

Men and causes behind the infamous 1959 Montana prison riot.

Jerry's Riot: The True Story of Montana's 1959 Prison Disturbance

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A ghost's whisper

A board falling flat to the floor is thunder to the heart. And so it was that when prison guard Clyde Sollars heard a hard clap, he stiffened in fear. For a few seconds he listened, breathless.

Sollars looked at his wristwatch, an anniversary gift from his wife. The hands showed almost four o'clock. He reached into the canvas bag he had carried into the prison from the main office across the street. Inside the tiny mailroom that was nothing more than a cubbyhole with shelves, wedged at the end of a short hallway, he sorted the day's last letters. That noise, sharp and urgent, echoed in his head. The convict carpenters working with hammers and saws near the deputy warden's office must have dropped a board. The day suddenly felt used and cold, like frost on a flower. Feeling a chill that he couldn't understand, he worked faster.

An hour earlier, Sollars waited outside the prison's rock walls, across the street, while his wife Helen censored the last letters. She was the new matron in the Women's Unit, a small stockade behind the main prison. They told her that if she worked with the mail superintendent for a few weeks she would know the prison better. Every morning she and another matron marched eleven of the thirteen female prisoners from their quarters to their jobs in prison offices outside the walls. Clyde felt lucky to see her during working hours. He was one of two mail and transportation officers, alternating with another guard on road trips to return parole violators to Deer Lodge. The most recent assignment had been to North Dakota. The other guard asked for it, hoping to visit relatives along the way.

On this Thursday, April 16, 1959, Clyde Sollars might have been driving hundreds of miles to the east, free as a bird on the perpetual

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plains of eastern Montana. Instead he stacked mail into a bag, looked at his watch, and decided that before he ended his shift he would walk one more time into Montana State Prison.

"See you at home, Mom," he had said to his wife. That was what he called Helen sometimes. They had two daughters, grown and gone, and it felt good to speak to his wife as if the children were still at home.

He had come to the prison in 1957. Like many of the guards before him, who found their way to Deer Lodge from the sawmills and the mines and the timber crews, he arrived at the prison with dirt on his heels. After leaving the Army after World War II he went to work in the grain elevators in Charlo, Ronan, Polson, Pablo and Paradise, all towns in northwestern Montana. Sollars was an ordinary blue-collar worker, as unadorned as the other guards who filed in and out of those imposing sandstone and granite walls. He was about to find out how plain men take on new worth in a crisis.

He swung the canvas sack onto his shoulder and walked forty paces across Main Street and into the lengthening shadows of two mighty cell houses. The fortresses stood four stories high. Castle-like turrets clawed at the pale sky from each of the eight corners. One cell house had been built before the turn of the century, the other, during Teddy Roosevelt's presidency. They made an awe-inspiring sight to travelers who drove into town on Highway 10, a two-lane ribbon of asphalt, and stopped and pointed their Brownies to snap pictures. The forbidding prison, by some accounts one of the worst in the country, made for interesting vacation snapshots next to the more pastoral elements of Montana, like steaming geyser spray from Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park.

Like most prison guards, Sollars saw little romance in the rugged architecture of the cell houses. He thought them ugly and wretched because he knew of the misery that they hid. He felt them staring at him with their troubled swollen eyes. The prison had eyes everywhere. The hundreds of prisoners watched and remembered all they saw, as did the guards if they knew what was good for them. The seven wall towers watched what was inside, and everything

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inside stared back. Eyes watched from everywhere. It was said that the prison's ears heard all, even a ghost's whisper.

Wind swept the scent of spring snow off the mountains that loomed like a painted backdrop behind the prison. The scent stung his nose but felt fresh and clean. Only when Sollars arrived at the looming stone entrance did he shiver. Instinctively he zipped his blue uniform jacket.

He tilted the bill on his police-style cap to shut out the sun, which already was fading behind the prison. Then he looked up. On the wall outside the tower, known as Tower 7 or the main gate, a guard stood with a loop of clothesline rope. He uncoiled it and let it drop twenty feet or so to Sollars, who unclipped from it a brass key that filled his hand. At the front of the tower, standing almost on Main Street where the cars rolled past, Sollars unlocked an ornate black grill door to enter the base of the two-story tower. Here, the easy innocence of small-town Deer Lodge dissolved into a dark cave of sandstone rock. A naked bulb cast dull yellow light that didn't penetrate the corners. The room was cold and drafty. Sollars felt a change in him as he always did when he went inside.

He locked the grill door behind him. This time, the rope dangled through a round opening in the ceiling. The guard who had stood on the wall a minute earlier was now inside the tower, up in the eagle's nest where he could see the guts of the prison through its broad windows. Sollars attached the key, tugged on the rope, and the guard above pulled it back. Seconds later the rope returned. A new key rattled inside the tin tube. Sollars used it to unlock a wooden door, as thick as his hand was wide, on the opposite side of the tower. He swung open the door, stepped into the prison yard, and locked it again. The other guard, standing outside on the wall again and facing the prison now, dropped the rope. Sollars surrendered the key.

