



Prose from the pen

George E. May wrote to the *Daily Nebraskan* late in January asking for a subscription. After his name was put on the subscription list, May wrote again in March requesting permission to write a series of articles. The first article appears below.

Editor Tom Lansworth and staff writer Tim Anderson visited with May and toured the prison, viewing the things that he had written about.

May, 45, operated an illegal check ring throughout the United States for 17 years, before being arrested in Omaha in October, 1970.

He and his three "assistants" would go into a community and "set up" the town. Then they would write bad checks that usually amounted to thousands of dollars.

May was given a sentence of four to six years in prison and is up for parole in May. He has been active in Checks Anonymous, which he will explain in one of his articles, and the prison

chapter of the Jaycees.

After May was arrested and imprisoned in Nebraska, he received word from the state of Ohio that he was wanted there for a similar charge.

May now owes Ohio either two years in prison or a monetary restitution of several thousand dollars. To pay off this detainer, May has developed a birthday card idea which he hopes to sell to a greeting card company.

His card has the birthdays of famous people printed on the inside with a space for the name of the person receiving the card.

For example, May found out the birthday of the president of Hallmark Cards and then found out a long list of famous people with the same birthday.

The list of names was printed on the inside of the card with the president's name at the bottom. Near the bottom it read "Join the Club." The president did not buy the idea; May has not paid off his restitution.

A key turns, freedom escapes inmate's grasp

Today the *Daily Nebraskan* runs the first in a series of five articles written by George E. May, an inmate at the Nebraska Penal and Correctional Complex.

The articles deal with the orientation into prison life; rehabilitation facilities inside the prison; Checks Anonymous, an organization of former illegal check writers inside the prison; the return of the inmate back into society and the cemetery at the prison, which includes graves of executed criminals.

by George E. May
Number 27571

Part one: The clanging doors

*Where I live, we do not shake hands.
Where I live, we do not hear a baby cry.
Where I live, we do not hear kind words.
Where I live, we do not hear a happy child laugh.
Where I live, we do not have pets.
Where I live, we do not have trees.
Where I live, we do not have money.
Where do I live? In prison.*

The deputy sheriff opened the rear door to let us out. The inside door handles had been removed. We eased ourselves through the door—a difficult feat when you are wearing handcuffs and leg-irons. We somberly viewed our new home. The only emotions I experienced were relief from the discomfort of the crowded station wagon and fear.

We started shuffling toward the little building where we were relieved of our fetters and the long chain that tied us together. Here we were searched while standing spread-eagle (called a shakedown) and then moved forward through the first of many doors. Between the first and second door, the impact hit me! I had just entered the prison grounds and, between here and the next door, I would have my last look at freedom for many years.

The full weight of my plight was almost unbearable. Straight ahead, I saw the foreboding walls and the gun turrets, replete with indistinguishable men in blue, cradling shotguns.

The third and fourth doors took us to the turnkey area—the pivotal point where two doors cannot be opened at the same time and where the "turning of the keys" is accomplished electronically, by someone in a glass cage. The stop in this little cubicle allowed the guard stationed there to subject everyone passing through to a shakedown.

Three doors later, we found ourselves in the dress-in room, immediately below the turnkey area. Here, I suffered my first real indignity—being assigned a number. This number will be a part of me during my entire incarceration and will be used to identify me each day.

We were then photographed, fingerprinted, showered and subjected to another indignity—being sprayed with DDT. The purpose was obviously to prevent communicable vermin from infesting the institution.

But the callousness shown when spraying a man with the same type of canister used on ordinary garden weeds only helped to accentuate my surroundings. They seemed to be saying, "you are now number 27571—and you damn well better not forget it."

We were then relieved of our money, clothing and other valuables and issued our new clothes—denim shirts, trousers and jackets. The supervisor disappeared and we talked to the photographer, who was the first inmate we met. He immediately took us into the next room where we viewed the electric chair. He briefly told us about the last electrocution. We then returned to the clothing area, where he told us the prison taboos:

—Stop in your tracks if you are outside and hear the whistle blow. That tower guard does not use

popcorn in his shotgun.

