

A Women's Prison That Resembles a

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ALDERSON, W. Va.—The scene belongs on the inside cover of a yearbook.

Couples stroll across the quadrangle, against a backdrop of Georgian brick dormitories. Massive trees, bearing the first glints of autumn, cast dark splotches under the late afternoon sun.

It is 4:30 P.M., time for the half-hour chimes. Instead a whistle shatters the calm and the couples scatter. The dormitory doors are locked as matrons begin the afternoon count, checking each room for its occupant.

This is the Federal Women's Reformatory. Except for a small facility at Terminal Island, Calif., is the only Federal prison for adult females in the United States.

While the news in recent weeks has focused the attention of the nation on conditions in prisons for men, Alderson, in its sylvan setting, is also feeling the pressures that led to the eruptions at Attica and San Quentin. Earlier this fall, Alderson had a confrontation between inmates and guards.

Tokyo Rose Served There

It was in Alderson that Tokyo Rose, the Japanese radio broadcaster whose seductive voice was beamed at American G.I.'s during World War II, served six years for treason.

She probably met Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, arrested for subversive activities and jailed in 1955 for 28 months. Mrs. Flynn later recounted her experiences in "The Alderson Story." Her book discussed overcrowding, lesbianism, and monotony, criticizing the prison's failure to provide rehabilitation. Officials admit these conditions still exist to varying degrees.

Even Mrs. Flynn, however, appreciated the pastoral setting. Alderson is located in southeastern West Virginia's rolling Greenbrier Valley, where healing spas once drew thousands of visitors. One, the Pence Springs Resort Hotel of the nineteen-twenties, has been converted into the West Virginia State Prison for Women, housing 27 inmates in spacious rooms with connecting baths.

The reformatory's collegiate atmosphere is reinforced by prison officials. They refer to the two quadrangles as "campuses," in-

mates as "residents" and dormitories as "cottages."

A population profile in April of the 600 inmates revealed that 80 per cent were between the ages of 22 and 45; 40 per cent had a history of drug usage; 54.5 were black and 75 per cent had never finished high school. The four most common offenses involved postal violations, interstate transportation of goods and vehicles, forgery and narcotics.

Each of the 17 cottages houses 30 to 50 women. Newcomers are grouped in large rooms, but the turnover is such that a resident can expect her own quarters

Inmates may wear their own clothes, smoke when and where they wish, have daily visitors and send and receive letters, uncensored except for spot checks, authorities say.

Lesbianism is widespread, but accepted as part of institutional life. There are no penalties for note passing or affectionate displays, short of sharing a bed. "Is handholding homosexuality?" the warden, Mrs. Virginia McLaughlin, demanded during a recent tour. "What's homosexuality? I believe whatever consenting adults do is their own business."

42 Demands Presented

Alderson, certainly no Attica, is the last place one might expect an uprising. But three weeks ago, a memorial for those slain at the New York prison — encouraged by the warden — mushroomed into an emotional confrontation between prisoners and staff.

Between 100 and 200 women occupied the prison's former garment factory for four days, refusing to report to their jobs. They presented prison officials with a list of 42 demands, which ranged from speedier action by parole boards to more vocational training, disinfectants for cottages and lower prices on commissary items.

At Mrs. McLaughlin's request, the Federal Bureau of Prisons intervened, dispatching armed guards from other institutions to evict the women from their stronghold. When tensions failed to die down, 66 inmates were transferred to maximum security headquarters in a men's prison at Ashland, Ky., to be sent from there to state institutions with whom the bureau has contracts.

Federal policy flatly prohibits discussions between press and inmates, and the scanty official details of the episode prevail.

'Reasonable' Demands

A "minor amount" of tear gas was used, Mrs. McLaughlin said, but no one was injured and property damage totaled less than \$2,000, all in broken windows. She pointed out that officials kept the protesters supplied with food and blankets. No reprisals were taken against the inmates who participated, she added.

Describing the demands as

"reasonable," she said those within her power have been granted and the others referred to responsible authorities.

A short, forthright woman, Mrs. McLaughlin oversees the prison from a tastefully furnished office, whose walls in eggshell-white are hung with colorful, abstract paintings.

During her 30 years in penal work — all but six months at Alderson — she has risen from a secretary to her present position, which she labels a "social change agent."

Mrs. McLaughlin said she disapproves of prisons. "You could put all but about 75 of the people here into community treatment centers and it would work. Those 75 would have to be in an institution. I'm not saying what kind."

Alderson's remote location poses special problems. It was opened in 1928 to accommodate the large number of skirted moonshiners that the Volstead Act establishing Prohibition was flushing from the Appalachian hollows.

Few Community Resources

But now most of the inmates are from cities. So are their friends and relatives, and few ever visit Alderson, which has no bus or passenger train service. An Oct. 2 demonstration, called by a coalition of leftist groups, drew 80 people, to their own surprise. The nearest large city, Richmond, is a five-hour drive.

The rural setting also makes work-release programs nearly impossible, Mrs. McLaughlin observed, and there are few community resources to enliven the educational and vocational programs.

New inmates generally work in the kitchen. They can move on to the garment factory, which turns out clothing for other Federal institutions, or train for the data processing center, servicing Government agencies. Depending on productivity and service, they earn \$20 to \$90 a month.

The trouble with Alderson, concludes a former inmate, is not that it's "a place where people are beaten and starved or anything like that. A lot of the stuff is stuff that's not in the physical fa-



Mrs. Virginia McLaughlin

within months. Though no more than a cubicle, with a bed and dresser, it is hers to decorate as she wishes, and many exhibit painstaking efforts.

Only the "maximum security" cottages, where errant inmates are punished, has bars, and those are confined to the entrance. The prison's 96 acres are surrounded by a barbed wire fence and a new lighting system will throw high powered beams on the quadrangles. But there are no observation towers, and none of the matrons — called "corrections officers" — is armed.

Campus

ilities. It's in the nature of imprisonment."

DeCourcy Squire, 22 years old, was released Sept. 3, after a year's imprisonment for destroying draft records in Rochester, N.Y. She spent nine months at Alderson and now believes prisons should be abolished.

"Having been there and living with the women there, I can't see any sense in their being locked up," she said. "They're not dangerous. They're just people."