He crossed a short courtyard to ten steps that led upward to another barred door. Behind it was Inside Administration, where guards brought their prisoner counts. Convicts came for medicine, or to get their teeth pulled in the dental office, or to shine the guards' black leather shoes. In the photo office, they took pictures

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of the “fish,” the new men who arrived through the main gate and wrote descriptions of their scars and tattoos in case of escape. The visiting room was here, too. Inside Administration was the business district of this town of criminals.

The cell houses, like big brothers, pressed against the chalk-white Inside Administration on either side, dwarfing it. On the south end, to Sollars’ left, was the 1896 version. This cell house had buckets for toilets. Despite all the technological inventions before its construction, it more resembled a Civil War-era fortress with its galleys of wood and its cell doors that had to be locked individually. It was made of dark brick, the color of dried blood. Its round turrets had roofs that came to a point, where in the early days big flags flew. To the north, the 1912 cell house was much the same in its rectangular construction, although its brick looked more orange by contrast and its square turrets flared at the top. Even forty-seven years after it was built, guards called this building the “new” cell house because it had plumbing and interlocking cell doors.

None of the guards would doubt that this was Floyd Powell’s prison. The new warden from Wisconsin State Prison, a beefy, chest-thumping champion of reform, had proclaimed at his arrival eight months earlier that he would change this reputed hellhole into a model institution that would be the envy of every prison in America. He was a man who didn’t try to hide his dreams of achievement. Some residents of Deer Lodge would say that he came to the prison preoccupied with the perpetual pursuit of a name for himself. The town wasn’t accustomed to a warden of such outward determination. At the prison, he disliked debate; in fact, he wouldn’t tolerate it. He tutored his foes that it was best to take him at his word or suffer the consequences. That being understood by guards who came to resent him, Powell then promised that he would show them how to make the prison safer. He issued a stream of memorandums from his office to make his point.

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The new warden arrived in Deer Lodge to repair decades of decay and mismanagement at the only prison in Montana's vast landscape. It was an outpost of sorts, planted in a town of fewer than 4,000 residents in a tall empty county – Powell County, coincidentally – where Hereford cattle outnumbered people. The prison had stood at that spot along the Clark Fork River since Montana was a territory, when sluice miners crawled the snow-fed creeks and road agents fleeced them of their gold nuggets. It had been a familiar face to three generations of Deer Lodge folk who worked there. The old prison was a tolerated place, if not tolerable, a dark ripple in the stream of a good life. In a wide lonesome valley that felt like cupped hands beneath the heavens, the prison's purpose was a spoiling, a footprint of humanity's inevitable sorrowful deeds. Montanans liked their prison kept quiet, much like ignoring a sleeping dog for fear of its bite. With Floyd Powell's arrival, that was about to change. There, between folds of the Rocky Mountain Front that wore some of the best forests in Montana on its flowing cape, his ambition for reform took shape.

As summer waned, Powell charged ahead with uncommon energy, trying to change everything at once. He recruited Ted Rothe, his friend and ally, from Wisconsin State Prison. To make the prison safer, he hired more guards. To know the troublemakers, he started classifying prisoners by crimes and behavior. He even fired the "con bosses" who had supervised their peers in the industries and shops. Powell was a whirling dervish. In his quest to bring the prison into modern times, he was upsetting the balance of power inside of it.

Clyde Sollars felt a haunting at the prison. The prison felt dead and ugly. Knowing the men held inside was like ripping open a psychological veil. Behind it were the men's victims and their personal agonies. Sollars and all the other guards discovered that in the midst of convicted men they met hell, exposed and raw and full of pain. Guards coped with two evils: real dangers and apparitions. They sensed in Floyd Powell something faintly curious but ominously suggestive, like a storm building on the mountain. Civilized humans built prisons to hide what they didn't want to see.

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To many Montanans, prison reform was worse than a futile gesture. It was a violation of faith.

If anything, a guard's life was a fertile field for conversation. On the outside, off shift, guards cracked their foaming Great Falls Selects and smoked their unfiltered Camels and ranted of how it was, how it *really* was, and lamented Powell and the joint and the torment of their working lives.

At the top of the steps at the barred door into Inside Administration, Sollars pushed a button that sounded a buzzer. Officer James "Little" Jones, the second-shift turnkey, appeared at the door. He was as short as his nickname implied, but a muscled, wiry man, and his hair was thick and black. "Last trip for today?" he asked Sollars. He opened the door for Sollars to pass and then swung it shut. Metal crashed against metal. He turned the big key until the lock slid closed with a thunk. Jones made small talk before Sollars entered a little hallway to his right. He had been sorting the mail for fewer than ten minutes before he heard the noise that scared him.

Jones worked two grill doors that day. On the west side of the building, opposite from where Sollars had entered, two grill doors spaced twelve feet apart created a vestibule, where on most days one door would be locked before the other was opened. Those doors admitted convicts from the yard. Usually a second turnkey guard worked between the doors and had to work them with care to avoid being trapped with both sets of keys. Today Jones was working alone. On such days when the afternoon shift was short a man, the outside grill door was left open. Convicts who had business to do came up the steps from the yard on the west side of Inside Administration and walked right up to the second grill door in the vestibule. As a matter of policy, Jones would order them to step back before he unlocked the door.

