



The Missouri State Penitentiary: 170 Years inside "The Walls" (MISSOURI HERITAGE READERS)

Jamie Pamela Rasmussen

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Asked how the Missouri State Penitentiary compared to other famous prisons, a historian and former prison administrator replied, "It's older and meaner." For 168 years, it was everything other prisons were and more.

In *The Missouri State Penitentiary*, Jamie Pamela Rasmussen recounts the long and fascinating history of the place, focusing on the stories of inmates and the struggles by prison officials to provide opportunities for reform while keeping costs down. Tales of prominent prisoners, including Pretty Boy Floyd, Sonny Liston, and James Earl Ray, provide intrigue and insight into the institution's infamous reputation.

The founding of the penitentiary helped solidify Jefferson City's position as the state capital. A highlight in the chapter on the Civil War years is the story of George Thompson, who was imprisoned for attempting to help a number of slaves to freedom. The narrative enters the twentieth century with the controversy surrounding the various systems of inmate labor; the effort to make the prison self-supporting eventually caused punishment to be driven by factory needs. The example of Firebug Johnson demonstrates how inmates reacted to the prison labor system while Kate Richards O'Hare's struggles and efforts to improve conditions in the penitentiary illuminate the role of women in the system at the time. A full chapter is devoted to the riot of 1954, and another concentrates on the reforms made in the wake of that catastrophe. Rasmussen also considers the effect inmate lawsuits during the 1980s and 1990s had on prison life before telling the story of the decision to close the prison.

The Missouri State Penitentiary provides a fitting account of an institution that was part of Missouri's history for well over a century. Numerous illustrations and a list of recommended reading contribute to the readers' understanding of the history of the institution.

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