



By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

The campus-like grounds of the reformatory at Alderson, W.Va.

Female Homosexuality Prevalent

Fourth of Eight Articles

By Ben H. Bagdikian
Washington Post Staff Writer

So far as anyone knew, she had a conventional sex life on the outside. But shortly after she arrived at the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, W.Va., she stopped telling people her name was Charlotte and said it was "Charlie."

Charlie soon discovered the mysterious ways some of the inmates get hold of men's clothing—desert boots, dungarees, T-shirts, zipper jacket, visor cap. She began walking with a masculine swagger, talked tough, held a cigarette in the

corner of her mouth, and shortly afterward established a relationship with another woman inmate whose manner was obedient and submissive while Charlie acted strong and protective. They were thought of by the other inmates and by the staff as husband and wife.

One of the peculiarities of women's prisons is widespread homosexuality. Estimates run to 80 and 90 per cent, far higher than for men's prisons.

But homosexuality is only one of the distinctive qualities of female imprisonment.

Women's prisons are the step-

sisters of corrections. The literature on them is sparse, statistics on the female prisoner even less reliable than on males. The massive nine-volume report of the President's Crime Commission in 1967 barely mentions women.

The unkindest cut was from prisoner reformers, whose publication, *The Freeworld Times*, listed prisons that experienced unrest after Attica but ignored the sympathy strike of 130 federal women prisoners in West Virginia who were teargassed and 66 of whom were punitively transferred to other states.

See PRISONS, A10, Col. 1

Homosexuality in Women's Prisons Estimated at 80%

PRISONS, From A1

One reason for lack of attention is small numbers. Of 21,000 federal prisoners, 800 are women. Of the third of a million prisoners in state, county and local imprisonment on any one day, 5 per cent are adult women.

But another reason is the peculiar status of women in criminal justice. In some offenses judges tend to be more forgiving of "the gentler sex." But when a woman violates moralistic codes, she gets harsher treatment than men.

Prostitution is a major cause of female imprisonment. For every prostitute there are dozens of male customers. The male participant is seldom arrested and when arrested seldom tried and when tried seldom imprisoned. In 1968 in the District of Columbia, 112 men were prosecuted for patronage of prostitution; 800 women were prosecuted for soliciting.

The impact of imprisonment on women appears to be profoundly different from that on men. Except in the most savage jails and state prisons, women inmates do not suffer the physical brutality and sense of imminent threat typical of the average male prison.

For one thing, women's prisons usually look less grim. They tend to resemble low-budget junior colleges. The buildings are called "cottages" and there may or may not have bars on the windows.

Women's prisons vary in their discipline, but all are less regimented and formal than the average male prison.

But the locked-up woman has special pains. The worst is separation from her children. At Alderson, 55 per cent of the inmates have dependents. When they were convicted, the law wiped out their rights as mothers and made the children subject to adoption. Once the children are placed in a foster home, the adoption agency may forbid the mother to communicate thereafter with her children.

Another special trauma is prison's disruption of the conventional role assigned females in society—homemaker, helpmate to a male, repository for the gentle virtues in humankind. Women are usually brought up to behave as though they are tender, accepting and sensitive. All these are antithetical to prisons.

Males are conventionally taught that they are supposed to be strong, tough, aggressive and able to endure privation. Prison reinforces all of these. While homosexuality is common in men's prisons, it is more so in women's. Most women are conditioned to feel less than complete beings unless they have a man. But it is socially acceptable to touch each other, hold hands, and kiss. Confidential relationships among women in normal society are more common than among men.

A man without a particular woman is not considered deficient in outside society. There is glorification of the bachelor as supermale.

So the woman entering the all-female society of prison has special problems of social and sexual identity.

Jane Meyerding, 21, was imprisoned at Alderson. She says of her first week in prison:

"In orientation, I was in a dorm with eight or nine people and we'd spend a couple of hours talking before we went to sleep. You could just hear people trying to find themselves. Some who had never been exposed to homosexuality or to this kind of very compact social structure, they were throwing out



The Shame of the Prisons

ideas, just trying to decide who they were going to be while they were in there because they were so completely separated from anything they'd been before.

"Maybe they had been a mother and this was their whole thing—being a mother. But now they don't have their kids. So what are they?"

The result is homosexuality as an almost standard phenomenon among a majority of female prisoners everywhere. Whether it is in West Virginia or in South Carolina or in California, there is a typical scene in the yard of a women's reformatory:

A "butch," the male-like partner, dressed the same masculine style everywhere, hair bobbed as short as local regulations will permit, with her arm around the waist of the "femme," the female partner who is dressed conventionally, hair usually long.

