

Prison Work Crews Save More Than Is Spent On Jail Operation

By Ron Reeves
Sentinel Staff Writer

It's a strange, but true fact, that county jail inmates through supervised work crews, save the county more each year than is spent for the entire operation of the jail itself.

For example, last year the work crews, figured at the rate of \$1.75 per hour worked, saved the county approximately \$123,000. The over-all cost of jail operation, including meals, services and other expenses, came to about \$86,000.

But to be accurate, the "sav-

ed" \$123,000 probably wouldn't have been spent by the county anyway.

Said Sheriff Doug James of the work crews: "They perform functions which normally would not be done—things the county wouldn't hire to be done."

The jail inmates don't complain about working, the sheriff said. The benefits are readily seen.

Instead of sitting in the overcrowded jail day after day, trustees assigned to work crews get out and around. They receive a five-day reduction for every 30 days they are assigned, and are given a larger-than-normal lunch and a pack of cigarettes a day.

"I feel it is beneficial to the inmates to get out and do something beneficial for the county, rather than sit up there stewing and doing hard time," Sheriff James said.

"If they had to stay in up there, I don't know what would happen," the sheriff added. He indicated discipline problems would undoubtedly go up, probably including fights and perhaps even riots.

"Our inmate morale is quite high," the sheriff said.

To get on a work crew an inmate must be sentenced, not just be waiting for court proceedings. He cannot have a background of narcotics, escape or violence. Generally, the work crew is made up of men serving sentences on drunk, non-support, bad check or theft charges.

Even with the restrictions, about half of the inmates work, which means some 50 a day go out of the jail to work seven-hour days.

Sheriff James has expanded the work-crew program to cover a lot of projects. At the county

hospital they help out in the laundry, with yard, cleanup or repair work, or are just on call when extra muscle is needed. At the county service center they grease and wash vehicles, change tires and pump gas.

The road and yard crews are important in the area of litter control, picking up trash or debris dumped along county roads. They also paint posts and do body work on county vehicles.

At the county courthouse they maintain the lawns and gardens, help with general repair, move and transport items from place to place and maintain the entire second and third floors of the annex, which includes the sheriff's offices and the jail. They also work in the jail kitchen under direction of the paid cook, Charles Cole.

Sometimes the schools get help, such as moving equipment or maintenance, and the county clerk uses inmates for projects like transporting, setting up and returning election booth equipment.

The county welfare department uses inmates to help receive, store and distribute groceries to the needy, or just to help out in general. When the small craft harbor was beautified, prisoners planted the ice plant and helped landscape the grounds. In the county duplica-

tion department they help stock the supplies or, if they are especially talented, they can work with duplicating equipment. Prisoners also go to the county fairgrounds at Watsonville to help do maintenance and clean-up.

The inmates volunteer to work, but specific crew assignments are up to the sheriff and Lt. Carl Wood, head jailor, to decide.

At times, however, an inmate has particular talents which are put to good use. A cabinetmaker made many of the courthouse cabinets, and an artist painted many of the signs used in the courthouse. A professional gardener was put to quick use in shaping up the courthouse grounds.

The inmates, who are under supervision of deputized employees at the various areas they work, are never allowed to drive vehicles. They are stripped and checked for contraband when they return to jail. The most popular item for smuggling is liquor.

Although supervision isn't extreme, there have been only five walk-aways from work crews during the past several years. All were recaptured to face felony escape charges, and four went to state prison.

Women inmates don't have a chance for work outside the courthouse, but they can get their cigarettes and time off by sewing and repairing jail clothing and bedding. Occasionally



A county jail inmate gets out of his crowded cell and into the sunshine by working as part of a county hospital

work crew. Prisoners work at a variety of jobs, under a work-crew program directed by Sheriff Doug James. The prisoners get a five-day reduc-

tion off every 30 day sentence for working, as well as a larger-than-normal lunch and a pack of cigarettes.

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