

# *Life at Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institution*

by *Cindy Arason*

I could never have envisioned myself within the environs of a jail. I was always fascinated by these places, hidden from the public, where a chosen few led out their lives: a world I thought I would never be a part of. Little do we know of what fate holds in store for us, though, and I now find myself in jail

My reduced status of "inmate" vs. citizen began in September 1981 when I was tried for armed robbery. No longer did I have any rights; no longer was I treated as an individual who was deserving of any respect or civility, I became a number, a person without a name and scarcely deserving of one—an encumbrance to society.

My introduction to the way of life for the prisoner began in Calgary in Calgary Remand Centre. From the moment you arrive you do what you are told and you have no choice in the matter. You're searched and showered and you and your mattress head into population of City Cells.

Population consists of twelve bunks in one dorm. You realize quickly you are a part of this now and it is vital you adjust readily. You will be spending twenty-four hours of the day, every day with these women.

I spent three weeks in Calgary Remand before I was sentenced to two years less a day. Those three weeks of dead time soon turned out to be of considerable value. My arrival at Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute in October was not as traumatic as *it* could have been. My familiarity with several

women from the Calgary Remand Centre who had preceded me to Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute eased the move from one institution to another. The new arrival, the "fish", is most often watched closely by her fellow prisoners in order to establish the "solidity" of the individual before she is accepted. Being known beforehand makes this transition easier.

Acceptance depends a great deal on the understanding of the inmate code—what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. Provisions of this code entail:

1. allegiance to other inmates as a group,
2. no fraternization with "authorities" unless firmly imbedded within the core group,
3. ability to stand alone and in no circumstances go to the "screws" for help.

Much of the inmate code is ambiguous and to a large degree simply depends on the socialization skills of the individual.

An important concept which must be understood is that of "the rat". "The rat" is anyone who gives information to screws or police authorities for her own benefit to the detriment of others. But often the rat is simply an individual who is not accepted. Usually of weak character and unable to defend herself, she will be pigeonholed at the least provocation. Continually harassed and ill-treated she will eventually break down and flee to the guards as her only recourse, seeking sympathy and understanding. This defensive action

further stigmatizes the girl in her antagonizes' eyes. Even if the guards are not initially involved, this is of little import for they will be soon. The strong prey upon the weak. The emotionally impaired seek to strengthen themselves by denouncing those unable to stand up to them. These are called the "heavies". They seek to maintain a law and order of their own by imposing their will on others. The more they can control their environment, the more they are justified in doing so, as they are maintaining an equilibrium—or so they choose to believe. They are insecure individuals who cannot successfully manage their own lives so attempt to manage others, thereby demonstrating a perverse control.

I find this situation particularly repulsive and am alarmed at the possible destructive repercussions. Continual witnessing of this type of behaviour forces the individual to harden her feelings. She learns to ignore the situation, since to intervene could result in her own alienation from the group.

The inmate code, in regard to its stand on fraternization with the guards is a built-in defense mechanism. It is hard to forget that they are your jailers. When they say jump, you ask how high. Disrespect for or disobedience to any of their rules leads to a stay in solitary. The inmate must learn to listen but not to hear. The guards have too much control over your behaviour to allow you to mingle with them. Searches and direct orders are continual reminders that you have no say.

In order to protect your individuality you build up an immunity to them; they become an external force that is to be little considered and responded to automatically with no feeling. Respect for authority figures is, considerably lessened. Self-preservation dictates that you must learn how to circumvent them and thus you become adept at lying, cheating, and stealing. You cannot deal effectively with them without reverting to subterfuge means. This attitude is not transferrable to your dealings with other inmates, however.

Confinement for considerable time periods leads to a very complex and intense socialization process. You must either make it or break it and, hopefully, you will make it. You learn a lot about your fellow man.

One of the first insights I had into people was the realization of my comparative naivete. Never before had others been so closely incorporated into my own life. I became aware of how multi-faceted

people are and discovered how difficult it was to judge any person. I also became aware of the darker side of each person. In my innocence I was astounded at the baseness, deceit, the viciousness, and immorality which was unveiled to me. I no longer accepted people at face value or believed in their innate goodness. It was a comparable experience to men fighting side by side in wartime. They see much horror and treachery and they gain a far deeper insight into their fellow man. Close-knit friendships develop and veterans reminisce about days gone by, but it is a world that is never to be recaptured and dissipates at its culmination. Such is the world of prisoners.

