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A Brief History of California's Prison Camps

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The history of the forty-three adult (and two juvenile) prison fire camps that dot the state of California today, housing more than four thousand men and women, can be traced back to the opening of the first permanent forestry camp co-managed by the California Department of Corrections and the Division of Forestry in 1946 at Camp Rainbow in Fallbrook, California. But the history in California of putting state prisoners to work outdoors and housing them in open camp settings is in fact quite a bit older, dating back at least to the opening of the first state road camp in 1915. One might go back even further to 1850, when California began the practice of having convicted offenders build roads while housed in county road camps and later temporary road camps established out of Folsom and San Quentin (Chernin 1937: 12-46).

From the opening of the first state prison road camp in 1915 the program expanded rapidly, and by 1924 about one in eight male state prisoners in California were incarcerated not at one of the state's two famous walled prisons (i.e., San Quentin or Folsom), but rather in a road camp (Chernin 1937: 149). At their peak road camps housed 665 men¹ (Chernin 1937: 149), a small number by today's standards but a substantial proportion of the total prison population at the time. Starting in the 1930s the numbers of prisoners housed in road camps began to decline—a decline, it turns out that lasted nearly half a century, with the last road camp operating until 1974 (California State Archives, F3717: 1779).

Those familiar with California's fire camps today may be surprised to learn how much the road camps have in common with the fire camps as they exist today. The primary work goal was, of course, different—with road camp inmates building many of California's more remote highways and secondary roads, including parts of Highway 2 in Los Angeles County and segments of Highway 101 along the northern coast (Chernin 1937; Yaley 1980), whereas fire camp inmates today work to prevent and fight wildfires and complete other projects for the local and regional community. And yet there are also remarkable similarities. For instance, prisoners in road camps after a 1923 amendment to the law governing road camps received a wage for their labor in addition to good time credits (Chernin 1937: 53-58), somewhat akin to what is earned by those housed in fire camps today. Furthermore, by most accounts the food was better in the camps than in the prisons (Blow 1920), and those in the camps enjoyed relative freedoms such as the ability to move about the camp somewhat freely (within certain rules and boundaries) and were considered "on their honor" not to escape as there was no fence or other secure boundary—again not altogether different from today. Some final similarities include the fact that those in the road camps had to work hard (or risk being sent back to a walled prison), that the work was dangerous, and that those doing time in the road camps periodically took advantage of their relative liberties and got into trouble with camp authorities (Chernin 1937).

In addition to some programmatic differences between the road camps and the modern fire camps (especially insofar as earlier camps tended to have looser eligibility requirements, a lack of female prisoners in camps prior to 1983, and less contact with the public), a notable difference is that road camps were understood and presented by correctional administrators and those outside corrections in a manner very different from today. Specifically, prison road camps in California tended to be viewed as just another way of putting convicts to work to save the state money; rehabilitation and reform of those housed in the road camps was mostly an afterthought, something believed to be positive if it happened to occur, but never a major focus of those running and administering the road camps (Goodman n.d.). Here California was neither a leader nor a laggard, for many other states (especially in the west) had prison road camps, some created earlier and some larger than California's program (e.g., New York Times 1913; United States Department of Agriculture 1916).

As mentioned above, the first permanent forestry camp opened shortly after WWII in Fallbrook, California, and was named Rainbow. Unlike the temporary or interim forestry and harvest camps operated during the war (Viargues 1960), these new forestry camps were built and designed to last—and last they did, with Rainbow, for instance, still operating proudly today and, beginning in 1983, home to several crews of female inmate firefighters. The number of forestry camps grew steadily in the 1940s and 1950s, and got a real boost when Governor “Pat” Brown made a promise in 1959 to double the size of the Conservation Camp Program (as it became known in 1958) (Thorpe 1972: 92-101). At its peak in 1967 (in terms of the proportion of prisoners in forestry camps) camps held about 2,680 adult inmates (and 320 youth), or about 8.5% of the total prison population (Thorpe 1972: 245); several thousand inmates were also housed in newly built conservation centers designed as training centers for the camps (see, for example, California Department of Corrections 1968: 113-115). After 1967 the Conservation Camp population began declining, in part due to across the board cuts demanded by California Governor Ronald Regan (Thorpe 1972: 239-251), and by 1976 there were less than a thousand inmates housed in forestry camps (Janssen 2009).

