

August 2017

The Constable's Corner: Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville

By: Mitchell Clark

Constable Pct. 2

Nueces County, Texas



Hello everyone! We have had a busy first half of 2017 here at Pct. 2. From uniform changes (going back to Stetson hats), policy changes, continuing peace officer education classes, upgrades to our technology systems, new web site, new Facebook page, the day-to day services my department provides, our community policing programs and our "pray for police" wristbands which was hugely successful. All of these successes were not possible without the dedication of my officers, administrative staff and the ever growing support I receive each day from the citizens of Pct. 2. Thank you from all of us at NCCO Pct. 2.

The Constable's Corner. Yes, its been a while since my last publication. This month's focus is on the Texas State Prison at Huntsville, Texas.

A few months ago, I attended Constable's School at Sam Houston State University. During that week, which was crammed full of lectures and training, I got a tour by a Captain of the Guards of the prison. The University is located right next to the prison and right in the heart of town. Got to see the Walls Unit, Death Row, Educational Unit, Recreational Unit and the Leather Shop. Most interesting to me was the stories, the old stories, which is where I begin in this month's Corner.

The prison is officially the Huntsville Unit, the prison's red brick walls lead to the nickname "Walls Unit. The prison's first inmates arrived in October 1849. Originally women in the Texas Prison System were housed in the Huntsville Unit. Beginning in 1883 women were housed in the Johnson Farm, a privately owned cotton plantation near Huntsville. The Huntsville Penitentiary was the only prison in the eleven Confederate states still standing at the end of the Civil War, at which time it entered a dramatic period

of its history. The increase in lawlessness that accompanied the end of the war resulted in more persons being sentenced to prison.

Over time, there has been some famous escape attempts from the Walls Unit.

In January 1934, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow hid guns in the field for their friends, Joe Palmer and Ray Hamilton. These guns lead to the death of J. Crowson, the first correctional officer killed in the line of duty. The prisoners were caught which ended up getting the death penalty for the killing of Officer Crowson. For Bonnie & Clyde, this was the last straw for them. This eventually lead to their death in a hail of automatic gunfire in a Louisiana ambush.



Old Sparky

Whitey Walker was the leader of probably the most successful bank robber in Texas during the 1930's, the Whitey Walker Gang. They were much better than Bonnie & Clyde because Whitey subscribed to the John Dillinger school on robbing banks.....plan, plan & plan. The Barrow Gang had no planning, no escapes routes planned. They just walked in, robbed the bank and left. Problem was most of the time the banks they robbed had no money due to the Great Depression.



Various devices used to restrain inmates over the years

While in the Walls Unit, Whitey Walker wanted his dear friend, Blackie Thompson to be saved from the electric chair. This also included death row inmates Palmer & Hamilton of Bonnie & Clyde fame. Walker had guns smuggled in from with the help of a guard. A huge gunfight ensued between the guards and the convicts as the prisoners were climbing a ladder trying to get over the wall. Walker was killed by Guard Roberts. The three prisoners made it over the Wall to an awaiting getaway vehicle.

In 1974, the prison was the site of an eleven-day siege, one of the longest hostage-taking sieges in United States history. Three armed inmates (Fred Carrasco, Ignacio Cuevas, and Rudy Dominquez) held several hostages in the education department. The ring leader, Carrasco, had been a porter in the chapel. Cuevas usually worked in the inmate dining hall. Ten hostages were employees of the prison system: two were educators, and one was a guard. Later on, the prison chaplain would also become a hostage. Four prisoners were also held as hostages. On the final day, the inmates tried to escape using chalkboards and hostages as shields. Dominquez was killed in the attempt. Carrasco killed Elizabeth Beseda, then shot himself. Julia Standley was also killed that day. Ignacio Cuevas was executed on May 23, 1991, for her murder. I am told that Carrasco was a prisoner at the Nueces County jail and was transferred from Corpus Christi to Huntsville.

One of my favorite stories is that of Dr. B.W. Jones. Dr. Jones was an intellect, professor of psychology with an I.Q. higher than the sun and a true photographic memory.

In 1955, Dr. Jones so impressed the Warden with his background and intellect, he was immediately hired as a lieutenant of the guards and rose to captain and eventually Assist. Warden. Cap. Jones set out to change the way prisoners were treated, instituting a rewards for good behavior system, sensitivity training and treating prisoners in a way they were not used too. Cap. Jones was a big guy, 6ft, 300 pounds and he would get in any inmates face, even when threatened with violence, and calm the situation. The convicts couldn't figure him out and his guards thought he was either very brave or crazy.

Then a funny thing happened. A prisoner was reading about a man, Ferdinand Waldo Demara, in Life magazine. He showed the picture to the guard and said “doesn’t this guy look just like Cap’n Jones?” The Warden confronted Jones about the picture. He denied it, went into a tirade, gathered his belongings, left and was never to be seen in Texas again.



Ferdinand Waldo Demarra

Demarra was one of the biggest imposters the world had ever known. He could speak nine languages and could read and remember 5 books a nite. He impersonated a surgeon (doing actual surgery), a monk, psychologist, lawyer, teacher, minister, dean at college, engineer, zoologist and yes, a warden in the Texas Prison at Huntsville.

Some other notable Huntsville Inmates:

John Wesley Hardin: One of the most notorious outlaws and killers in Texas. Said to have killed 42 men. Sent to Huntsville in 1877 for 25 years but was released in 1894 and was subsequently gunned down by the Constable in El Paso in 1896.

Duane “Dog” Chapman: served 18 months for a murder in 1976. Well known for his top hit reality show Dog The Bounty Hunter.

David Crosby: sentenced to 5 years for drugs and weapons in 1983. Began serving in 1986 and was paroled 5 months later. Famed lead singer for rock group Crosby, Stills & Nash.

Semper Fi,
Constable Mitchell Clark



Constable Clark is the duly elected official for the Pct. 2 Constable's Office. He has been involved in the Nueces County Constable operations since 1981 and holds a Masters Peace Officers license from the State of Texas. He is a licensed attorney in Texas and Tennessee and in the U.S. Supreme Court. He is a former Marine with assignments as a military policeman with a specialty in corrections and as highly prestigious Marine Corps Drill Instructor @ MCRD San Diego. Constable Clark knows the law. Learn all about your constable by going to his new web site: **ConstableMitchellClark.net and Facebook @ Nueces County Constable Precinct 2**

References:

Time Magazine 1974

Wikipedia, Huntsville

The Wall, Patrick McConan

Texas Prison Museum