

# PRISON MUSEUM POST

The Official Newsletter of the Burlington County Prison Museum Association  
Incorporated in 1966

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## KINGS OF THE ROAD

*I know every engineer on every train  
All of the children, and all of their names  
And every handout in every town  
Every lock that ain't locked when no one's around....*

Who can forget Roger Miller's \* whimsical ode to the American tramp, a figure that established itself suddenly in the 1870s, when hundreds of thousands of men, left adrift by the devastation of the Civil War and late 19<sup>th</sup> century economic upheavals, took to the newly-laid railways.

Many of these men ended up in our Jail, as can be seen by the commitment records now archived on our website. They were incarcerated not because they committed normally-jailable offenses, but rather just to keep them off the streets. The cost of their maintenance was a source of tremendous consternation for the County Freeholders and the taxpayers. By the mid-1880s, it finally started to dawn on taxpayers that the more they spent on jailing tramps, the more



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\* Roger Miller was a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century singer/songwriter whose honkey-tonk-inspired novelty songs succinctly and amusingly depicted the human condition. He was born in Texas in 1936. When his father died a year later, he was sent to live with relatives in Oklahoma. He joined the Army at age 17 and served in the Korean War. His gift for music led him to Nashville, where he landed a job as a fiddle player in Minnie Pearl's band. He hit it big in 1964 with the songs "Dang Me" and "Chug-a-Lug", followed by "King of the Road" in 1965. He died in California in 1992.

tramps they got. This was because several players, including sheriffs, constables, judges and contractors (e.g., food suppliers) were enriching themselves off of what had become a "tramp industrial complex". A *Courier Post* article dated December 28, 1886 summed up the situation:

"But the tramps must go somewhere, and they are flocking to Burlington and adjacent counties, where the authorities are entertaining them at the taxpayers' expense. The Burlington County Jail, at Mount Holly, is crowded with the nomads, as they find it much more comfortable behind grated doors than the inhospitality of the cold outside world.

They are sure of a warm berth and two substantial meals a day, and that to a tramp is paradise. The system which allows this state of affairs to exist, imposing a heavy burden on the taxpayers, is a peculiar one, and much fault is beginning to be found with it. The bills each year are growing larger, and, unless something is done to stop it, the burden will soon become unbearable. The root of the trouble lies in the fact that the freeholders each year appropriate money to buy food for the tramps. The sheriff is allowed thirty cents per day for boarding them, and, as the cost of heat and light comes from other items, that official merely buys food. But two meals are furnished a day, and it is claimed that the sheriff, during the course of a winter, makes a handsome profit from the tramps. The freeholders once made an effort to reduce the number of tramps sent to jail by passing a resolution requesting the justices of the peace to commit all tramps to the almshouse, where they can be kept for less than ten cents per day, and be made to work in the bargain. This was observed for a time, and the result was tramps were scarce. The justices of the peace, seeing that the source of a considerable portion of their income had been taken away in consequence, decided to ignore the request of the board of freeholders, and committed the tramps to jail as heretofore.

Since then matters have been going from bad to worse. Within the past six weeks over 200 tramps have been committed to jail by the Mount Holly justices of the peace. The latter have been known, in the absence of an officer, to make out a commitment and give it up to a tramp, who would thereupon walk up to jail in his own custody, hand the commitment over to the jailer and suffer himself to be locked up. At other times tramps would be sent up with a memorandum to the sheriff saying that a commitment would be sent up later in the day.

It is said that the Mount Holly police officers also derive considerable revenue from the arrest of these vagrants, receiving 50 cents a head. For some time past the competition among the officers has been so sharp that some of them have furnished the tramps with liquor and tobacco for the privilege of arresting

them. The business has become so systematized that nearly every night a gang of tramps congregate at a certain spot on the edge of the town and there await the arrival of the officer who has made the highest bid for the privilege of arresting them. And there is a curious code of ethics among them. No officer would think of arresting a tramp without first asking his consent or making a deal with him. If he did otherwise it would be considered a breach of etiquette.

The existence of this state of affairs has long been generally known and the imposition patiently borne, but it is now believed that patience has been exhausted and that the people will demand a change.”



