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# Deer Island a house of not much correction

By F. B. Taylor Jr.  
Globe Staff

All last summer and into late October, birds by the dozen would fly through broken windows and frolic in the cellblocks at the Deer Island House of Correction.

"The inmates make pets of them," William C. Murphy, deputy commissioner of Boston's Penal Institutions Dept., explained to a recent visitor. "It's one of the things the officers sort of overlook."

Now the birdmen of Deer Island are birdless; the holes are covered with pieces of plywood.

The birds and the plywood are symptoms of Deer Island's difficulties — neglect, deterioration, laxity, lethargy and, for most of the 400 convicted criminals in custody at any one time, no chance for correction.

The shame of the place is not the dingy, dirty accommodations for inmates, nor the antiquated physical plant. It is rather that 1000 men are sent back into society each year with little likelihood of becoming law-abiding and productive.

Although statistics are not kept, it is believed that 50 to 75 percent of Deer Island's current population has been in jail before and will be again.

The other 12 houses of correction in Massachusetts share this overriding fault by turning out unrehabilitated offenders.

In varying degrees, so do the prisons and forestry camps of the state Dept. of Correction.

Including the Division of Youth Services, Parole, Probation and the state penal system, Deer Island is part of a process costing more than \$40 million a year, with 35,000 persons under supervision in society and 6000 in detention on an average day.

## NOTHING TO DO

Inmate idleness, commonplace at nearly all correctional institutions, is evident through Deer Island.

Three weeks ago and again last week, during tours with Murphy and his superior, Comr. Joseph V. McBride, scores of prisoners assigned to various work details were observed playing cards, watching television, reading newspapers, playing handball, tossing a football or merely passing the time in conversation.

Day in and day out, inmates are loafing. Rehabilitation programs reach a tiny minority. This is what Boston taxpayers get for the \$3750 a year it costs to keep a man at Deer Island.

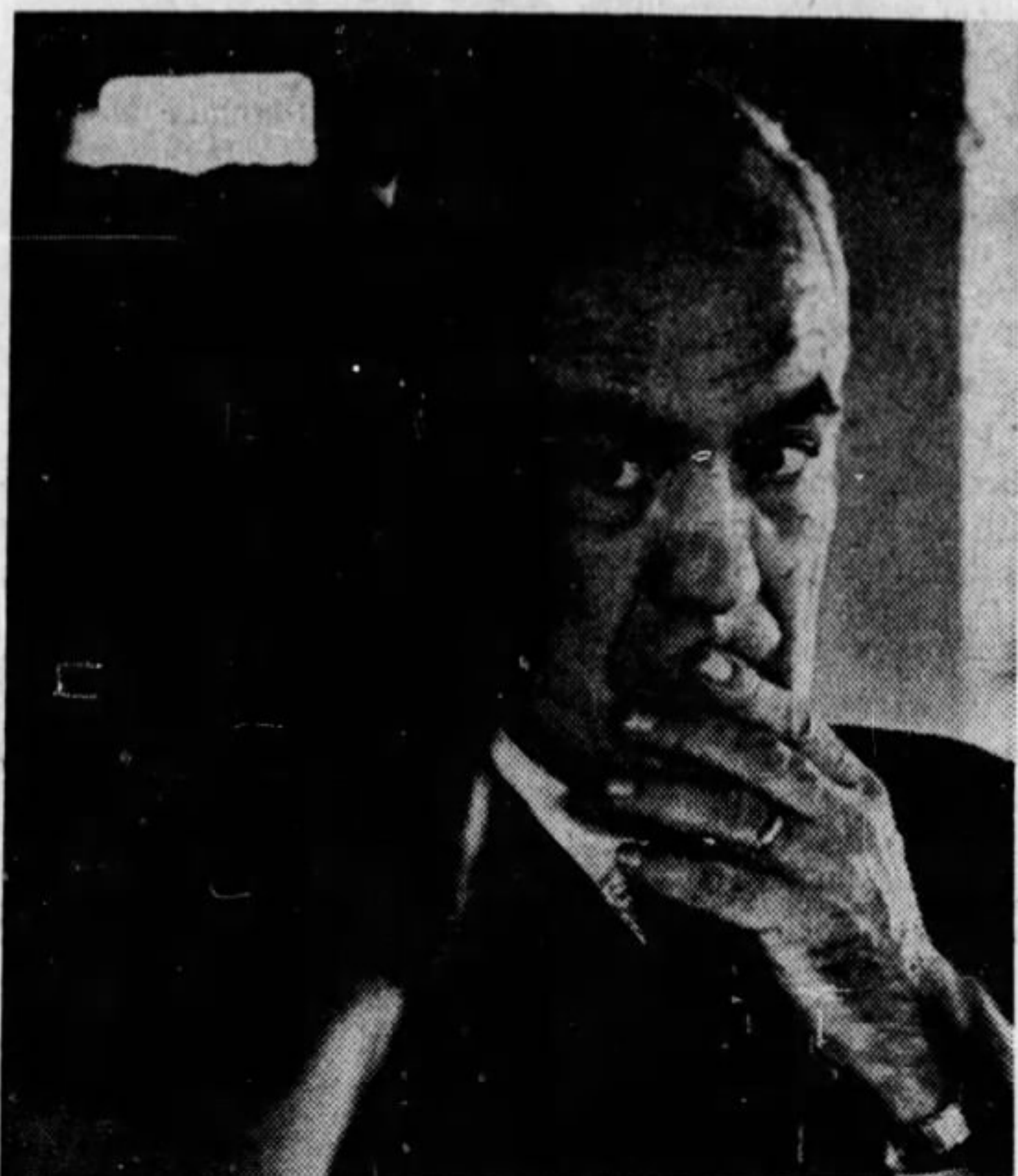
You can be sentenced to the island for as much as two and a half years. Most men there today were found guilty of assault, larceny, burglary, nonsupport, forgery or narcotics offenses. The average sentence is a year, but the typical inmate is paroled after six to eight months.

