

Prison Journal No. 9, June 16, 2006

Today marks my one month down at the Federal Prison Camp (FPC) in Yankton, SD. I am not unfamiliar with this FPC. Back in the 1990's I did three separate bits here. It was my preferred place of incarceration in the 90's. I never thought I would get back to the FPC since it started to specialize as a drug and alcohol (DAP) facility. But times have changed and so has FPC Yankton.

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) opened this prison camp in 1988. It was the campus of Yankton College, the oldest higher education institution in the Dakota territories. It was sitting empty for five years. Yankton College was started in 1881 as a congregational church-sponsored school. It is located right in the middle of a residential neighborhood in Yankton, SD, 90 miles from Sioux Falls, SD. Yankton is a city of 15,000 people. The campus sits on 32 acres of prime land with 12 buildings. The first time I stepped foot on this campus was in the winter of 1968. I was a senior at Dowling High School in Des Moines and a carload of us football players drove up to Yankton for a recruiting visit. It was in the middle of a snow storm. I do remember eating a meal at Warren Center. We did not stay long. None of us were impressed with the place. We left that night; didn't even meet the coach. They still use the Warren Center for the camp cafeteria. Back then Yankton College was known for being a party school. It lost its accreditation and closed in 1983. The most famous alumni was Lyle Alzado, the all pro NFL player, who according to school folklore single handedly created the party school reputation for the college.

By the time the BOP bought the campus, the buildings and grounds were in poor shape. This would change. Throughout the remaining 80's and 90's the Federal government put a lot of money and inmate sweat and labor into renovating the buildings and beautifying the grounds of the campus. Today the campus buildings and property are in the best shape they have ever been in. They have always had a first class horticulture program here where inmates can get a certification in a professional level horticulture apprenticeship. When I first hit the campus this time, I was so impressed with the grounds. The grass is a vibrant green. There are flowers everywhere of every kind. The trees and bushes are healthy and full. The town could be in the midst of a drought and you would not know it by being on this campus. They have an automatic watering system with an unlimited water supply and tons of fertilizers to keep the place green and lush.

If you were to drive around this camp today, which the public can do, you would not believe it was a federal prison camp. Except for the posted BOP signs and the sight of men in army surplus clothes, the place could pass for a small well-endowed private college whose campus could be featured in Better Homes and Gardens.

A lot of things have changed since my last visit to FPC Yankton in 1999. Some of them are big and others are small, yet they all tell the same story. The first thing a prisoner notices is the quality of food. I used to call this place "camp yum-yum" because of the high quality of food that was served then. I wouldn't give this camp the same compliment today. They used to have a salad bar at the lunch and supper meals. Not any more. Milk is available only in the mornings at breakfast time. The meats are of a poorer quality, lots of gristle in the beef. Their roast beef is as tough as leather. They started serving ½ of an 8 oz. hamburger on hamburger day to stretch their limited supply. Commissary food saves many a day for the poor food they serve here.

The really big difference that explains all the other changes is the increase in the inmate population. The last time I was here we had just over 500 inmates. Today the number is closer to 850 and climbing. They expect to reach 950 by 2007. Why the increase? The

short answer is the whole BOP system is hemorrhaging. The federal government cannot build prisons fast enough. More population boom. This had been going on since the 1980's. It has not let up. With over 2,000,000 people locked up in the USA, both state and federal prison systems are having a hard time finding places to house all their inmates.

The long answer for the FPC Yankton situation is that it's special DAP emphasis is no longer that special. Many BOP facilities have DAP's. And the Bush administration frowns on what they call "free standing" FPC's. Free standing FPC's are not attached to higher security prisons. In this era of sky rocketing prison populations, there is less and less federal dollars to spend. Like most domestic government programs, the BOP is being asked to do more with less because of our current wars overseas. So, even though it is cheaper to imprison an inmate at FPC Yankton than it is at any higher security facility, it is even cheaper to house an inmate in a FPC that is attached to an already existing higher security facility. So to justify its continued existence, FPC Yankton has to increase its inmate population base from the 500's in the 1990's to close to 1,000 by 2007.

What that has meant for the housing of inmates is the overcrowding of the three inmate living quarters. Because of its understanding with the city of Yankton, the camp is not allowed to build any new buildings on the site. When I first arrived, I was placed in the Kingsbury Housing Unit. It is a big old building that was built in 1915. I was placed in its basement in a room that was one of the four TV rooms when I was last housed in Kingsbury. There were nine bunk beds and 18 inmates in this room now. In fact, all the TV rooms in Kingsbury's basement have been turned into dorm rooms. The four TV's are now placed in the four corners of the old common room. In order to hear a TV program, an inmate must now buy one of the radios sold at the commissary store. The radios can pick up the audio signal of the four TV's on different set frequencies. With this change Kingsbury can now hold fifty more inmates than it did in 1999. Today it houses 350 inmates, with the same number of phones, washers and dryers and a lot less common area than it had in 1999.

