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Jackson an Enigma
In Life and in Death



Camilla Smith

George Lester Jackson in San Quentin Prison last year

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SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 19— It has been nearly a month since George L. Jackson was shot and killed inside the walls of San Quentin Prison.

In the time since then demonstrations have been held across the nation, investigations have been demanded and an effort has even been made to put the case before the United Nations.

But while much has been said and much more has been written about the circumstances of his death, his life remains something of a mystery.

Who was George Jackson, the man? What was he like and what was he all about? What did he stand for? Why did he die and for what?

Some of these questions are easily answered. He was born in 1941, in the slums of Chicago. He was imprisoned in 1960 after pleading guilty to armed robbery and was accused in 1970 of murdering a guard. He was a best-selling author, a bitter critic of the prison system and a high-ranking officer of the Black Panther party. He died in an afternoon of violence in which three guards and two other inmates were killed.

Those facts are not in dispute. But they say little about what there was in the character of the man that left such a powerful imprint on the lives

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of almost everyone who came in contact with him. To his followers, he was a dedicated revolutionary, a leader and a hero. To wardens, police and parole officials he was a troublemaker, a sociopath who would always be a menace to society.

Police record Cited

Those who believe that George Jackson was indeed a sociopath generally point first to his police record as their prime evidence.

The record shows that his first arrest took place on Jan. 5, 1957, when he was still only 15 years old. The Los Angeles police accused him then of "suspicion of joyriding" on someone else's motorbike. He was released in the custody of his parents.

When interviewed years later by a reporter, Jackson was to explain that he had bought the motorcycle and that the person he had bought it from had given him a fake bill of sale. Police records in Los Angeles show that the bill of sale produced at the time was signed "Roy Ward." But no such person could be located and the authorities said that they had found strong similarities between Jackson's handwriting and that on the bill of sale.

Two weeks later Jackson was arrested again. And again his version differs from that listed on police records. His second arrest was on suspicion of burglarizing a motorcycle shop in Los Angeles.

According to the police, he slipped into the motorcycle shop, dropping through a skylight, and stole a crash helmet and other cycle riding equipment. The police say that they found a clue pointing to him and that his mother was ordered to produce him for the juvenile authorities.

Jackson admitted the thefts, the police said, but records show that he got into trouble when he turned on the officer who was about to search him as part of the booking process.

Held as Juvenile Offender

Although he was only 15, Jackson was listed then as being a six-footer and weighing nearly 200 pounds. Police reports say that he not only struck the officer but was also attempting to drive the officer's back into a desk spike when other detectives intervened. As a result he was detained briefly as a juvenile offender but later released on probation.

George Jackson's first lengthy incarceration came when he

was still only 15 years old. It was an incident in which he was also shot by the police. The official reports say that he had broken into a furniture store in March of 1957 and that he was apprehended by the police when a burglar alarm sounded.

According to police records, Jackson was shot when he ignored an order to surrender. The doctor who examined him said that he found a single gunshot wound on the right elbow. The wound was described as being superficial. A combination of the burglary attempt and the two arrests in January resulted in Jackson's being committed to the California Youth Authority, which sent him to the Paso Robles School for Boys.

He resumed his schooling there, finishing the 10th grade. He was paroled from Paso Robles on Dec. 20, 1957.

After that, Jackson kept clear of the police until August of 1958, when he was arrested in Bakersfield, Calif., for allegedly threatening his employer, a labor contractor, and slashing the seats of a bus that his employer owned.

In September of 1958 he was arrested again along with two other youths for robbing a service station of \$105. One of his companions had a gun. Jackson, police records say, admitted his role in that crime.

Escaped From Jail

While awaiting assignment to the youth authority, he escaped from the jail in Bakersfield. He was later apprehended in Harrisburg, Ill., a small rural town where his mother had grown up and where he had spent many of his boyhood summers. He was returned to Bakersfield but later that same month he escaped again. He was a gain recaptured and in February he was committed to the youth authority. He served time as a juvenile offender until paroled in June of 1960.

Then, in September, just five days before his 19th birthday, he got involved in the \$70 gas station robbery that was to lead him to a prison sentence that for him would never end.