McBride said: "There's not enough work for them to do. That's why we need more education programs."

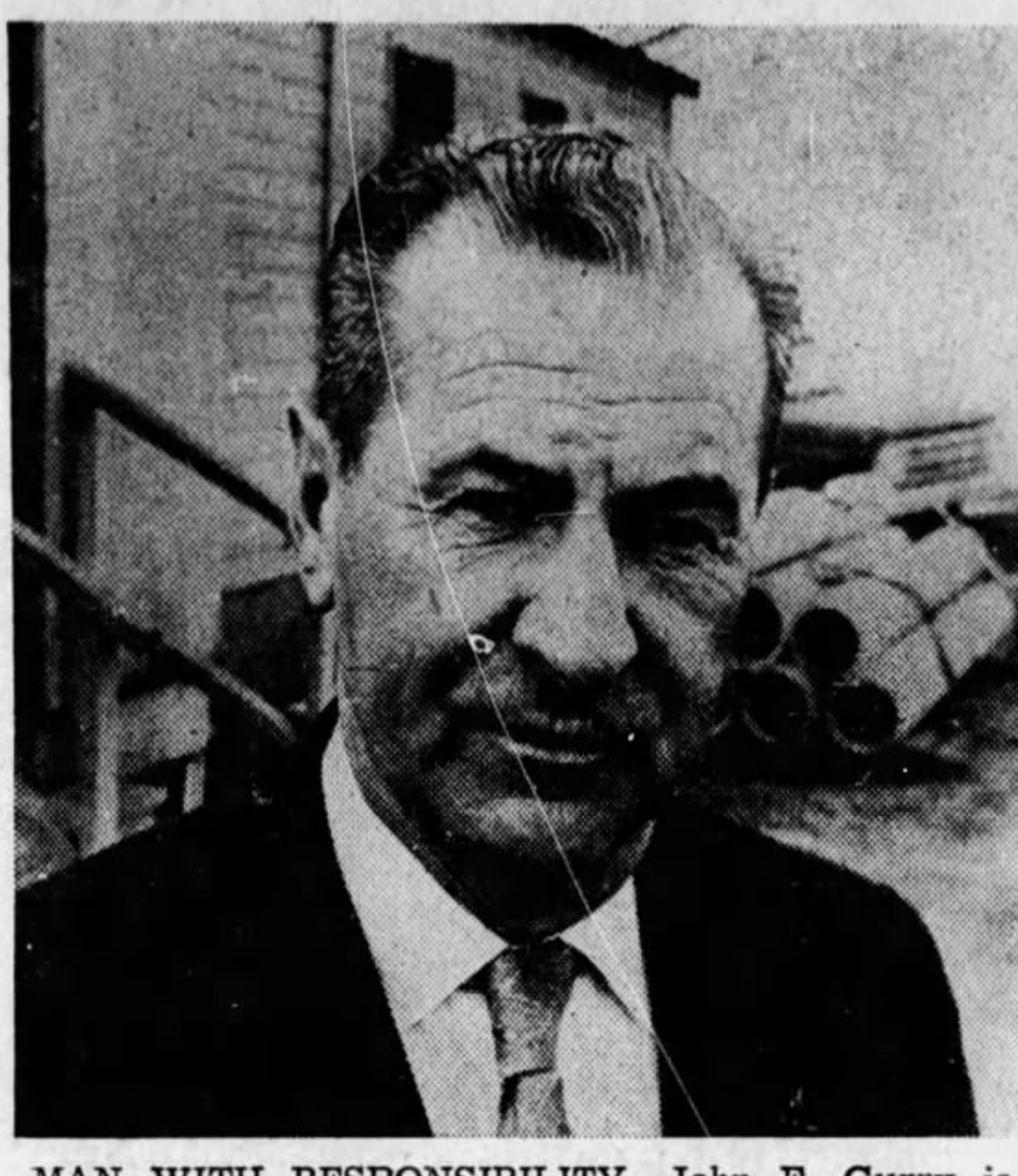
McBride also believes in economy. "We're trying to save the taxpayer," the 50-year-old former Boston detective said.

