

FEATURE--HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

An Example: Why the History of Prison Reform is Called “The Hidden Heritage”

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The definitive political biography of reform warden Thomas Mott Osborne—Tannenbaum, F. [1933]. *Osborne of Sing Sing*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press—was acquired by the United States Library of Congress (LOC) in its year of publication. In 2005 the Center for the Study of Correctional Education director (the current author) told a New York State jails educator about it. The book had clearly not been read before and an LOC librarian confirmed from the record that it had not been borrowed until then. That book has an introduction by US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The president had been a close friend of Osborne’s. In other words, no one, not even presidential historians, was aware of, or took the time to learn, about a very important prison reformer and prison educator. The rest of this vignette is based on the Tannenbaum book.

In 1913, after being requested by the prisoners at New York’s maximum security Auburn Prison, and with the warden’s permission, Osborne helped the prisoners organize themselves into what they later called the Auburn Prison Mutual Welfare League. The League developed their own constitution, elected representatives from each prison shop and a slate of League officers, and managed the prison democratically. It was a great success. Osborne went on to be warden at the infamous Sing Sing Prison in 1915, and later at the U.S. Naval Prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. At these locations the prisoners also developed their own Mutual Welfare Leagues, and then the Auburn, Sing Sing, and Naval Prison Leagues were in touch with each other. They even organized an “outside branch” in the free community. It was a consolidated, four site League, a system which demonstrated that the best security system is a good organizational culture. That system made a silent film called *The Right Way* in 1921, on how to do prison reform. It got a very good, half-page review in the *New York Times*. Together, the Leagues generated a great deal of public discussion throughout the U.S. on the positive results of shared management in prisons and the benefits of treating prisoners as people. This was a front page topic in many newspapers around the US. But, because of the dominant “coercion only” paradigm in the nation, that whole tradition was relegated to the hidden heritage of prison reform and prison education.

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