

BIG HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

To break out of its economic trap, Florence broke into the nation's toughest jail.

BY MIKE O'KEEFFE

The Colorado territorial government offered Cañon City a choice over a century ago: The town could be the home of the state prison or the University of Colorado.

Since the territory's rough-and-tumble miners and ranchers saw the drive to build the university as a useless stab at respectability engineered by Denver's snobbish gentry, Cañon City picked the prison. The town's fortunes—and those of its neighbors in Fremont County—have been tied to corrections ever since.

Fremont County is now the home of nine state prisons and 3,200 inmates. Over 10 percent of the county's 11,000-member work force is employed by the Colorado Department of Corrections, and a new state prison, scheduled to open in 1993, is expected to employ almost 200 more residents.

That's welcome news in Fremont County. Over the past decade, with the county suffering from a deeply troubled economy, state prisons were the only thing that kept the area going.

Florence, a dry, dusty town of 3,000 about 50 miles southwest of Colorado Springs, suffered the worst. A local coal mine gave pink slips to 70 of its 100 workers. A cement manufacturer slashed its staff in half, laying off 150 employees. Last summer, a wallboard plant gave workers three days' notice that it was going out of business, leaving 100 more jobless. Unemployment stands at 17 percent, and government-assistance checks are an important mainstay. "We cash a lot of 'em in here," says Don Ingle, owner of the Alibi Lounge, a Florence tavern.

"You don't realize what those jobs mean," says Florence city councilwoman Barbara Gonzales. "It doesn't just affect the people who lose them, but the people they pay rent to and buy groceries from. You just don't lay off one man. You affect an entire community."

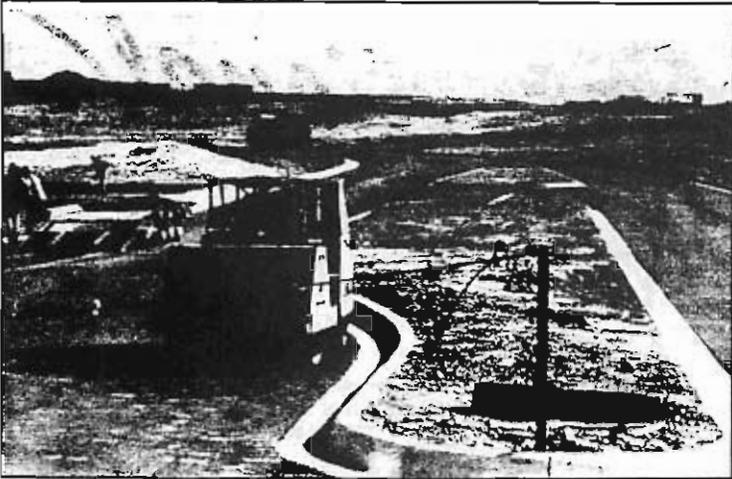
Many of the shops in Florence are vacant, and even during the middle of the day as many tumbleweeds as cars cruise through the main intersection.

But these days the folks of Florence are as optimistic as the economy is depressed. After an aggressive campaign by Fremont County's economic development council, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons chose their town as the site of a massive new federal prison complex that's now under construction.

While the prospect of housing a really big house might frighten some communities, Florence remains unfazed. In fact, the townsfolk are excited about the possibility that infamous cons like spy Jonathan Pollard, coke kingpin Carlos Lehder Rivas and neo-Nazi Bruce Pierce, one of Alan Berg's assailants, might wind up a few miles down the road. There's even talk that Manuel Noriega will land in Florence (never mind that Noriega hasn't been tried, much less convicted). "People seem to appreciate the notoriety," says Bob Wood, editor and publisher of the *Florence Citizen*. "A lot of us want to put Florence on the map, and this is the way to do it."

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Bar time: Construction began last July at the Florence prison site, to the satisfaction of city councilwoman Barbara Gonzales (below).

Photographs courtesy of Florence Citizens



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Economic development chief Skip Dyer likes to boast that when the prison complex, expected to house 2,350 inmates, is fully operational in 1993,

Fremont will be the corrections center of America, home to more prisoners than any other county in the country. And as he also likes to point out, that means even more jobs. About 200 locals have already gone to work on the building crews, and when the facility is finished, 750 staffers will be needed to operate it. According to the Bureau of Prisons, most supervisory jobs will be filled by current federal employees, but at least 400 citizens from Florence and nearby communities will be hired for the entry-level positions.

