WHAT SHALL BE DONE WITH OUR CRIMINALS?

Dr. S. H. Blitch, State Prison Physican and a Member of the National Prison Commission, Contributes a Timely Article on the Subject.

From whatever point of view the subject may be approached, the problem of criminology is one sufficiently perplexing; but the various systems inaugurated, both in this country and abroad, in the last fifty years, clearly indicate that the method to be employed in dealing with criminals, both habitual and casual, depends largely upon the economic conditions of a country, and whether its predominating interest are industrial or agricultural.

Broadly speaking, the purpose of imprisonment is to protect society on the one hand, and, on the other, to protect the criminal against himself. The criminal is still a man, and in dealing with him it should never be forgotten that society can best protect itself by elevating the prisoner to a higher plane, and leaving him more of a man and less of an outcast than it found him.

Neither should it be forgotten that the criminal is, both ethically and financially, a burden, not only to himself, but to the state. For this reason it is wisely provided that he shall be made to labor during his term of imprisonment. Idleness, especially in chose penitentiary life, is a potent cause of insanity. At the outset, the prisoner's life should not be so hard that he has nothing to hope for, nor so bright that he has nothing to fear. His life must necessarily be a hard one—a life of subjection and toil, so adjusted as to give the state due compensation for its outlay in prosecuting, detention, maintenance, etc. Nevertheless, the prisoner should always be allowed to look forward to bettering his condition by good conduct, while, if he deliberately chooses the opposite course, this step should inevitably bring down upon him increased burdens and fewer privileges. I do not, in making this statement, it should be explained, mean to convey the idea that the convict is any man's slave; but that he is in the grasp of the state, and that it is necessary to the welfare of the community that its laws be enforced.

Is here an ideal system of prison management? Would not a perfect system for imperfect human beings be a perfect failure?

Where are the vaunted remedies of the misguided enthusiasts and the newspapers who clamor so vociferously for the abolition of the lease system? Why do not these theorists follow up their vicious attacks upon our convict and lease system, and mount the rostrum, and by rising to a question of personal privilege, point out to a long suffering public the means to the end they seem so anxious to attain? Something more than theory—something more than idle rhetoric—is needed here. Discussion—practical, logical, rational discussion—is required by a people already over-taxed, in view of the financial difficulties that will unquestionably follow the complete annihilation of the convict lease system in this state. As the annual income from that lease is now, approximately, $250,000, sentimentality and vague humanitarianism should never be permitted to color a controversy over a subject of such vital importance; nor, on the other hand, should the issue be looked upon purely as a cold-blooded, business proposition, but rather with due consideration of all the factors involved.

In short, this question should be handled in a common sense, humane, business-like manner, with a view of being fair to the prisoner, just to the tax payer and creditable to the state.

The difference between one convict system and another is, after all, simply a difference between the manner in which the labor of the prisoner is utilized. In the north, the labor of the convict is leased. In Florida, the convict is leased outright and bodily—a distinction without a difference. The state of Florida now maintains supervision and control of her convicts, and the duty of the state to watch the lessees is one that never ends.

So far as abuses are concerned, who has ever known of a system into which abuses have not crept? Shall the oil industry, for instance, be wiped out because an undue share of the benefits are absorbed by the few? Shall the meat packing and produce business be destroyed because of the great abuses recently unearthed? Our open air system is naturally more subject to criticism than is the close penitentiary system of the north, under which the prisoners are segregated—buried alive in the great stone dungeons, unknown, unsuspected, unattended. The lives of the Florida convicts are spent in the open air, where they, their work and ther treatment may be seen of all men.

This is not written in defense of the lease system, but rather with a view of inducing those who would discuss this problem to lay aside prejudice, and realize at last that, from the prisoner's point of view, work is not, in itself, punishment; but that lack of compensation for that work is the real punishment.

Men in Prison Must be Worked—How Shall They be Worked?

We do not think it necessary to consider the right of a prisoner to labor. We recognize the fact that every man, whether freeman or prisoner, has by virtue of his very existance, the right to labor. But, who shall fix the adjustment of the prisoner to the conditions under which he is to labor?

This must, of course, rest with the state, and should the state ever surrender its control of this adjustment, if it should ever cater to maudiln sentiment, it would be doing a grave injustice to society. The greatest danger in our country today is the growing spirit of lawlessness. Parents humor their child in failing to exact due obedience, thereby wrecking the home and unfitting the child for sound citizenship. Good civil government is possible only when wise and just laws are rigorously enforced, and due penalties imposed for disobedience.

As to the System of Labor

On this point, as is well known, a great difference of opinion exists; but it seems to be clear that this point should be determined by circumstanecs, by locality, surroundings, and the clas of prisoners to be employed. In Florida there seems to be a growing sentiment in favor of working the prisoners on the public roads. But will this secure the more humane treatment our sentimentalists are seeking? I consider it more than doubtful. Will the rays of the sun be less severe? Will the guards, captains and supervisors be men different in character—men of a higher type from those who now control and punish our convicts? Would the camps be more neatly kept than now, the food and equipments better? To all this I unhesitatingly answer, No. I am convinced that the conditions would in every respect be much worse. And for this reason: If the prisoners are worked on the roads they will be controlled by the counties; and, as there are forty-six counties in Florida, this means that they will be handled by forty-six different boards of county commissioners, men wholly inexperienced, wholly incompetent for the grave responsibilities that would then devolve upon them under the present system. The convicts are now controlled by one central authority—an authority that is vested in the hands of the Hon. B. E. McLin, the state's efficient commissioner of agriculture. It is, I think, obvious which of the two methods is likely to give the best results.

