

The Joliet Prison Photographs (Photo Essay)

Richard Lawson

Richard Lawson received his B.S. in photography from Southern Illinois University and his M.F.A. in photography from the University of Illinois. He taught photography at Southern Illinois University from 1977 to 1981 and is currently in charge of Color Technical Services at Ambassador International, Tempe, Arizona.

◀ "Cell for Two Male Prisoners," ca. 1915.

On April 1, 1969, I was sentenced to a term of from two to six years at hard labor in the Illinois State Penitentiary for possession of marijuana. By May I had been transferred from the county jail in Rock Island to a diagnostic depot next to Joliet Penitentiary in what once was the women's division. I was first placed in a three-man cell, approximately six feet by nine feet, which had been designed to hold one woman. A month later, I was housed in one of the round panopticon cellblocks at Stateville Penitentiary, Joliet's sister prison, where I had been assigned as an inmate photographer in the Bureau of Identification. The B. I. maintained mugshots, fingerprints, and criminal records of convicts from the early days of the prison. In a corner of the basement darkroom in an old filing cabinet were several hundred glass-plate negatives that documented Joliet prison around the turn of the century. I spent most of my two years working in these darkrooms, producing a blend of public relations and evidence photographs for the prison administration. The photographs were used in penal publications and were occasionally released to news agencies to illustrate the events and social progress of the prison.

Of all the memories which I carried from that period in my life, the photographs recorded on the old plates were among them; especially: "Cell with two male convicts," ca. 1915. Finally, in 1977, I managed to have them transferred to the Illinois State Archives in order to preserve what remained of the dwindling collection. Over time, many of the plates had been broken from handling or destroyed by fire. This collection is merely what remains of a much larger documentation.

During the time period covered by these photographs, the Illinois penal system had progressed from the various forms of public punishment used in the early 1800s to what was considered a more humane retribution: the penitentiary system. This system had been first introduced in 1790 by the Pennsylvania Quakers under the leadership of Doctor Benjamin Rush, and it resulted in the world's first penitentiary—the Walnut Street Jail. It was the first to combine a method of isolated cellular confinement with solitary work and the reading of the scriptures. This concept of purification through suffering, inherent in Christianity, was becoming deeply imbedded in penal thought. The system of almost total solitude was more than many prisoners could endure. When New York built its first prison at Auburn, it varied the Pennsylvania System so that the men were isolated in the evening but had congregate work areas in the day. The silence rule prevented any communication during congregate times. Both of these models had adopted the work ethic and reform through suffering, penitence; hence "penitentiary."

The state's first prison, built in Alton, Illinois, had followed this model with dedication, but by 1847 there was severe public criticism concerning its conditions. Dorothea Dix visited the prison and reported her findings to the legislature: Each man was shackled with an eight-foot chain from his waist to his ankles, and one side of his head had been shaved to make him easy to identify. There were no bath facilities, and two men were required to live in a damp, unheated stone cubicle. Complete silence was required at all times. Violations of the rules were punishable by flogging; hospital records indicate that penalties varied from 5 to 45 lashes. The men worked from sunrise to sunset and slept on beds made of straw with coverings of blankets and buffalo robes.

In the 1850s most prisoners came from Chicago, and so in 1857 the legislature approved the construction of a new penitentiary at nearby Joliet on a site located over a layer of limestone so deep as to make tunneling impossible. The Auburn style of castellated Gothic architecture was chosen along with the Auburn style of cellblock. One building, with a stockade around it, was constructed by civilian workers in 1858 from limestone quarried at the site so that 53 prisoners could be brought from Alton to construct the walls and buildings.

Although the photographs in the collection document the period between 1890 and 1930, most were made between 1913 and 1916 when Edmund Allen was warden. His father, Robert Allen, a warden at Joliet from 1894 to 1897, had accumulated a sizable fortune, which he left to his children. After his father's death, Edmund served as police magistrate in Joliet for eight years and was elected mayor in 1912. In 1913, Governor Edward Dunne was trying to make truly progressive changes that would have a lasting effect on the prison system. To do this, he needed a warden who was not just sympathetic to his cause but progressive by nature. In April 1913, Governor Dunne, a Democrat, appointed Allen warden of the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet to replace E. J. Murphy, a Republican. It wasn't just Edmund who was progressive but also his wife, Odette Allen, who supported his work and was a considerable influence in establishing the "honor system" at Joliet. With this system, inmates were graded on their conduct. Starting at a middle grade, they could be elevated by continued good conduct or demoted by bad conduct. Punishments could be handed out upon the occurrence of offenses, but the honor system required continued good conduct as a method of obtaining better job assignments and privileges. Allen discussed his attitudes and changes in a biennial report to the governor in 1915:

