

Jailed Newsman Denied

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LOS ANGELES, Dec. 13—William Farr, the Los Angeles Times reporter serving an indeterminate contempt sentence for refusing to divulge the sources of a story, is being held in virtual solitary confinement in Los Angeles County jail.

Farr, a journalist for 20 years is the only prisoner among 3,700 in the jail who is being held for a civil rather than a criminal offense. But, under a state law requiring segregation of civil inmates, he is deprived of most of the privileges allowed criminal inmates.

He is confined to an 8-by-12-foot cell in the jail's hospital ward. The cell has no windows, just a 6-by-6-inch vent in the cell's steel entrance door, which until recently was covered from the outside by a metal flap.

He is not permitted to take his meals outside his cell with the other prisoners. He cannot participate in the daily exercises, watch television or have a watch. He is allowed pencil and paper. Visitors are permitted to bring him only underwear.

Superior Court Judge Charles Older, who incarcerated Farr 17 days ago, issued an order to jail officials that Farr was to be given no special privileges.

The only exception is that Farr is allowed unlimited press interviews in the jail attorneys' room. The fre-

quent flow of reporter visitors, many of whom are friends, has eased Farr's sense of isolation.

When interviewed Tuesday, Farr, a chunky 37-year-old with thinning, longish blonde hair, was in relatively good spirits. He joked that his editor had guaranteed him full salary for the first 50 years in jail, with an option to reappraise the situation at that time.

But the real possibility of a long term in jail hung over the conversation. Farr was found in civil contempt by Judge Older because he had refused to name the attorneys who were sources of a story Farr wrote while covering the Charles Manson trial in 1971. Farr was working for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner at the time, but Judge Older took no action against him until he left the newspaper busi-

ness to go to work for the L.A. County District Attorney.

By the time the case was heard, Farr was employed by the Los Angeles Times, but a California law protecting newsmen could not apply retroactively.

Farr's lawyers have exhausted all appeals through the state court system, and are now awaiting a ruling on an appeal to a U.S. District judge.

"None of the attorneys can give me any indication how long it will take," said Farr, dressed in baggy prison dungarees. "That's the grim, ominous thing. That's the only thing that really gets to me a little bit."

Farr has received 125 letters from sympathetic strangers all over the country. "I know there are people out there who care, but

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what worries me is 18 years later I'll stumble into the sunshine and people will say Bill who? Oh I remember that guy!"

Farr's days of limited activity have already grown familiar and routine. He is awakened by lights at 5 a.m. Breakfast arrives a half-hour later ("the food is surprisingly good, at least as good as what I got in the Marine Corps"). He shaves and does daily exercise of 30 push-ups and 60 sit-ups.

For the remainder of the morning he writes (he is keeping a journal) or reads the few books available to prisoners from the county library.

"I ordered six books the first day, and the guy looked at me like I was out of my mind. The first couple of days I had nothing to read. My only touch with the world was a radio playing

down the hall in the hospital ward, you know, songs like 'I'll Be Home for Christmas.' It was like a bad B movie."

Farr's Christmas, as well as his 38th birthday Dec. 22, may be spent in jail.

The afternoons are usually passed with visits from family (only 6 20-minute visits a week permitted) or press interviews. Lights out is at 10 p.m. The first night in jail was the hardest.

"I felt I was totally prepared, but when they slammed that steel door behind me, I wasn't quite as prepared as I thought. Then 'bang' at 10 o'clock lights are out. I had no warning. There was something innately frightening about absolute darkness. I'm not normally afraid, but you get the tremendous feeling of isolation and loneliness. It encompassed me.

"But I've already become institutionalized. If I can get enough reading materials, I'll be all right. I've adapted to the point where if I have to be here several years I'll bear up under it. I'm not happy, but I'm willing to do so, because there's no alternative. The judge ought to know that no amount of time here would change my mind."

Farr is convinced that his case, and the spate of other cases around the country involving challenges to reporters' First Amendment rights, "is going to discourage people from coming to us with information."

He believes, too, that the media have done a poor job in communicating the urgency of defending against attacks on the press. "We don't want any special privilege or right. These protec-

tions are for the singular purpose of serving the public. Unfortunately, the public has considerable suspicion of the media. We have to do a better job of selling.

A defense fund has been formed to help Farr fight his case. Attorneys have provided free time, but printing of briefs and other expenses have cost Farr \$5,000 out of pocket.

But the future remains cloudy. Unlike grand jury contempt cases, where internment ends with the 18-month life of the grand jury. There is no limit to the time Farr can be held.

"The jailers are very nice here," says Farr. "But no jail is a nice place. You can't get a drink. You can't kiss a girl at night. They take away your freedom. There's no way to compensate for that."