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Escapes face tougher prison life as old lax rules scrapped

BY AMBER HUNT • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 28, 2008

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Patricia Stafford casually walked toward the prison cottage she was to permanently call home after an hour outside for recreation.

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She never showed up.

Instead, on that May evening 32 years ago, Stafford made her eighth -- and final -- escape from the Detroit House of Corrections for Women, where she was to serve a life sentence.

She quietly slipped past prison workers, climbed the 6-foot-high chain-link fence that surrounded

DeHoCo (pronounced dee-hoe-koe), as the Plymouth Township minimum security prison was known, and was never caught again.

"I can't absorb that we ran this portion of the correctional facility the way we did back then," said John Cordell, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections. "What happened then simply would never happen today."

Four women who escaped DeHoCo -- which was leveled in the late 1980s and replaced by the more-secure Robert Scott Correctional Facility -- have been captured in recent months. The first arrest in April made national news. Susan LeFevre had moved to California, raised three children and left behind the drug dealings that landed her in DeHoCo with a 10- to 20-year prison sentence in 1975.



Dehoco in 1974: The maximum security section of the Detroit House of Corrections for Women in Plymouth Township. Free Press file photo



PAUL SANCYA/Associated Press

The Robert Scott Correctional Facility, formerly the Detroit House of Corrections for Women, used to be far less secure than it is today. But the days of the chain-link fence are gone. The new prison is hugged by 12-foot-high fencing, with two guard towers and sensory detectors.

Then came the arrest of Barbara Corley. And Rebecca Hatcher. And Tamiko Smith. The women, on average, had been on the lam for 34 years.

They were caught by determined U.S. marshals, officials who followed tips and backtracked address changes to put these women back behind bars.

The state still is looking for 10 others who disappeared in the 1970s. And when they are caught, they'll live in a much different prison from the one they escaped.

Strict standards in place

The flimsy chain-link fence that Stafford, LeFevre and others scaled is no more. Gone, too, are the days when prisoners were allowed weekend furloughs to spend time with their families and stayed in nine dorm-like cottages on prison land rather than in highly regulated cell blocks.

The new prison is hugged by 12-foot-high fencing, with two guard towers and sensory detectors in places officials prefer remain a secret. It hardly resembles the laid-back atmosphere of its predecessor.

"The sunlight beaming off the razor wire surrounding the prison is enough of a deterrent these days," said Heidi Washington, the warden at Scott Correctional, which replaced DeHoCo in 1987.

Now, more than 100 law-enforcement agents from multiple agencies are deployed anytime a prisoner disappears. And that doesn't happen often.

"The idea behind incarceration was different then," said Russ Marlan, an MDOC spokesman. "Across the whole country, it was a different time than it is now."

In the '70s, it was all about rehabilitation. Then, with the Just Say No campaign of the '80s and '90s, came zero-tolerance punishment and mandatory prison sentences.

The pendulum is slowly swinging back now toward a more rehabilitative environment, but not so much that the cow-milking and other farm chores once assigned to DeHoCo women will likely ever make a comeback.

Rampant escapes

Today, it's hard to imagine someone simply walking away from MDOC custody. It occasionally happens -- 40 prisoners escaped statewide between 2000 and 2005 -- but in the 1970s, escapes from Michigan prisons were rampant.

Between 1970 and 1975 alone, 148 prisoners escaped from state prisons, according to state figures.

The state still is looking for 106 escapees, as of Friday.

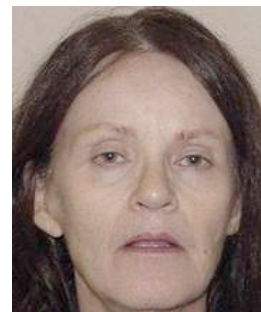


Free Press file photo

Cottages with slate roofs, white blocks and red brick trims are the living quarters for prisoners at the Detroit House of Corrections for Women in Plymouth Township in 1942. In the 1970s, women still lived in cottages and also were allowed weekend furloughs to spend time with family.



Patricia Stafford



Rebecca Hatcher escaped in 1975



Barbara Glenn escaped in 1972

Of those, just less than half went missing in the '70s; all but a handful of the others disappeared in 1980 or later. Thirty-two are men who disappeared in the '70s. Most of them walked away from community residential programs, meaning they were under MDOC's watch but not in a typical prison setting when they vanished.

Women get different rules

Men had to work their way down from maximum-security settings to more lenient ones. Women, however, statistically committed less violent crimes and were deemed less of a threat -- so even those with armed robbery and assault charges were sent to the lax environment of DeHoCo.

DeHoCo focused more on rehabilitation than punishment. It had a capacity of 318 women. All female prisoners were sent there until the state opened the Huron Valley Correctional Facility for Women in Ypsilanti in 1977.

DeHoCo's prisoners got training to become nurse attendants, child care workers and teachers' aides.

Prison guards were known as cottage matrons. Family and friends often drove up at night and tossed six-packs of beer over the fence for their incarcerated loved ones to find and drink.

When a prisoner disappeared -- even a violent one such as Stafford, who was convicted on a robbery charge -- only eight or nine prison guards went looking for her.

