

Prisoners Leave Lorton—The Prequel

Sour milk led to unrest at the workhouse

By Irma Clifton

Anyone who lived in the Lorton area before the DC Prison closed will remember the hair-raising stories told about events that occurred there. From the buzz of helicopters overhead to sirens blaring in the dead of night to police combing through backyards in search of escapees; it all happened within easy memory of a lot of local folks.

When the prison closed for good in 2001, its prisoners were sent to other prisons throughout the country—many to federal facilities and some to state-operated jails. But this was not a new occurrence in the DC prison system's history. Before the construction of the reformatory and penitentiary, felons with longer sentences were routinely shipped via train to Albany, New York; Leavenworth, Kansas; and Atlanta, Georgia. They were accompanied by prison guards and watched closely by railroad detectives. The more recent transfers were accomplished by airplane and bus.

Even after the construction of the Reformatory, there was a time when large numbers of men were transported to federal prisons. One time in particular occurred in 1933, when more than one hundred prisoners who had been deemed "ringleaders" and "trouble makers" in a prison demonstration (carried out to protest the quality of food served in the prison mess hall) were sent to the federal penitentiary in Atlanta and the new federal prison at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

One Saturday night trouble began brewing when some convicts objected to the food being served and complaining that they were served sour milk. Captain M. M. Barnard investigated the complaint, and, finding it valid, dismissed the chef. However, beneath the surface there was a tense relationship between the Captain and A. C. Tawes, Superintendent of Lorton, resulting from a struggle for power at the prison. Captain Barnard was seeking Superintendent Tawes' retirement as a way to get rid of him. The Captain had the support of the D.C. Board of Public Welfare under which the prison was organized. Tawes was resisting the forced retirement and, from all accounts of the time, was popular and well-liked, (especially by the convicts).

On the morning following the mess hall disturbance, Captain Barnard called a mass meeting in an attempt to quiet any further disruptions at the prison, but Superintendent Tawes interrupted the meeting shouting, "You know the trouble has been caused by bad food, and you know I have tried to improve the food for two years." Tawes was accused of openly inciting the prisoners against Barnard and attempting to organize a distinct anti-Barnard faction within the prison walls.

Unrest continued in the prison and as a precaution 75 police officers from the District were ordered to Lorton to be at the ready if any trouble should develop. District firemen were positioned near the prison as rumors had spread that the prisoners may try to set fires, but later there was no evidence found to substantiate this. Armed with sub-machine guns, Winchester rifles, heavy police pistols and tear gas bombs, the police remained within sight of the dormitory windows, while inside the guards were searching the prisoners and weeding out those they considered troublemakers. Knives

and other sharpened weapons were found on some prisoners and after the search those prisoners who had been identified as ringleaders were taken from their dormitories and segregated in a newly constructed prison building with cells.

To avoid any further threat of violence it was decided that the prisoners deemed responsible for the near insurrection should be banished from Lorton and sent to federal prisons. Less than two weeks after the trouble began over prison food, sixty two prisoners were led out of their solitary confinement in shackles, marching in pairs to a steel rail prison car which had been hauled to a railroad spur near the prison. The thirty white men, thirty one African American men and one Chinese man boarded the train in their prison-issued denim and began the journey to Atlanta. They were escorted by two prison guards, six Washington policemen and five railroad detectives. Among those cast out of Lorton that day was Bernie Fegen, a former Washington policeman convicted of a hotel holdup who, along with several other prominently know criminals of the day made the trip south. A second train would later transport forty-six recalcitrants to Lewisburg.

All this over some sour milk!



Although this photo was taken in the 1940's it clearly shows that there were no walls or fence surrounding the prison. Credit Photo courtesy of the Orsinger Collection at the Workhouse Museum



This photo of inmates working in the corn fields around the reformatory is from the 1940s Cr Orsinger Collection at the Workhouse Museum