Two weeks into my stay I was mercifully moved to the Lloyd Housing unit. Kingsbury is not air-conditioned and the summer months in southeast South Dakota can be unbearably hot and humid. Because of my age and heart condition, I managed to get a medical deferment to move to a bottom bunk in the Lloyd Housing Unit, on the ground level. Lloyd has air-conditioning. The Lloyd building was the newest building on the campus built in the 1960's. It is a two-story building. When I first started serving time here, the 2nd floor served as the administration's offices and the ground floor served as the visitors' area and the Officer's Control Room. The visitors' area was one of the big plusses about the Camp in the 1990's. They had both a large indoor area with a separate area for children to play and watch VCR movies and a large outdoor area with picnic tables.

All this has changed. In 1999 the administration offices were moved to the Ward building, one of the last of the college buildings renovated. And the Lloyd second floor was turned into a living area for inmates. A couple of years ago, the ground floor was taken over for more inmate living space and the visitors' area was moved to the Fargo building. The Officer's Control Room remained in the Lloyd building, plus they are currently building a 12 man disciplinary cell block on the ground level of Lloyd, known as "the hole". The inmate living quarters in the Lloyd building is all large dormitory areas with two man bunk beds.

They are still working on getting the bathroom and shower area done for the ground level of Lloyd building. So, those three of us who live on the ground level must use the 2nd floor bathroom and showers. To reach these facilities, we have to use an outdoor staircase. This added inconvenience in the middle of the night when I need to relieve myself brings the whole idea of doing time at a prison camp into a new level of reality.

The real tragedy in moving the visitors area to the Fargo building is that there is only half the space there that was available in the Lloyd building with no outdoor visiting area. Add to this the 350 more inmates who might get visits and you have a real space problem. The problem was solved by discontinuing the Thursday night visit and dividing the inmate population into two, allowing visits for each inmate every other weekend. I am told the visiting room is always very crowded and some people have been turned away, or had their visiting time cut short because of over crowding.

Because there are more inmates with the same number of BOP personnel to work at the camp most of the programs that serve the inmates have been greatly diminished. The library and rec area is less available as is the chapel. Religious programs have been greatly reduced. Something that I felt was unique about FPC Yankton in the 1990's was the presence of Native Americans especially from the Lakota Tribe. They used to have at least two sweat lodges a week and Indian Pow-Wows twice a year in the 1990's. Today they are no longer allowed Pow-Wows and are limited to just one sweat a week. This reduction of weekly sweats has caused friction between the Native inmates who used to have their own weekly sweat, and the Anglos who wish to participate in a weekly sweat. And even though there are a number of apprenticeship programs available in the service and trades fields, there are so few of them available that the number of inmates who can participate in these programs is minimal. The federally-funded higher education programs were pretty much stripped from the BOPs in the 1990's. There has been no real improvement in this area either. It's a real shame because the place lends itself to being a center for education.

When I was here in the 1990s, everyone knew there were more inmates than work to be done. Still there was a pretense that everybody was supposed to have a job and be working. People were not allowed to bring books to read or to sleep at their work site. Looking busy while doing nothing became an art form. Now there is no pretense about working at the work site. People can bring books to read and they can sleep if you wish. On any given day, at least half of the inmate population either sleeps or reads the entire work day. It is one of the few places in the BOP where it is not getting the 12 cents an hour's worth of work from inmates.

The demographics of the inmate population have also changed. The last time I was here, close to 20% of the inmate population was Hispanic and another 15% was African American. Now no more than 10% of the population is non-white. And better than 85% are here on drug charges. Most of them are first-time nonviolent offenders, people who were users turned dealers to support their addictions. These are not the well-educated, professional white-collar types, mostly working class white guys who are more likely to have tattoos than any post high school education.

FPC Yankton is one of five remaining "stand-alone" FPC's in the BOP. The guards I have talked with believe the BOP will try to keep this camp open as a showcase FPC to show the public it can run a prison camp with no fences right in the middle of a residential neighborhood in small town middle America. This explains why the buildings and grounds are so well kept. And it is another example of the universal run of thumb for inmates in the BOP when trying to figure out why the BOP does what it does, "it's not about us".

There is a walking track right in the middle of the campus with horseshoe and bocce ball courts inside the track. There are also two tennis courts inside the track but the nets have been removed. I asked some of the inmates why the nets are not put up. They told me that the last warden took them down because he felt it made the place look too much like a country club to the neighbors. This camp is all about what looks good to the public; it never

was about the inmates. The overall objective the camp these days is to stay open and keep the existing BOP jobs in Yankton. If that means doubling the prison population and stuffing inmates into the three already overcrowded living units, so be it. If that means running a prison camp with 50% more inmates with the same budget and personnel you had in the 1990's, it can be done. And if our Yankton neighbors are not made aware of the increases in inmate numbers and continue to see a beautifully run facility, then Yankton FPC has a place in the BOP.

Still, all things being relative and given the hemorrhaging BOP system, the overcrowding and shrinking of budgets that is taking place in all BOP facilities and some of the god-awful places the BOP is contracting with for-profit, county and state facilities to handle their overflow (my own 2 ½ month journey to get to FPC Yankton as an example) this prison camp in Yankton, SD, still earns its "Club Fed" label. Doing time here in Yankton is doing time as an elite person, a gilded cage by any other name.

In my next person journal, I will share more about what my life is like day to day and about some of the men I share my time and space with. Just over two months to go. I'm looking forward to returning home to the Catholic Worker.