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The View From Here

## **State prison is good place to get out of**

By Carl Strock

One place I would not care to spend the rest of my life is Clinton Correctional Facility, the maximum security prison in Dannemora, near the Canadian border. I was up there the other day to interview a prisoner -- which I will write about on another occasion -- and it is not a cheery place.

True, some prisoners do have little private picnic areas on a hillside surrounding the outdoor recreational area, which is a touching thing to see. If they get approved for one of these "courts," as they're called, they get to hang out there with their buddies during yard time, and they also get to plant flowers and what-not, if they can obtain their own seeds, and even cook out, on stoves built of old truck-tire rims stacked one on another. I gather this is a tradition at Clinton, which at 150 years is one of the oldest prisons in the state, and it's one of the few things that give the place a touch of anything but hardness. These private picnic areas are not exactly bucolic. They're just miserable little walled plots carved out of a stony embankment, each with a table and a tire-rim stove, but weeds do grow there at least, if not flowers, and they do have picket gates for entrances, so they have some of the irregularity of nature about them. Otherwise, life at Clinton is a life of concrete and steel and right angles, and oh, it's grim.

I got to visit a cell block when most of the guests were in the yard, and I can tell you a one-man cell at Clinton is not luxury accommodation despite what you sometimes hear about the coddling of criminals. The cells are arranged in a long row facing a railing and a blank wall, so from inside one of them you do not see another human being -- just three solid walls and one of bars, facing nothing. You have a narrow cot against one wall, and if you sit on the edge of that cot you can lean forward and press your palms against the opposing wall. In that confining little space are a small washbowl, a seatless toilet, a locker and a shelf. You can stand up in the space remaining, but that's about all. It's like living in a closet, and a rather small closet at that.

For much of the day, the prisoners are not in their cells, or I suppose they would go completely crazy. They are in workshops sewing underwear for state institutions, they are attending classes of one kind or another, they are in the yard, they are in the gym, they are in the mess hall. The new Schenectady County Jail doesn't have a mess hall but feeds inmates in their cells, which is the new way of doing things, to avoid the danger of having a large number of prisoners gathered together. But Clinton is an old institution.

I wondered about the safety of having hundred of inmates, many of them violent, breaking bread together. My guide, Deputy Superintendent Mike Allard, pointed out the "gas tower," a glassed-in booth overlooking the dining area. The nozzles in the ceiling of the mess hall, he explained, are not part of a sprinkler system to suppress fires. They are jets to spray tear gas, and the guard in that "gas tower" has his hand on the lever. An effective way to control unruly dinner guests.

There is a disturbing colonial aspect to the prison. Most of the prisoners (83 percent) are black or Hispanic and come from New York City. Almost all of the guards are white and are natives of the North Country.

A young man from the Dannemora area goes to work in the prison the same way a young man in Schenectady used to go to work at GE -- with the expectation of making a career of it. It's the biggest employer around, and the guards I talked to expressed confidence in its future. They describe the job as "99 percent boredom. 1 percent pure terror." They like the pay, they like the benefits. You really have the sense the guards and the prisoners are from different societies, almost different worlds, not merely that they are distinguished by being lawbreakers or law-upholders.

I was there for about four hours -- talking, listening and looking -- and at the end I can't tell you how happy I was to be able to walk out.