

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Carbon Paper In the 21st Century

Does anyone remember carbon paper? You know, that stuff people used to place between sheets of paper to make multiple copies. In the computer age, carbon paper is an anachronism. Many people don't make hard copies of documents or letters, preferring to keep electronic files. For those that do keep paper files, photocopies are inexpensive and widely available.

There is one place carbon paper is still a hot commodity - prison. Prisoners still use carbon paper daily. In Stanley prison, photocopies are expensive and access is limited. We must pay 15¢ per page and the only items we are allowed to copy are legal papers for court filings and papers required in a school class. If I want to keep copies of my blog entries, I must use carbon paper or type each entry twice.

You would think that with the need for carbon paper in prison it would be readily available. Nope. Carbon paper is hard to find. Very few people buy it so most stores do not sell it. The one mail order store I am aware of sells packages of 10 sheets for about \$2.00. The problem is that on each order of one package of carbon paper, shipping costs are \$4.00. We are only allowed to order one package at a time. Getting carbon paper in Stanley is a very expensive proposition.

I thought it would be a good idea if the prison canteen sold carbon paper so I wrote canteen staff and asked them to stock it in the canteen (it is where we can buy hygiene supplies, snacks and other items). They responded that carbon paper would be placed on the requested items list. I'm not sure what that means but I do know that the security director must approve all new canteen items. I wrote him and asked him:

"Do you have any objection to selling carbon paper in the canteen? It is not available from the inmate catalogs and I don't know where else I can buy it."

His response was surprising, to say the least:

"Yes I do. I don't want to sell it on canteen."

What? Are you kidding? What possible reason could he have for not wanting carbon paper sold in the canteen? Note that he didn't state what his objection was, only that he had one. I suppose I could expend a lot of time and effort trying to get his objection overruled by the warden but it is pointless. The warden is not going to go against the security director. They are all team players here and a team player does not take the side of a prisoner over a staff member.

In my opinion, the real issue isn't carbon paper. It is that prisoners are still restricted to mid-20th century technology (typewriters and carbon paper) well into the 21st century. Prison officials should be finding ways to bring new technology into prisons, not trying to make it harder to get the outdated stuff we are allowed to have. We are trapped in a state-created 3rd world country in the middle of America. Policies like this are intended to keep us ignorant, powerless and ineffectual. Prisons in Wisconsin exist to provide good jobs with benefits to its employees and are run for the convenience of those staff members.

I can tell you from personal experience that the Wisconsin prisons of the 1970s were more enlightened and progressive than Stanley prison is in 2013.