

doubtful. Will the rays of the sun be less severe? Will the guards, captains and supervisors be men different in character—men of a higher type from those who now control and punish our convicts? Would the convicts be more neatly kept than now, the food and equipments better? To all this I unhesitatingly answer, No. I am convinced that the conditions would in every respect be much worse. And for this reason: If the prisoners are worked on the roads they will be controlled by the counties; and, as there are forty-six counties in Florida, this means that they will be handled by forty-six different boards of county commissioners, men wholly inexperienced, wholly incompetent for the grave responsibilities that would then devolve upon them under the present system. The convicts are now controlled by one central authority—an authority that is vested in the hands of the Hon. B. E. McLin, the state's efficient commissioner of agriculture. It is, I think, obvious which of the two methods is likely to give the best results.

Again, how are the prisoners to be sheltered and cared for on the roads? If adequate stockades and quarters are provided, they must obviously be moved at great expense, as the work progresses. If the several counties found it impossible to sustain this burden, what would be the result? Simply poor and uncomfor-

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ble quarters—discontent, privation and death. That some of the counties already realize all this is indicated by the fact that no less than thirty counties are now leasing their convicts rather than utilize them on the public roads at the public expense.

Do certain would-be critics realize that road service is as arduous, if not more laborious, than most manual occupations? Do they realize that the change they advocate would throw upon the tax payers, for the sake of a doubtful experiment, a financial burden of \$500,000 per annum, against the \$250,000 now derived from the convict hire? Do these people realize that "good roads" are possible only in densely populated and long-settled sections, and that it may, though, be easy to have such highways in Belgium, France and England, to say nothing of some of the eastern states in our own country, it would certainly be quite as difficult in a state so thinly populated as Florida.

As to the alleged "abuses" of the present lease system, I can only say that my four years service with the lessees, and my experience in the national congress with penologists and prison officials, not only in the United States but abroad, justifies me in the belief that wherever prisoners exist, there will abuses be found. I believe that there have been abuses in Florida, but I also believe that most of the reports have been exaggerated; that many of the narratives were prompted by the desire of the irresponsible reporters to get a "good story," under flaring headlines, and I am quite certain that in nearly every instance the "horrors" thus set forth were found among the prisoners worked by county authorities in different parts of the state on public roads, and that the poorest clad, fed and lodged have been those so employed.

Abuse is not argument. What is wanted are facts and figures—a practical plan that will satisfy practical men, and not unduly burden law-abiding citizens and tax payers.

Do I defend the lease system as now conducted? No. Why not? Because no system is just that leases for hard labor women, and those physically unable to perform manual labor.

What would be your remedy? Improve on our present system? How can this be done? A plan has already been suggested by our progressive commissioner of agriculture, the Hon. B. E. McLin, which removes some of these defects and materially lessens the odium now more or less attached to the lease system.

Mr. McLin's Suggestions

"First. Let the legislature, over the board of county commissioners of state institutions to use a fund sufficient, arising from the hire of the state prisoners, to purchase the present hospital property near Ocala, or other property, and construct such buildings thereon as, in their judgment, is deemed advisable.

"Second. Direct the board of commissioners of the state institutions not to lease women, the aged, disabled or infirm. Eliminate all such from the lease. Put such on the farm, the state to maintain such prisoners and farm out of the proceeds of the farm. Those able to do service on the farm to help maintain themselves should do so. The deficiency, if any, would be supplemented. When we have eliminated the classes named we have nothing for which to condemn the leasing of prisoners. All states use the labor of prisoners for financial aid. It matters not what term we call the system under which they do it—lease, hire, rental, or sale of the products of the prisoners—the principle is the same, the one as creditable as the other, and all proper and right."

The above suggestions are condensed, as a verbatim report would make this paper too lengthy.

Suppose the members of the legislature consider these suggestions and that the newspapers deal fairly in discussing this problem.

A Note of Warning

The state has no property in the shape of land or shelter for the convicts should they be delivered to the commissioner of agriculture, as the law provides. How could he locate, or even temporarily care for them? In view of all this, would it not be wise for our lawmakers to arrange for the carrying out of the statutory requirements by providing a home for all of our criminals, should it ever devolve upon the state to shelter and provide for them S. H. BLITCH.

---1908---

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