His comment reflects the rock-bottom priority accorded Deer Island since it opened before the Civil War. Mayors, city councils, legislatures and voters all share responsibility.

Its 400 prisoners have no library, gymnasium or



THOUGHTFUL LISTENER—Comr. Joseph V. McBride listens to member of inmates' grievance committee.



MAN WITH RESPONSIBILITY—John F. Gurry is director of work release program at Deer Island.

auditorium. Nor do they have the services of a psychiatrist or psychologist. Its 1970 budget of \$1,556,705 includes a meager \$2000 for repair and maintenance.

It has one "institution school teacher" who instructs some of the 40-odd illiterate inmates two evenings a week. He is paid \$26.20 a night, or \$2735.28 a year, according to the budget.

"By law," Murphy said, "we must have a teacher to teach the illiterates."

## ALL LOCKED UP

It has two organists who play at Catholic and Protestant services. Each receives \$26.20 per Sunday. That comes to \$5470.56 a year.

From 4:30 p.m. to 7 a.m., seven nights a week, 250 inmates are locked in their cells. On Sundays the same men are routinely denied yard privileges and must remain inside the 70-year-old brick walls of Hill Prison.

All 39 cells in the ancient administration building still have crude metal buckets instead of toilets. The cells are used for newly admitted prisoners as well as those held in segregation and isolation.

The Penal Institutions Dept. has two full-time social workers on its staff of 134, paying each \$181.50 a week, but they spend five days a week at City Hall doing paperwork or at Charles Street Jail counseling inmates. The jail is the province of Suffolk County Sheriff Thomas S. Eisenstadt, not McBride.

Deer Island prisoners get to see one of the social workers on Saturday mornings. Most prisoners do not know of their existence.

Aside from a couple ping pong tables and chess sets, Deer Island's athletic and recreational facilities consist of a grassy field, two basketball courts and a handball court.

One basketball court has backboards with one hoop and no nets. Its surface resembles a gravel pit. Last week, rainwater had left a puddle, a foot deep and 15 feet wide, in front of one backboard.

The other court has hoops and nets but is considered unplayable because of an uneven blacktop strip running from basket to basket. The blacktop was put in by unskilled inmates.

A private contractor has offered to resurface this court for \$2800. Deer Island cannot afford it. "We'll do it ourselves," McBride told the inmate grievance committee last week.