As much investigating as there has been into Jackson's past, much about the circumstances of that robbery is still unclear. There was never a trial to establish the facts because both Jackson and his 18-year-old companion pleaded guilty to the crime.

However, police records in Los Angeles say that the two robbed a service station at 4201 Washington Boulevard of \$71 and that Jackson sat behind the wheel of an old Chevrolet that he owned while his friend held

a gun on the two attendants, one of whom jotted down the license number when they fled.

The report said that officers traced the car to Jackson, and later arrested him in Los Angeles, where he was visiting friends.

According to the report, Jackson readily admitted that his car had been at the station at the time of the holdup but explained that he had only gone there for gas and that he had

been forced at gunpoint to drive the bandit away from the scene.

Jackson later admitted having been a participant, the report said, but maintained that he had not known in advance that the crime was to be committed. Rather, he said that his friend had unexpectedly produced a gun when they stopped for gas and committed the crime.

But Jackson's companion told a different story. He said that the holdup had been Jackson's idea and that it was he who had produced the gun.

Jackson's file at San Quentin, according to prison officials, said that he had also entered the service station and that he had exhibited what was thought to have been a revolver. That report says that Jackson later explained that it was not a gun but rather a cap pistol belonging to his brother.

'Obvious He Was an Amateur'

"It was obvious that he was an amateur," a spokesman in the warden's office at San Quentin said. "You would think that he would have at least stolen a car if he was going to use it in a holdup instead of using his own."

In a discussion of the crime in his book, "Soledad Brother," a collection of his prison letters, Jackson said that after he

had been accused of robbing the gas station he had agreed to accept a deal.

"I agreed to confess," he said, "and spare the county court costs in return for a light county jail sentence. I confessed but when time came for sentencing, they tossed me into the penitentiary with one to life. That was in 1960. I was 18 years old. I've been here ever since."

On Feb. 1 of 1961, as a three-time loser he was given under California law an indeterminate sentence of from one year to life imprisonment. His companion in that holdup was paroled seven years later. But George Jackson was never again to be free and he would spend much of the rest of his life in solitary confinement.

Jackson's police record is a long one. But his friends and followers argue that it appears worse than it really is and that while he was involved in many brushes with the law there was nothing serious, nothing that another boy of the same age might not easily have survived.

So why, then, did George Jackson spend the rest of his life in prison? Why was he locked up so long in solitary confinement? Why was he consistently refused parole?

The answers to those questions also have two sides. The parole and prison authorities say that it was because he was a troublemaker and that while he was on the inside he was never able to demonstrate that he could get along if permitted to return to the outside.

45 Infractions Reported

According to Joseph O'Brien, an assistant to the warden at San Quentin Prison, there were 45 infractions on the record that Jackson compiled in his

more than 10 years of incarceration.

"He never gave the adult authority any reasonable feeling that it should consider him for release," Mr. O'Brien said.

Mr. O'Brien gave this run-down on Jackson the inmate:

¶Feb. 1, 1961, sentenced to prison for a term of from one year to life. Recommended for placement at the state's vocational training facility at Tracy but sent to Soledad instead because of overcrowded conditions at Tracy.

¶In the first four months at Soledad, cited for seven infractions, mostly disobeying orders.

