

'Doing time' finds new meaning today in Texas prisons

"Doing time" in a penitentiary once meant paying your debt to society by breaking rocks or stamping license plates.

Such is not the case, however, in today's sweeping prison reform movements across the country. One such reform is taking place at TAMU through the combined efforts of the Criminal Justice Council, the Texas Department of Corrections and TAMU's Engineering Extension Service.

Eight men from the TDC Walls Unit in Huntsville are engaged in a power lineman training program at Texas A&M's Research Annex.

The men were admitted to the program through a series of applications, interviews and records evaluations. "Trusty" status, good conduct records and a general education level of ninth-grade equivalent enabled the men to participate in the training program.

"We were all screened carefully," James Vincent noted. "But the most important part of our selection was our application. We had to show that we wanted the training program. We weren't coerced or 'volunteered' for the program; we had to make the first move ourselves."

Being in the program increases the prisoners' chances for parole, according to TDC Vocational Training Director Michael D. Hopson.

"By volunteering for the program, these men are saying, in effect, that they want to learn a trade that will keep them out of trouble. And the program at A&M looks especially good on their records, since they are bused from Huntsville to Bryan each day. This shows they are trustworthy individuals."

Although most of the inmates who complete the training programs at TAMU and elsewhere are paroled soon after completion of the course, Robert Davis maintains the parole possibility is not the main reason he volunteered.

"I wanted to learn a trade which would provide me with a decent living after I'm discharged," he said. "By using the knowledge I've gained through this program, I feel I can become a worthwhile citizen and stay out of situations that got me where I am now."

Olite Watson feels training programs such as he is enrolled in will greatly reduce the high rate of returnees after parole or discharge.

"Without specialized training, a man can't get a job," he noted. "About the only thing available before was chopping cotton, when you were lucky enough to get that. Without a job, a man has to resort to illegal means of providing for himself and his family, and I think this program will allow men who want to gain their self-respect to do so."

Adan Rios, who was chosen from a volunteer list of 50 inmates, said he feels fortunate to have been given the opportunity to learn a decent trade.

"I feel, for once in my life, that I'm accomplishing something," he said. "I believe I can provide a better living when I am discharged, and will have a job I can be proud of."

The inmates in the training program feel there is a need for more classes, but James Jackson expressed his frank opinion that the public must be considered above all else.

"TDC will have to be careful about who they let into the program," he said. "They can't put too many of us out in public at one time, or the public wouldn't consider it safe."

Thomas Horace believes the training program says a lot for

the current trend in penal reform.

"With a lack of training, many men resort to the same means of 'making a living' as they did before they were sent to prison," Horace said. "When we are given training like this, we feel someone cares."

Joe Hewett praised instructors in the training program, saying they are very patient with the program participants.

"The staff is very safety-minded here," he noted. "They don't

allow us to work with high voltages until they are sure we understand what we are doing thoroughly."

Companies on the "outside" are very receptive to the program, according to Hopson. He said one firm has indicated a willingness to hire all parolees who have completed the course.

"Most power and cable companies we have contacted show no reservations about hiring the men," he continued, "as long as

they know the men can do the job."

Hopson pointed out that approximately 90 per cent of the inmates completing the course are released on parole within a short time after graduation. He said those not released are employed on TDC installations performing line work on high tension lines and other electrical utility facilities.

The lineman's training program at TAMU is only one of several

vocational programs offered by the Engineering Extension Service for inmates. Other programs include a heavy equipment operator's course in the summer, and an annual water utilities course.

The inmates currently enrolled in the program have been receiving their "hands-on" training by re-wiring electrical lines at the Brayton Firemen's Training Field near the Texas A&M campus.

Course instructors reported students have done a first-rate

job at the facility, replacing lines and repairing tie-in points and other areas on electrical lines.

With the ultimate aim of criminal justice being the reforming of a criminal into a useful member of society, perhaps inmate Ollie Watson sums up the success of the training program best.

"I'm so proud to have a trade," he said quietly. "Now I can say I know how to make honest living."

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Smith resigns as library head

John B. Smith, TAMU's director of libraries, has announced his resignation, effective May 31, to accept a position as dean of library services and director of libraries at State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Smith has headed the TAMU libraries for three years and has been a member of the staff since 1966.

"We will certainly miss John Smith, who has done a remarkable job with our libraries," noted TAMU President Jack K. Williams. "His new assignment is an exciting one and we wish him all success."

Prior to joining the TAMU library, Smith was assistant law librarian at Columbia University. The College Station native is a 1960 TAMU graduate and 1963 graduate of the Columbia University School of Library Service.

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