"It'll sure help," says Fremont County Commissioner Bud Chess. "No matter how rough times get, you'll always have inmates, and the rougher times get the more inmates you have."

But the economic boon has its price. About 550 of the federal inmates detained in Florence will be held in what the government calls an "administrative maximum security"

prison designed for its most troublesome criminals. The facility will be modeled on, and replace, the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois, a super-maximum-security prison that human-rights activists say is the most brutal jail in America, where prisoners are locked in small cells for 23 hours a day and denied basic human rights. It's the only U.S. prison ever condemned by Amnesty International, which usually reserves such criticism for jails in countries like Turkey, Chile and Iraq.

"It's equivalent to working on a slave ship," says Steven Whitman of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, an Illinois group that monitors and protests conditions at the prison. "I would say to the people of Florence that I understand your economic dilemma, but you've made a wrong moral choice. How different are they from the people who worked on the slave ships?"

Counters councilwoman Gonzales, "The government knows what it's doing—a lot more than the bleeding-heart liberals do."

THE U.S. PENITENTIARY at Marion opened in 1963, the same year the government closed Alcatraz, once the home of Al Capone and other criminals the government deemed problem prisoners. There was no pretense of rehabilitation at Alcatraz; inmates were locked in cells or assigned to hard labor. In contrast, Marion was a maximum-security facility with a thriving prison industry, open classrooms and relative freedom of movement for prisoners.

By 1973, however, Marion had taken over where Alcatraz left off. Because of a sharp rise in racial and gang violence within the federal penal system, the Illinois jail was designated as a central control unit for the country's most difficult cons.

A precarious peace was maintained until the early Eighties. "Prisoners

say that up until about ten years ago, the prison was run on an uneasy equilibrium," Whitman says. "The guards were not systematically brutal. The guards gave the prisoners some respect, and in turn, the prisoners didn't try to kill the guards. It wasn't nice, it wasn't gentle, but it allowed for a minimal coexistence."

Marion's real problems started in late October 1983, a week after two corrections officers were fatally stabbed during separate assaults by inmates (prisoners say the slain men were among the penitentiary's most abusive guards; prison officials say the inmates involved in the attacks were psychopathic killers). The prison bureau declared a state of emergency that's been in place ever since at Marion, earning the facility super-maximum-security status.

About sixty guards from other maximum-security prisons were brought to Marion to form a unit called the "A Team." In the two weeks that followed, the A Team reportedly assaulted dozens of prisoners, according to a 1987 Amnesty International report. Many of the officers used three-foot clubs tipped with steel beads to attack the inmates in their cells and on nearby tiers and stairways. Prisoners claimed they were hauled in handcuffs to the prison hospital for additional beatings and rough, humiliating rectal searches prompted by rumors that they were hiding hacksaw blades and weapons.

"The allegations include reports of beatings to the chest, spine, groin and genitals, often when a prisoner was in a prone position; kickings; kneecappings in the groin and chest, having prisoners' heads rammed against the metal doors or grilles," the report stated.

"Amnesty International is not in a position to establish the veracity of the above allegations," the report continued.

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AMERICA'S LEAST WANTED

The federal Bureau of Prisons claims that the inmates detained at the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois, are the baddest of the bad, violent troublemakers who've endangered officers and prisoners at other facilities. Or they're high escape risks, the government argues, men who'll make a break the minute security is eased.

But the only security threatened by many of the people now warehoused at Marion was the national security, the prison's critics charge. Some of the most notorious inmates were sent to Marion after they protested their convictions for political crimes.

"The government needs Marion to send a message to the rest of the prison population: If you don't conform, we'll send you to Marion," says Osai Kwamina, who was held at the Illinois facility from 1983 to 1989.

The current lineup at Marion includes Jonathan Pollard, sentenced to life imprisonment for passing American intelligence to Israel, a diminutive man who'd be an unlikely security risk inside a prison—and an equally unlikely candidate for rescue,

since Israel is dependent on U.S. military and economic aid. Although federal prosecutors promised they'd mitigate the charges against Pollard in exchange for his cooperation, the government didn't keep those promises. Instead, Judge Aubrey Robinson received a secret memo from then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who said Pollard should be "shot" or "hanged" for his crime. Pollard received a life sentence and was sent to Marion.