TRAINING NEEDED  
McBride said that in his

10 years as commissioner, City Hall has never refused to meet his requests. At his invitation, Parks and Recreation Comr. Joseph Curtis has scheduled an inspection tour Nov. 30.

"Give him credit," Curtis said of McBride. "This is the first time in 10 years that anybody's bothered."

Essential to any prisoner reform effort, penologists agree, is a rich diet of academic and vocational training combined with opportunities for day jobs on the outside. Deer Island scores poorly on all counts.

Last week seven inmate held factory jobs, mainly at American Biltrite Rubber-Co. in Chelsea, under the prison's work-release program.

Since work-release was initiated in December 1969, only one of the 50 inmate alumni of the program has been returned to jail. The City Council recently voted to borrow \$500,000 to build a new work-release dormitory.

Once a week at most, academic instruction is given to 40 men, or 10 percent of the population, but at least half, or more than 320 men, are high school dropouts.

In the last two years, according to Deer Island officials, 30 inmates received high school equivalence certificates. In two years, 2800 men do time on the tip of the Wintrop peninsula.

As for job training, 30 men are learning drafting, typing and accounting in Federally financed courses. Inmates and prison authorities estimate that perhaps 350 of the 400 men have no occupational skills.

All this leaves about 350 inmates on work details.

## SUGGESTIONS

"Given the current conditions, society would be better protected if we opened the gate and let everyone out there go back on the street under strict supervision," Samuel Tyler, executive director of the Massachusetts Council on Crime and Correction, remarked.

McBride bristles at the mention of Tyler's name. Tyler, he said, is an "ultra do-gooder who comes into the institution, starts all sorts of brush fires and runs away while they're burning."

Boston City Councilor Thomas I. Atkins advocates a less radical approach: close Charles Street Jail, put up a new building on Deer Island's unused 35 acres for these men, abolish McBride's position and put the Suffolk County sheriff in charge.

"A sheriff is in a better position to fight for improvements, since he is judged by his record," Atkins says.

"This would give Deer Island an independent ad-

vocate. Who's the penal commissioner accountable to? The mayor? What incentive does a mayor have to run a good prison? The way things are now, the squeaky wheel doesn't get oiled; it gets crushed."

Deer Island has proved resistant to change at least since 1898, when a Suffolk County grand jury noted that "prisoners were not regularly employed" and urged more exercise in the open air and four to five hours of schoolwork a day for those who wanted or needed it.

In 1919, the Boston Finance Commission recommended closing Deer Island and all other county prisons and moving the inmates to state prisons.

In 1924, the Legislature toyed with the idea of buying Deer Island from the city for \$1.2 million.

In 1962, the Gardner Commission called for a state takeover of all county jails and houses of correction.

Each time the status quo prevailed.

## 'NO OUTLETS'

Some changes were forced by fire and economics. Deer Island's piggery burned to the ground in 1962, putting an end to hog raising. Its cow barns and turkey farm were abandoned after they became a fiscal drain. Its 500-cell "bucket prison," built in 1897, was demolished in 1967 for humanitarian reasons.

In addition, McBride has added two dormitories to house 80 well behaved prisoners, and Boston's Public Facilities Commission is now financing

\$234,000 worth of renovations in other buildings.

"We try to keep it habitable," Robert T. Kenney public facilities director, said.

All these innovations will leave Deer Island's major shortcomings virtually untouched, in the opinion of most observers.