The physical brutality and rape that accompany male homosexuality in prison is usually absent in women's prisons, partly because of anatomy and partly because of the difference in socially acceptable closeness among women.

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

In some women's prisons, staffs are obsessed with homosexuality and inmates are literally forbidden to touch each other. In such places, women seated in groups to watch television or movies must keep an empty seat between each person. This does not stop homosexual affairs which, like heterosexual affairs in the outside world, have a way of transcending barriers. But thoughts of homosexualism dominate such institutions.

Virginia McLaughlin, warden at Alderson, speaks in a relaxed way about it.

"One of the problems in a women's prison is staffs' preoccupation with homosexuality. My own personal feelings are that what goes on between consenting adults is their own business. We try to say that we're not moralistic about it."

Some inmates and former inmates of Alderson dispute the total tolerance. "At Alderson," one former inmate said, "the staff will bust you if they catch you."

Mrs. McLaughlin isn't sure that all the apparent homosexuality is consummated in physical relations.

"Who knows how much real homosexuality goes on here? There's a lot of role-playing. I suppose that 80 or 90

per cent of the residents here are in boy-girl play. Within our culture, if you ain't got a man, you ain't got nothing. That model carries into this institution. So a lot of people dress and act in boy-girl ways. But a lot of it is just role-playing to fill out the public image we've said women are supposed to project."

She thinks that whatever happens sexually at Alderson is reversible.

"If you come into this joint heterosexual, you leave here heterosexual. You may play games and spend 20 years doing it. But darn few women who have developed a permanent pattern on the outside get turned around permanently in here."

Mrs. McLaughlin, the first married warden of Alderson—she married the local football coach—presides over the most famous of women's prisons, the only federal one specifically designed for females and one obviously more relaxed than the mass of state and county institutions.

Like most prisons, Alderson is 100 miles from nowhere. There is no public transportation. The train doesn't stop there any more, only at the Greenbrier resort hotel 20 miles away.

It is an unlikely-looking prison. The setting in the foothills of the Appalachians is among forested hills and fast-moving creeks. The security is less than that in some fashionable girls' schools, the low chain link fence no challenge to a moderately athletic woman. Mrs. McLaughlin is a shrewd, sharp-eyed, sophisticated woman whose office is decorated in abstract non-inmate art and whose non-government-issue coffee table has a shingling of highbrow magazines—The American Scholar, Intellectual Digest, Trans-Action, New Yorker.

Prisoners are called "residents"; they can dress almost as they wish and pay a lot of attention to the latest fashions. The food is good as institutional feeding goes, rooms are decorated individually and there are few matrons visible to the visiting eye. Two honor cottages are self-governing and have no staff in them at all (and are unkindly called "snitch houses" by other inmates; in prison an informer is known as a "snitch").

Mrs. McLaughlin knows she has the perennial problem of modern prisons: white rural staff, hired from the surrounding area, in total control of the lives of prisoners, who are mostly from big cities and mostly blacks.

She has a staff of 261 overseeing 530 inmates. Eleven per cent of the staff is black, compared to 54 per cent of the inmates.

"It's very important to have blacks on the staff, important for the role they play. The black residents need to see blacks who have made it and are 'square.'"

"There's an immediate communications gap. There's the gap between the very young, inner-city residents and the older, white, middle-class oriented staff. But even between black staff and black residents there can be a gap nobody likes to talk about, a class gap."

One afternoon recently, she had her final interview with a young, fashionably dressed black woman who was about to join the staff. The woman nodded as she left. "Thank you, ma'am," Mrs. McLaughlin smiled innocently and replied, "Why don't we drop that s—, 'Thank you, ma'am' is lower-class white, you know."

Mrs. McLaughlin is sure that

women prisoners are changing in attitude.

"Our drug problem's not so different. I looked at some board meeting minutes from 1959 and they had 40 per cent addiction then. But we are seeing more young offenders and a small but growing number of women who are active parties in regular crime. They don't just drive the getaway car or hide the money any more. They're pointing the guns."

"And we have militancy. They have a just concern with their rights. That's the way it is. Blacks have taken all they are going to take, being kicked around. Everyone has a right to say how they feel. Inmate or not, we have to be concerned with individual rights. I don't care whether a person is in prison or out, they have fundamental rights."

Who the Inmates Are

Mrs. McLaughlin is asked about the unpromising "dormitories," and "campuses" she enjoys smashing the stereotype of the hardhat warden issuing public relations mush.

"I don't care if this was the Greenbrier Hotel, it isn't fun. This is a prison with 500 miserable people forced to be together. It can't be good, they can't go home, they can't relieve the pressures by going out to the street to a show."