Others held at the prison include Oscar Lopez-Rivera, a Puerto Rican *independentista* arrested in 1981 and later sentenced to 55 years for seditious conspiracy. Under United Nations rules, he's a political prisoner, since he was arrested for attempting to win self-determination for a colony. Lopez-Rivera initially was sent to the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was later charged with "conspiracy to escape." After his conviction, he was sent to Marion. Steven Whitman of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, an Illinois group that protests conditions at the prison, attended Lopez-Rivera's trial. "It was a farce," he says. "All prisoners think about escaping. Thousands try, and hundreds do, but they're not sent to Marion. He was sent to Marion because of his political beliefs."

Federal prosecutors in New Jersey charged Yu Kikumara, an alleged member of the left-wing Japanese Red



I spy: Jonathan Pollard leaving court after sentencing.

Photograph by AP

Army, with nine separate crimes after he was arrested with three pipe bombs. Kikumara is now serving a thirty-year sentence at Marion. John Walker, convicted of selling Navy secrets to the Soviets, is another Marion inmate.

Tim Blunk, a revolutionary sentenced to 58 years for possession of weapons and explosives, was sent to Marion after his 1985 trial. During that trial, the judge lectured Blunk and co-defendant Susan Rosenberg on the evils of communism, then recommended they be denied parole because their views are dangerous.

Marion also housed Leonard Peltier of the American Indian Movement,

who was sentenced to two-life terms for the murder of two FBI agents despite strong evidence that Peltier acted in self-defense and allegations that the government's case was fabricated. (Peltier is now in Leavenworth.)

Marion's sorriest story, however, belongs to Alan Berkman, a New York physician serving a twelve-year sentence for possession of weapons and explosives and for failing to appear in court to face charges of providing medical aid to another radical. Berkman is dying of Hodgkins disease, but despite a judge's recommendation that he be sent to a prison with a good hospital, he was sent to Marion immediately after his trial. Marion has just one doctor, a physician unlicensed to practice in Illinois but allowed to work at the prison because federal regulations don't require the same standards as the American Medical Association. Berkman has been eligible for parole since 1987 and has sought release on humanitarian grounds, but despite pleas from doctors, congressmen and religious leaders, he's been denied parole because he won't renounce his political views.

Berkman won't make the move to Florence, though; he recently was transferred to a prison hospital in Rochester, Minnesota.

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"Nevertheless, it is this organization's view that the allegations described present at least reasonable ground to believe that inmates of Marion prison may have been subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment during the period in question."

And that was just the beginning of the Marion lockdown. Since then, the 350 inmates held in the super-maximum-security prison have lived in conditions that violate the United Nations' Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, Amnesty International charges.

Prisoners are now locked in eight-by-ten rooms for 22 and a half hours a day (most federal prisoners average thirteen hours a day out of their cells). The prison industry has been dismantled, and inmates are forbidden to socialize or participate in religious services and classes. When they are allowed out—to use recreation areas or for other business—their legs and arms are shackled with chains.

Beatings, while not as frequent as when the lockdown began, are still common, inmates charge. So are rectal

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searches. Troublemakers often are tied spread-eagled and naked to their concrete-slab beds.

"It fucks you up. You become a fucked-up human being. It drives you insane," says Osai Kwamina, who arrived at Marion two months before the lockdown began. Kwamina, a former black revolutionary who's now a civil rights activist on Long Island, served six years of a twelve-year sentence for armed robbery at Marion. He was released in 1989, but in his frequent nightmares he's still at the prison, he says. "It makes you feel powerless and helpless. It fucked me up emotionally. I'm still having a tough time relating to people. I was a damn mad man."

Conditions at Marion are tough but not cruel, according to the Bureau of Prisons. "The inmates there are treated humanely," says prisons spokesman Dan Dunne. "The courts say the procedures are constitutional."