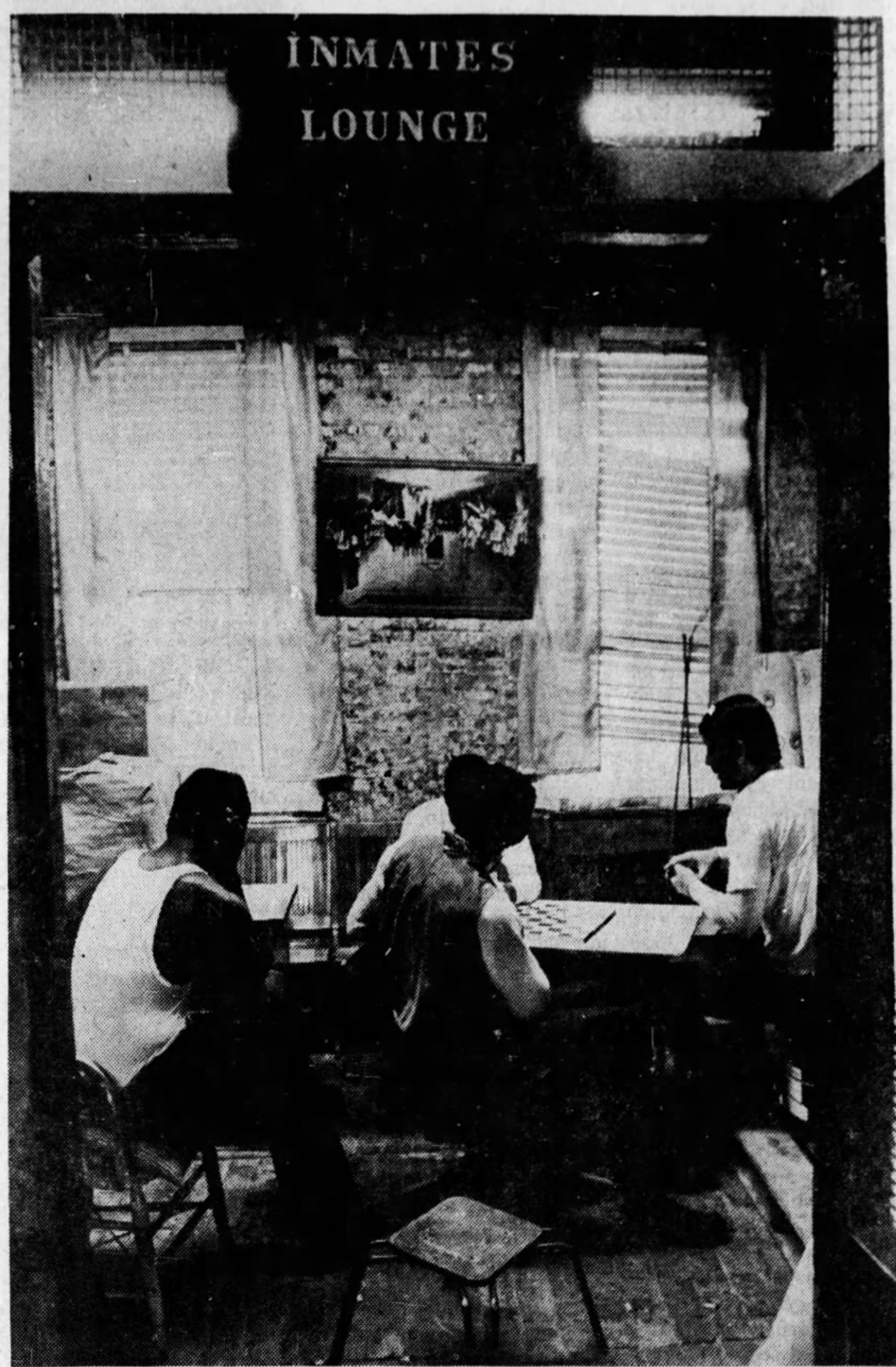
As one recently paroled inmate explained, "There are no outlets. We play cards all day. It's idleness. You stay out of the way."

Asked why so many prisoners are idle, McBride said: "We have epileptics and others who aren't physically able to work around the prison."