She is not euphoric about the power of an authoritarian figure bringing inner change. "There are a lot of ways they used to be called around here, and I'm not their mother."

But many of the inmates are, in fact, girls. Seventy per cent of the residents are 30 years or younger and a few are 15 and 16. They come from 40 different states and about 30 of them from foreign countries, convicted of crimes in the United States, usually smuggling dope. Thirty per cent have a history of prostitution.

"How are you going to teach a woman a trade that will earn her \$1.25 on the outside when she's been in the habit of making \$500 a night?"

If the women work in the prison industries, they make from 19 to 47 cents an hour.

Forty-two per cent have a history of narcotics use. Only nine per cent have ever had a significant alcohol problem.

Like all prisoners, women inmates do little intelligence but have lacked sufficient schooling and what schooling they received obviously was deficient. About 60 per cent have average IQs or higher. About half of them were higher than with grade but they test out at a median of sixth grade level.

They are serving federal sentences for postal violations such as mail fraud, 10 per cent; narcotics, 20 per cent; forged checks, 10 per cent; and with stolen goods in interstate transportation, 12 per cent.

There have always been about 30 prisoners and about 30 in for conspiracies of various kinds but only a few murderers and kidnappers.

Federal offenses are different from state. In one state prison for women, half were in for killing their husbands recently in a crisis and most of the rest for prostitution.

Like male prisoners, 80 per cent at Alderson have histories of prior arrests, with criminal arrests starting as young as age 7. Half of them have less than \$3000 a year before their imprisonment, but only 28 per cent had ever been on welfare.

The statistics support the bias of the criminal justice system and of the outside society. Mrs. McLaughlin tells interviewees, "If you're poor, if you're black, if you're twenty-six and you're a woman, the dice are loaded against you."

She likes to tell that to the residents and then add:

"But prisoners have responsibilities. I'm sorry if your mother didn't love you and I'm sorry if you have no money, but you've got to face the future."

"An Emotional Binge"

For all its bucolic grace, tolerant atmosphere and the warden's anticipation of traditional complaints, Alderson has had its troubles. It has its "hot" segregation cells in which women are punished by being locked in a bare tiled cell with no transparent windows, a toilet, and a cot. There are tensions and bitterness.

In September, residents of Alderson held a memorial for the prisoners in Attica. It evolved into a strike for reforms at Alderson, with 130 residents occupying the prison's garment factory building for four days. Mrs. McLaughlin sent in food and blankets for the strikers and received their list of 42 demands.

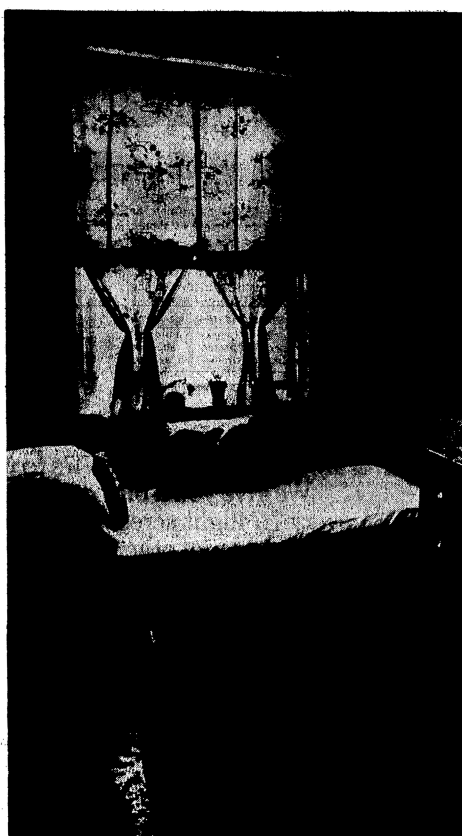
Like most prisoner demands, these would be agreed to by many prison administrators if they were free to do so: reasons to be given for denial of paroles; more halfway houses; work release programs for qualified inmates; more caseworkers; the state's first psychological counseling; more vocational training; better education within the institution; published standards for changing inmates' level of restraint; unlimited mail; disinfectant for all cottages; reasons given for severe disciplines, and so on.

But at some point, Mrs. McLaughlin decided the strike had gone on long enough. She called in help from other federal prisons. Male guards went through the campus, used tear gas, rounded up a predetermined list of inmates thought of as ringleaders, put them into a waiting bus (by mistake including one staff member), and transferred the women to maximum security institutions in Ashland, Ky., and Seagoville, Tex.