In 1988 a federal court rejected a suit filed by Marion inmates seeking an end to the lockdown, and the Supreme Court later refused to hear the case. But Marion hasn't avoided scrutiny entirely. Former U.S. Representative Robert Kastenmeier, who as head of a House Judiciary subcommittee investigated Marion in 1985, likened the relationship between guards and inmates there to that of "hostages and the terrorists who hold them."

Inmates at Marion are far from hostages, Dunne argues; half are convicted murderers, while most of the others have demonstrated that they're violence-prone. "The inmates at Marion warrant high security," he says. "We need a system in place to manage them."

A 1985 congressional report on Marion, however, noted that almost 80 percent of the inmates held in

super-maximum-security merited less severe security classifications.

"The lie of Marion is that the prisoners are there because they're uncontrollable," Whitman says. "But nothing the government says about Marion is true. Many are there because the government wants to break them."

Some were sent to Marion because they committed crimes for political reasons [see story, page 12]. Kwamina wound up in Marion because he "robbed every bank in Manhattan" to raise funds for radical black liberation causes, he says. "We didn't hurt anybody. We wouldn't hold up stores or anything like that because we didn't want to steal from other poor people. We stole from banks because the government, the FDIC, would have to cover it. But when I was classified, the report said I was an overtly dangerous person."

"It seems to me they're sent there because the government wants to punish them for the nature of their crimes, not the crimes themselves," says Marc Mauer, assistant director of the Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project, which promotes criminal justice reforms. "The justification of the security there is very open to question. To me, this sounds more like a POW situation than a prison."

Other Marion inmates are convicts who became political after they were imprisoned, people who complained too much or filed too many lawsuits seeking better conditions at other facilities.

But the people of Florence don't think they have anything to fear from the inmates who'll be moved from Marion to the new complex's super-maximum-security prison. "They're not nearly as bad as the state offenders," says Dyer. "Some of them are real animals."

RUSS MARTIN, the Bureau of Prisons' project manager at Florence, says the new complex's super-maximum-security wing will be a marked improvement over Marion. "The entire design of the facility is to create a more humane environment, to take away the dungeon effect," he explains, leaning back from his desk in the mobile home that serves as his office at the site. "The safety of the inmates and the staff will both be increased."

Yet in many ways, the super-maximum-security unit at Florence is designed to increase prisoners' isolation. At Marion, prisoners at least are able to shout at each other through their bars. At Florence, the cell design will make that more difficult. When prisoners are allowed out of their cells, they'll be guided through a series of electronic sliding doors operated by an officer in a control unit. Human contact between inmates, and with guards, will be almost nonexistent.

And the lockdown will continue, according to prisons spokesman Dunne. "The policy won't change," he says. "Florence will be a new facility, but our policies will remain consistent."

Florence shares something else with Marion: environmental problems. During the mid-Seventies, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency discovered high levels of carcinogens in the Marion water supply. While the city of Marion found another source, the prison continues to use contaminated water (the Bureau of Prisons is now digging new wells).

The Florence complex is being built a few miles from the Cotter Corporation uranium mill, designated in 1984 as

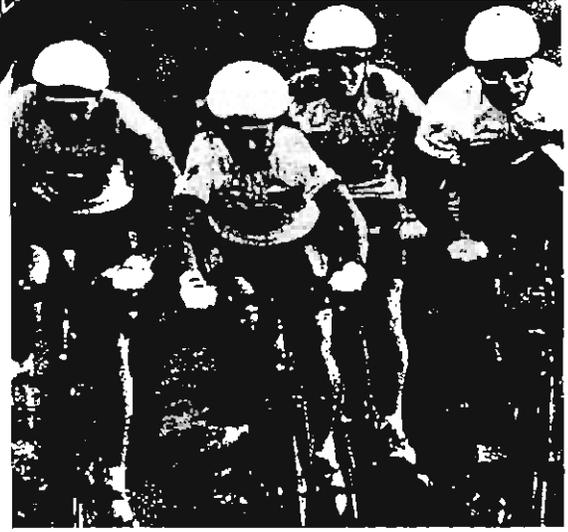
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a Superfund site. Uranium tailings dumped in unlined ponds have poisoned the underground aquifer and the nearby Arkansas River; dried radioactive dust is carried many miles away by the high winds that blow through the canyons around Florence.

"We are concerned about that," admits Martin. "But we don't think it will be a problem. I like to think our engineering crew has done its homework."

