

A Decade of Diesel Therapy in the Floriduh Gulag

Gerald Niles

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, in the Wapello County Jail in Ottumwa, Iowa, prisoners were allowed to sit and visit with family and friends in a normal manner. Suddenly, plexiglass barriers were installed, with a telephone receiver on each side. The prisoner stood on one side of the plexiglass while visitors peered through the other side. The prisoner could speak with one visitor at a time on the receiver, hardly conducive to family visits. I wrote the local newspaper editor in an attempt to publicize this ridiculous situation. My intent was that prisoners would know that their plight had been publicized, people in the community would realize the way their taxes dollars were being wasted, and jailers would know that their implemented abnormality was exposed and that no one was pleased with their actions. Or so I hoped.

In the winter of 1998-99, construction of a new jail in Ottumwa was frozen like the ice, because the public finally balked at the further expenditure of public funds. Possibly my letter to the editor two decades earlier sowed the seeds of this current public indignation in the farming State of Iowa. Certainly my letter started a chain of events in which I am still enveloped. In the past decade I have been subjected to a tour of the Floriduh gulag via “diesel therapy”. This retaliatory ploy by prison officials relies upon multiple transfers to quell prisoners’ resistance. My response is to publicized this carceral practice as played out in Floriduh.

For me, a primary means of resistance to mistreatment or abusive conditions has been litigation; sometimes in the courts and often via the prison system’s own grievance procedures. Prison officials do not like having their gregarious conduct corrected by captives. A typical and unlawful response is to transfer the prisoner in retaliation. For every prison transfer there is an official reason which rarely reflects the real reason. I will stick to the “truth”. I am no fiction writer.

A current denizen of any of the “joints” named herein will quickly observe changes that have occurred since I was there. Some places like the Leon County Jail in Tallahassee, Florida (circa 1990) do not even exist anymore. It had to be shut down. Furthermore, turnovers of

populations, construction or logistic overhauls can give a prison a facelift overnight.

In 1990, the jail in Tallahassee contained the “Bundy Slammer”. During my 11 months in that jail, a few months were spent in that “slammer”. On visiting day, I could look out the little window in the door at the butts of visitors to the cell block across the hall. One day, a young lady broke into tears upon learning that she stood next to the cell which had held the ghostly Bundy. A deputy provided solace. “There, there, he’s dead now ...”.

The day came for my commitment to the “floriduh department of corruption”. For six weeks there was processing at the North Florida Reception Centre (NFRC)-Main Unit. Each prisoner was administered a battery of mental, physical, and psychological tests, so prisoncrats could formulate ideas concerning the type of creatures that were now in their custody. In 1991, NFRC guards routinely beat prisoners. Countless times I saw a prisoner handcuffed and then pounced on by a gang of guards, before being dragged across the compound. Docility Training! A beating might be meted out for not having a top shirt button buttoned, for not looking straight ahead when commanded to, for “stealing” four packs of sugar from one’s breakfast tray, or innumerable petty offenses. The terror lay in not knowing what they would decide to define as an infraction. During head count, prisoners had to sit for hours on their bunks, never daring to flinch, or else! Days were spent in the yard, under the sun, evenings in open dorms where TV viewers faced directly into the shower room. Of course any grievance there would be construed as a “request for a beating”.

In the summer of 1991, with a group of other captives I was crammed onto a Bluebird Bus refitted for prison transport; a big cage on wheels. If you are lucky enough to sit next to one of the eight windows (in order to breathe), you can stare through heavy mesh as obscured swamps and pine trees fly by. After an overnight stay in the South Florida Reception Centre at Miami, we wearily rolled out to be deposited in the “sweet camp” at Avon Park. I spent nearly two years there, watching snitches have foot races to see who could tell first and child molesters brag about it being “their camp”. They were safe there, and could only molest each other, having no other options. The “sweet kamps” are supposed to be considered privileged locales, and any dissent is most unwelcome. Eventually I was doomed to dungeon Hardee,

because my grievances never sat well with prisoncrats at Avon Park. Prison officials at Avon Park were determined to enforce the pettiest rules. However, when a prisoner utilized grievance procedures and filed civil suits to compel them to follow their own policies, the gestapo reeled off the reprisals¹. I never let them run things unchecked. No one could call me a happy camper. I could never be happy in prison.

