

It's interesting that this appeared (PST) on the 4th of July when millions are celebrating "independence."? Clearly slave labor continues in amerika.? I read an editorial in today's? Chronicle that noted the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world; that it jails more people (over 2.2 million and rising at the rate of 1000 new prisoners per week) -- making it # 1.? China is a "distant second" with four times the U.S. population!??

Love & liberation,

Kiilu

The New York Times
nytimes.com

July 5, 2006

With Jobs to Do, Louisiana Parish Turns to Inmates

By ADAM NOSSITER

LAKE PROVIDENCE, La. ? At barbecues, ballgames and funerals, cotton gins, service stations, the First Baptist Church, the pepper-sauce factory and the local private school ? the men in orange are everywhere.

Many people here in East Carroll Parish, as Louisiana counties are known, say they could not get by without their inmates, who make up more than 10 percent of its population and most of its labor force. They are dirt-cheap, sometimes free, always compliant, ever-ready and disposable.

You just call up the sheriff, and presto, inmates are headed your way. "They bring me warm bodies, 10 warm bodies in the morning," said Grady Brown, owner of the Panola Pepper Corporation. "They do anything you ask them to do."

It is an ideal arrangement, many in this farming parish say.

"You call them up, they drop them off, and they pick them up in the afternoon," said Paul Chapple, owner of a service station.

National prison experts say that only Louisiana allows citizens to use inmate labor on such a widespread scale, under the supervision of local sheriffs. The state has the nation's highest incarceration rate, and East Carroll Parish, a forlorn jurisdiction of 8,700 people along the Mississippi River in the remote northeastern corner of Louisiana, has one of the highest rates in the state.

As a result, it is here that the nation's culture of incarceration achieves a kind of ultimate synthesis with the local economy. The prison system converts a substantial segment of the population into a commodity that is in desperately short supply ?

cheap labor ? and local-jail inmates are integrated into every aspect of economic and social life.

The practice is both an odd vestige of the abusive convict-lease system that began in the South around Reconstruction, and an outgrowth of Louisiana's penchant for stuffing state inmates into parish jails ? far more than in any other state. Nowhere else would sheriffs have so many inmates readily at hand, creating a potent political tool come election time, and one that keeps them popular in between.

Sometimes the men get paid ? minimum wage, for instance, working for Mr. Brown. But by the time the sheriff takes his cut, which includes board, travel expenses and clothes, they wind up with considerably less than half of that, inmates say.

The rules are loose and give the sheriffs broad discretion. State law dictates only which inmates may go out into the world (mostly those nearing the end of their sentences) and how much the authorities get to keep of an inmate's wages, rather than the type of work he can perform. There is little in the state rules to limit the potential for a sheriff to use his inmate flock to curry favor or to reap personal benefit.

"If you talk to people around here, it is jokingly referred to as rent-a-convict," said Michael Brewer, a lawyer and former public defender in Alexandria, in central Louisiana. "There's something offensive about that. It's almost like a form of slavery."

That is not a view often expressed in East Carroll Parish.

"I've been at cocktail parties where people laugh about it," said Jacques Roy, another Alexandria lawyer. "People in Alexandria clamor for it. It's cheaper. I've always envisioned it as a who-you-know kind of thing."

The prisoners are not compelled to work, but several interviewed here said they welcomed the chance to get out of the crowded jail, at least during the day. Still, Mr. Brewer said, "if one of them were to refuse, you can imagine the repercussions."

Nearly half of Louisiana's prisoners are housed in small parish jails, a policy that saves the state from building new prisons and is lucrative for sheriffs, handsomely compensated for the privilege.

"They're making a ton of money," said Burk Foster, former criminal-justice professor at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and author of the recent textbook "Corrections." The sheriffs are paid \$22.39 per prisoner per day for accommodating their charges in facilities of often rudimentary construction.

The accommodations here appear to be made of no more than corrugated metal. "Hey man, we're sleeping on the floor," an inmate called out from behind the fence at the parish jail last week, before a visitor was shooed away by an angry guard.

Exactly how much the sheriffs pocket, however, is unclear.

"Sheriffs deliberately obscure from the public how much money they're making," said Mr. Foster, a leading expert on Louisiana prisons.

A spokeswoman for the state corrections department said she could not respond to the idea that sheriffs profited from housing state inmates.

The sheriff here, Mark Shumate, did not reply to phone calls and messages, but one of his investigators, Brandon Wiltcher, had an explanation for the popularity and pervasiveness of inmate labor here.

"It's just such a shortage of people who will work, or that can work," Mr. Wiltcher said.

This parish, the poorest in Louisiana, lost 20 percent of its free population from 1980 to 2000. The inmate population, however, grew.

Mr. Shumate is a very big man in these precincts of lush green corn, cotton and soybean fields that stretch into a horizon shimmering in the heat. Residents say his inmates cook hamburgers for community get-togethers; they are in the concession stand at children's baseball games; they dig graves, mow roadsides and roof churches.

"They are a constant fixture and presence, at each of these community events," said Danny Terral, who works in his family's farm-supply business. "I daresay I haven't been at a community event where it's not been, those orange shirts."

They build dugouts and tend the athletic fields ? free ? at Briarfield Academy, a private school here. "They did an excellent job," said the school's principal, Morris Richardson, adding, "We try to provide their lunch for them."

Mr. Wiltcher, of the sheriff's office, said there was nothing wrong with helping out the private school without charge.

"It's not only used at this private school, it's used parishwide," he said of inmate labor. "Since it's used for everyone who needs it, I don't see where there would be a problem with it."

The churches, too, are grateful beneficiaries. "They sent me prisoners for a month" for menial chores at the First Baptist Church, said Reynold Minsky, also chairman of the local levee board. "All completely free," Mr. Minsky added. "It's a real good deal. Everybody is tickled."

Many here view the inmates essentially as commodities, who can be returned behind bars after the agricultural season is over, and the need for labor is reduced.

"Good thing about it, wintertime, you can lock them up ? put them in cold storage," said Billy Travis, a farmer and police juror, as county commissioners here are known. "I call it deep freeze."

Right on the main road into town, at the base of the levee, up from the Economy Inn and the Scott Tractor Company, the quasi-employment agency behind concertina wire is neither out of sight nor out of mind. At midday, passing motorists can spot its residents, out for a brief exercise spell. "They got D.O.C. mixed in with parish prisoners," another inmate complained, referring to the State Department of Corrections inmates who mingle freely with those who have committed lesser local crimes.

At Lake Providence Country Club one afternoon last week, during a Rotary Club meeting, the talk was of organizing a midsummer fish fry. "I imagine the sheriff can do that," one man called out. "I hear the sheriff does a really good job," another said.

Outside the worn little town, a succession of empty storefronts and others headed that way, inmates can be spotted clearing up the remains of a ruined church off a hot country road, while a deputy lounges in the shade; picking up trash; and clearing undergrowth from roadsides with heavy equipment.

Up the road, toward the Arkansas line, a half-dozen or so are at work in the stifling production-line room of the small pepper-sauce plant, sweating alongside the free laborers. Another is fixing up a house next door that Mr. Brown bought to rent out.

The factory owner sings his praises, calling him reliable, trustworthy, honest. The inmate, Roy Hebert ? he says he is in for forgery ? beams. "Mr. Brown, he takes care of me," Mr. Hebert said.