

This month's theme:  
The Old Idaho Penitentiary



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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

# PROSPECTOR

March, 2008



## The Old Pen

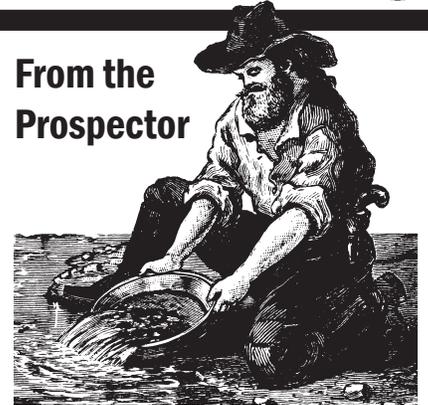
**L**aw and order was a tough job in territorial Idaho. In the 1860's, Idaho had a very small law enforcement community. Catching criminals and finding a nearby courthouse to put them on trial could be a difficult task for the few lawmen in the area. Worse yet, when a criminal was actually convicted, there wasn't much space available to imprison him. For the first decade or so, Idaho had two temporary prisons. One was located in Lewiston and the other in Idaho City. Both buildings were simply constructed, basically logs covered in heavy planks. The Idaho City prison had only twelve cramped cells,

but sometimes more than twelve prisoners. In these crowded and dangerous conditions, the one guard on duty had a hard time keeping everything safe and secure.

In 1864, the territorial capital was moved from Lewiston to Boise, and lawmakers started to look for a location for a permanent penitentiary. The government eventually choose available land one mile east of the city. The site was picked because of the nearby sandstone quarry, which provided material for buildings and work for the prisoners. In April 1870, construction began on the territorial prison. Using dynamite to remove sandstone from the quarry, prisoners

*Continued on next page*

## From the Prospector



**I**t's springtime and that means my mule is getting into trouble. I don't know what it is about this season, but the critter always seems to get ornery this time of year. Listen to what he's been up to so far this week. On Monday he walked with muddy hooves across the carpet. On Tuesday he left hay and oats all over the couch. On Wednesday he stayed out an hour past curfew. And on Thursday he smashed my favorite gold pan (and didn't even say sorry). Unfortunately, I think it's time for some punishment. If the critter won't mind his manners I'm going to take away his television for a week. At least one good thing is coming from all this mess. All this talk about rules and punishment gave me the idea for this month's issue. Enjoy the story of the Old Idaho Penitentiary!

# The Old Pen Continued

hauled the blocks down from the Boise foothills on horse-drawn wagons. Work was completed in January of 1871, with 42 cells for prisoners. The first 11 prisoners were locked up at the new territorial prison in May of 1872. This early prison was only surrounded by a wooden fence.

Another cell house was added in 1889. After Idaho became a state in 1890, prisoners used sandstone blocks to build a 17 foot-high wall surrounding the prison. By 1926, two more cell houses, a dining hall, and a solitary confinement building (used to punish prisoners who broke prison rules) had been built.

A large cell house, with enough room for 360 prisoners, and a maximum-security cell house, built to house the most violent criminals at the prison, was built in the 1950's.

At night, prisoners slept on mattresses stuffed with straw. During the day, they spent their time working. They grew food, raised animals, and made shirts and shoes. Living conditions in the prison were difficult. In the winter, the cells often were freezing cold. In the summer, the buildings could be uncomfortably hot. Sometimes prisoners got fed up with the harsh conditions and rebelled. Five times in the penitentiary's history, prisoners staged riots, where they became violent and took control of the prison.

There were over 500 escapes and escape attempts during the time the Old Pen was in use. Approximately 90 prisoners were never caught. The most common way to

escape was to walk away from prison farms, road camps, construction sites, and other work outside the walls. Only 50 men and seven women ever escaped from inside the prison. Prisoners tried to dig tunnels, make false keys, and cut through the bars of their cells to get out. One prisoner named Danny Williams rode out of the prison gate in a barrel of garbage on a truck going to the prison hog farm. A massive hunt succeeded in finding him the next day.

Although men made up the bulk of the prison population, the penitentiary held women prisoners

served her husbands. Later, she would collect the money from their insurance policies. Lyda's fifth husband wisely divorced her after she entered prison. In 1931, Lyda escaped over the wall of the Women's Ward. Once free, Lyda married a sixth time, but was eventually captured and returned to the prison in 1932. She was released from prison in 1941.

One of the most beloved inhabitant of the Old Pen was a cat named Dennis. He was all black except for a white patch on his chest. Dennis was born on May 30, 1951 at the prison chicken farm.

Prisoners cared for and fed the lucky cat. He lived a good life and died peacefully in 1968. The old cat was laid to rest in a grave behind the shirt factory building. A concrete tombstone was poured atop the grave and a stainless steel plaque, engraved in the machine shop, was added marking the grave. If you visit the Old Pen today, you can still see his grave.