Martin used to work in the prison bureau's facility management division, but moved into construction because it was "a good career path for me." Besides the Florence facility, the federal government expects to build six more prisons around the nation within the next few years, including another large multi-prison complex in Allenwood, Pennsylvania.

The prisons are needed because the number of federal inmates has skyrocketed in recent years. Between 1950 and 1980, that figure varied between 17,000 and 25,000 prisoners; during the Eighties, it soared to 61,000. By 1999, according to bureau figures, 125,000 prisoners will be held in federal jails.

Dunne says the sharp increase can be attributed to the Department of Justice's aggressive war on drugs, as well as stiffer sentencing guidelines adopted in the mid-Eighties.

But according to Boulder criminologist Roger Lauen, a member of Governor Roy Romer's criminal justice commission, the increase in federal prisoners has more to do with

"How different are they from the people who worked on slave ships?"

politics than actual crime rates. "First the Reagan administration, and now the Bush administration, wants to appear tough on crime," he says.

"There's no dramatic increase in crime that can explain this dramatic increase in federal prisoners," adds Mauer. "There's been no dramatic jump in drug crimes, or in overall crime, for that matter."

Kay Knapp of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Rational Public Policy, a criminal justice think-tank, agrees. The feds have taken over so many drug cases—cases that in the past would have been left to state and local jurisdictions—that federal district courts have now become "drug courts," she says.

Local officials don't object, she adds, because their work loads are decreased and they need fewer beds. "Money is always an issue at the state level, but money is always available for the Bureau of Prisons," Knapp says.

And as the number of federal prisoners increases, so does the number of employment opportunities in Florence.

When the Fremont County economic development office first learned in mid-1987 that the federal government was looking for a site for a new federal prison complex, it immediately began

an aggressive campaign to net the prison for Florence. After local officials learned the prison bureau wanted the best community to contribute at least a portion of the land needed for the prison, economic development chief Dyer began fundraising with a vengeance. Thousands of dollars were raised through a carnival and a 24-hour radiothon, while local clubs and civic organizations competed with each other to raise the rest. Within three months, \$129,000 had been banked to purchase 400 of the 600 acres needed for the complex.

While the Bureau of Prisons continued to evaluate sites in other parts of the country (most of those, like Allenwood, will receive federal prisons as well, Martin says), Florence kept fighting for the facility. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents to a mail-in poll in the *Cañon City Record* said they wanted the complex in Florence. Not a negative word was heard at a March 1989 public hearing, where everybody from Teenage Republicans for Fremont County to representatives of Senators Tim Wirth and Bill Armstrong lined up to praise the project.

"We see many positive things about that community," says Dunne. "They have a good location, and it's a good place to recruit staff. And the welcome they gave was also a factor."

In October 1989, the Bureau of Prisons announced it had selected Florence as the home of the new prison. Last July the bureau hosted a housewarming barbecue attended by 1,000 local residents. A job fair held at Florence High School drew hundreds more.

Florence is now getting ready to enjoy its prosperity. Local real estate offices are receiving calls from around the country from federal employees looking for housing. Interest in downtown commercial space is up, too. The city has annexed hundreds of acres for new developments. The Cañon City extension of Pueblo Community College is offering criminal justice classes tailored to those interested in being hired by the federal prison system. "We need to be ready," says Gonzales. "We'll reap what we sow."

What with all the wooing, sowing and reaping, no one in Florence has been interested in questioning what might happen inside the super-maximum-security wing. The only person to publicly voice any concern about Fremont County's reliance on the corrections industry is Dyer, who's now trying to land a national corrections lab that will study the causes and effects of crime. "Corrections will be a major industry here for a long time to come, so this is a bright side to all this," he says. "We wish it could be more productive, so that's why we're going after the national corrections lab."

"Yes, the people of Florence have problems with jobs," former Marion inmate Kwamina says. "But what they should do is pressure the government for another kind of industry, one that is less willing to make money from people's suffering. The government is sneaky. They're buying Florence's loyalty."

"We don't have any basis for judgment whether the prisoners at Marion are treated fairly or not," Dyer argues. "In most people's opinion around here, they deserve it."

And in most people's opinion around there, Florence deserved the break. □

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