This is an era in penal progress. It has come slowly, but with a certainty which leaves no doubt as to its permanency. Crude, cruel, and barbarous methods which were almost universally in vogue at the beginning of the present generation have been or are being superseded by methods which are founded upon principles of humanity and square dealing.

The man inside is being given a chance to prove that he possesses at least some qualifications which determine character and purpose. For my own part, I am glad it is here. I rejoice at the thought that I am in a position to contribute, so far as my own abilities will permit, toward the creation of a new system that must eventually lift the man who has sinned and atoned for his sin from the shallows and perils that heretofore have surrounded and destroyed him.

I have always believed in the theory that there is some good in every man; that there exists some influence which will appeal to his heart and reason. When I was chosen warden of this penitentiary, I found that the man who gave me my appointment entertained views similar to my own. His views, perhaps, were broader than mine. His philosophy is founded upon a bigger and more generous conception of life and its amenities. He believes in the Golden Rule. All his life he has stood ready to extend the helping hand to the man that is down and out. As a judge his decisions were tempered by a spirit of humanity and mercy.

I told him about the things that I had been considering in connection with my plans to regenerate the penitentiary at Joliet. I told him that I believed the lives of the men confined therein could be rendered happier and that hope could be re-awakened in their hearts by relieving them of some of the barbarous exactions and ruthless discipline to which they had been subjected for many years. I told him that I would endeavor to lift the fifteen hundred men who would be under my direction from dead levels of silence and unbroken routine which breaks the hearts and spirits of men and sends them out into the world without courage and without hope. He assured me that every idea I had discussed with him had his unequivocal endorsement and approval and that he would stand behind me while I was endeavoring to put them in force.

Not only the people of the State of Illinois, but the Nation are fortunate in the fact that Edward F. Dunne occupies the governor's chair at Springfield. Those among us who believe that the old way is passing, that a new and better era is dawning in penology, are fortunate indeed in having so eminent a friend and counsellor as Governor Dunne. His earnest cooperation in the work of regeneration in the penal institutions of Illinois is certain to bear results that will be far reaching in their effects on penological work in years to come. The work that has been started under his auspices will progress far and will leave an uneradicable impression which will serve as a guide to the generations which are to come hereafter.

Public sentiment is slowly but surely grasping the new thought and stamping it with approval. The people know that the barbarities of the nineteenth century will not be tolerated in the twentieth century. The people are becoming insistent that those who are atoning for their sins committed against society shall be treated with decent consideration and taught not that they shall expect the blackjack or the bludgeon, but that if they will observe the fundamental rules of honor and manhood within their enforced environment, their opportunities outside will multiply.

This is the underlying theory of my work at this penitentiary. You cannot maltreat men, you cannot starve men, you cannot force them to live in surroundings that are unhygienic and unsanitary; you cannot break their bodies in performance of tasks that strain their powers to the limits of endurance and then expect to receive in return their confidence and cooperation. You must feed them an abundance of healthful food; you must clothe them so that their sense of self-respect will not be entirely violated by contemplation of their rags; you must provide healthy outdoor recreation; you must see to it that the cell houses in which they are compelled to spend most of their waking and sleeping hours are clean and sanitary.

