

# "I Paid for Another Man's Crime"



by Roy B. Eaton



How would you feel if you were unjustly imprisoned for 16 years? Here is the story

of a man who lived this experience.

I SPENT 16 YEARS in prison for a crime I didn't commit.

When the doors of Stateville prison in Illinois opened for me in April, 1956, newsmen and well-wishers expected to meet a bitter, spiteful man.

They were surprised to find I was neither. Yet I know what hate is, and at one time I could have matched anyone in bitterness. But those are things which I left behind prison walls.

If newsmen had met me during the first days of my imprisonment, they would have seen the angry man they expected. It was 1938 then, and like a lot of others I had just weathered the depression. Prosperity was around the corner at last, in the form of several valuable mines I was working in the Southwest.

Then suddenly I was arrested and extradited to Illinois. The victim of a \$40 robbery in Rock Island identified me as one of two holdup men. In those days there was

no public defender for people too poor to hire an attorney. I had witnesses in New Mexico who could have cleared me, but no money to bring them to Illinois.

I sat in my cell the night of my sentence and learned hate intimately. Then, slowly, self-pity was eaten away by something God has given man to distinguish him from other creatures. I wanted to rise above odds. What's more, I knew I could; men had done so before against even more overwhelming odds.

I began studying law, sociology, theology, psychology, and accounting. But law was my key to freedom and I concentrated on it.

It wasn't easy. Years dragged by, most of them at hard labor. My health failed, and the prison authorities lacked funds for proper medical care. Just recently, a doctor examined me and told the Illinois legislature. "He has suffered serious and permanent injury as a result of his 16 years imprisonment . . .

attributable to forced confinement, nervous and mental strain, inadequate food and medical care."

Nevertheless, I learned how to file petitions and bring action in civil courts. I bombarded authorities with legal papers. But I was blocked at every point. Officials refused to give me access to records; all requests for investigations were pigeonholed. To fellow convicts I was "bugs." They laughed at my hopes to clear my name and labeled me "the petitionin' man."

I WAS too busy battling for freedom to pay much attention, but my battle wasn't just with law terms, procedures, precedents. Inside my own heart and mind was an even tougher fight.

That old bitterness died hard; each setback gave it new vigor. Yet I knew that if it again gained control of me, I would be locked in a prison far more ruinous than one of concrete and steel. Even if I was freed, what would hap-

pen to me if hate and animosity won out?

I had seen too many victims of these two diseases in Stateville. They were as hopelessly trapped as the drug addict or the alcoholic. I wanted freedom, but I wanted to enjoy it, too. I wanted to join the world outside those walls, not fight it.

Years of failure, though, made it hard for me not to jeer at justice and the triumph of right. Then in 1947 a Federal judge in Chicago took cognizance of my case and ruled that state authorities must answer my petition. That meant producing those forgotten records. And those records, in turn, would eventually reopen investigation of the case.

Legally, that was the turning point. In the battle within myself, however, I still had a lot to learn. I had taught myself the law and how to fight injustice. But only others could help me learn how to win a final victory over malice. And I found

those others while in prison.

Injustice, I learned, is something that can happen to anybody, like a disease or an accident. But once alerted to a wrong, people will dedicate themselves to righting it. Judges, attorneys, prison officials were among those who taught me that lesson in humanity as they helped in the final years of my struggle.

State's Attorney Bernard J. Moran of Rock Island opened the last door to freedom when he obtained a confession from the actual holdup man after two years of diligent investigation. The hoodlum named his accomplice, a man already imprisoned in the state of Washington.

STATEVILLE is behind me now, and I think my stubborn legal efforts can take credit for my physical freedom. For the freedom from vindictiveness and revenge, I must thank others.

I'm still asked, "What about the people who put you in jail? What do you feel toward