

State Pen

Shops give jobs, wages to inmates

Stories by JANIE NAFSINGER
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Of the Emerald

Some people might not know it, but the state of Oregon runs a \$1.5 million business operation in Salem.

It's not your typical private enterprise, however.

It makes only enough profit to sustain itself. Its sole customers are state agencies like itself. And most of the work force receives wages that are far from union scale — a mere 50 cents to \$3 a day.

But these workers are prison inmates, and the unusual business they work for is Oregon State Penitentiary Industries.

Penitentiary Industries is the name given to six separate shops located at the state prison — a laundry, metal shop, furniture factory, automotive shop, upholstery department and warehouse. The shops are run much like "outside" private businesses, but they're not out to make a big profit.

The operation has two main purposes: to create work for some of the prison's 1,500 inmates, and to provide goods

and services to state institutions at low prices.

The industries, which employ some 350 inmates, are not new. The laundry itself has been around ever since the penitentiary opened in 1866, according to Ed Sparks, laundry superintendent.

"We have about 109 prisoners working here," says Sparks, a 22-year prison employee. The men handle a daily load of 7½ tons of laundry and 200 pounds of dry-cleaning, in addition to 60,000 pounds of prison laundry a month.

By mid-afternoon, few of the blue-

shirted, denim-clad inmates are to be found in the laundry building. Most of the mammoth gray and white machines — some have 800-pound capacities — have been shut down.

"The work is pretty much done by now," Sparks explains. At the laundry, open five days a week, the day begins at 6:15 a.m., and everything is shut down by 5 p.m.

"We need a work force of at least 80 to maintain (our present business)," says

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Factory work lets inmates 'escape'

It's a little after 3 o'clock on a Thursday afternoon and the furniture factory is winding down toward the end of a shift. Workers in blue jeans and denim work-shirts are moving down long aisles of electric sanders and buzzsaws. Behind the plate glass windows of the balcony office the machinery-hum is muted enough so that the ringing of the telephone is plainly heard.

Don Works, furniture factory superintendent for the past four years, answers the phone, listens for an instant, mutters an "okay" and reaches for the button on the wall. As the buzzer sounds, the men below finish cleaning up and begin lining up for the shake-down before they can return to their cells.

The furniture factory, like the laundry shop, upholstery shop and sheet metal shop nearby, is run by the Oregon State Penitentiary within the prison walls. An auto shop also run by the penitentiary lies just outside the walls.

"One of our prime functions is to make jobs for the inmates," Works says of the furniture shop. It's a statement of purpose which applies equally well to the other shops in the penitentiary's Industries program.

As superintendent of the furniture factory, Works oversees an operation with

a state Legislature-approved budget of more than \$1 million for two years. Numbers in his work force share at least one common factor: they have all been convicted of crimes resulting in sentences of one year or more in the state penitentiary.

Works agrees with other shop superintendents who say the inmates are eager to relieve the monotony of the cell time by working for 50 cents to \$3 a day in one of the prison shops. As a matter of fact, he says, the furniture factory is overstaffed.

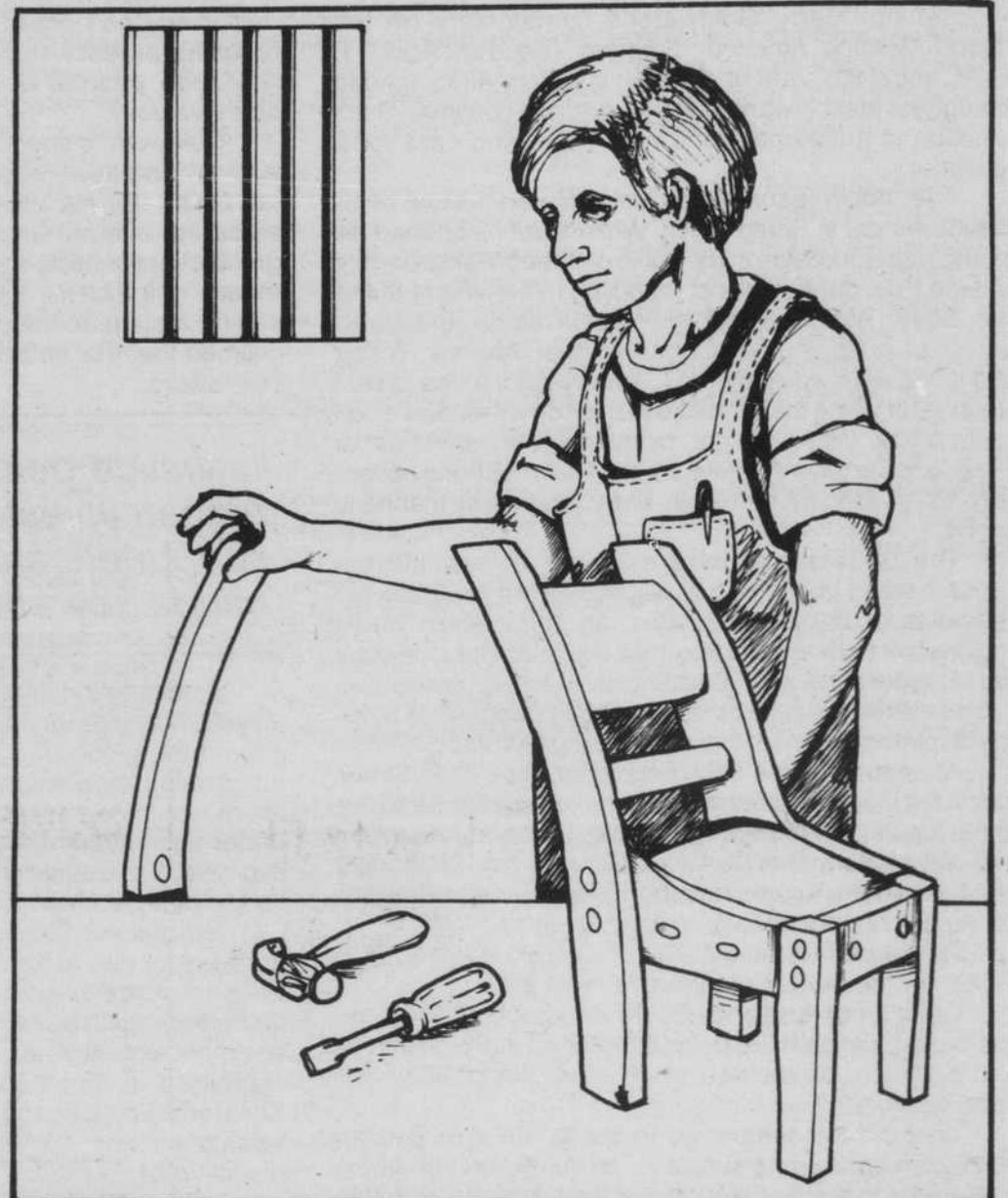
"We're overpopulated now at 120 men," he says. "I'd say we're about fifty percent overstaffed."

Because inmates are not allowed to carry cash, three-quarters of their pay is transferred to credit at the prison canteen where they can purchase food and cigarettes. The remainder of their pay is placed in a savings account the inmates collect upon their release.

The inmates begin arriving at the factory from breakfast between 7:30 and 8 a.m. After a midday break for lunch they return to work until the clean-up buzzer at 3:15 and shake-down at 3:30 p.m.

"Everyone goes through shake-

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Drawing by Terry McBride

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