Tramps, vagrants and drunks were not usually locked up in cells, but rather were kept in the “tank” in the basement. This room, pictured at the left, is about 12 by 15 feet. When Dr. Ezra Hunt of the State Health Department visited the jail in the spring of 1887\*, he found 43 men sitting around in the tank “socializing”. He asked that those from New Jersey raise their hands. All but three were from various other states and foreign countries.

Dr. Hunt was concerned about the sanitary conditions, noting that there were only a few indoor toilets, and that they flushed into sewer pipes connected directly into the Rancocas Creek. There were no bath tubs in the basement and the inmates washed their clothes in buckets. Amazingly, our antiquated Jail wasn’t as bad as many other county jails. Dr. Hunt noted that ours, with Mills’ arched ceilings, fireplaces and windows, had the best ventilation. We also had the best food and clothes for the prisoners\*\*.

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\*Dr. Hunt’s report is discussed extensively in the December 2, 2019 issue of the *Post*, archived on our website. The entire report can be found on the internet. We also have a copy in the PMA office.

\*\* An article in the *Mount Holly News* dated February 16, 1882 reported that “A tramp stood in front of the jail on Monday morning in his bare feet, having been turned out in that condition. He tried to excite sympathy with those who passed by and succeeded very poorly. The tramps have been in the habit of hiding their shoes away before being committed with the hope of getting a new pair when they were discharged. This fellow had burned his up and consequently was sent away without new ones. If Sheriff Hays and Turnkey Taylor will send a few more away in this condition, they will save the county considerable money.”

No wonder tramps came from far and wide to enjoy the amenities at the "Burlington County Hotel", as taxpayers came to ruefully call it.

Dr. Hunt was troubled not only by the unsanitary conditions, but also by what he considered to be misuse of taxpayer money in Burlington and all other counties. He wrote that most of the jails were sufficient to meet the average needs of the counties for serious offenses, but then

"... fall and winter come. Three or four or ten tramps are arriving in villages or in the county town (*county seat*) each day. They are vagrants. Some of them get drunk and are disorderly. In addition, some well-known drinkers indulge too much and may get into a brawl in which no one is seriously hurt. There is pecuniary motive on the part of the constable, the justice and even others to have them arrested. One officer gets twenty five cents and another fifty, and the keeper of the jail is allowed from twenty-five to thirty-five cents a day for keeping him. These are the kind of commitments that pay. A vagrant brought in at ten o'clock at night on Monday and discharged at ten o'clock in the morning on Wednesday counts three days. Often he has eaten nothing. In one county an incensed Freeholder offered \$3500 for the privilege of being a Warden – at least, such is the newspaper statement. Vagrants, and all these minor offenders, need attention, and often need arrest, but they do not need the bars of a jail, or such jails as they are sent to. They belong in the station house or work-house, or, if sent to jail, it should not be for companionship, but for punishment."

The author of a *Courier Post* article dated March 1, 1887 optimistically predicted an improvement in the situation after the elections that were to be held the next week:

"Tuesday of next week will witness exciting and hard-fought contests in every township in Burlington County for the position of Freeholder.\* The reason for this is that many of the present members of the Board of Freeholders are candidates for re-election, and a majority of them recently voted to increase the pay of the sheriff to thirty cents a day for feeding tramps, contrary to the wishes of their constituents. The members who voted in favor of this measure were not confined to one particular party; there were Democrats as

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\*At that time the Freeholder board consisted of two persons from each town.

well as Republicans among them, and they thought the people they were sent to represent would forget all about such a small matter as increasing the pay for boarding tramps by the time the next election rolled around.



*Historic ballot box, now the donation box in our gift shop*

The people have not forgotten. In fact that they have taken unusually lively interest in them ever since; so much so that they will turn out en masse on Tuesday next and administer a rebuke that will be felt. Some of them have since attempted to excuse their action by saying that they voted before having time to give the matter the careful attention it deserved. Others that they did not fairly understand the measure and supposed it was something else. But all these will not down. The fact is the taxpayers are tired of footing the bills every year for the maintenance of tramps that are encouraged to come here by every device that ingenuity can suggest. And the freeholders made themselves a party to this robbery by voting to increase the pay fifteen cents per meal. Some of these men expect to be re-elected, but it will surprise everyone if they are.