One of my first innovations was the granting of one hour a day for recreation. Every hour of the day from 8 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the afternoon, excepting the mid-day hour, there can be found about two hundred men playing baseball, pitching quoits, and some other games that are congenial to themselves, on a field set apart for that purpose within the prison walls. When I published my recreation program a number of the older employees of the prison who had come down from the period when recreation in any form was unheard of told me frankly and with sincerity that I was undertaking something which was potentially perilous. I told every man that if he believed I was wrong and did not care to take the chance of testing the plan with me that he could resign and step aside. I told them that I wanted around me only men who were in complete sympathy with my plan. I received no resignations. Notwithstanding that the space in which two hundred men have to play is less than two acres in extent and is cluttered with overhead pipes, buildings, and materials, and that the base lines of the various diamonds overrun each other; that the fielders both in and out, in various games play in identical territory; that collisions and mixups are of hourly occurrence, not a single prisoner has been taken from the recreation field for violation of the rules of the prison. I am more proud of this record than any other thing that has come into my life. It has vindicated my hopes; it has proved that the man inside, when given a chance, knows how to take advantage of it. It has done more than this—it has practically wiped out the punishment records of the prison. Where previous confinements in solitary would average upwards of seventy-five a month, they now run about thirty a month and appear to be decreasing all the time. The men are happier; and some of them told me they would rather be deprived of their lives than of the outdoor recreation period. The pallor that once marked them as men from the inside has given way to tan and ruddy health. They look more like men and they act more like men. I cannot help believing, and I think you gentlemen

will concur in the thought, that men coming from an environment that is lightened by healthy and enjoyable physical exercise are more apt to be self-respecting, more self-reliant, than men who are crushed by ruthless discipline.

The man inside at this penitentiary is no longer bound by the rule of silence in talk. If he desires to address a fellow inmate it is his privilege to do so. He can exchange conversation with his comrade in line of march, and that privilege has not been abused. The men have not neglected their work for the purpose of talking. The keepers in the shops have reported from day to day since the new rule went into effect that the men have observed it in about the same spirit and manner as men would in occupations outside. I believed when I prepared and promulgated this rule that it would have precisely that effect. I believed the man inside would not care to waste his own time nor the time of the State in useless conversation, and that if he felt he could address a guard or a fellow inmate when the spirit moved him that he would do it in precisely the same manner as one employee of an industrial shop would address a fellow worker. The results of these reforms or innovations, or whatever you may chance to call them, have been provocative of good discipline. There is no doubt on that score, because the records of the prison prove my statements. I do not want it understood that there has been any relaxation of vigilance, nor do I want it understood that we have reached a point in our work where we believe the millennium in penology has arrived. I appreciate that there are desperate and ruthless men among our prisoners. I appreciate, moreover, that the abnormal conditions which are inevitably created by confinement within the walls of a prison, especially such a prison as this one, breed plots against authority and discipline. But I can state with a spirit of self-rejoicing that the discipline was never better in the history of this prison than it is at the present day. I need hardly tell you that this is a condition more than satisfactory. The man inside at this penitentiary is beginning to understand what it means to be placed upon his honor; he understands precisely as we understand it outside the prison. It means to him just as much as it means to us outside. It means freedom from unnecessary espionage, or freedom from espionage that changes and injures one's self-respect, and freedom from ruthless barbaric punishments. He performs his work in a better spirit; he performs more work in a better spirit, and he performs more and better work. This fact has been demonstrated by the output of the various shops. When I introduced an hour's recreation for every man here, I naturally concluded there would be a diminution of production in the shops in proportion to the time lost by outdoor play. There was in fact no loss in production. The men not only worked faster, but better. The output of the shops today is of better quality than at any time in the history of the prison. The man inside is beginning to take an actual personal interest in his work and pride in its performance. That is something I thought would never come to pass in a prison. I pray that the spirit of performance such as this will grow among these men, because if it goes with them outside of the walls it must necessarily become a bulwark for their redemption and regeneration.

On Saturday, June 19, 1915, Warden Allen and his wife were preparing for a short trip to the hot springs in Indiana, but since her dress was not yet back from the dressmaker, Odette decided to wait until the next morning and encouraged Edmund to proceed without her. Shortly after six the next morning, a fire was reported on the second floor of the warden's house. Some guards, along with convicts from the volunteer fire department, managed to break down the door to Odette's bedroom and extinguish the flames. The coroner reported that her skull was fractured by a water bottle which was found next to the bed and that, although she was unconscious from the blow, she was killed by the smoke and flames which engulfed her bed. The fire had been started by a container of alcohol spread over the bedding. A trustee by the name of "Chicken Joe" Campbell, who had been appointed by Edmund a few months earlier as Odette's personal servant, was charged and convicted on circumstantial evidence and sentenced to death. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by Governor Dunne. Warden Allen continued to support the honor program and begged others not to judge all men by the actions of one man. He resigned several months later. This event and the increasing involvement by the United States in World War I brought an end to the era of progress. Reform would not be attempted again for many decades.

