

Trapped in Time

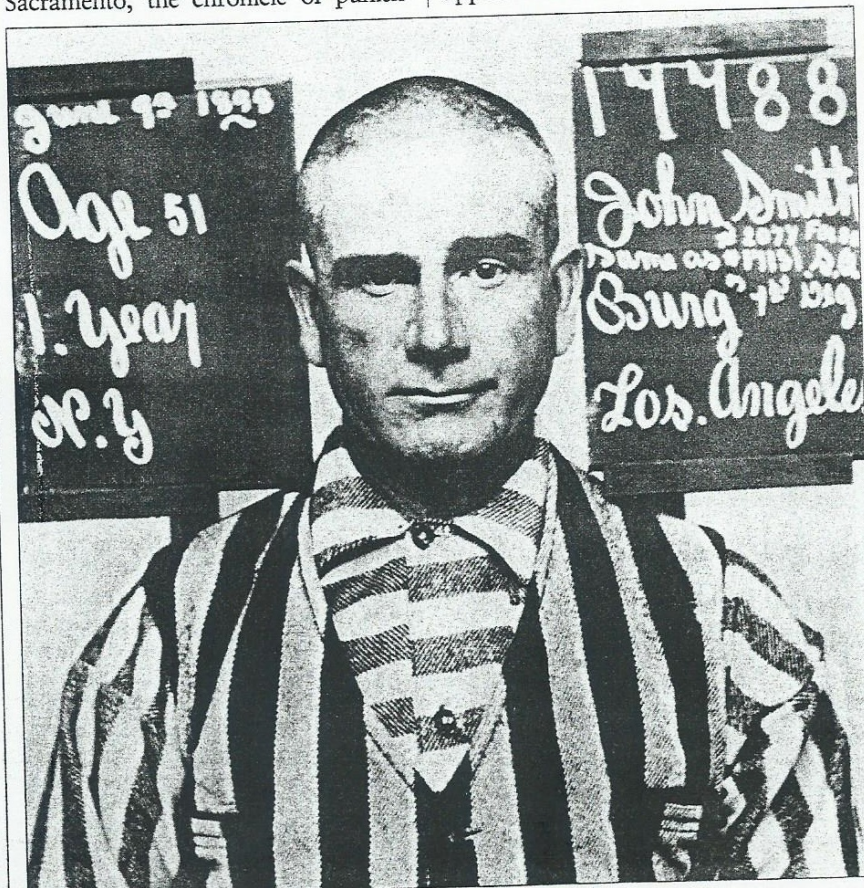
A state archives exhibit takes a look back into California's prisons

SACRAMENTO—Preserved behind glass, the big brown ledger offers compelling commentary on conditions in California prisons in the late 19th century. In elaborate, fading script, the "San Quentin Punishment Record Book, 1872-86" details lashings and floggings and other forms of punishment common in prisons at the time.

Part of a fascinating new historical exhibit at the California State Archives in Sacramento, the chronicle of punish-

ments at California's oldest prison lies open to entries made in July and August 1879.

The record shows that on July 23, Peter Gibson, No. 7952, was punished with nine days in the dungeon, 12 lashes and the loss of "one month credit" for "assaulting and beating a fellow prisoner." On July 26, George Wilson was placed in solitary confinement for "smuggling tobacco into the dungeon," and on August 16, N.F. Kent received seven days in the dungeon for "snatching apples from a Chinaman in the corral."



"John Smith" spent 10 months in San Quentin for his third burglary conviction.



If these adobe walls could talk: a cell in San Quentin's "Old Spanish Block."

Various early-day instruments of discipline are on display as well: a ball and chain, leg irons, a steel-and-leather-shoe contraption called an "Oregon boot," a metal cane and a carved wooden baton carried by guards at Folsom Prison.

And there is the deposition—signed with an "X"—of Evve Thompson, who was caught fighting and "tightly bound in a straight jacket for 24 hours." Thompson said he suffered "excruciating agony and pain," and when he pleaded with a guard to loosen the jacket, the guard said, "You black bastard, I've been laying for you quite a while." Thompson lost consciousness after about an hour. When the jacket was finally removed, he said, his legs were bent and badly swollen, his arms and shoulders swollen and blistered. His fingers were blistered and could not be straightened.

The Legislature put an end to punishment by straight jacket in 1903. Other forms of punishment noted in the exhibit—flogging, confinement in dungeons and "the practice of stripping off an inmate's clothing and spraying him with cold water under high pressure"—presumably continued. Dungeons, the exhibit notes, remained in use until the 1940s.

The exhibit contains only portions of the state archives' vast prison collection, which includes a century of prison registers, inmate photographs from 1880 to 1950, pardon applications, governors' clemency records and San Quentin's execution books from 1893 to 1967. The exhibit continues through May 1990.

—SIGRID BATHEN