Mrs. McLaughlin refers to the strike as "an emotional binge" and the result of "two or three very troubled people." Our psychiatrist says that we have about 50 people who are in and out of psychosis all the time. But the demands were consistent with what most correctional administrators are themselves asking for, at least when outside their own institution.

Nevertheless, Alderson is a far more humane institution than the average state and county prison for women. Elsewhere there are female prisoners subjected to rent and degradation and the same kinds of psychological pressures that afflict male prisons.

Tom Murton was a warden in Arkan-



Curtains brighten a woman's room in the Alderson, W.Va., prison.

By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

sas who unearthed murdered inmates and tried to reform the institution, alleged swaggers before he was fired by Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller. Because prisons are typically closed institutions protected by secrecy, their worst characteristics usually come out only with a riot or after an administrator has been fired.

A warden who preceded him at Cummins prison farm, Murton says, had an electric buzzer installed next to his bed in the warden's residence on the grounds of Arkansas State Penitentiary. When he pushed the button, the staff would select a woman inmate to go to the house to perform sex acts on the warden.

Black women were forced to "clip" grass on the prison grounds with their bare fingers, and for meals were permitted to eat only whatever white women prisoners left behind them. Women prisoners were beaten with leather straps.

When prisoners under sentence to the state prison were transported from the local county jail, all the prisoners—men and women—were put in the same covered van and it was usual that the women began their prison term by being gang raped in the van.

Lawsuits claim brutally to women in some prisons that match those in some men's institutions. In Louisiana, seven women prisoners brought suit recently in a federal court claiming that at the state prison the seven women were punished by being beaten, stripped to their underwear, three of them handcuffed together in one cell, four of them handcuffed together in another cell, and gassed repeatedly with a spray that burned their eyes and made it difficult for them to breathe, and that this went on for four days.

Last October in Miami, a civic committee of business and professional women protested "inhuman living conditions" for female prisoners in Dade County Jail.

The committee said women, often incarcerated for months, had total recreation facilities consisting of one inmate lived in one large cell, rain leaked through windows soaking beds, very young girls in jail for their first time were left alone with experienced older prisoners and no exercise was permitted for weeks at a time.

In Michigan, Carole Morgan, a teacher for two years for women prisoners in the Detroit House of Corrections, said that an 18-year-old girl prisoner, finishing her term on a drug charge, once came to her hysterical because shortly before she was scheduled

for release she was visited by a detective from the city narcotics squad who told her that if she did not become an undercover agent for them they would make sure that she served more time in jail.

Listening to the Inmates
Jane Meyerding, 21, was held in Monroe County Jail, N.Y., while being tried on charges arising from raids on Selective Service and FBI offices in Rochester. She said she and other women were stripped and searched before and after each court appearance, a process in which they did not resist but did not cooperate.

"When we were convicted and brought back to the jail they had a real field day. There was a man there when we were searched. The men brought us up the stairs and when it was my turn he put the handcuffs on me and dragged me over to where they wanted to strip-search me. He didn't take too much part in the actual stripping because I was just being passive."

During the trial I wrote the judge a letter and he told the marshals to come over and stop the strip searches. But after the conviction they started all over again.

Compared to the institutionalized cruelty and neglect typical of many women's prisons, the residents of Alderson are fortunate and the experience of others casual and cool. The accents ranged from Deep South black to university British. To the casual eye, it could have been the board meeting of an integrated middle-class PTA.

Some of the bitter complaints would require relocation of Alderson. For example, the separation of women from children, the lack of public transportation. Of twenty-eight women, 22 raised their hands when asked how many had minor children. When asked how many had not seen their children since their imprisonment, the same number of hands went up.

But the most bitter and impassioned complaint would take no revolution: quick response on parole applications, together with a detailed reason for denial of parole. At stake are years of a woman's life, but present procedure is casual.

A parole examiner visits the institution and interviews the prisoner in sessions that inmates say range from three to five minutes, with a few 10 or 15 minutes. Then there is silence for three to five minutes. If the parole is denied, there is no reason given except, possibly, "lack of progress."

Nothing causes more frustration in prison than the mysterious and indefinite working of parole boards.

As one young woman, interviewed at random in her dormitory, said, "I got good time. I know I did wrong. I'm doing good time. I take courses, I have a good record here. My mother is taking care of my kids. I get no answer from the parole board except not enough progress."

It is what that means and nobody can tell me. Why keep trying? I mean if you want to drive someone crazy, then put them in an institution and never let them know when they're getting out."

In that respect, men and women in prison have a common experience.

Next: The initiation — juveniles.



VIRGINIA McLAUGHLIN sophisticated warden