

Visit to county jail takes strong stomach

By MARJ VON B

The game of political football over what to do about the conditions at the decaying Santa Cruz County jail is all but over.

On Friday a federal district court judge will tell the county what it must do in the matter of prisoner care in order to meet standards set by the court.

The prospect of that action forced, at long last, a decision by the Santa Cruz County board of supervisors. Faced with a choice of either rehabilitating the jail or building a new one, the supervisors took the latter route.

It is a decision that has been postponed for a long time.

Almost 10 years ago, construction of a new jail was recommended by a county grand jury.

And since that time, successive grand juries, two sheriffs and state department of corrections authorities have echoed that recommendation.

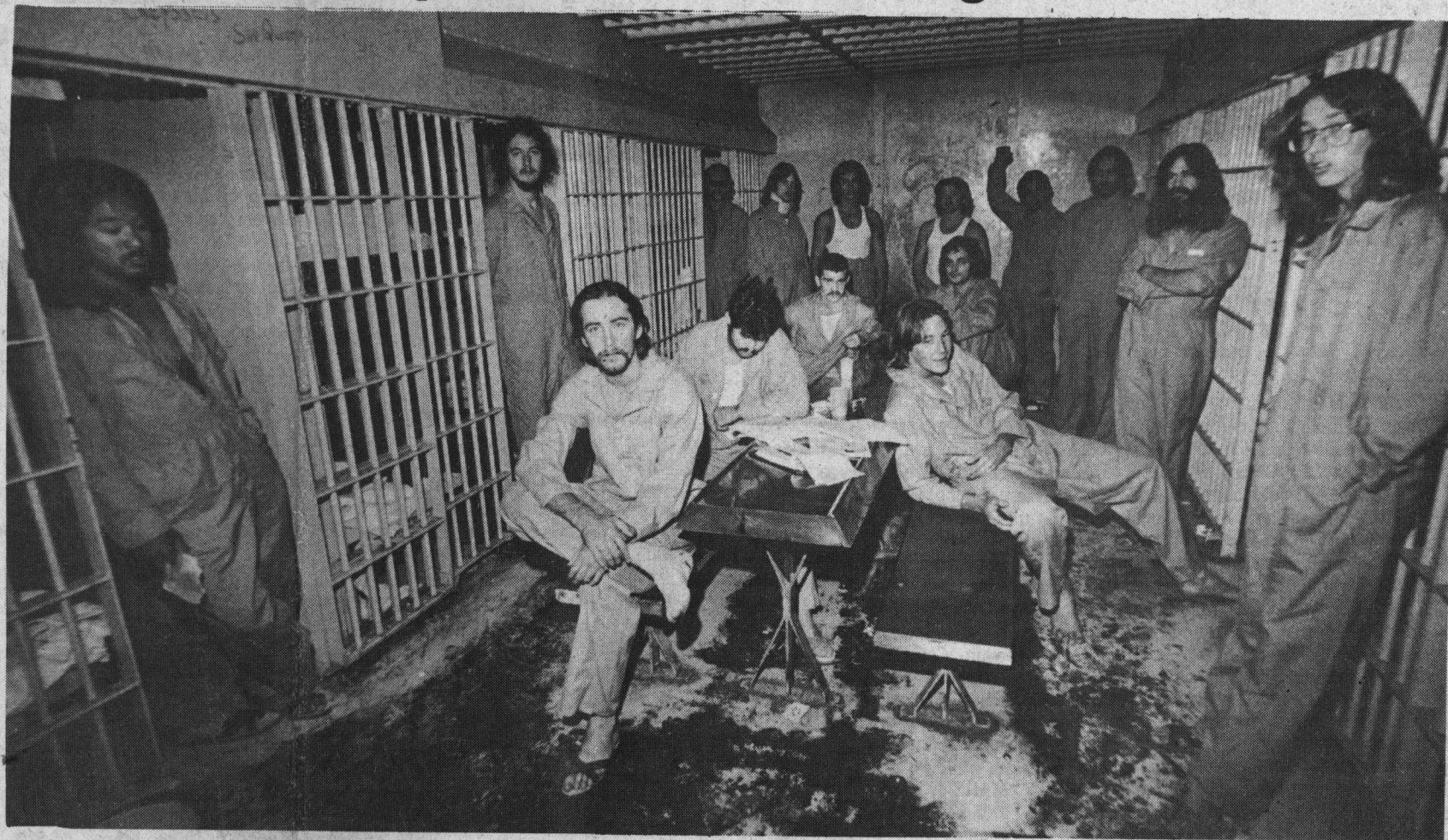
The one bright spot in the recent history of the county jail system was the construction of the Sheriff's Rehabilitation Center several years ago to house sentenced prisoners.