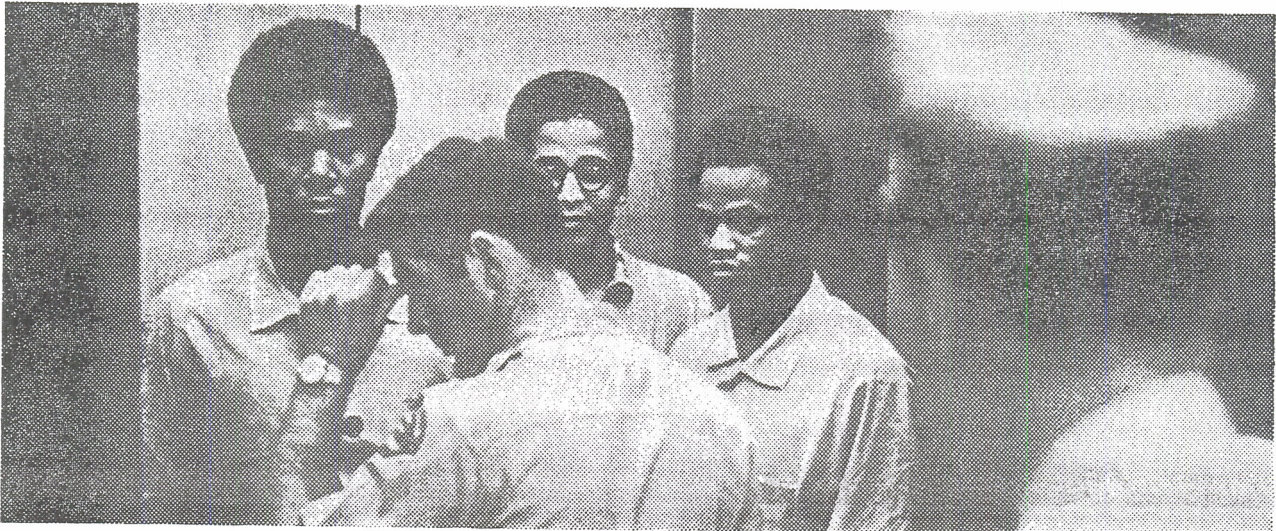
¶By April of 1962 his attitude was termed by prison officials at Soledad as "surly and intractable" and a transfer was recommended. Officials say that he "flatly refused to obey orders." He was sent to San Quentin.

¶He arrived at San Quentin but because of his age was reassigned to Tracy. He stayed there until November of the same year and was then sent back to San Quentin because he was "in need of control because of his behavior."

¶He arrived back at San Quentin, officials say, with a "changed attitude." They said that he now caused "more problems" and what had been minor infractions were now turning into serious offenses, including assaults on other inmates.

¶In November of 1968, he was again assigned to Soledad for what officials said was "an opportunity to prepare himself for release." They said that his progress was "reasonably good" until February of 1970, when he was charged along with two other black prisoners with killing a white guard.

¶From the time that he was



Dan O'Neil

John W. Cluchette, Jackson and Fleeta Drumgo, shown being taken to hearing in the Monterey County Courthouse, were all charged in January of 1970 with the murder of a white prison guard at the Soledad correctional facility.

charged with that murder until his death, Mr. O'Brien said, Jackson was defiant of the rules and had a poor attitude toward the staff. He was returned to San Quentin and kept there until his death.

A Pattern of Escalation

Another more detailed record of Jackson's prison activity, not released but confirmed by prison authorities, said that he had collected 47 entries in his disciplinary file.

Those records show that his early infractions were for minor offenses. But they also show a pattern of escalation.

The first serious offense on Jackson's record came in April of 1965, when he was charged with stabbing another prisoner. And on September of 1966, another inmate said that Jackson had tried to stab him in a prison fight.

On Jan. 17, 1967, these records said that Jackson had emerged from a cellblock gang fight carrying a length of pipe. And on June 8 of 1967, he allegedly refused an order and then assaulted the guard who insisted that he obey.

In October of 1969, a guard said he had found a simulated gun in Jackson's possession, and then in January of 1970 he was charged with a role in the killing of a guard.

The white guard, 26-year-old John Mills, was beaten to death by convicts in Soledad, where Jackson was then confined. He was killed three days after an-



Associated Press

Angela Davis, who tried to aid in defense of Jackson.

other white guard had shot and killed three black inmates at Soledad.

Jackson and two other black prisoners—Fleeta Drumgo and John Cluchette—were charged

with Mills's murder and transferred to San Quentin's maximum security block to await trial for the slaying.

Angela Davis's Role

The defense of the three men, who became widely known as the Soledad Brothers, was one of the highest priorities of the radical movement on the West Coast. Among those most active in the defense was Angela Davis, the former philosophy instructor at the University of California at Los Angeles, who was later charged with murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy.