Some idea of the feeling may be had from the fact that a majority of the new candidates had to pledge themselves in favor of a reduction in tramp's board in order to secure their nominations.”

So did the election bring changes? Yes and no. Laws were passed to limit reimbursements, and following an audit in 1894, the Freeholders sued one justice of the peace for overcharging \$240 (a large sum then) between March of 1892 and March 1893. All the other justices had to pay up as well, and commitments dropped after that. They probably would have dropped anyway when the national economy improved in the 1880s, and probably rose again when the country was thrown into the Great Depression of 1893-1897. By the early 1900s, however, our Jail's population appears to have leveled out to its normally low numbers, Burlington County never having been a hotbed of criminal activity.

There were probably many reasons for the explosion of the tramp population after the Civil War. Many attribute it to the fact that many combat veterans were left with physical, mental and substance abuse disabilities. But it was probably more a function of economic factors. Many southern veterans had no home or job to go back to, their properties and cities having been destroyed. Many northern veterans lost their jobs to industrialization and hordes of cheaper labor that had migrated from the south. The American



economy was a veritable roller-coaster, with a Panic in 1873 and a severe depression from 1893 to 1897. Whatever the reasons, it doesn't appear that anyone was interested in discussing them at the time. The authorities were too busy making money off the tramps, and the citizenry were too busy complaining about them to discuss, let alone address, the root of the problem. It wasn't until the very last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that reformers began to understand that the existence of a large migrant population was largely the result of economic processes and not, as many believed, an irrational psychic state of "wanderlust".

Paradoxically, the existence of a large number of geographically mobile men in search of work also had a positive impact on America's economy. The fluid labor supply was essential for the construction of major transportation networks and other monumental infrastructure projects. It guaranteed that seasonal demands in various industrial, extractive and agricultural locations were met. And finally, the "Kings of the Road" were a major factor in our country's great expansion to the west.



*Another view of the "tank", now interpreted as the "workshop".  
When the Jail closed in 1965, the road gang was kept there.*

## *KING OF THE ROAD*

*Trailers for sale or rent,  
Rooms to let, fifty cents  
No phone, no food, no pets,  
I ain't got no cigarettes*

*Ah, but two hours of pushing broom  
Buys an eight by twelve four-bit room  
I'm a man of means by no means  
King of the Road*

*Third boxcar, midnight train,  
Destination Bangor, Maine  
Old worn out suit and shoes  
I don't pay no union dues*

*I smoke old stogies I have found  
Short, but not too big around  
I'm a man of means by no means  
King of the Road*

*I know every engineer on every train  
All of the children, and all of their names,  
And every handout in every town  
Every lock that ain't locked when no one's around*



*The quintessential tramp*

### **Historic Burlington County Prison Museum Association ("PMA")**

PO Box 483  
Mt. Holly, NJ 08060  
Museum/Gift Shop Phone:  
609-265-5476  
PMA Phone: 609-288-6372  
Email: [info@pma1811.net](mailto:info@pma1811.net)  
Website: [www.prisonmuseum.net](http://www.prisonmuseum.net)

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Please help us preserve and promote the museum by joining the PMA. Annual dues are \$15 (individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates and free admission to the museum. See website for application.



Destroy not the ancient landmarks which the fathers have set. *Proverbs 22:28*

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**COME ENJOY A  
“LOVE YOU TO DEATH”  
VALENTINE’S DAY at the  
HISTORIC BURLINGTON COUNTY PRISON MUSEUM  
Friday, February 14, 2025 6 P.M. to 9:15 P.M.**



**FREE ADMISSION (but donations will be gratefully accepted!)**

**Spirit Boxes available \$5 for 30 minutes - first come, first serve**

**Audio tour (also available in Spanish) - \$3**

**Escape Game \$10 per game – up to 4 people can play on each game – first come, first serve**

**8 PM – 8:30 PM Join us in the Debtor’s Day Room for a discussion about three inmates who “loved them to death” – Joel Clough, Wesley Warner and Barclay Peak (recommended for adults only)**

**We’ll be open from 6 P.M. to 10 P.M. – No admission after 9:15 P.M.**