia, I was with a small tour group of about 16. We started out in Leningrad, headed down to Moscow, and then by plane to Samarkand near the Pakistan border and on up to Taskent. From there we flew to Irkutsk on Lake Baykal in Siberia, which is reputed to hold more water than all the five Great Lakes combined. On the train from Irkutsk down to Ulan Bator in Mongolia, the Russian military boarded the train with submachine guns and methodically searched each traveler's luggage. Here one realized the difference between the way things were done in a communist dictatorship as opposed to the United States. One citizen from North Dakota started to complain about the violation of his constitutional rights. A couple of us told him to “pipe down” and remember where he was.

Getting Involved With Jails—A Stimulating Shock

I do not want to rehash my political involvement with the Francis R. "Dick" Ford, which I described in Part One of my jail book, *Exploring Jail Operations*. Teaching for five years in the Maryland prison system, including a semester at the then Patuxent Psychiatric Prison, did not prepare me for the jail scene. Washington County, Maryland's 1857 "firetrap" jail shocked me. I spent four years working as an unpaid consultant at the Washington County Sheriff's Department, including a stint as a jail officer managing and supervising inmates, which influenced my thinking considerably. With such a beginning, the only way to go was up, and this I did thanks to the strong support of Sheriff Francis R. Ford who got me into the jail scene big time!

It was Dick Ford who suggested that since I liked to travel, I should go about the country looking at jails. As improbable as it sounds, that is what I started to do. What an education!

This concludes part one of a two-part article about Ken Kerle's travels and observations about jail and prisons.

