

# Will the Walls Come Tumbling Down?

By MAURY THOMPSON

It's hard to envision Great Meadow Correctional Facility at Comstock, N.Y., without its great wall.

"The great building stands in the middle of the 'great meadow' from which the institution takes its name, and to the travelers who pass on the state highway to the Green and White mountains it looks like a huge factory sat in the country far from the houses of the men employed," is how *The Post-Star* of Glens Falls described the setting on Sept. 12, 1922.

For nearly a century, the maximum-security prison, which the state recently announced will close in November, has been associated with the most dangerous of the state's incarcerated individuals.

But in its earliest years, before the 24-foot-high wall was constructed, it was an institution for model prisoners who had "graduated" from other state prisons by exhibiting good behavior.

The open perimeter was by design.

"A wall was assumed to be inimical to the honor principle and to have a detrimental effect on the prisoners," *The Post-Star* reported on Dec. 3, 1923. "Guards were placed at strategic points around the farm and personal oversight took the place of a wall. At one time blood hounds were kept in reserve, but were found more troublesome than useful."

In its earliest days, escapes were reported occasionally and more frequently in the 1920s, but escapees typically were quickly captured.

The original plan was to teach inmates farming, as part of their rehabilitation.

However, in typical bureaucratic fashion, little of the 998-acre parcel was conducive for agriculture. Most of it was woodland, and the soil was rocky and stony.

In the institution's early days, Warren and Washington county residents treated the inmates more like wayward neighbors than dangerous criminals.

Baseball teams from around the area, and their fans, traveled to Great Meadow to take on the Prison Nine inmate baseball team, which played all of its games at home.

More often than not, grit and determination overcame the enthusiasm of the visiting crowds, and the inmates won.

The weekly games on Saturday afternoons, played through late October, were covered in *The Post-Star* as routinely as any other sporting event.

The 1920 season included a fund-raising game against Glens Falls Knights of Columbus to benefit construction of a rectory at Fort Ann Roman Catholic Church for the Rev. Daniel R. Burns, the prison chaplain.

Baseball was not the only activity that brought local residents together with the prison inmates, according to *Post-Star* stories of the era.

About 200 invited guests from the community joined about 500 inmates in May 1920 for a banquet with speeches, musical entertainment and boxing matches.

The Daughters of Isabella Lady Minstrels of Glens Falls performed a vaudeville show at the prison on June 14 and returned for a second performance and banquet on June 24.

“The menu served would have done credit to any banquet table in the fashionable hotels of New York City, and to see those 50 ladies and guests sitting at the beautifully decorated tables with a similar number of inmates of Great Meadow would have been a revelation to most ‘outsiders,’” an inmate wrote in a review published June 26, 1920.

The performance inspired inmates to organize their own “monster minstrel, dramatic and vaudeville” show, which they performed Sept. 15, 1920, for “outsiders” who purchased 50-cent tickets to benefit the inmate sports and activity fund. About 65 inmates rehearsed for two months under the direction of Francis C. Lambert of Glens Falls.

The Delaware & Hudson Railroad ran a special train from Glens Falls to Comstock and back on the evening of the show, with stops at Hudson Falls, Fort Edward, Smiths Basin and Fort Ann.

“The show given at Great Meadow prison of Comstock last evening for the benefit of ‘outsiders’ proved as big a success as any of the road shows ever shown in this vicinity, for not only the throngs that were present but for also the ability of the men being able to act,” *The Post-Star* reported on Sept. 16.

During World War I, inmates did their part to support the troops, giving up their state-issued tobacco and collecting cash for a “smoke fund” for soldiers and sailors serving overseas.

“Every convict is supplied by the state with a package of tobacco on Saturday nights,” *The Post-Star* reported on July 3, 1918. “Last Sunday nearly every prisoner dropped his package into a basket on which was pinned to a poster reading ‘Tobacco for the men of our Army and Navy.’”

Inmates also had collected about \$200 — the equivalent of \$4,161 in 2024 — to purchase tobacco for soldiers and sailors, and planned to take a collection from the audience at the annual July 4th inmate track and field day at Homer Field.

Gov. Nathan Miller proposed building a wall around Great Meadow prison as part of a get-tough-on-crime platform when he ran for reelection in 1922.

“Half-holidays, entertainment, self-management, the honor system and ‘prisons without walls’ will pass away in prisons of the state ... and in their stead will be the rigors of discipline and hard labor,” *The Post-Star* reported on Sept. 12, 1922, summarizing Miller’s 90-minute speech to a New York League of Women Voters convention the previous day at Syracuse.

In the speech, Miller specifically called for constructing a wall around the Great Meadow facility.

Miller, a Republican, had defeated incumbent Democrat Al Smith in 1920. In 1922, Smith rebounded and defeated Miller to return to office.

In December 1923, a state commission recommended making 13 modifications to the institution, including using inmate labor to construct a wall, to update the facility to house more dangerous inmates in order to relieve crowding at other state prisons.

Construction of the wall, begun in 1924, would take four years to complete.

On Jan. 3, 1928, *The Post-Star* reported that 55 inmates had been transferred from Clinton Correctional Facility at Dannemora to Great Meadow.

“Construction of the wall has been completed and the the lighting equipment is now being installed,” *The Post-Star* reported on June 4, 1928.