Law creates crime by defining criminal acts, and it is the primary nature of law to reflect the moral and social codes which allow a society to function. Basically, crime may be thought of as acts of aggression or violence against another person and damage to or theft of property. It is the purpose of law to create social order through a system of rules and penalties; but Jessica Mitford writes: "Criminal law is essentially a reflection of the values, and a codification of the self-interest, and a method of control, of the dominant class in any given society." Even Plato said that justice represented the will of the stronger—power. What exists in the United States, as in most of the world, is not justice in the sense of fair play, but justice as power of the ruling class over the working class.

Prisons were designed as an extension of the criminal justice system and were meant to perform four functions: punishment, deterrence, isolation, and rehabilitation. There is no question as to their ability to punish and isolate individuals. Even a partial reading of *In the Belly of the Beast* by Jack Henry Abbott brings a clear understanding of the brutality of the modern penal system. The Quakers started the penitentiary system in order to abolish the physical assault on the body and to bring about a more humane system. Further, it is widely known that rehabilitation in prison is almost nonexistent since government budgets barely allow for enough funds to "warehouse" convicts, let alone treat them. That the primary function of prisons is deterrence is the most frightening aspect, and although the mechanisms of the system are focused upon the criminal, the severity of the punishment is for the benefit of those on the outside who might otherwise consider criminal acts. By increasing the cost to the criminal (it is thought), prisons are meant to deter others from crime, even though substantial research shows that most persons who commit crimes never consider the cost—most don't even know the penalty for their particular crime. There are two injustices here. One is that punishment against an individual is imposed, not for therapeutic value, but to affect others who may have criminal intentions. The other is that the principle of deterrence does not work. The concept of sending one person to prison as an example to others is an archaic home remedy.

It is important to understand that the criminal justice system is disproportionately directed at those individuals who are least able to defend themselves. American law is the extension of the influence of the ruling class in an industrialized economic power. This is not democracy, but capitalism; crime, in part, is the result of the choice to maintain this structure of wealth and power. Ramsey Clark, in *Crime in America*, reports that in major American cities "two-thirds of the arrests take place among only about two percent of the population"—the poor. This statistic is contrary to evidence showing that crime exists in very high percentages in all levels of society, but citizens in the upper two-thirds of the social structure manage, for the most part, to escape the consequences of the system. These people are better prepared to defend themselves and have more financial resources. Both the system and society tend to be lenient with the more affluent offender and do not choose imprisonment as a form of punishment.

Today our prisons are overflowing, and legislators are talking of increasing the number of men per cell rather than expanding the system. Rehabilitation isn't even being discussed in today's budgets. All of this is being done in spite of the evidence that white-collar crime costs the individual a hundred times more than

street crime ever has. Both the problem and the solution are not to be found in the penal system but in society. In *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*, Margaret Mead wrote:

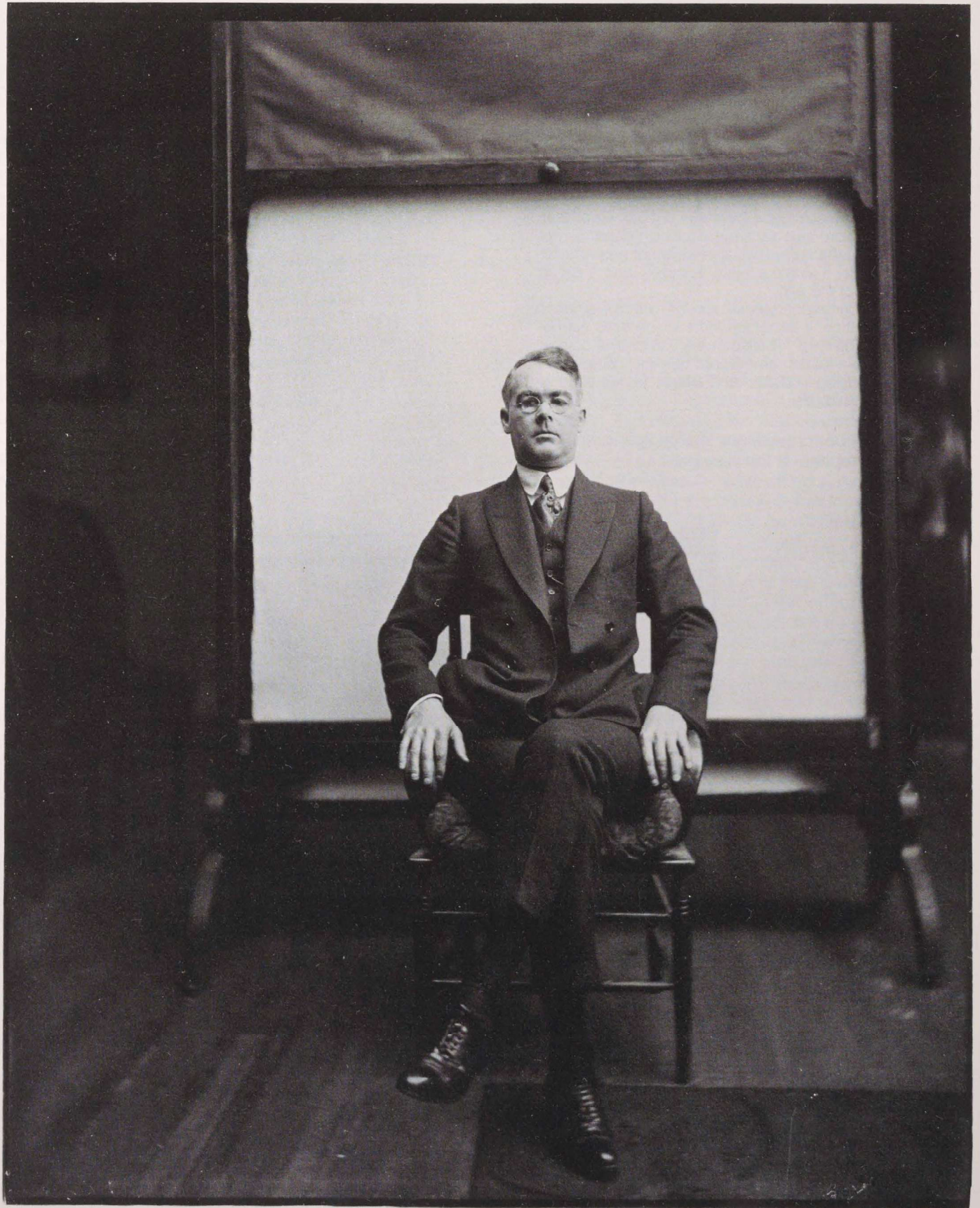
There is a correspondence between: a major emphasis upon competition, a social structure which depends upon the initiative of the individual, a valuation of property for individual ends, a single scale of success, and a strong development of the ego.

There is a correspondence between: a major emphasis upon cooperation, a social structure which does not depend upon individual initiative or the exercise of power over persons, a faith in an ordered universe, weak emphasis upon rising in status, and a high degree of security for the individual.

Cooperation or competition. The choice is whether to cure the symptom or the disease.