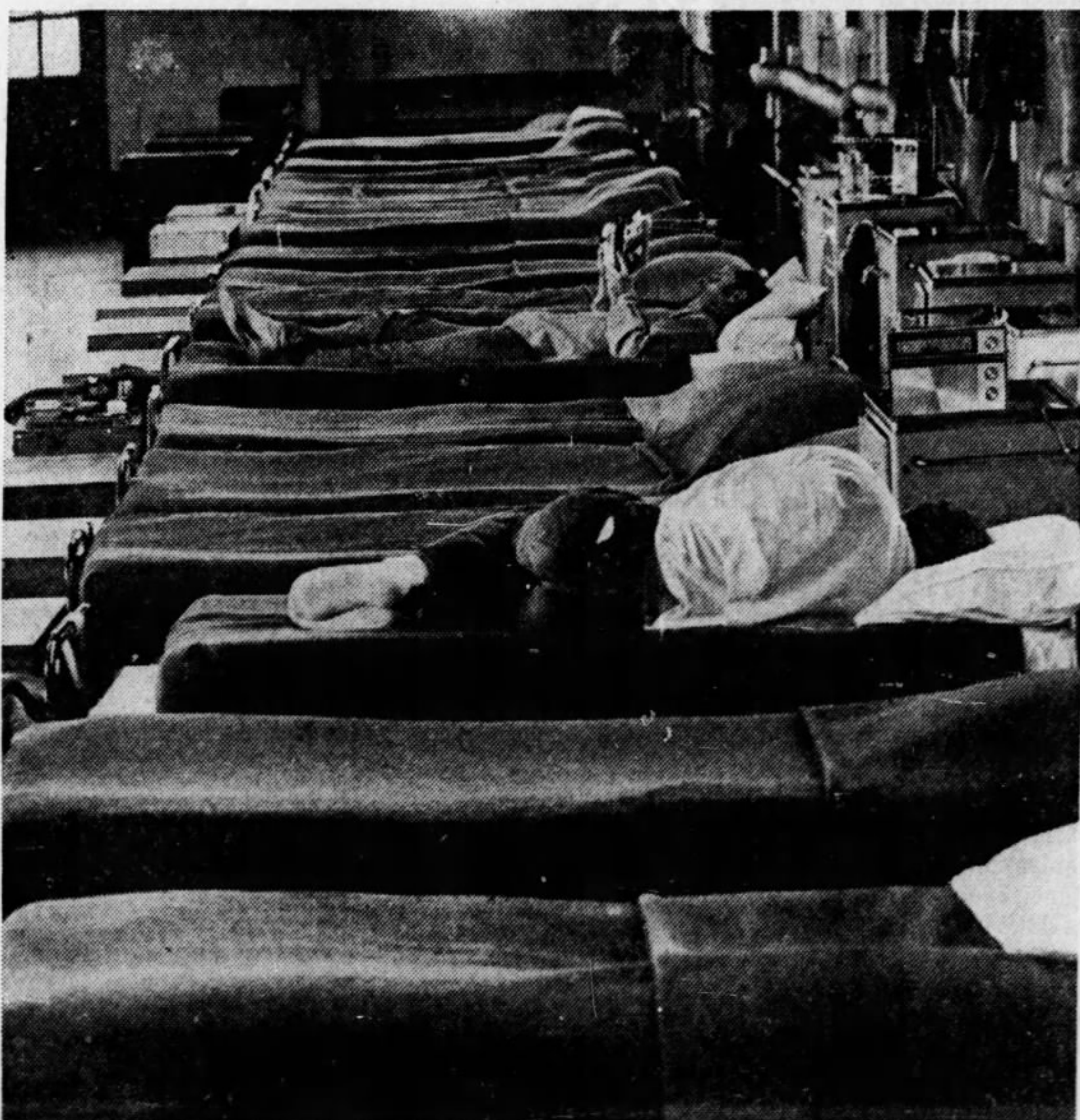
McBride on inmate education: "We're dealing with men with IQs of 50 and 52. We're not dealing with people that are normal. Most haven't finished high school. They're not insane — don't get me wrong — but they pose a problem whether they're in a family or in an institution."

Rev. Gerard Barry, Deer Island's Catholic chaplain, is pessimistic.

"Are they going to spend the money to do the job that has to be done?" he asked. "You know the city won't. They just want to keep patching these places."



LOUNGE—Everyone seems oblivious to of inmates' lounge at Deer Island. (All painting hanging upside down on wall photos by Ed Jenner)



TIME TO REST—One inmate catches 40 winks while another reads in nearly deserted dormitory at Deer Island House of Correction.



RECREATION PERIOD—Three inmates relax before television set in recreation room at Deer Island House of Correction.



NO GAME TODAY—Puddles which persistently form at base of basketball backboard poses problem.