In dungeon Hardee “plenty” of legal action was necessary; we contested property seizures to beatings. Litigation in this prison led to the turnover of the entire administration. It was precisely “because I brought legal action” that I was shipped to DeSoto, a fragile regime. After only five weeks (my request for an inter-State transfer to Iowa was supposedly denied), I was on the Bluebird again. DeSoto was another “sweet kamp” and would tolerate no complaints. After a few days back at SFRC Miami, I was taken back to NFRC Lake Butler. There I was given the opportunity to observe guards beat up several prisoners - always one at a time, of course.

In the summer of 1994, at midnight, I met TRANSCOR, a private prison transportation corporation. In vans, shackled hand and foot, for the next five days and nights we dropped prisoners off and picked prisoners up at jails and prisons in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and finally Iowa. There were no overnight stays for rest. Meals were the cheapest possible fare from fast food outlets. When we dropped a guy at the jail in Iowa City, I overheard the TRANSCOR guards discuss going to Wisconsin and Minnesota before my destination, which I knew to be the Iowa Medical and Classification Centre, two miles from where we sat. It took considerable persuasion to convince the guards of this. They would not believe it until verified by local jailers and the personnel at Burger King.

By this time, aggressive litigation had become a bad habit. Iowa prisoncrats, being no different than any other species of guards, reacted with no less than nine bogus disciplinary reports. “The first and most serious charge is rioting ...” began the judge. “What does that mean?” I interrupted. Reading from the Department of Corrections’ own definition, the judge began, “Three or more ...” I interrupted again. “Because I am the only person charged and because I am only one person, this charge is as invalid as the other eight”. The judge agreed, found me not guilty of three charges and dismissed the other six.

So in typical “sore loser” fashion, the gestapo changed my confinement status to “administrative”, which can be based upon any reason or none at all. Soon I learnt of their plan. The worst prison in Iowa was better than the best prison in Floriduh, so the worst thing they could do to me was to send me back. So they did, via TRANSCOR, with overnight stays in jails in Jamestown, North Dakota, Dodge, Wisconsin, and Ashland, Tennessee. The Jamestown jail was small and new. TRANSCOR guards made us leave our smokes in the van, telling us that it was a non-smoking institution. We were surprised to walk into the little cellblock and see ashtrays on the tables. In Minnesota we picked up a crack addict who became sick from withdrawal, so he was dropped off in a hospital in Dodge, while we spent the night in a local jail. There were more bodies than beds, so half of us bedded down on the floor. Our next stop, Ashland City, Tennessee is the dirtiest jail I have ever seen. The walls were smeared with faeces and maggots. Though we had no clean clothes we wanted to shower. In the shower, sewage seep out of the drain, so in the end it was more sanitary not to bathe. The whole trip took five days. It was not easy eating fast food in full shackles, and we were too cramped and weary to even appreciate the scenery; especially that provided by the jails and prisons at which we stopped.

In the mid-August heat, I was deposited back at the North Florida Reception for further classification. I remained there for 100 days, during which I wrote two accounts of “Iron Fists Striking”, for *Prison News Service*. These articles described the increasing frenzy with which guards were ganging up on individual prisoners; chaining, kicking, dragging and stomping them. Some devil had robbed those poor guards of their consciences, and to this day I wonder whatever came around for them.

Just in time for Christmas 1994, I was shipped to Baker prison. It was cold in the cells, there was no heat. So I joined in a civil suit against the prison. They reacted with a half dozen bogus infractions, and when I still refused to drop the lawsuit they shipped me to Columbia prison. The Floriduh DOC had recently rewritten its policy for long-term solitary confinement and begun their construction blitz of new Control Model units. The new policy made assigning prisoners to these units much easier. Based upon the bogus disciplinary reports from Baker prison, I qualified for 13 months in the control unit at Columbia.