Again, how are the prisoners to be sheltered and cared for on the roads? If adequate stockades and quarters are provided, they must obviously be moved at great expense, as the work progresses. If the several counties found it impossible to sustain this burden, what would be the result? Simply poor and uncomfortable quarters—discontent, privation and death. That some of the counties already realize all this is indicated by the fact that no less than thirty counties are now leasing their convicts rather than utilize them on the public roads at the public expense.

Do certain would-be critics realize that road service is as arduous, if not more laborious, than most manual occupations? Do they realize that the change they advocate would throw upon the tax payers, for the sake of a doubtful experiment, a financial burden of $500,000 per annum, against the $250,000 now derived from the convict hire? Do these people realize that "good roads" are possible only in densely populated and long-settled sections, and that it may, though, be easy to have such highways in Belgium, France and England, to say nothing of some of the eastern states in our own country, it would certainly be quite as difficult in a state so thinly populated as Florida.

As to the alleged "abuses" of the present lease system, I can only say that my four years service with the lessees, and my experienc in the national congress with penologists and prison officials, not only in the United States but abroad, justifies me in the belief that wherever prisoners exist, there will abuses be found. I believe that there have been abuses in Florida, but I also believe that most of the reports have been exaggerated; that many of the narratives were prompted by the desire of the irresponsible reporters to get a "good story," under flaring headlines, and I am quite certain that in nearly every instance the "horrors" thus set forth were found among the prisoners worked by county authorities in different parts of the state on public roads, and that the poorest clad, fed and lodged have been those so employed.

Abuse is not argument. What is wanted are facts and figures—a practical plan that will satisfy practical men, and not unduly burden law-abiding citizens and tax payers.

Do I defend the lease system as now conducted? No. Why not? Because no system is just that leases for hard labor women, and those physically unable to perform manual labor.

What would be your remedy? Improve on our present system? How can this be done? A plan has already been suggested by our progressive commissioner of agriculture, the Hon. B. E. McLin, which removes some of these defects and materially lessens the odium now more or less attached to the lease system.

Mr. McLin's Suggestions

"First. Let the legislature, over the board of county commissioners of state institutions to use a fund sufficient, arising from the hire of the state prisoners, to purchase the present hospital property near Ocala, or other property, and construct such buildings thereon as, in their judgment, is deemed advisable.

"Second. Direct the board of commissioners of the state institutions not to lease women, the aged, disabled or infirm. Eliminate all such from the lease. Put such on the farm, the state to maintain such prisoners and farm out of the proceeds of the farm. Those able to do service on the farm to help maintain themselves should do so. The deficiency, if any, would be supplemented. When we have eliminated the classes named we have nothing for which to condemn the leasing of prisoners. All states use the labor of prisoners for financial aid. It matters not what term we call the system under which they do it—lease, hire, rental, or sale of the products of the prisoners—the principle is the same, the one as creditable as the other, and all proper and right."

The above suggestions are condensed, as a verbatim report would make this paper too lengthy.

Suppose the members of the legislature consider these suggestions and that the newspapers deal fairly in discussing this problem.

A Note of Warning

The state has no property in the shape of land or shelter for the convicts should they be delivered to the commissioner of agriculture, as the law provides. How could he locate, or even temporarily care for them? In view of all this, would it not be wise for our lawmakers to arrange for the carrying out of the statutory requirements by providing a home for all of our criminals, should it ever devolve upon the state to shelter and provide for them?

S. H. BLITCH.

BEWARE OF FREQUENT COLDS

A succession of colds or a protracted cold is almost certain to end in chronic catarrh, from which few persons ever wholly recover. Give every cold the attention it deserves and you may avoid this disagreeable disease. How can you cure a cold? Why not try Chamberlain's Cough Remedy? It is highly recommended. Mrs. M. White of Butler, Tenn., says: "Several years ago I was bothered with my throat and lungs. Someone told me of Chamberlains Cough Remedy. I began using it and it relieved me at once. Now my throat and lungs are sound and well." For sale by all druggists. m

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L'ENGLE IS FOUND GUILTY OF LIBEL

Graham Wins in His Case Against Tallahassee Sun Man

Bartow, Fla., Dec. 4.—The jury in the Graham vs. L'Engle libel suit brought in a verdict of guilty against Claude L'Engle at 3 o'clock this afternoon.

J. L. Wilson of Bartow, M. B. Macfarlane and W. A. Carter of Tampa represent the state, and N. P. Bryan of Jacksonville and Park Trammell of Lakeland the defendant.

The case grew out of alleged libelous attacks made on John Graham of Bradentown by Claude L'Engle of Tallahassee, when L'Engle was publishing the Tallahassee Sun. At that time Graham was running for the legislature from Manatee county, and it is said that his defeat by A. J. Petigrew, socialist, was largely due to the attacks which L'Engle made on Graham in the Sun. The case was set for trial in Manatee county, but L'Engle, charging prejudice on the part of the court there, procured a change of venue to Polk county.

VALUABLE INFORMATION FREE

It is pleasing to note the real practical information the Wilson & Toomer Fertilizer Co. are sending out in their booklets. Every grower in the state and all prospective settlers should have a set of them, for each industry is described in a thorough manner by an authority. There is quite a series of books on citrus culture and valuable leaflets on strawberry and pineapple culture, but perhaps the three that are especially interesting at this season are the complete booklet, "Florida Vegetables," and the leaflets, "Irish Potatoes," and "Fall Fertilizing Citrus Trees." Each is a complete treatise on its subject, yet so concise as to be handy for the pocket. In no case has so much information of practical value been given free to the public except by the Agricultural Departments of the state or the United States. 12-4w

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