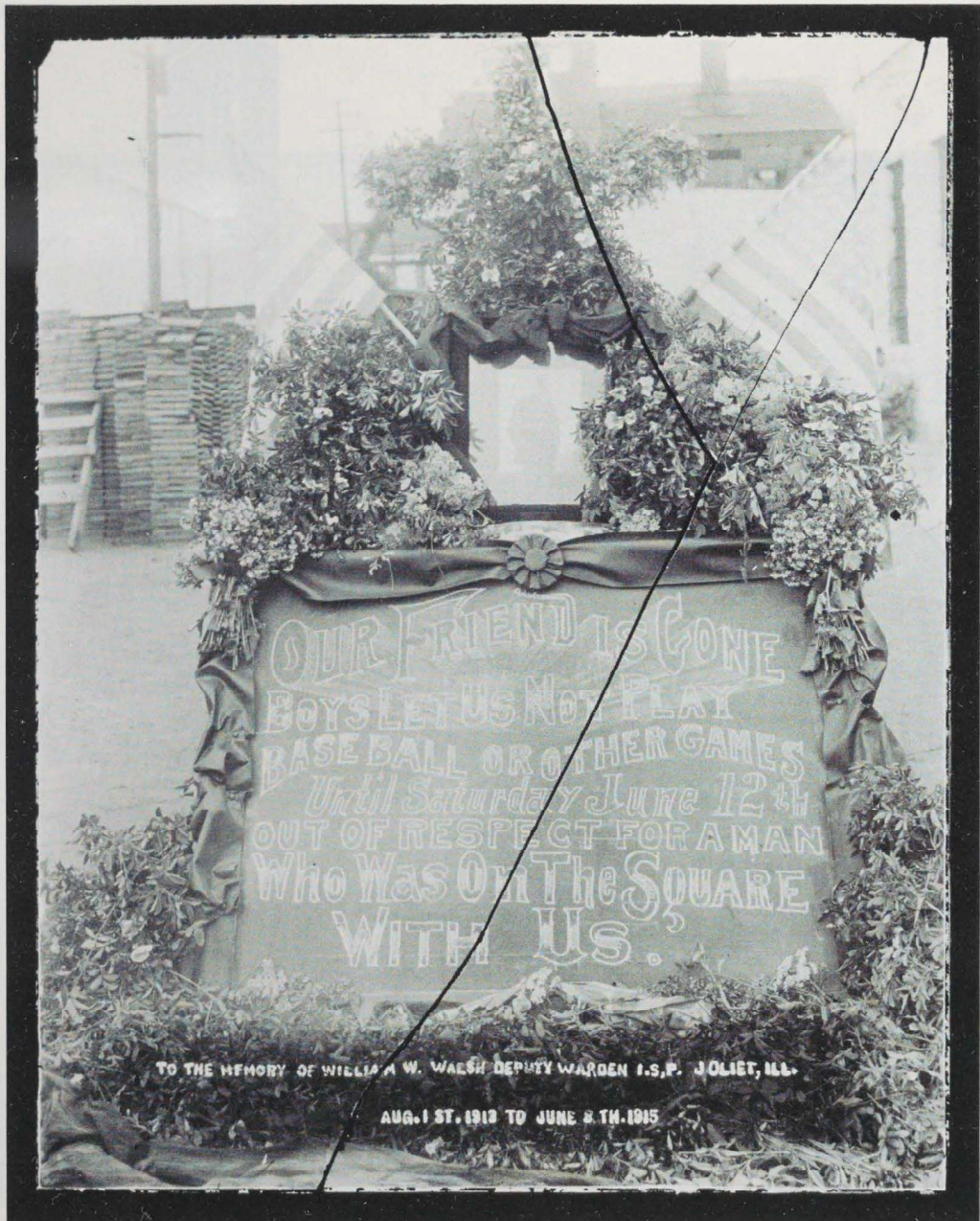


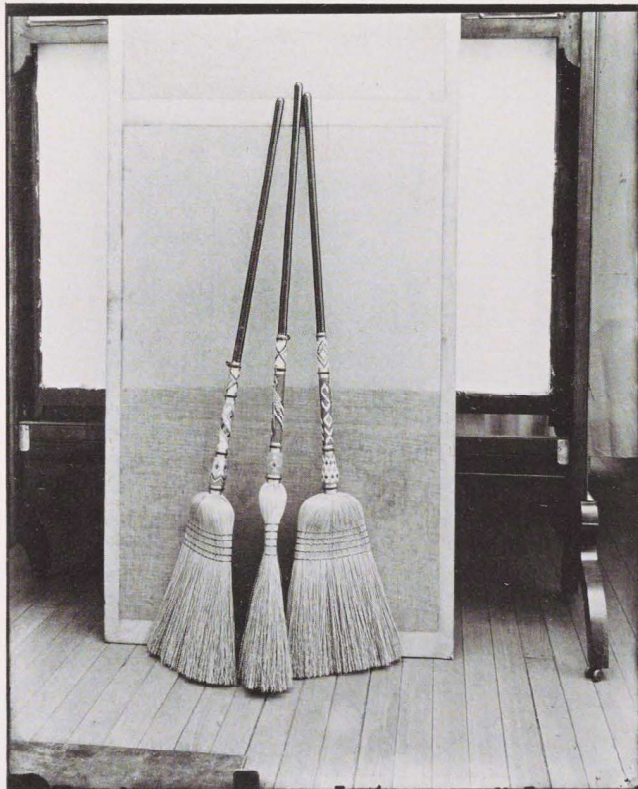
"Mugshot, No. 7213."



◀ "Unidentified Warden," ca. 1915.

