

Vacaville to Chino, swimming pools and movie star killers

Greetings!
Well friends, I believe we left off in Vacaville Prison in northern California. I had just come back from the movies where I had quite an experience. Things were pretty routine after the initial settling in.

THE DUBIOUS LIFE

By Art Garcia



Art Garcia is a Vietnam War veteran who returned home to a dubious life involving some colorful incarcerations. He is the author of "Memoirs of a Vietnam vet," a collection of his columns published in Street Roots.

On several different occasions I happened to see Charles Manson. I'm sure you all have heard of him. It seems ol' Charles was trying to win some friends there at Vacaville, so he decided to buy every dorm a color television. Trouble with that was nobody wanted anything from the little weasel. I don't care much for Charles. He was always escorted by two or three correctional officers wherever he went. It wasn't for our protection, but his.

Well, I had finished my intake and was on my way to Chino, which is way down in southern California. Now, during your intake an inmate may choose three prisons where he would like to go and they say they will try to send you there. My three choices were California Men's Colony, San Quentin Ranch and Folsom Ranch, where I had once been. These prisons are all in northern California, so of course they sent me in the opposite direction: Chino State Prison.

So here I am now in Chino State where, once again, we were all put in lock-down for two weeks so they could get all our paperwork in order. You'd think after spending three months in Vacaville they'd have everything in order, but not the state of California. Time went by fast, though, and I was placed as a clerk in the captain's office. I was in a two-man cell, which was only locked at 10 at night till about six in the morning. The rest of the time we were free

to roam around.

Now, Chino was a huge prison. They had correctional officers driving around the prison in cars like a regular town. It had a small golf course, several weight yards, and a gymnasium. Why, there was even a swimming pool right outside my dorm across from the Captain's office where I worked. That made it real handy on hot summer days, and there were a lot of them in southern California.

I only had about 14 more months to do so I was considered short (as time goes) when I arrived there.

My work days were great as I worked for a Sergeant Garcia — a blonde, good-looking woman named Debbie who had a boyfriend who worked on the border patrol for California (no relation).

Debbie and I hit it off right away. I worked mostly as her clerk so we got to know each other quite well. She informed me that she boxed and was quite good, and she showed me pictures and articles of some of her bouts. Debbie also did commercials for Everlast. She said she was working as a correctional officer to keep herself in money while all the time hoping to break into movies. I guess that is a lot of people's dreams down in Southern California. Why, even I wanted to be an actor later on in life when I lived in Hollywood for a short period. The phase passed, though.

The six hours we spent together every day just seemed to fly by. I was actually enjoying being locked up. We were becoming quite close. I would pick fresh flowers out of the garden every day and place them on her desk. Sometimes if the mood struck me I would write a poem along with the flowers. Hey, come on people, I was trying to make life as easy as I could for myself, OK? Besides, she was awful easy on the eyes.

However, my cellmate told me I was crazy

to get involved with her; said I was going to get my ass in real trouble. I told him I was being real careful, besides, I said to Joe (not his real name), "You are the one who needs to be careful."

Joe played in a band called Rough on the Streets, and he said he sold drugs on the side. Well, he kept some of his old life in prison. He played his guitar and sang and sold marijuana on the side. Seems like everyone knew it. I was surprised the officers didn't. Well, turns out they did. About a week later one of the officers we named "Snake" because he would always sneak around, was hiding up in a tree and watched Joe make a sell to another inmate. Snake jumped down from the tree and scared the hell out of the two perpetrators. The Snake had struck again!

My cellmate was led away in handcuffs, and I was still writing poems and clipping roses for Debbie. The only problem was, although I liked Debbie, I was not in love with her. I mean, come on, I was in prison and I was trying to make time as easy as I could. However, Miss Debbie Garcia was becoming quite attached to yours truly.