While it is not a Waldorf Astoria for wayward travelers, it seems like it when compared with the dismal wreck of a jail in downtown Santa Cruz where predominantly pre-trial "detainees" (who have yet to be convicted of any crime) are locked up with security-risk sentenced prisoners, in violation of state law.

At the "Rehab," off Buena Vista Drive on Harkins Slough Road, inmates have the freedom of the outdoors on the 14-acre site. And while they sleep dormitory-style in their rows of cots, they have a measure of privacy in their modern bath facilities, a quiet place to read in the library, arts and crafts and recreation rooms and a dining hall.

They are allowed daily furloughs for work and education, returning to the center for the evening meal and to sleep. Some maintain the center's young orchard and garden, which produces fresh produce for all the county's inmates, including those at Juvenile Hall.

On weekends, the inmates at the Rehab are allowed family



In "the tank" there's no escape from people, the noise, the stench.

visits and are not separated from their visitors by a glass wall or bars.

Prisoners in the downtown jail have long had a far different lot. But little has been done to remedy this, other than a few changes which have been mandated by Judge Robert Peckham, of federal district court in San Jose.

His orders have come from pretrial hearings in a class action suit filed three years ago on behalf of all inmates in the jail by Legal Aid Society lawyers and associates, including Gary Patton, who is now on the board of supervisors.

The original purpose of the suit was to close down the county jail, and it was supported politically by a number of community groups "interested in prisoner welfare."

However, when it appeared county supervisors might decide to build a new and larger jail as a part of an almost \$4 million law

enforcement complex, the political emphasis shifted.

Out of the community groups emerged the Jail Moratorium Coalition with a political voice loud enough to halt the board's adoption of a hired consultant's \$40,000 report, which recommended building the law enforcement complex and the new jail.

The coalition called for programs to reduce the daily inmate population of the jail and insisted the old jail could be remodeled to provide a human environment for a smaller number of prisoners. (A larger jail would just result in more arrests, prisoners, which wouldn't solve a "social problem," it was argued.)

Some of the programs have been implemented, but the jail is still bulging at the seams, while the political struggle over its future has raged on. And the board has taken refuge behind a succession of committee study reports.

A trip to the Front St. jail is enough to make the average

visited the jail last week.

Though both of us had been there a number of times before covering stories of one kind or another, I had never found it as depressing an experience as it was the other day.

The front door of the three-story building has been boarded up — since the sheriff and his staff were ordered by Judge Peckham in April to vacate the first two floors of the building — to allow removal of combustible materials which had been added in remodeling over the years.

Now the only entrance to the building is through the basement back door, off what once was an alleyway, before construction at Cooper House blocked it off.

Sam and I opened the back door and stepped into a dark, barred entryway under the surveillance of a monitored TV camera.

The outside door swing closed behind us, shutting us away from the carefree sounds of the Cooper House jazz band entertaining sidewalk cafe customers in the warm sunshine on the Mall.

We made voice contact with the

clicked and we followed his instructions to come in and shut the gate behind us and then take the elevator.

After a groaning and creaking ride to the third floor, we opened a hall door, to once again step inside a metal cage.

Welded to the side of the cage is a permanent reminder to arresting officers to properly search their prisoners before bringing them to the jail to be booked.

It is a .25 automatic Colt pistol which had six bullets in it when it was found hidden near a camera used to take pictures of all prisoners during the booking procedures.

Again, a push of a button released the lock on the cage and we were admitted into the jail office. Lt. David Lemmon, commander of the jail, greeted us and we began our tour.

A few things were different from what I remembered the last time I was there, about a year ago, but not much.

The jail nurse no longer has her desk and medicine in a closet that was too small to accommodate a

But the jail's only isolation cell, called the "Blue Room" or the "hole," hasn't changed.

It is just big enough to allow a prisoner's mattress to be laid on the bare concrete floor and leave the drain screen exposed. The pipes leading to the toilet are still rotting with rust.

There are no windows in the room, and only a peek-hole in the door. Small cubicles, partitioned off from the jailer's office area by glass embedded with chicken fence wire, hadn't changed either.

Though they have been given fancy names in the past, such as visiting rooms, legal conference rooms and prisoner holding areas, they were the same bleak, ill-furnished bits of space, used for whatever the need of the moment demanded.

A woman prisoner wrapped in a blanket was "sleeping it off" in solitary splendor on a bench in a narrow cubicle, sometimes called the "library" because there are a half-a-dozen or so books there.