After five months, Columbia changed the unit's regime, and as a result I was transferred with a group of others to the control unit at Taylor. After a month in Taylor, I won release from the control unit by having the Baker prison disciplinary reports invalidated by an outside court. I was in open population in Taylor for only ten days, when guards threatened to put their boots on my throat for asking a question during orientation. I was immediately locked up for being a threat to security. Three weeks later I was shipped down the road to Cross City prison, where kinfolks of the Taylor guards were employed. The first day in Cross City, a guard came to me and threatened to carry out what his brother in Taylor had started. More kinfolk joined the fray with assorted threats. In Dixie County, Florida, always beware of the incestuous ***** Clan, who must breed faster than rabbits.

I reported the Cross City assault to the Warden and was locked up at once for being a threat to security; as if you could not guess by now. After a few weeks in a cell with the paedophilic son of a prison guard, I was shipped to Gulf prison. Ten months in Gulf brought umpteen bogus infraction charges, and when I beat all of those, the guards planted a knife in my cell. I was found guilty of possession and spent 60 days in the "box". They committed battery against me a few times, once while Warden Henry Alford watched. I considered every dirty work they meted out to be their admission of defeat. My litigious actions increased.

On June 17, 1997 I was shipped to the new super maximum Control Model Unit at Santa Rosa prison. Although the "shank" charges served to justify my transfer to Santa Rosa, the conviction had already been reversed on appeal. Therefore, the Santa Rosa officials kept me on indefinite confinement status, each week assuring me that they would hold the necessary hearing the next week. After three months I tired of the game and sued. About the same time, I was moved to attend the federal jury trial in the Baker prison "heat" suit. The jury ruled that it was okay for Floriduh prisoners to freeze in their cells. I pondered this in light of my summer of baking in Santa Rosa's hotbox. Later, a State Judge ordered Santa Rosa officials to hold a Control Model review hearing or release me to the open population.

Upon return to Santa Rosa I was released to the open prison population. So that regime and I rock'n rolled on litigation and the inevitable assaults by guards that followed. I litigated to get yard time, a laundry operation, a library, usurious canteen prices reduced, and a

myriad of other claims. When the threats by guards came, I reported it to prison officials and they did nothing. So I went to outside law enforcement agencies for relief. Rather than act against their own assaultive guards, I was shipped to Marion prison to take a drug treatment program.

At Marion I was able to establish that I had never used alcohol or drugs, therefore invalidating their justification for the transfer. They were unhappy at my refusal to participate because it meant the loss of per enrollment federal funding. They really sell the program hard; for example, the participants are rewarded with the best prison jobs. The incredible part is that the programming consists of nothing more than the gruesome behaviour modification tactics well known to all of us here. So they did their worst and sent me back to Santa Rosa prison. The trip was pretty much a waste of nine weeks. I caught two colds and they were hot!

After four months back at Santa Rosa they asked if I wanted to go to DOC cooking school at Quincy prison. I said "no thanks". So they sent me anyway. Sitting here now pondering the various cells, bunks, and "holes" (CMs) in 17 prisons I have visited at least once for an overnight stay, I suspect that my travels through the Floriduh gulag have not come to an end. I guess they have 50 more jails and prisons I may yet visit during my life sentence. Then I will be able to say "Now I have seen them all"!

ENDNOTES

¹ For an elaboration of the revenge tactic schematics of the Floriduh penal staff, see; Niles, G. "Submission, Subservience, Model Inmates and the Fear Factor: Observations from a Sweet Kamp down Florida Way", JPP, 1993, vol. 4:2, 11-114; Gaucher, B. "Editor's Introduction", JPP, 1993, vol. 5:1,2-3.

POSTSCRIPT

[Editor's Note: The last correspondence we received from Gerald Niles was dated November 19, 1999. He writes:

Finally Quincy got rid of me. There are three prisons in this Hamilton complex. Things are going okay. By that I mean Resistance is progressive. I have been getting back into advocacy here.]