

County jail too often destination for troubled souls

On Sept. 25, 1857, John Houseman, a German immigrant “deranged for some months,” committed suicide by hanging himself at the McLean County jail. “Self destruction” was the coroner’s jury verdict.

Such a scene was all-too common, not only in McLean County but in a great many of the jails and prisons throughout the nation. The American penal system has long failed to protect its most vulnerable populations, especially the mentally ill.

When James Swaim retired in November 1902 after serving twenty years as the county’s “turnkey,” he reflected on the risk mentally ill inmates represented to themselves and to others. “The most dangerous prisoners,” he said, “were not the murderers, horse thieves or other criminals, but the insane.”

For every successful suicide there were many more unsuccessful attempts. In the summer of 1903, Hattie Watt, a “feeble-minded girl aged nineteen years,” was charged with insanity and placed in the county jail. On Aug. 15, she tore her night dress into strips and tied them together to make a rope some eight feet long. She placed one end tightly around her neck and was about to throw the other end over a two-by-four joist in the ceiling when a night jailer, alerted to her locked room by suspicious sounds, halted the effort.

This attempted suicide occurred in the county’s fifth jail (see accompanying image), located at the corner of Madison and Monroe streets on the western edge of downtown. Many longtime residents will remember this jail, which served as the county lockup for 95 years, from 1882 to 1977.

In the fall of 1915, Annie Henrichsen, inspector for the State Charities Commission, paid a visit to the McLean County jail. At the time, Illinois sheriffs were reimbursed a set amount for each prisoner under their charge, with the rate set by the respective county government. Henrichsen noted McLean County paid about the lowest rate in all the state, a reflection of the county’s longstanding reputation for parsimony.

In March 1955, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons issued a report on a recent inspection of the county jail. Inspector Roy J. Guenzel found conditions deplorable, especially when it came to sanitation. Prisoners had to make use of two decrepit toilets and wash basins in the main cell block. Individual cells did not have running water, so open chamber pots were used during the night.

The jail, according to the report, was also infested with rats, prompting the inspector to call for much of the interior to be gutted and rebuilt.

Many on the McLean County Board of Supervisors took umbrage to the findings. “It seems to me things are in pretty good shape at the jail,” was the response of Clyde Hunter, the board’s public buildings chairman.

In late September 1959, a jailed 15-year-old, charged with truancy and car theft, committed suicide using a shirt tied around a steel bar.

In its final years, conditions in the county jail deteriorated further. In March 1970, The Pantagraph published a letter from a Bloomington resident who four days earlier had spent a brief stint in jail. He was placed in the “holdover” area equipped with little more than a few hammocks, though since the chains holding them were broken, they proved useless.

“If a person wants a drink of water, he has to drink from the bathtub which has scum on it a foot thick,” he wrote. “There are water bugs and roaches big enough to ride on. The officers were truly nice and courteous but it is a shame even for them to spend a workday in a place like that.”

On March 1, 1977, the crumbling, rotting 95-year-old jail finally gave way to the current one, which is located immediately to the south of the Law and Justice Center. “It is hard to believe this place was designed for men,” noted Pantagraph reporter D. Wesley Smith, upon visiting the old jail a week after the last prisoners were transferred to the new one. Sheriff John King led Smith on a tour, showing off things such as the “black cell,” so-called because of its iron door and unlit room. There was also the closet-size “stand-up” cell. “There is room only to stand, barely to breathe” noted Smith. “Once the door is closed, there is nothing at all.”

Although the new McLean County jail represented an immense improvement over its predecessor, the sheriff’s department has struggled to meet the needs of an ever greater number of mentally ill prisoners.

County officials began tackling this intractable problem in earnest after the National Institute of Corrections issued a report several years ago critical of the county’s mental health system.

The longstanding problem had clearly reached a tipping point to become a full-blown crisis. Over one nine month period, from January 2012 through September 2013 (to cite a representative example), jail staff put a stop to 34 suicide attempts. At the time, Sheriff Mike Emery said that on any given day around 25 percent of the inmate population had received treatment for mental illness.

In 2015, the County Board released the Mental Health Action Plan, aimed at addressing the myriad of problems faced by the mentally ill, both in jail and out, from juvenile services to housing. A centerpiece of this reform effort is the \$45 million, 80,000 square foot addition to the county jail. The addition will include a special needs unit to accommodate upwards of 48 prisoners, with 16 cells set aside for the seriously mentally ill.

County residents should take heart that this concerted, well-funded effort is underway. It's been a long time coming.

In September 1871, Bloomington police officers arrested and fined a “crazy man named Thomas” on a charge of disorderly conduct at the west side depot. Unable to pay the \$7.35 fine (or about \$150 in today's dollars, adjusted for inflation), Thomas was “lodged in the calaboose” (whether the city or county jail is not known).

That was not the end of this story, though. “The bystanders at the depot, who witnessed the arrest,” reported The Pantagraph, “feeling indignant towards the policemen for beating and then arresting a simple insane man, yesterday subscribed the money to pay his fine and had him released.”