

Warden Clinton Truman Duffy

Col. James Barrett - (brother) Stephen - Benjamin - George - Emma - Eugenia

Clinton T. Duffy was born August 4, 1898 at San Quentin Village in a house just a few doors outside the East gate of the San Quentin Prison Reservation, presently addressed as 21 Mc Kinzie. He grew up in the village, attending San Quentin Grammar School for eight years and on to San Rafael to complete his high school education.

His grandfather, Truman Dixon Palmer, was a Justice of the Peace, in San Pablo, for ten years. His father, William J. [Duffy](#), also, was a Justice of the Peace, in San Pablo, for ten years then employed by the prison for thirty years. He married a long time girl friend who also grew up at San Quentin. She was Gladys Carpenter, who's father was Captain of the Yard.

Clinton was commissioned a Notary Public. There was no other Notary Public available in the vicinity, even at the prison, so Duffy was called to the office of the Warden often to notarize papers. On one occasion he heard Warden Holohan say that he wished he had a free person for a secretary and was going to hire one. Duffy asked for the job, was hired, and became a state employee. On November 1, 1929 he began seven years as secretary to the Warden.

Warden Holohan always felt that the hardest part of his job was to preside over the many executions that were held at the prison. On most of these occasions he would ask Duffy to accompany him as he did not want to go alone. Holohan advocated the abolition of hanging and if executions were necessary, the gas chamber should be used.

In time, Duffy developed a firm conviction about the capital punishment issue and had taken a decided stand against it. Briefly, his stand is based on his belief that it does not curtail murder, as intended, and that the victims are the poor and the ignorant and underprivileged. He believed in and supported this philosophy.

Court Smith, who was Warden of Folsom Prison, was appointed the Warden of San Quentin when Holohan resigned. Smith had his own secretary at Folsom, and wanted him to come to San Quentin, so Duffy was bumped upstairs and

became secretary and historian to the Board of Prison Directors and one of the secretaries to the Board of Prison Terms and Paroles. Here he worked for five years.

After many months of hearings on brutality, lack of constructive programs, bad food, killings, etc., the governor fired the Prison Board; the one for whom Duffy had been Secretary. One member of the new Board suggested that since Clinton had been born and raised in San Quentin, and had worked in prison administration for over eleven years, that surely, he must be somewhat familiar with its management. So when Duffy was asked if he would become temporary warden and watch the prison for thirty days while they looked around for a new warden to replace the one who had just been relieved of his post, Duffy was very surprised and pleased, as well as honored.

Prison wardens and other appointive positions were usually allocated to someone who was in favor with the governor. It was a political plum, based on the old rule of the Spoils system. Duffy's temporary appointment was expected to be a caretaker position. The board would have been satisfied if he did nothing more than to keep the prison operational for 30 days. This, however, would not be the case.

Clinton Duffy knew prisoners. He had been brought up in their midst. Surely, he remembered his father saying many times, "These men are human. They are much the same as the rest of us. They are unfortunates who had been imprisoned. If these men were given a chance, they might redeem themselves, and we should try to help them."

It is difficult to understand the importance of the wardenship of San Quentin at that time. The warden of America's largest and one of the most notorious prisons, held much more authority than it would seem. He was in complete control of a group of several thousand men, regulating their lives, their actions, their every living minute. He laid out their work and saw to it that it was performed according to his rules. He planned their spiritual, religious, and intellectual routine. He programmed their recreation, their health, their future.

Clinton Duffy immediately realized his responsibility. He saw his duty, not as a custodian but as a person with the power to plan and put into practice a program of rehabilitation. Every life that was salvaged was a victory for both

the man and the government. After all, 95% of them, at some point, would be released from prison.

In these first, and perhaps only 30 days as warden, he abolished all forms of corporal punishment. He dismantled the dungeon and did away with that kind of punishment. He talked to every guard and officer and laid out the new rules that would be followed. Anyone not following them would be fired. He fired the Captain of the Yard, who encouraged brutality and he eliminated all other brutal devices such as whips, etc.

Duffy had no backing from political sources, but the Board of Prison Directors sensed the change in the atmosphere of the prison, both among the inmates and the employees. They knew that the man that they needed for warden was already on the job. By the time the one month of wardenship was up, the entire atmosphere of the prison had changed. The so-called powder keg that all seemed to be sitting on before had disappeared. The men were for this warden. He offered a square deal. He offered hope. He was ready to treat them as men. He gave them his word. He wanted them to give him their word. There was nothing else the Board of Prison Directors could do but to name Duffy as permanent warden. To do otherwise would have incited a riot. So Duffy became the permanent Warden of San Quentin Prison, a job which he administered for eleven and one-half years.