—Never fraternize with the "screws." (Guards are variously called "screws," "hacks," "bulls" and other unprintable appellations.)

—Never try to talk religion to another con. God doesn't live here.

—Never ask another con what his rap or sentence is.

At this juncture, the "screw" returned and I couldn't help but think that I had just received the first of many contrived experiences. We returned to the turnkey area, were again shaken down and, seven doors later, encountered indignity No. 3—losing the locks.

I imagine everyone says the same thing to the inmate barber, "don't cut it too short," and each haircut seems to come out the same way—short. After the three-minute haircut and two additional doors, we entered the interior of the prison, the yard area.

If the reality of our situation had not registered before this, it certainly did then. We were in a yard area of about an acre and could see nothing but concrete and steel around us—and five visible guard towers. We were escorted to the Reception-Diagnostic Center, not too affectionately called "the fishtank," which was to be home for the next thirty days.

We were greeted at the "fishtank" door by another officer and another shakedown. Then we were assigned to specific groups. I was assigned to the third floor and allowed to proceed unescorted. I was met

by another locked door, another officer and the inevitable shakedown.

After he determined that his fellow guards had not permitted me to possess any contraband (anything not specifically issued to me), he gave me an inmate handbook, admonished me about responding when my number is called and allowed me to enter the "day room" to join the other inmates.

As I entered the huge room it seemed that every action stopped for a fraction of a second. I was being appraised by every man in the room. A feeling of unfriendliness and indifference seemed to permeate the air. I quietly found a place to begin the task of studying the rule book.

I could neither concentrate on or comprehend the contents of that book. I laid the book aside and started pacing the floor until the bell rang—the repeating ritual of announcing all activities in the prison.

We lined up at the door, were shook down and marched to the main dining room for the evening meal. Here I got my first glimpse of the general inmate population and a view of the entire inside prison.

Here also, I had my first conversation with another "fish." He nudged me, pointed to another inmate and told me in a conspiratorial manner about the escapades of one of the multiple-lifers. I detected a note of awe in his voice as he revealed this little tidbit. This was my first exposure to one of the greatest fears of prison life—the omnipresent fear of violence.

I imagined it would be difficult sleeping the first night, but I was wrong. I was physically and emotionally drained and slept like a baby.

The next morning I began the first of a series of tests, lectures, interviews, examinations and form-fillings that would occupy about three hours a day for the next three weeks. The other 21 hours were spent in reflection and becoming acclimated to prison life.

Three weeks later we got the word that activities had been concluded and we would be classified for job and living quarters the next week. I didn't look forward to a week of inactivity. Spending three hours each day in special activities had become somewhat pleasurable. I would have liked to continue staying busy.

The day finally arrived. The thirty days in quarantine were finally over and I could begin earning "good-time" as soon as I saw the classification board that morning. I had seen or heard all of them in lecture groups or interviews but that day they decided where I went from there.

They placed me in the plate factory—making license plates. Being an accountant by profession and possessing the normal clerical skills of typing, speedwriting, office machine use and so forth, I thought they would use those skills already acquired, rather than send me to an unfamiliar job.

I knew they had clerical openings because one supervisor stopped over to talk to me the week before about my background. But then I remembered a conversation I heard a few days earlier between two men in the day room. One fellow was explaining to another the way to go about receiving your choice of jobs.

Although his method of explanation was a little more involved, the gist was: the barber will never get a job barbering, but will be assigned as a welder. A welder will never get assigned to a welding job, but will be assigned as a barber. The point being that in order to become a barber you must tell them you are a welder, so you can continue your tonsorial skills. Confusing? Maybe, but for me this was my first of many lessons in "How to beat the system."

Tomorrow: Rehabilitation—A joke or a promise?