The last time I saw that room,

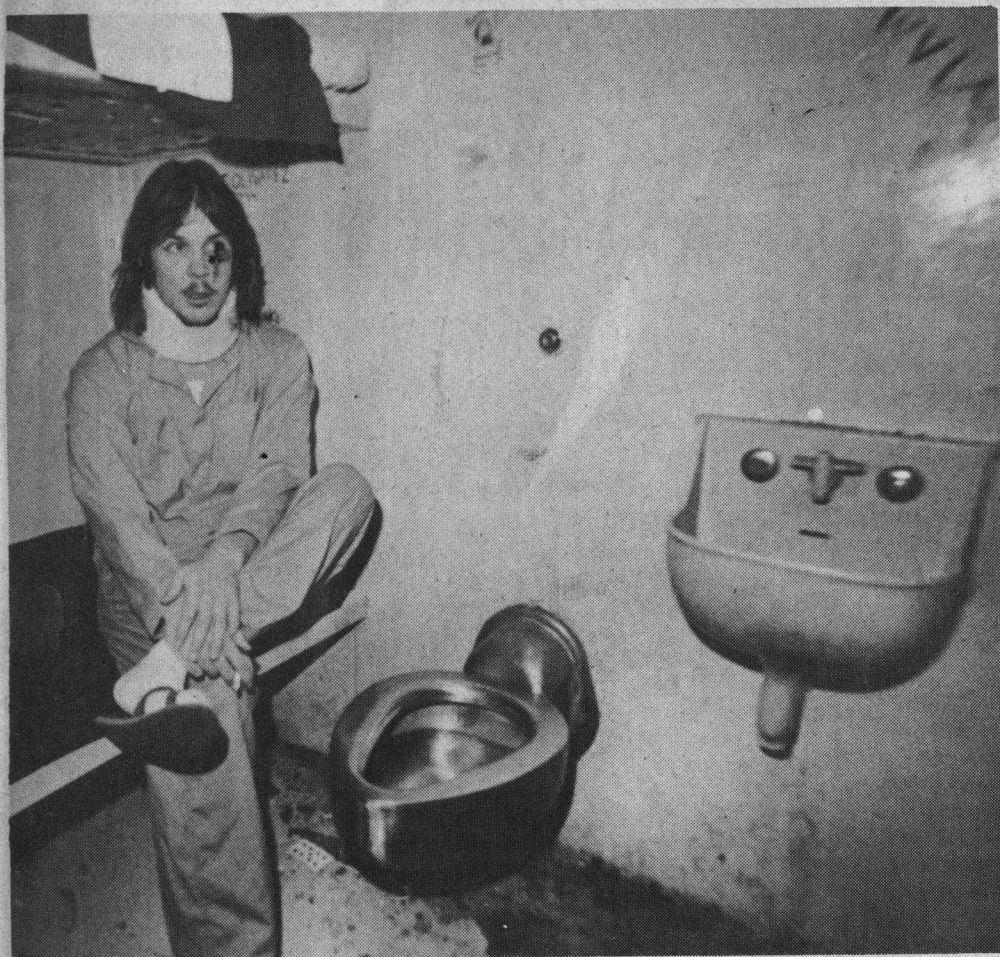
person wonder if anybody involved in the furor "really gives a damn about the men who are caged there."

Photographer San Vestal and I

jailer monitoring the TV camera on the "back gate," from his desk in the jail office up on the third floor.

The lock on the barred gate

prisoner for examination. She now has a small office that is big enough for an examination table and a few other medical supplies and a desk.



Malfunctioning toilets back up into the cells.

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it was used as a holding cell for murderer Edmund Kemper, to give him some relief from endless hours in "the hole," where he had been placed to protect him against his repeated suicide attempts.

"The Tanks" were something my memory was not prepared for, though.

This is the term used for the four cellblocks which house the men prisoners in a cavernous room off the jailer's office. The cellblocks are laid out side-by-side and back-to-back, separated from each other by steel walls and cordoned off the surrounding access hall by bars.

The tops of the tanks also are covered by bars, to permit more ventilation from the fans which suck in fresh air and attempt to blow out the stale atmosphere.

But it is obvious that a ventilating system doesn't exist which could remove the tank area stench of stopped up toilets and jail house sweat.

Each tank has only one shower, and sometimes there are as many as 24 men in one tank.

Sam was allowed into one of the tanks to take pictures, where all of the inmates agreed to be photographed, because they wanted "people to know what the conditions are like in their county jail."

The men pointed out the sewage seeping through the rusted cracks from the tank next door.

"Every time they flush their toilet over there, it backs up the other toilets," one of them said, "and we walk around in this stuff."

Prisoner's "open" toilets are on the back wall between their tiers of bunks in their cells which are separated only by bars from their communal area, where they eat at a long metal table in each tank.

While the kitchen is clean and well-maintained at the jail, there is no dining area for the prisoners, and they must eat only feet away from where they bathe in small slimy showers and go to the bathroom in full view of other prisoners.

Most of the time, the communal area also must serve as an exercise area for any exercise an inmate can get in a 15-by-25 foot space shared with as many as 23 other men.

The prisoners can be taken to the exercise cage on the roof of the building, if there are enough jailers available, and the weather permits.

Inmates told us they had not "been on the roof for two weeks,

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