The charges against Miss Davis stem from an aborted effort to free three San Quentin convicts from custody by using a judge, two jurors and a district attorney as hostages. The inmates were involved in a court proceeding at the Marin County Courthouse at the time and it was Jonathan Jackson, George's younger brother, who allegedly smuggled the gun into the courthouse triggering the escape attempt.

The authorities later said that Miss Davis was linked to the crime because it was she who had purchased a number of the weapons used in it. Four persons, including Jonathan Jackson and the judge, died in the escape attempt.

That the long years of im-

prisonment had had a telling effect on George Jackson has never been doubted. His anger and bitterness were clearly evident in his best-selling book, "Soledad Brother," a collection of his prison letters. In one he wrote:

"If I leave here alive, I'll leave nothing behind. They'll never count me among the broken men, but I can't say that I'm normal either. I've been hungry too long, I've gone angry too often. I've been lied to and insulted too many times. They've pushed me over the line from which there can be no retreat. I know that they will not be satisfied until they've pushed me out of existence altogether. I've been the victim of so many racist attacks that I could never relax again . . . I can still smile, now, after 10 years of blocking knife thrusts and the pick handles of faceless sadistic pigs, of anticipating and reacting for 10 years, seven of them in solitary. I can still smile sometimes, but by the time this thing is over I may not be a nice person. And I just lit my 77th cigarette of this 21-hour day. I'm going to lay down for two or three hours. Perhaps I'll sleep . . ."

Evaluation Difficult

The prison record of George Jackson contains many entries, but most of them are such that they cannot be evaluated by outsiders.

A guard says that Jackson was "surly" or that he "refused to obey orders." Or another prisoner says that Jackson tried to stab him. Or another guard says that Jackson was involved in a fight.

What do these things mean? Jackson's followers ask. And they challenge the official versions, arguing that it has been their experience that the authorities are not always correct.

Two items in Jackson's prison files worth mentioning are a psychiatric evaluation report that was made at Soledad in March of 1961 and a letter that his father, Lester, wrote to prison officials a few months later.

The psychiatric report, in part, said:

"Jackson is an egocentric individual who states he is satisfied with himself and sees no need for any change within himself. He rationalized at great length that his anti-social behavior was justified and that it is his intention to continue with his anti-social acts 'until he accumulates a sufficient large sum of money that would satisfy him.'"

The letter from his father to prison officials was received at San Quentin on May 25, 1961. He wrote:

"We love our son dearly and we have spent more than our share of time with him, and money on him.

"I hope you have had more luck in reaching him than we have. . . ."

"He may not be released in his present state of mind. If you are able to get near him, I will be surprised. He can be reached if he sees you as a way out.

"So don't let him fool you with the many faces he is capable of showing.

"He lived under strict house rules while under our guidance and always slipped past his mother when he wanted to break those rules."

'I've Lost Them Both'

Nine years later, just after his son Jonathan was killed at the Marin County court house, George Jackson's father said in an interview that he had written such letters and that he had believed what he said in them at the time. He said he then thought that if George had been released from prison he would have been an undesirable influence on his younger brother, Jonathan.

Mr. Jackson said that he now thought that he had made a mistake in perhaps helping to

keep his older son imprisoned in order to protect his younger son.

"Instead of saving one of my sons," he said, "I've lost both of them."

The parole authority declined to discuss the Jackson case in detail. However, Joseph Spangler, the authority's executive director, did disclose that Jackson had refused to even appear before the board on at least the last two occasions that hearings for him had been scheduled.

Mr. Spangler said that Jackson was never granted parole basically because "he kept getting into such serious, violent disciplinary problems in the institutions."

The adult authority, the parole board in California, has nine members. All were appointed by Gov. Ronald Reagan. At present, there is one vacancy on the board. Of the eight members currently sitting, one is black and one is Spanish speaking.

It is often pointed out by critics of the board that of the white members, one is a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, another is a former police chief, another is a former police officer from Los Angeles, and yet another was the police chief in Richmond, Calif., who was among the first in the nation to give his men "shoot to kill" orders when dealing with looters in time of civil disturbance.

Recommendations Followed

Generally, one or two board members attend hearings. They then make recommendations to the full board and invariably those recommendations are followed.

