

Old prison opened once again for tours

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The Martin family of Fairfield toured the old Iowa State Penitentiary Saturday and at the end of the tour they viewed a display of knives and other weapons offenders used against fellow offenders or correctional officers. Cody Martin looks along with Jamie and Keiten Martin. Off camera is their mother, Tawsha, and older sister, Elizabeth.



The Martin family of Fairfield toured the old Iowa State Penitentiary – closed in August 2015 to move the offenders into the new prison up the road – on Saturday during one of the rare times the old prison has been open to the public.

Tawsha and Cody Martin brought their three children: Elizabeth, Jamie and Keiten.

“We know some people who had served time,” Tawsha said of the reason for their visit, and some of those people are still incarcerated elsewhere. “We were curious.”

By the tour’s end, Tawsha said, “When you see the scenery, you can put a picture in your mind to see what it was really like. It makes it surreal.”

Touring the old cellhouses, most of the lights were turned off, but Cody was “surprised at the lighting,” because of how dim it must have been.

Tawsha added, "I was surprised at how nice the gym was."

Indeed, the basketball court was new enough it looked as if it were waiting for next break time for the offenders to come shoot some hoops; or for a team from the outside to come play a prison team as was done for softball and football back several decades ago.

One would think that nothing would change from one tour to the next. But when the tour group entered the "chow hall," they couldn't go into the kitchen area. The ceiling was starting to deteriorate.

Retired officer Doug Hayes told how the offenders were brought in only so many at a time. Kitchen fights were few and far between, although that was in part because one C.O. (correctional officer) would be up in a "gas cage," prepared to send fumes into the area should a major problem break out.

He recalled, however, that in the 1990s, an offender was killed in a stabbing during one of the meal times.

The different cellhouses were used for different levels of offender and not just for the type of crime committed. Those who assaulted an officer or fellow offender were sent to "the hole," with only one hour of freedom daily.

But Hayes said that even those offenders could earn back some privileges for good behavior, such as a radio or a television, before eventually earning their way back to the general population.

Although it's not uncommon for law-abiding citizens to be critical of such perks like cable television, Hayes said that it's been proven that an offender is better behaved when there are incentives – or negative consequences – to their behavior.

Those touring the facility learned of the different tricks of the trade offenders used to send contraband from one cell to the next, whether using a laundry bag or something called a jigger pole, a thin white pole used to pass things through the vents of the cells.



Jim and Betty Posz of Fort Madison made their first tour of ISP, at least in this capacity. Jim was a social worker for 30 years and one time took someone to see their father behind the walls.

But it wasn't their first prison tour overall.

"We went to Jefferson City," Jim said of visiting the former Missouri State Penitentiary.

"Condition-wise and size-wise, (the old prison) is in far better shape," Jim said. "There are entire chunks torn down" at the Missouri facility.

They also went to the old prison in Mansfield, Ohio, where the movie "The Shawshank Redemption" was filmed.

Jim said that Mansfield isn't far from the state capital of Columbus. "There's more potential visitors."

The Ohio prison was shut down 20 years ago, he said, "then they fixed it back up again."

Betty said, "Hopefully, we can get something back up and running before it (the old prison) deteriorates."