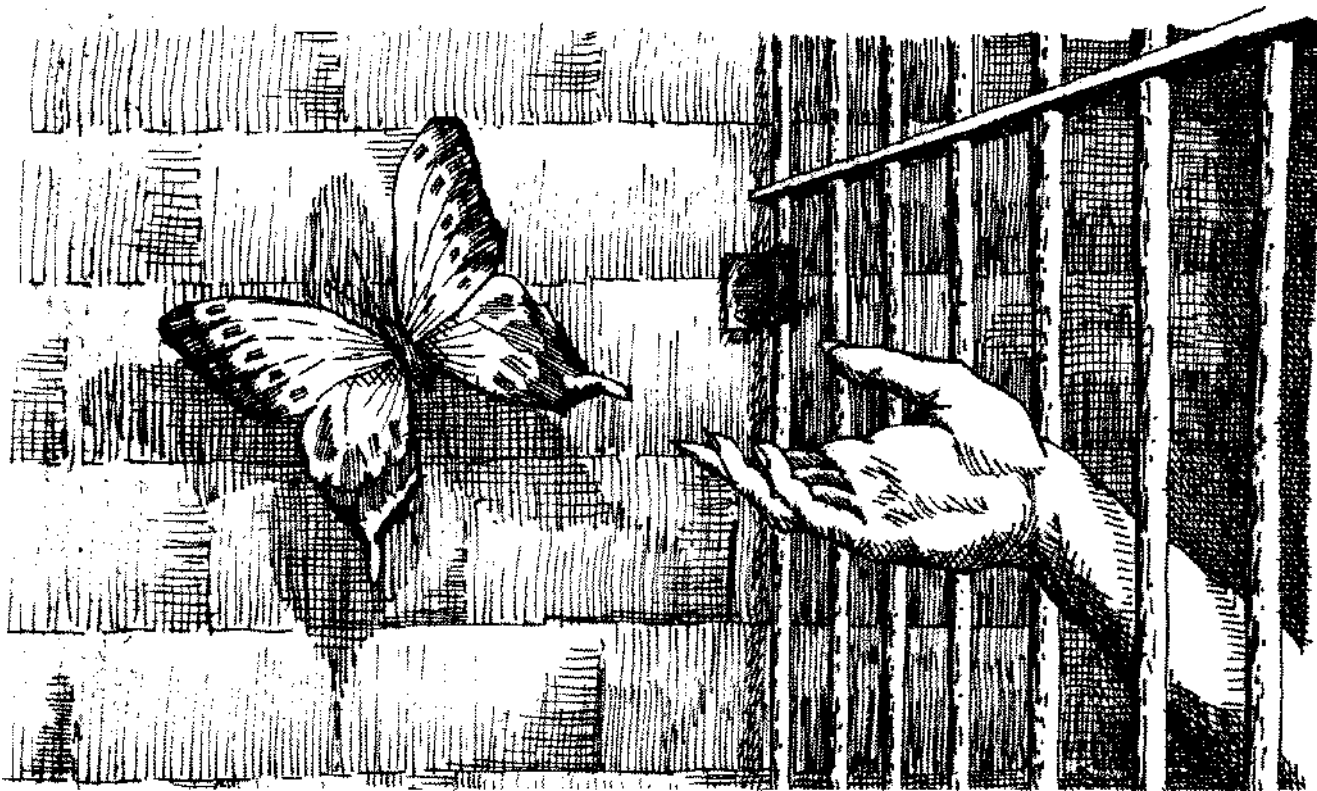
The moral fiber of the average inmate is soon reduced to that of a "survival of the fittest" mentality. This is not conducive to charitable or Christian attitudes.

Inmates are also faced with incredible loneliness. They are closed off from their families, friends, and loved ones. The extent

of their reunion with their loved ones is limited to two hours per week. Many inmates rarely, if ever, have any visitors. People quickly forget your presence if you are not there to remind them regularly.

Homosexuality is not rare in jails. Is it surprising? While some women have definite homosexual tendencies, many others succumb because they lack inner strength and prevail upon others to reassure them of their worth. A love affair is a very positive reinforcement and provides direction and fulfillment otherwise lacking.

Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute purports to be co-ed. It is co-ed inasmuch as it is to comparable to offering a steak to a starving dog and then removing it. As far as co-ed activities go they are limited to church functions, Native Brotherhood meetings, and the odd social. Church functions dictate no conversing—only listening to the word of God. Few whites attend Native Brotherhood and for the majority of the socials you require a



ffiusitanooiii Wayne Allison

visitor from the outside world to attend.

With the advent of summer they have initiated a sportsfield once a week.

A few of the jobs are co-ed—*men* and women working together. This is the only break in the system.

Relationships limited to co-ed functions are subjected to unrealistic expectations on each person's part. Having so little time to spend together, couples rarely get to know one another well and their involvement is based more on dreams and wild hopes.

Whatever the drawbacks, however, I feel the situation is far more healthy than total segregation of the sexes. I find it reassuring to have my sexuality confirmed by the mere presence of males.

On the whole, living conditions for the women are much more habitable than those for men. There are twenty women to a block as compared to fifty for the men. The fact that there are only fifty women while there are four hundred men accounts for a great many differences. Smaller numbers permit more functional arrangements in regard to laundry, yards and gym, phone calls, and visiting.

One aspect of the female confinement totally alien *to* the male is that of the level system. Here, women must work their way up from Lower Cell Block to Upper Cell Block to Closed Dorms. Inmates in Lower Cell Block cannot have radios, hobbies, or attend any co-ed functions. Inmates in Closed Dorms live in a boarding house type atmosphere with roomettes shared by two girls with a separate T.V. room. They may have up to three sets of personal clothing, group passes, attend all co-ed activities, hobby privileges, and there is greater freedom of movement with no lock-up at night.

On the male side, all inmates are treated equally. There are no special

privileges.

Does the level system provide incentive? I doubt it. There seems to be little thought given as to the merits of those who have advanced more readily than others. It is ineffectual and pointless.

What transpires within the confines of these walls does not provide us with answers as to how these women *end* up here nor why they return.

The majority of the female prisoners range in age from twenty to twenty-five years of age. Eight per cent of them are single although 75 per cent claim close family relationships. Their parents' income level is less than twenty thousand per year in 75 per cent of the cases. Seventy-two per cent have less than grade twelve education and only one had any college education.

More than half have been in jail before. One quarter had specific job training or employable skills (i.e., hairdressing, book keeping, office work). The remainder had either no job skills or had been previously employed where few job skills were necessary, and were generally poorly paid (i.e., waitress, babysitter/housekeeper, factory worker).

Less than 40 per cent worked at least 60 per cent of the year. Forty per cent supplemented their income via illegal activities, and for 30 per cent illegal activities provided most of their income. Fifty per cent were heavy drug users (daily).

In summation, it does not look healthy: few job skills, limited education, lower middle class backgrounds, previous involvement with the law, drug dependencies, and no clear cut plans or goals.

What can be done to help? What is being done?

Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute does not offer much in the way of vocational training. Bi-monthly there are two openings in an Industrial and Construction

Labourers' Program. There is one opening for women in autobody.

As far as educational opportunities, you are able to complete your high school. Any university courses are offered only through correspondence and are of a limited nature and must be done on your own time.

Most important there is a deplorable lack of counselling and psychological services. Grant MacEwan College offers a thirty day program entitled Life Skills. Other than this there is no concern for the individual. It sometimes takes months to see a psychologist and there is no opportunity to discuss your problems or seek guidance in the selection of goals. No helping hand is proffered. If there have been no changes in the person here why should they change upon release?

From Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute, inmates may go *to* Belmont in Edmonton or to a halfway house. In both instances they are able to locate employment so that upon release they are not bereft of funds to re-establish themselves as part of the community. If they are released directly, they almost invariably have no money and no place to go. Is it little wonder that many return?

The returnee rate at the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute has reportedly been as high as 95 per cent. Who is at fault—the system or the inmate?

Upon release the ex-con is unexpectedly thrown upon his own resources totally unprepared. Here-tofore, their lives have been lived for them.

Many come to know the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute as their home. One girl recently punched a matron in the eye; she refused to leave. Here they have friends, here they have no worries or cares. On the street they have nothing. It is sad. Isn't there something someone can do to help ? \*