Standing now inside his claustrophobic mailroom, Sollars was thinking again about the noise that bothered him. Like other guards

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he had become accustomed to listening beyond clanging doors and crude language for true and ominous signals of trouble. This noise had ricocheted around the jungle of concrete rooms like a clap of thunder. Had he heard a board falling flat to the floor, blasting the air away? Or had he heard something else? His suspicion grew.

For a few moments only silence came to his ears, and in prison, silence deafens. Here, a dictionary of sounds lay open in Clyde Sollars' mind, as it did for every guard, ready for quick reference. In this prison of a thousand eyes, danger usually came first to the ears. Sounds that fill the prison alarm new guards. As months pass those sounds become a pattern of routine. The prison at its safest was a numbing routine and a guard was soon to learn that he should listen close when the routine changes.

From somewhere in the maze of rooms came an urgency of shoes on tile. They weren't squeaks of new shoes but the warnings of a struggle. Sollars felt curious and then afraid. He crept into the lobby. Here in this gloomy room, where convicted men had tromped a trail in the linoleum, he saw no carpenters, nor did he see anyone else. Where was Jones, the turnkey guard? And why were both barred doors to the yard standing open?

That very second, as Sollars comprehended a guard's greatest fear, a squat and sweating convict rumbled into the lobby from Deputy Warden Ted Rothe's office. His big fist clutched a thin ugly knife, red with blood.

Sollars recognized him at once. He didn't know the man well, in fact couldn't recall a conversation with him, but in an instant Sollars sensed the man's frightful confidence.

Like a mad bull, Jerry Myles snorted through a flattened nose that listed to the left. Rivers of purple and red ran across his flushed face. His bully scowl, accentuated with heavy eyelids and full pouting lips, promised trouble. His high forehead, where only a tongue of wavy salt-and-pepper hair remained, shined with sweat. He tilted his head backward a bit, daring Sollars to defy him. Sollars

had heard this man was nicknamed “Shorty” and could see why. Myles stood only a shade over five feet, and despite thick arms and a chest as round as a rain barrel, his feet were dainty like a woman’s. His shoes seemed too petite for a man who propelled his stout body with such authority. He was a bull on tiny feet.

Although a common burglar, Myles had a reputation among the guards as a jocker, meaning he stalked young men for sex. They also called him “Little Hitler,” alluding to his remorseless and domineering behavior in the cell house. He courted violations of the rules in an effort to draw attention to himself, and when he was caught, tried to make amends in pitiful ways.

At 125, his IQ was far higher than most of his fellow convicts. He wrote poetry, enjoyed the strategic challenges of chess, and had learned to play the violin. Had he not been a psychopath, he might have been a scholar. Little good had come from his intellect. Other than occasional regret over his troubled loveless life, he reserved most of his thinking for petty hates and distorted illusions.

Sollars thought he saw a flicker of compassion in the eyes of this mad bull before him. When Myles spoke, his voice came softer than Sollars had expected. “This is a riot and if you want to live, Cap, do what I say,” Myles advised him.

At first Sollars didn’t understand that Myles was even more dangerous than he appeared. Prison was his home. Now forty-four years old, he had spent most of the past twenty-five years at Alcatraz Island and five other federal and state prisons. Mutinies came to him as second nature. He thought he knew prison life better than anyone who had guarded him. Myles was determined to impress on his captors that because of his long history of confinement he deserved special privileges. It soon would become clear to everyone in Montana that he desired to run the prison.

Myles stepped toward Sollars. He guided the knife in front of his short bulk like he was trying to clear a path with it. Sollars didn’t doubt that Myles would kill him. He raised his hands in surrender. Sollars had been to war and seen a few fights at the grain elevators but knew nothing about confronting armed convicts. Behind Myles came Lee Smart, the kid with eyes of ice. Sollars knew him as the

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teenage murderer. He was skinny and had a girl's countenance but everyone knew he was a psychopath and gave him room. Smart had a sassy defiant way about him. He walked around the prison with his trousers drooping.

Between Myles and Smart stood Sergeant Bill Cox. Blood soaked the shirtsleeve on his left arm from shoulder to wrist. He had a jaw of rock that made him look fierce but now his strength was gone and his face white and dazed. Cox worked in the captain's office between the lobby and Ted Rothe's office. As Sollars tried to understand what he was seeing, he wondered for an instant why the scene didn't include Deputy Warden Rothe. Then he looked closer at the boy.

Smart pointed a lever-action rifle at Sollars. He gripped the barrel not as a hunter would with a thumb on one side and fingers on the other for a clear view, but with his fingers wrapped all the way around. The ominous opening at the barrel's tip looked larger than life. Sollars smelled gunpowder. He saw Smart's other hand at the trigger, coaxing it. Sollars felt a violation of the basic order of life. He blinked hard behind his glasses. He wouldn't forget Lee Smart's blank cold face.

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