"Memorial to a Dead Warden," ca. 1915. ▶





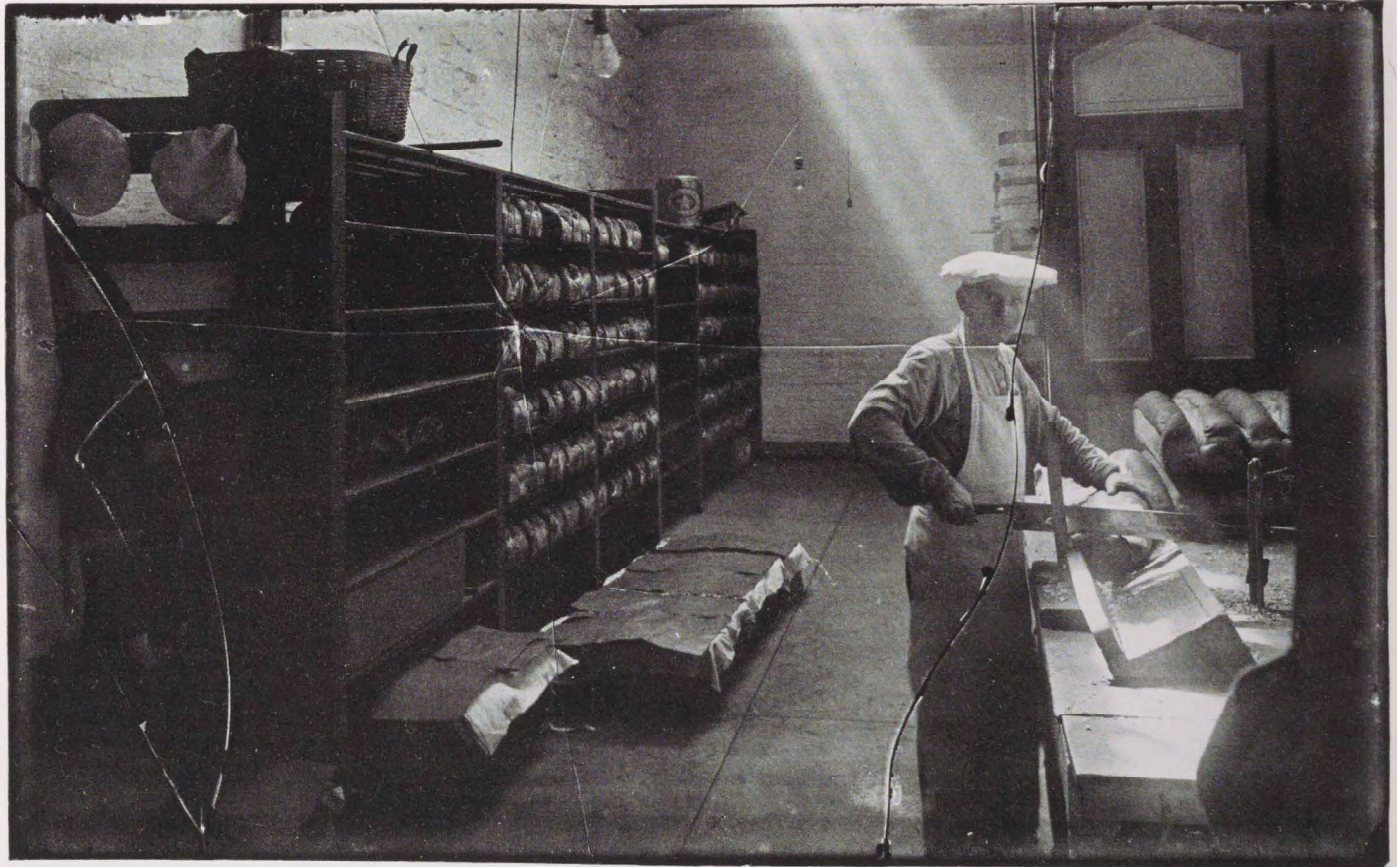
"Catalog Photograph of
Three Brooms," ca. 1915.



"Cell for Female
Prisoner," ca. 1915.



"Training Kitchen in Women's Division," ca. 1915.



"Prison Bakery," ca. 1890.



"Prison Chaplain with Four Inmate Assistants," ca. 1915.



"Mugshot, No. 7280."



"Shoe Factory," ca. 1890.



"Contraband," ca. 1915.



"Yard Activities," ca. 1915.



"Official Tour of Stateville Penitentiary," ca. 1925.