

High Sheriff: A Down

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

Editors' Note: Roman Gribbs is Sheriff of Wayne County and candidate for mayor of Detroit. Part of his attempt to sell himself to the people of our city has been on the basis of his role in reforming the Wayne County Jail, which is his responsibility.

Long a chamber of horrors, the Sheriff has been able to enlist the cooperation of Detroit's two daily papers to create an illusion that his dungeon has become a fit place for humans to inhabit due to his work.

The author recently spent several days as a guest of Sheriff Gribbs at the jail on Clinton Street and comments on conditions there.

Within the steel and granite gloom of the ward, the mumblings of poor men, the moans of the addicts, the curses of pimps, and the whinings of young neophytes among the "losers" heaved the air and stifled sane thought. From the glaring light fixtures came odious energies and schizoid hopes soon growing lethal in their futility.

Four or five times a day an addict would scream for a deputy after vomiting, just to return to his cell, righteous with dismay. Phone slips would pass through the bars to the indifferent deputies only to be discarded, the dimes also gone.

Thirty percent of the incarcerated men were users. Of those, two of three nursed their "joneses" with barbiturates and amphetamines supplied in the "clinic" by a physician too indifferent to be concerned with more than postponing the addicts' immediate requirements.

One addict, after vomiting profusely four times in one day, assailed the lazy deputy with an echoing harangue of just indignation (i.e. the obvious need by the prisoner for medical attention had been called to his attention a half-dozen times that day, his third day of withdrawal and requests for treatment).

He was hauled out by the dep and placed in the "hole" where he spent seven days sleeping on cement slabs in fifty-degree temperatures with merely his underwear and not one sheet or blanket. He was denied visiting privileges, medical attention, clothing and mail rights. This is under the martial law carried on by the Sheriff's branch of the ominously threatening Detroit police regime which has as its candidate this mayoral election chosen in all farcical irony, Sheriff Roman S. Gribbs.

Even the small, weak voice of newspapers and radio coming to the prisoners has been silenced by the strangulating censorship of the Sheriff's Office.

Deputies report that all mail addressed to Action Line and Contact 10 would be stopped due to the innumerable complaints exuding from the musty cellblocks and its neglected prisoners—some of whom are held up to three months awaiting trial for a traffic violation.

After an in-person visit to the jail by an interviewer from a local radio station in October the heartline of the prisoners to the public was cut off. The resulting radio program aired enough legitimate complaints to make it safe to report that Gribbs wouldn't even have made the ticket had the program been produced three months later.

The sheriff immediately put a stopper on all such interviews. Incurrigibly, the lethargic neglect of duties by the deputy sheriffs at WCJ goes on. Two out of ten earn their salaries—and that of the other eight.

Roman Gibbs has proven his indifference to those with first-hand experience, the very people whose rights he is responsible for: the prisoners.

In his statements responding to investigation of his department's apathy to the prisoners he refuses to reprimand his deputy representatives, and defends their indifference in the name of policy.

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