

## Mississippi Celebrates Bicentennial ; Slavery Lives On

Mississippi became a state in December of 1817. Eighty-four years later, in 1901, Mississippi opened the State Penitentiary at Parchman, MS. As Mississippi celebrated its bicentennial with the opening of two museums - one dedicated to Mississippi history in general and one dedicated to the civil rights movement in Mississippi - in Jackson, the irony my mind could not escape is that civil rights violations and slavery are still daily realities in Mississippi.

At the 116 year old penitentiary in Parchman during FY2017, inmates spent a combined total of 212,160 hours working 1,165 acres of vegetables, 96 acres of rice, and 4,738 acres soybean. They harvested 1,069,183 pounds of vegetables valued at \$440,386.43. The inmates did not receive a dime for their labor.

The slavery is not isolated to Parchman. Mississippi has two other state prisons - the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) and the South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI) both of which are over 30 years old.

CMCF brags about providing over 760 man-hours of free labor valued at \$4,422.50 to surrounding local, county, and state agencies each month. Meantime, SMCI is happy to provide 49,646 hours of free labor per year to adjacent municipalities and counties while their inmates who cannot leave the prison harvest 57,693 pounds of blueberries from a 5 acre blueberry farm, earning MDOC roughly \$79,595 of income with their slave labor. Make no mistake, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution renders slavery in prisons perfectly legal. But what's "legal" is not always right, and what's just and right is not always "legal". The slave labor in MDOC is currently "legal", but it's unjust and morally wrong. The purpose of our criminal justice system should be to rehabilitate errants, teach people better ways, and to build individuals into better people, not a mechanism to keep slavery alive and to treat humans like livestock as punishment.

And all the while, civil rights in Mississippi's prison system mean nothing. Group punishment - an outdated practice of punishing entire units of facilities for the actions of single individuals - is alive and well; it's the norm. Rehabilitation programs are few and far in between. Medical care is grossly substandard. Excessive force is a regular event and officers are rarely held accountable. Inmate on inmate assault is far too common and is often allowed by staff. Sexual assault is laughed at, ignored, or the victim is punished. The list goes on and on. Naturally, MDOC denies all of this. Their version never matches reality.

So as Mississippi celebrates its bicentennial in December 2017 by celebrating the progress of the state and honoring our civil rights icons, I wonder how much longer it will be before Mississippi's criminal justice and prison systems catch up with society. How much longer will Mississippi live in denial and allow slavery and civil rights violations to continue?

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