

# Rahway Prison Has Lengthy History of Grievances

By LINDA CHARLTON

Only a few weeks ago the warden of the maximum-security facility known as the Rahway Prison Farm complained that overcrowding made it impossible to achieve the administration's proclaimed goal of rehabilitation for the 1,143 inmates.

And the best that one-ex-convict familiar with New Jersey's prison system could find to say about the facility in Woodbridge, just outside Rahway, was that "Rahway is very progressive compared with Trenton."

He was referring to the state prison in Trenton, another maximum-security institution, which was described almost 20 years ago as an "obsolete, overcrowded firetrap."

That description came from a member of a special committee set up to investigate a series of prison riots in New Jersey in 1952, of which the largest, in terms of duration and the number of inmates involved, took place at Rahway.

## Officially Opened in 1903

Construction of the Rahway facility started in 1895, and it was officially opened in 1903 as a reformatory for 16-to-30-year-old first-offenders. But by April 17, 1952, when about 230 prisoners seized a two-story

dormitory wing, holding nine guards as hostage, it was already serving as a maximum-security prison, handling the "overflow" from Trenton.

Although Alfred C. Lagner, Director of Correction and Parole in New Jersey, said last September that there had never been a prison-hostage situation in the state, both the 1952 Rahway uprising and the Trenton rebellion that preceded it by a few days—and apparently sparked it—involved the capture of hostages. In both cases, the hostages were released unharmed when the inmates capitulated.

The rioting Rahway inmates held out for 115 hours, making public the reasons for their revolt by hanging signs painted on bedsheets from the dormitory windows. "We are fighting for better food, a new parole system and no brutality," one read.

The prison authorities made no overt move to oust the rebels from their barricaded dormitory. The reason for that, it was said, was fear that the hostages might be harmed—and confidence that the men would be forced to surrender, in time, by a lack of food and water. A "slight amount" of tear gas was also used on the fourth night.

Despite one incident in which crockery was thrown at a state

official, negotiations between the authorities and the inmates were described—by that same official—as "cordial."

When the inmates surrendered, they did so on condition that there would be no physical punishment in reprisal for their revolt, and that a survey of parole practices would be made.

In the aftermath of the 1952 Trenton and Rahway riots, the investigating committee called for drastic improvements in physical conditions in the two prisons.

The wardens and prison officials said they were handicapped by a shortage of guards. And the then-New Jersey Commissioner of Institutions and Agencies, Sanford Bates, said in response to prisoners' complaints:

## Town Protests Name

"It is quite evident that prisoners do not like to be in prison. The department . . . is engaged in operating the state's prisons not particularly for the convenience of convicts, but for the protection of the public and the rehabilitation of the individual when that is possible."

According to a man who spent 37 months at Rahway—it is still known by that name despite public protest by the town after the 1952 disorders, pointing out that the facility is actually situated in Woodbridge

—there was little attempt at "rehabilitation" during his term, which ended in February, 1970.

"Inside, you live by the bells," he said. "Bells to tell you when to eat, when to stop eating, when to sleep. It's all part of the dehumanization process that's supposed to prepare you for your release."

Gov. William T. Cahill, commenting at the time of last September's riots in the Attica Correctional Facility in New York State, said of his own state's prison system, "There's so many things wrong, I could write a book."

## Instructor Comments

In 1969, the Rahway prison began offering its inmates a college-level course dealing with the labor movement, which was viewed as essential in helping prisoners make the transition back to society.

One of the original instructors in that program, James Amos of the Rutgers University Labor Education Center, said the inmates were eager to learn, "acted like gentlemen and treated me with respect."

As a result of the 1952 prison riots, a \$16-million, 504-inmate showcase prison was built in Leesburg, but the "medium security" institution was not completed until 1970—and New Jersey's prison population had increased, by then, 23 per cent over the preceding decade.

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