Clinton Duffy began to work on plans for a better educational system. This meant that education had to be for many who could not even read or write; for men who had very little education in the grade schools; for others who had missed high school, and for some who were ready for college courses. He let the inmates know this. Many had never before had the opportunity for this. Now, perhaps, they can have a future in this world, that does not relate to crime. Duffy felt a sincere obligation to turn each man loose from prison as a better man than he was when he arrived there. It was just as simple as that.

Many reforms were introduced. He changed the inmates showers from sea water to fresh water; initiated an inmate committee to represent the prisoners, replacing the former thug rule; built up the educational system, both in ordinary schooling and vocational training; introduced college courses, through the help of nearby Marin Junior College; started a guidance center; abolished the use of numbers on clothing, which were used instead of names. He was the first to put inmates on war work, an enterprise that later became

general in other prisons reclaiming vast quantities of material from the Pearl Harbor wreckage, an incredible tangle of wire, aluminum, rubber, copper and steel brought from Hawaii. It was hard and meticulous work, but the salvage was very valuable and gave many a man an inspiration to better himself and to leave the prison a rehabilitated man. He also set up a program for manufacturing supplies for our navy.

Another important accomplishment at the prison, was the installation of a sewage treatment plant, replacing the direct discharge of sewage into the bay.

He always referred to them as inmates, and as men, not as cons or prisoners. But he let them know that there would be discipline. He told them that his job required that he keep them in custody until their time had been served. He also let them know that he would perform this duty with the help of armed guards. And one thing he made clear at the start. If any attempted to break for liberty and used hostages to protect them from rifle fire, the guards were ordered to shoot to kill, even if the hostage was the warden himself. This and other messages were plain talk. The men understood this kind of language.

Many were astonished and thought it was the height of recklessness when Duffy walked among the inmates, hundreds of them, alone and without a body guard. He would stop and chat with many, and even listen to the problems of some, writing a memo about it in his notebook. It was sure to have his attention later. No other warden had ever done this, but during his service as warden, there was no violence whatsoever.

Through all of the trying times at the beginning, and also throughout his entire career as Warden, Gladys, his wife was a constant consultant and loving support. When a closed communication system was installed in the prison, Gladys put on a weekly program for the inmates. It was very well received and highly regarded. Her theme song was Time on My Hands.

Duffy continued the use of "honor camps" or road camps first started by Warden James A. Johnston. Carefully selected men were taken from the prison and brought to the camps which were established and put to work on state roads. Aside from the freedom of the outdoors, the rugged and beautiful surroundings, the inmate could earn two days of his time for every

one day that he spent in camp, thus cutting his time to be served in half. These highway camps proved to be quite successful and were expanded. In the period of intensive food production during World War II some camps were established to assist in farm labor. These were more difficult to manage and some were not successful. Later, inmates were also sent out to fight forest fires in the mountains. Many men distinguished themselves with bravery and great loyalty.

When Duffy left the prison as warden his reforms at San Quentin made it a model in advanced penology. He continued to work in the field of penology. He was appointed to the Adult Authority Board, the successor to the old Board of Prison Directors and the Parole Board. He served five years. After his retirement he traveled around the United States and other countries lecturing about the penal system and speaking against capital punishment.

He was national president of the Seven Steps Foundation, an organization formed by Bill Sands, a former San Quentin inmate, for the purpose of helping ex-convicts after they get out of prison. Sands also wrote a book titled *My Shadow Ran Fast* in which he credits Duffy for his full rehabilitation.

Duffy had several books published. The first was as told to Dean Jennings, titled, *The San Quentin Story*. It was released in 1950.

A motion picture, *Duffy of San Quentin*, was released in 1954 highlighting many of the reforms he introduced. The warden was played by Paul Kelly who, incidently, had been an inmate at San Quentin several years before.

Gladys Duffy also wrote a book titled the *Wardens Wife* and relates to their lives at San Quentin. It was released in 1959.

Duffy's second book was prepared by Al Hirshberg, and released in 1962. It was titled, *88 Men and 2 Women*, the title being the number of executions held in the eleven and one-half years of his wardenship. Again, with Al Hirshberg, released in 1965, a book titled, *Sex and Crime*.

His last book, released in 1977, was titled *From Heroin to San Quentin*, written in collaboration with Eva Irene Linkletter.