

## H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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### Tattoos - Jailhouse and Otherwise

I got my first - and last - tattoo at age 14. I did it myself when a friend of mine told me what I thought was an outlandish story about how to do a tattoo. He said that I could wrap some thread around a sewing needle about 1/16" from the point, dip it into India ink and poke the skin. I had no idea how tattoos were made, but I just knew it couldn't be that easy.

Well, I was wrong, it was that simple. The first thing I tattooed on my arm was a heart. Why a heart? I don't know. I couldn't think of anything else and it seemed that a heart was what most people had for tattoos. Then I tattooed a "moonshine" jug inside the heart. I had a one gallon jug like that which I used for making wine using a recipe I got from . . . you guessed it, the same friend who told me about tattooing. Over the years, I've never found anything else I wanted to put on my body so I never got another tattoo.

Fifty years ago, tattoos were something mostly criminals, bikers and sailors had. Regular people didn't get tattoos, unless it was a small one during a stint in the military. Tattoos on women were even more rare and considered unladylike. All that has changed. Tattoos are now beautiful works of art incorporating multiple bright colors. Women and men decorate themselves extensively with tattoos. There are magazines and websites devoted to tattooing.

In other states, prisoners often tattoo each other. Wisconsin is too restrictive to permit tattooing and it is rare for a prisoner to get a jailhouse tattoo. If they get caught, both the artist and recipient end up in segregation. Many prison tattoos are poorly done in unsanitary conditions. There are now laser treatments which can reduce or eliminate ugly or poorly done tattoos. Prisoners in Oakhill can request tattoo removal and if approved, are taken to a laser center for free tattoo removal treatments.

My current cellmate is a phenomenal tattoo artist. He doesn't do any tattooing in prison but he is constantly creating new designs and lining up customers for when he opens up his shop after he is released. I admire his talent and creativity. If I ever decide to get another tattoo, I would trust him to do it for me - after I get out of prison and using sterile, state-of-the-art equipment.