On the one day we didn't work together she worked in one of the guard towers. She would call me three or four times a day from there. My coworkers were getting pissed. You know what jealousy does to people. I found out one day when I was standing out by the pool talking to someone who was in the water. Well, ol' friend, seems that they had it all planned. The guy in the pool distracted me while the other guy came up behind me and pushed me in. Clothes, boots and all. Everyone got a real laugh out of that. I took it in stride. It was all done in fun, and besides, it was a hot day.

Well, while I am going back to my cell to change I guess it would be a good time to stop before we start on my story about the "Birdman of Chino." Please stay tuned!

Semper Fi!

The latest news on the prison front piles up fast

My desk has been accumulating piles of emails, web printouts, telephone messages, and other miscellaneous sources that I regularly welcome and receive from supporters of prison reform.

I read every item and appreciate being sent updates of the constant flow of prison news. Maybe I won't print or broadcast every item, but it keeps me informed when folks ask questions. It also helps me know what prison issues the audience wants to hear or read about.

So here are a few brief items that could easily fall in the cracks when they should be told.

■ Vicki Walker, the new Chair of Oregon Board of Parole: State Sen. Vicki Walker has been named chairwoman of Oregon Board of Parole. Briefly, we are reminded of the very active and supportive role Walker has played in prison reform. The story of her personal awareness of injustices in the prison system has been told often. I once was privileged to hear her speak at a Partnership for Safety and Justice gathering and still am not sure which was the most compelling part of her delivery — her passion or her indepth awareness.

Walker is a childhood victim of sex abuse, and one of her big legislative accomplishments was a law banning secret legal settlements by sex crime perpetrators.

So we in the prison reform movement are cheering the good news that Walker will now be involved full time in parole board actions.

■ Leonard Peltier's parole board hearing: It will take a few more weeks for a final decision to be announced, but supporters of Leonard Peltier are very hopeful that finally his release is in sight. Peltier, who has spent 33 years in prison for the murder of two FBI agents in 1975, has maintained his innocence to this day. Tuesday, July 28 was his first parole hearing in 15 years. Most of his supporters consider him a political prisoner. During his incarceration, Peltier has been very vocal in the campaign for Native American rights. Personally, I am hoping for his full parole and freedom.

■ Prison Blues - Made on the Inside, to be worn on the Outside: Since 1989, the Prison Blues factory has been manufacturing jeans, yard coats and work shirts made by and for Oregon inmates at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, a medium-security state prison located in Pendleton. Inmates who work in the factory and stay in the program throughout their incarceration, re-enter the outside world with skills and work ethics that enhance their probability for success and minimize recidivism. From their earnings, 80 percent is withheld by the State

of Oregon to pay for incarceration costs, victim restitution, family support and state and federal wage taxes. (It's true. Inmates in Oregon's prison industries pay taxes!)

Although many prisoners hope to accumulate a nest egg after years in work programs, the 20 percent that is left to their discretion usually goes to family support, to pay for continued education (free college for credit courses are not available) and to buy items at the prison canteen that you might think would be provided by the prison.

The good news is the quality of the fine clothes that are produced. You can learn more at www.prisonblues.com. Or send for a catalog: Prison Blues, 17230 NE Sacramento Street, Portland, OR 97230. You'll see illustrations of the items for sale as well as locations and hours of several stores in the Portland area.

■ Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem is in lockdown following a brawl: According to news reports, on Friday, July 31, 2009 at 8:06 a.m. about a dozen inmates got into a brawl. Although first aid was administered for a few participants, neither inmates or staff required medical attention.

Lockdown procedures require modified prison operations during an investigation of the incident. This means that the entire prison population will feel the effects of some limits on activities and will be subject to scrutiny until the investigation is complete.

If any of you readers hear about or read about something you think would interest the Prison Pipeline audience or Street Roots readers, please don't hesitate to send it to me. You can send items to me at ruth@msn.com or to Street Roots, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or to KBOO, 20th SE 8th Ave., Portland, OR, 97214

FROM THE DESK OF

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Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 fm. She writes regularly about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.