Together then from the police, from the prisons and from the parole authorities comes a dismal picture of George Jackson. They saw him as a person who could not stay out of trouble, a man with a poor attitude who refused to obey orders and who, when pressed, would attack.

"Parole denied" had always been anticipated by Jackson himself. And at the end, he had refused even to go before the board.

But that was only one view of George Jackson, and there was another. Angela Davis saw him as not only a revolutionary leader but also "an ir retrievable love — so agonizingly personal as to be indescribable." Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther party, saw him as a "supreme servant of the people." His lawyer, John Thorn, saw him as a "great ~~man~~ full of love."

And his mother saw him as

a strong, courageous black man who stood up for what he believed.

The six Jackson children had always been the center of her life. She and her husband are remembered as strict, religious and hardworking parents.

'A Good Kid'

In his boyhood young George was considered "a good kid," and very bright. He went to Roman Catholic schools and to church regularly.

Then the Jacksons moved into the Troop Street project, the scene a few years later of bitter rioting, and it was there that he was "caught once or twice for mugging," as he wrote in his book, and his troubles with the law began.

"My family knew very little of my real life," he wrote. "In effect, I lived two lives, the one with my mama and sisters, and the thing on the street. Now and then I'd get caught at something, or with something that I wasn't supposed to have, and my mama would fall all over me. I left home a thousand times, never to return. We bobbed up and down

the state. I did what I wanted (all my life I've done just that). When it came time to explain, I lied."

In 1956, when Jackson was 15, his father moved him to Los Angeles, hoping to get him into an environment that would offer fewer pitfalls. But as Jackson was to say later, "Serious things began to happen to me after settling in Los Angeles."

Mother Petitions U.N.

Now, Jackson's mother has initiated an effort to petition the United Nations to investigate the shooting death of her son. She is convinced that he was not killed while trying to escape, as prison officials have said.

"He was murdered," she says simply. "I know that he was murdered."

Mrs. Jackson says that her son's problems began when he was first sent to Tracy. She said that he had spoken out then and had been sent to the "hole," where he had seen another young black man killed.

"From then on," she said, "it just went on and on. They sent him to San Quentin. They knew that they could bury him there, that he would never get out. They have complete control there. Anything they want to happen they can make it happen and that's what the American public does not understand."

Mrs. Jackson, who is 48 years

old, scoffs at the infractions that are listed on her son's prison record.

"Any time they [the guards] want to have a beef against you all the guard has to do is take out his pen and a little piece of paper and write it up. What can you do about it? You can't do anything. You know, you can spend all your life behind that. All that they have to do is write up a beef about you two or three times a year and when you go to the board [the parole board] they show you that and tell you to come back in 18 months. That's what they did to him for 10 years, 11 years, really, and during that time they've tried to get people to kill him, they've tried to get people to set him up and he's gotten out of the situation. And then there have been people who refused to do it. They've tried to get white people to do it who refused to do it because even though we know that they don't like us, people do have a respect for someone when they carry themselves a certain way."

Mrs. Jackson insists that the public is unaware of much of what goes on inside the prisons.

"What happens in the prisons," she said, "is when men go in there their lives just aren't their own anymore. They are controlled. They are never allowed to see an attorney. If an inmate wants to write out to an attorney, he's had it. They don't want them to have any legal advice."

Mrs. Jackson was also critical of the parole procedures, which, she believes, kept her son in prison.

"They [parole board members] sit there and ask you stupid questions," she said. "They insult you and expect you to sit there and just take it. George never would take it and I'm glad he never did. That's the reason he's dead now. He's dead now because he was beginning to be heard all over the world. People all over the world were listening to what he was trying to tell them and these things were true. He wasn't just speaking for himself. He was speaking for every man in that prison, even the ones who didn't have sense enough to know what he was talking about. Even the ones who were stool pigeons and rats. He was still speaking for them."

Of her son's prison record, Mrs. Jackson says: "He wasn't a good nigger, that's for sure, and that's the reason I'm proud of him. I don't like good niggers. As far as I'm concerned good niggers have no backbone. I'm not a good nigger myself."