Life in the forestry camps in many ways continued the patterns established in the road camps (which operated, albeit in diminished numbers, until 1974). Like their predecessors and contemporaries in the road camps, forestry camp inmates used hand tools to shape the land, clearing swaths of land for fire breaks and fire lines instead of grading the land for road construction. Rewards were similar, including good time credits, modest wages, and living conditions more closely resembling that enjoyed by “free” citizens, especially in terms of better food and greater relative freedoms than experienced by those in traditional walled prisons (see, for example, Goodman n.d.; Janssen 2009; Thorpe 1972). California's prison highway and forestry camps shared what might be considered a social compact between correctional employees and those imprisoned in the camps: sweat and time in the form of hard labor were exchanged for what by most accounts were living conditions considerably more pleasant than behind prison walls (Goodman n.d.).

There were, not surprisingly, some important changes over time that unfolded in the forestry camps. For example, an effort was made to make assignment to a forestry camp more formal and systematic in the 1960s, and there was an effort to “scientifically” determine which inmates were a good fit for camp (see, for instance, Thorpe 1972: 126-136). Perhaps related, eligibility

requirements were gradually tightened, although it was a slow and gradual shift: as late as 1968 those convicted of homicide were still eligible for camp assignment, with about 6.2% of those in forestry camps in 1968 convicted of homicide, compared to 9.5% of the overall California prison population (Thorpe 1972: 136). Furthermore, forest camps became increasingly integrated into the community, and inmates were involved in blood drives, service projects, and so forth (Thorpe 1972: 178-186), in part because firefighting meant closer contact with the public than building remote highways (regarding some of the issues related to contact and citizenship, see Janssen 2009). Reflecting this contact, in one amusing (but revealing) letter a local resident in 1961 wrote the following addressed to the inmates at Chamberlain Creek:

I wish to thank Crew 1 in their part in fighting and controlling the Guerneville fire...

I think what amazes most of the local people is as big as the fire was and at the speed at which it started the first day that you had it under control within three days.

I [overheard] one lady in a soda fountain saying, 'Those men from the volunteer fire department in the blue outfits, you know, like the dungarees the navy men wear, well, the fire came down to my back porch, right where my wash was hanging and they came in and put it out. They didn't even get the clothes dirty.' I asked [her] where she lived and she answered, 'The Old Cazadero Road.' Then I told her that you were convicts and she said, 'I don't care who they are. They saved my house.'

So, you boys, besides not letting a house burn, you also kept the clothes clean. That's what I like to see: Clean clothes on the fire line (California State Archives, F3717: 387).

The 1960s heralded another important shift in terms of the forestry fire camps: instead of seeing prison camps as a way of putting prisoners to work primarily for the sake of saving the state money (the main focus, as we have seen, of the road camps), those inside and outside corrections began highlighting the camps' purported potential in terms of rehabilitation and changing offenders' life trajectories (Goodman n.d.; Janssen 2009). Elements and aspects of the camps that before had simply appeared as a way to keep people busy were now seen as a way to set inmates on the proverbial right path, and California began using its prison camps as a way to establish itself as a leader in modern corrections. Thus although the structure of work and life in the camps remained in many ways the same as it had for decades, the camps were now seen in quite a different light.

A thoughtful observer looking at the California prison system in the 1980s might well have predicted the demise of the conservation camp program. After all, across the U.S. (and in California) there was a powerful political movement to "get tough" on drugs and crime, and this translated in California, and across the states, into ballooning incarceration rates unprecedented historically and unmatched anywhere in the world. With the decline of in-prison rehabilitation programs (see, for instance, Janssen 2009; Petersilia 2006), work furloughs for prisoners, and so forth, the prospect of housing convicted offenders in open settings, usually with no fence or other secure boundary, undoubtedly took on a new light during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Nonetheless California and the Department of Corrections responded not by shutting down the fire camps, but actually by increasing the number of camps in the 1980s, including the opening of five camps co-managed with the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Part of this increase and flourishing is due to the fact that there was yet another change in how fire camps were packaged and understood by those inside and outside corrections, including a renewed focus on saving the state money, protecting citizens and property, and the value of keeping inmates busy (Goodman n.d.). Perhaps it is not surprising that as rehabilitation again becomes a

focus in California at least at the level of discourse—as manifest in both the renaming of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the attendant reorganization—fire camps have recently come under renewed attention and interest (e.g., FoxNews.com 2008; PBS NewsHour 2009). Given the malleability of the Conservation Camp Program, it seems likely fire camps will be around for many decades to come.

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¹ Women were not housed in prison camps in California until Rainbow began housing women in 1983.