

IOWA HISTORY



Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1907

Prison Warden With a Heart

“Men are savages at meals. Give ‘em music.”

That was the opinion of Fort Madison State Penitentiary warden James C. Sanders. Sanders was in the position for ten years—1908 to 1918, and his philosophy about penal systems caused a sensation around the country.

Sanders’ training and early career as a teacher shaped his beliefs about handling people—including criminals. He had been a band director at Corwith, Iowa, and a soloist “of unusual ability” before coming to his position as warden.

In addition to serving up food at meal time, Warden Sanders provided a 12-piece orchestra—made up of prisoners—who played soothing music throughout meals. “Music appeals to the better side of men,” he said.

The orchestra was formed under the direction of Sanders. Instruments were purchased by the inmates with their earnings from their prison jobs. The orchestra also furnished music at the Sunday religious services. An all-male choir was formed too—thanks to Warden Sanders.

Sander’s wife, Laura, was brought in to help improve conditions at the institution. She implemented a number of changes. Meals were served in the dining room rather than in the cells where the men received their food from guards who spooned it through the bars into prisoners’ outstretched hands. Window curtains were installed in the dining room. A thorough cleaning was ordered. Laura Sanders planned the meals that became more tasty and nutritious. Variety was introduced to the menus.

Warden Sanders banned the wearing of traditional prison-stripped uniforms. Men were dressed in “tailor-made suits, laundered shirts, and polished shoes.” A barber shop and bathing facilities were made available. He implemented new forms of discipline—outlawing beatings and solitary confinement. He took clubs away from the guards. On Saturday afternoons men who had no infractions during the previous week were allowed to play sports—baseball and basketball were favorites.

As a former teacher Warden Sanders knew the importance of education for the rehabilitation of the inmates so he started a prison school. He organized a “capable corps” of teachers who worked one-on-one with the men. Sometimes the warden could be seen working with a student. A library was put in place. He brought in speakers from the outside to offer lectures—paid for again by the prisoners themselves.

On one occasion Sanders' teaching days intersected with his career at the prison. A banker from the little Hancock County town where the warden had taught was convicted of embezzling \$75,000 from the bank. After seven years on the run the banker turned himself in, was tried, and convicted. He ended up serving his sentence at Fort Madison, where he and his former teacher were together again. The warden was asked about his former student, who had been a favorite of his. He was reluctant to talk about the man. But he admitted he had not made a point of seeing his new inmate. Perhaps it was too painful to see how the 13-year-old boy had ended up in his adulthood.

Sander's never abandoned his love of education. He ended his career as it had begun—in a public school. When Sanders left his position at Fort Madison in 1918 he took a position as superintendent of schools at Avoca, Iowa.

When James Sanders died in 1922 his obituary recalled a man who had one ambition in life—to help others who were less fortunate. His respect for other humans was his legacy—to education and to the prison system.

Sanders always had a soft place in his heart for the little guy. He was remembered for having said, "might is not always right, and the majority is not always just and fair." Perhaps his years in the prison system prompted him to make this observation: "If a man steals a ride on a rail road he is called a hobo; if he steals the whole rail road his name is emblazoned in history as a financier."

Sources:

The Blue Book of Iowa Women, <http://www.kinyon.com/iowa/iawomen1914/00596sanders.htm>

James Sanders Obituary:

<http://iagenweb.org/boards/pottawattamie/obituaries/index.cgi?read=210861>

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"Warden Sanders Entertains Pupil," *The Daily Gate City*, July 31, 1914.

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