Many were recovered: In 1971, all nine women who scaled a DeHoCo fence, including one woman convicted on a murder charge, were caught within days. But often, if guards didn't find the prisoner within a few hours, they basically gave up, case files show.

Even back then, MDOC knew it had a problem, which Free Press headlines at the time chronicled, such as a Nov. 21, 1971, story: "Six Women Flee Dehoco in Underwear," and a July 13, 1976, article: "Escapes Find Dehoco a Real Snap."

In the late '70s, the state tried a remedy by heightening some of the fences to 10 feet and adding barbed wire, but prisoners simply climbed a little higher and covered their hands with blankets.

'That wouldn't happen today'

LeFevre's April arrest served as a national reminder that MDOC has not forgotten its escapees.

LeFevre was 19 when arrested for selling 3 grams of heroin to an undercover cop. In 1976, a year into her sentence, she hopped the chain-link fence and disappeared.



Susan LeFevre, left, escaped in 1976.



Tamiko Smith escaped in 1972. All four women were recaptured this year. In the 1970s, DeHoCo had relaxed rules. Prison guards were known as cottage matrons, and family and friends often drove up at night to toss six-packs of beer over the fence.

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Her escape differs little from most of the other women who walked away from their sentences.

Carol Hart, then 23, was serving 25-35 years for assault with intent to rob after she and a male cohort robbed then fatally shot a World War II veteran. She packed her stuff and walked out of her cottage Sept. 17, 1970.

"That wouldn't happen today," Cordell said. "She would be in maximum security."

Frankie McGraw, then 23, was to spend up to 14 years in prison for passing bad checks. At 10:05 p.m. May 28, 1974, a cottage matron noticed she'd walked out the door. She's still missing.

Not all walkouts were so civil. Margaret Stevens -- then a 37-year-old with more than 50 aliases and four larceny convictions -- overpowered a female guard and escaped July 11, 1979.

Today, she would be 66.

Scott Correctional is set to close next spring as the state consolidates its women prisoners into one complex at Huron Valley. Some of the women who disappeared 30-plus years ago might be dead, officials said. Most, however, are out there somewhere, leading clean-enough lives to avoid detection.

That doesn't mean authorities shouldn't keep looking, said Robert Homant, professor of criminal justice at the University of Detroit Mercy.

"To me, the state has no choice," said Homant, who had worked as a prison psychologist in the '70s. "The clock has stopped on that original sentence, and they have to go back and clean that up."

Washington said she's spoken with some of the women who have been recaptured. They face the culture shock not only of being tossed back into prison, but into a prison that is significantly different than the one from which they escaped.

No more cottages, or chain-link or weekend furloughs.

"It's hard to imagine today waving good-bye to one of my prisoners for the weekend," Washington said. "Now, our focus is making sure we have a secure facility."

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Replying to beatnik1209:

I find it interesting how MDOC is now working so hard to justify bringing back all these escapees from ancient offenses. For LeFevre they are now even willing to expose the lies they previously told. The spokesperson originally claimed that there was no fence around the prison, LeFevre just walked away from a work assignment. Now they admit she did scale a six foot fence.

br />

ALL-

Beware. Beatnik is one of Lefevre's family members. Talk about lies, they claim on their site that the "Country Club" where she is housed in Plymouth is one of the "worst prisons in the world" etc. This woman ruined my friends life. Read the "Welcome" folder message.

<http://susanlefevre.com>
09/29/2008 1:53:30 p.m. EDT

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Alan007 wrote:

The police need to track all these escapees. The investigators don't know that any of them become soccer moms living the ideal life until after they are caught. Also I want to know what is a real criminal vs a non-real criminal? Is one who uses fancy accounting and finance to steal millions more or less of a criminal than a guy with a weapon who robs a liquor store of a few hundred buck?

09/29/2008 1:00:29 p.m. EDT

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kahuna70 wrote:

Replying to aaa2008:
so jail for murder and attempted murder only??? everything else probation. (be good johnie or more probation for you)

Replying to walleye:

Is it really worth tracking these women down??? Except in the case of attempted murder give them probation. We need those police to get the bad guys that are out there now.

Not one of these women was convicted of attempted murder.

09/29/2008 10:05:56 a.m. EDT

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RoadRage wrote:

Replying to aaa2008:

Replying to RoadRage:

NOTHING send a clear message to convicts... that's why THEY ARE INCARCERATED! They DON'T heed any messages!!!

Now you bring a new twist to this mumbo jumbo... the "monsters are justifying their plans..." What muddled thinking! These monsters don't have to justify their plans to escape. THEY DON'T CARE WHAT ANYONE THINKS ABOUT THEIR PLANS! C'mon people, think about what you're saying.

Since nothing sends a clear message to these convicts, then each of the escapees that has been caught needs to do time for the escape.

I give up... this is to much like discussing religion with a Jehovah's Witness...

09/29/2008 10:05:47 a.m. EDT

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aaa2008 wrote:

Replying to walleye:

Is it really worth tracking these women down??? Except in the case of attempted murder give them probation. We need those police to get the bad guys that are out there now.

Not one of these women was convicted of attempted murder.

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