By 1970, the penitentiary had seen better days. Old buildings were falling apart, and prisoner conditions were again cramped and dangerous. In 1973, after more than 100 years, the prison was closed and prisoners were moved to a new prison south of Boise. Instead of tearing down the historic buildings, Idaho decided to save the Old Penitentiary. Today, the former prison is owned by the Idaho Historical Society. If you're in the Boise area you can visit the site and take a tour take tour of its spooky and historic buildings.

*By Julie Hutchinson*



too. Beyond the main prison walls, was a smaller walled compound known as the Women's Ward. The women prisoners could be just as dangerous as the men. Take Lyda Southard, for example. Lyda entered the Old Pen in 1921, just after her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday. Before she was jailed, she was married five times and her first four husbands all died shortly after marrying Lyda. An investigation of the death of her fourth husband uncovered evidence of homicide. Lyda apparently boiled flypaper containing poison and added the poison to the food she



# The Fun Page

Directions: Look up, down, forward, backward, and diagonally to find the hidden Old Penitentiary words.

- ARMORY
- CELL
- CONTRABAND
- CRIME
- ESCAPE
- EXECUTION
- GUARD
- HANDCUFFS
- INMATE
- MAXIMUM SECURITY

- MUG SHOTS
- PARDON
- PAROLE
- PENITENTIARY
- QUARRY
- RIOT
- SOLITARY
- TRUSTY
- WARDEN
- WOMEN'S WARD

M U G S H O T S D O E M P A I  
 J A I L A Y N O I T U C E X E  
 P R X K O R F B A G M R N F Z  
 D M U I R R U A R N S P I Q U  
 R O I N M A T E V O L U T U C  
 A R Z E V U F Y Y D H S E A X  
 W Y A X S Q M T K R I O N T G  
 S L Z E P A C S E A D L T E U  
 N W O T A C P U E P Y I I R A  
 E X A N R L C R F C F T A H R  
 M P D I O E W T X N U A R B D  
 O B M Q L N E D R A W R Y R J  
 W E T L E F Q V B Q V Y I M D  
 G V H A N D C U F F S O K T F  
 C O N T R A B A N D T O V O Y



## Next Month's Activities

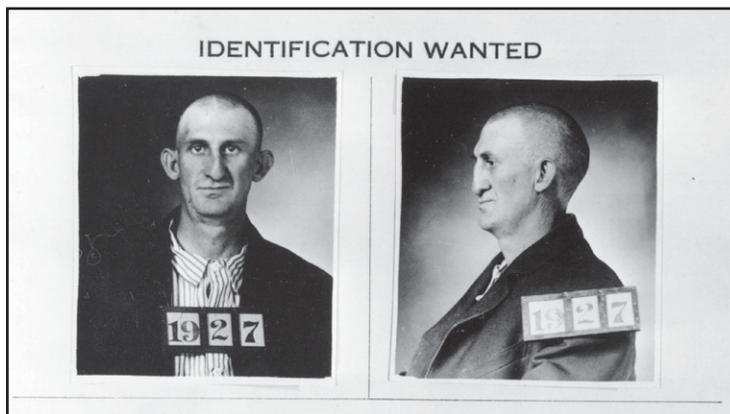
**W**ell, we've told you all we know about the Old Idaho Penitentiary and now it's your turn. This month you can pick from one of the activities below or make up your own Old Pen project and send it to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, the town and school where you are from, and the name of your Prospector Club. We can't wait to see what you come up with!

the poster. Don't forget to post a reward for anyone who captures the villain.

**Penitentiary Blues:** Being locked up in a cell can be sad and lonely. One of the ways the prisoners used to pass the time at the Old Idaho

**Escape Plan:** In the 100 year history of the Old pen there were close to 500 escape attempts. If you want to escape from prison, you've got to have a good plan. Pretend your school has been turned into a maximum security prison and your classroom is your cell. All the

windows have bars and all the doors are locked up tight. Come up with a clever escape plan to outwit the teacher guards and the principal warden. Give the rest of the Prospectors a brief description of your escape. If you want, draw us a map, so we can see how you snuck out.



**Wanted!:** One of the ways lawmen could track down a criminal was with a wanted poster. The police would copy a picture of the lawbreaker and put it on a poster to put around the community. Pretend you are a member of the fairy tale police force. Create a wanted poster of your favorite fairy tale villain (the big bad wolf, the wicked witch, etc.). Draw a picture of the criminal on top and a description of the crime on the bottom of

Penitentiary is to sing the blues. The blues is an American form of music where people sing about their troubles. Sometimes singing about how bad things can get, can actually make you feel good. What gives you the blues? Write a short blues song about the sad things in your life. Will you write the *homework blues*, the *I don't want to clean my bedroom blues*, or perhaps the ever popular *I hate broccoli blues*?

Send in your work by April 24th to:  
 Prospector Club/Lucky Noah  
 Idaho State Historical Museum  
 610 North Julia Davis Drive  
 Boise, ID 83702  
 Or email it to us at  
 Kurt.zwolfer@ishs.state.id.us