

Politics and Violence

# The Bloody History Of San Quentin

By Peter Stack

The bloody events of Saturday, August 21 at San Quentin State Prison — three inmates and three guards killed — formed another tragic climax in the recurring drama of strife that has characterized the prison's 117-year history.

But this time — in what was certainly San Quentin's deadliest chapter — the events, and the currents of foment and social disorder that led to them, carried an ominous 1970s tone.

There has been violence at San Quentin ever since the institution was founded in 1852 and quickly filled to capacity with 2800 convicts who had previously been housed in rotting ships off Angel Island.

And there have been decades of racial strife. In 1912, more than 120 Negro inmates at San Quentin conducted a hunger strike to protest segregation in the mess hall.

**RIOTS**

In 1925, repeated riots between whites and Chicanos in the prison's notorious jute mill resulted in six inmate killings.

But despite those early strains of trouble, the 1960s-70s scene has carried a different complexion. Thirty years ago, the men who inhabited the heavy concrete walls of Quentin were not, by and large, politically aware.

And racial battles in one California prison did not set off similar clashes in other facilities.

This year, a total of nine

correctional officers have been killed in the state's network of 12 prisons.

In the last two years, inmate killings have increased dramatically — 11 dead in 1970, 15 the year before.

**POLITICS**

The number seems to have risen according to the rise in political zeal.

The death on Saturday of "Soledad Brother" George Jackson was the death of a widely-known black revolutionary. To some he was a quiet hero; to others his mystique carried the imprint of enemy of the establishment.

San Quentin's establishment has faced many enemies in the past. But the first inklings of spreading political awareness on the part of its growing black inmate

population came about a decade ago.

**MUSLIMS**

In the summer and fall of 1961, San Quentin began to broil with a new kind of racial strife when a meeting of Black Muslims was broken up by guards. In October, 1961, one inmate was killed and four were wounded in racial disturbances related to the breaking up of the Muslim meetings.

In 1962, many inmates who were thought politically daring were placed in the adjustment center. A year later, a well-known Muslim leader, Booker T. (X) Johnson was shot in the center's exercise yard by a tower guard who said he fired to stop a black-white showdown.

By 1967, the Muslim's membership had grown significantly at San Quentin. The group called a general

strike. Some 1200 black inmates refused to leave their cells but prison officials said the mass refusal was based on a fear of reprisals by the Muslims.

As the Muslims grew, so did a radical white inmate group which took on the name Nazis. The hostile factions were blamed for a racial riot among 2000 inmates on Jan. 21, 1967.

By 1970, the name Muslim had almost disappeared from the black political alliances. Other groups, other individuals, other prisons had their impact on San Quentin. Black Panthers, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Soledad.

Finally, of course, the San Rafael courthouse shootings, the arrest of Angela Davis, the transfer of the Soledad Brothers — all confirmed the changing style of Quentin.

**ESCAPES**

There were other styles, however, that seem never to change there. One has to do with escapes. Like the sad escape try on Saturday, most of the daring attempts to get free of San Quentin have not worked.

San Quentin was named after an Indian outlaw, Quentin, who was captured by the Spanish on the clay beaches where today's prison is set. The fact that he failed to get away forecast the history of famous escape attempts there.

The most notorious bid for freedom from the prison occurred in 1925, when six inmates killed a guard at the prison's Hog Pen Point and commandeered a tugboat. They steered the boat toward Richmond, as a flotilla of police boats and hundreds of officers fired on the tiny tug. None of them got away.

Two major escape attempts were recorded in 1934. In one, four inmates used guard uniforms to break out, but were captured.

In another, two convicts slugged a guard, took his gun, escaped and kidnaped two San Rafael policemen. The convicts forced the cops to drive them all the way to San Bernardino before turning them loose. Shortly afterward the two fugitives were gunned down by sheriff's deputies near Victorville.