

Smash Sexism! Smash Homophobia!

Once an ex-con told me i was pretty,
he said if i were in prison i'd be somebody's woman,
i'd have to obey him and be faithful to him,
if i got caught screwing with someone else,
i'd be slit with a knife or a razor blade,
slit until the blood from my faggot ass
met the blood from my throat,
bled until the redness became a poem
and then a song,
until a mute nation heard
but they haven't heard and sometimes
i realize they can't hear at all.

- Tommi, "The Rape Poem," Washington State, 1976[1]



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The Anti-Exploits of Men Against Sexism

In which Mead is horrified by conditions in
"Concrete Mama" and joins with new
companions to improve them



"I'll tell you what, we were tough faggots."
- Ed Mead, Men Against Sexism organizer, 1997

A dilapidated bus shunted twenty-one prisoners from processing at the Shelton Corrections Center on the Olympic Peninsula to the Washington State Penitentiary (WSP) in Walla Walla, on the far eastern plains of the state. The transport, which inmates called the “Gray Goose,” was stuffy in the late summer heat. Each person in the capacity crowd sweated copiously. Each was cuffed to his waist chain, which was linked to the inmate next to him, and manacled at the ankles. Fresh contributions to the open bucket at the back of the jostling vehicle activated the odor of an older layer of miasmic filth coating the floor. The anxiety was palpable as the entire busload of awed “fishes” and discouraged old-timers approached “Concrete Mama,” the largest and most notorious penal colony in the Pacific Northwest.

The institution, when it came into view, was as imposing and dreary as Ed Mead had imagined it would be. Its guntower-capped rock walls protected blocky dormitories and industrial facilities. It looked like what it was: a factory producing dead souls.

Mead pondered the shell of a cocoon from which he might not emerge. He scanned the monotonous wheat fields for any landmarks which could orient him if the opportunity for escape presented itself.

The “Goose” passed into a sallyport. A prison guard boarded the bus and casually scanned for contraband. A second gate opened into the prison yard. The newcomers were disgorged, shuffling two by two, in a chain.

Established cons gawked at the inductees. Old buddies greeted each other raucously; old enemies glared at one another ominously. Any inmate looking fresh and new was presented with more bawdy calls—“Oh, she’s a pretty one!”—which were accompanied by laughter and leers.

After waiting in line Mead was uncuffed, handed clothes, and given a cell assignment. He asked other inmates directions to Six Wing, his new home, and meandered over. The ramshackle condition of everything depressed him. The prospect of passing his two life sentences in such drabness turned all the color inside him to gray.

The inside of Six Wing was cavernous. Four stories of tiers buzzed with activity as men, packed four to a tiny cell, settled in for the coming evening count. The air, poorly circulated, was composed of equal parts body odor and cigarette smoke.

Only one of his three new cellmates was in when he arrived. “Doc” was a grizzled old white dude who, Mead discovered to his pleasant surprise, was also a jailhouse lawyer. The two chatted amiably. Count was called over the loudspeaker. A squad of fully armored guards appeared in front of the cell. The commanding officer barked “Mead! Out!” Mead complied. He was cuffed and escorted to the Intensive Security Unit (ISU) (also known as “Administrative Segregation,” the shortened version of which is “Ad-seg”), where disciplinary

A gym and martial arts studio was established in the club. On one wall a life-size silhouette was painted which was used for kicking practice. Mead, unable to resist an opportunity to proselytize, wrote the letters “KKK” on the target’s chest.

MAS was at its peak. Mead felt the organization had accomplished the goals he set out for it—the transformation of a rape culture. This shift at WSP percolated down through the lower security joints and the overall conditions in the state improved dramatically. Media coverage of the campaign was encouraging. The public attention it drew legitimized the organization and gave it bargaining power with the administration. MAS submitted a petition to the appropriate Deputy Superintendent requesting official sanction of its existence. If approved, MAS would become the first legal gay prisoners’ organization in the country. In order to make the success of this petition more likely Mead handed over the presidency of the organization to another prisoner more palatable to the administration. He himself had a new priority: escape.

- [1] Morning Due (Seattle, WA), vol. 2, issue 3, may-june '76, p.14.
- [2] John McCoy, Concrete Mama: Prison Profiles from Walla Walla, University of Missouri Press (Columbia, MO: 1981), p. 136
- [3] Johnson lost face he never regained. Little over a year later he was ferociously stabbed by Agtuca and Gilcrist while being blown a “nose hit”—marijuana smoke passed from one party’s lungs into another’s via a tightly rolled tube of paper. The assassination attempt was part of a power changeover that began with the incident provoked by Mead in the ISU. Johnson, however, was so physically domineering that, after being stabbed 32 times, he snatched the two shanks away from his assailants and chased them off the tier.

Over twenty years later Johnson was profiled by Jim Brunner in The Stranger. The account contains multiple factual inaccuracies and is infused with a naïve reading of Johnson’s character: “Life Sentence,” September 17, '98, pp. 10-15; 17-19.
- [4] An account to their visit with MAS by two women from Women Out Now is printed as “Men Against Sexism” Through the Looking Glass (Seattle, WA), v.2, #10, December '77.
- [5] “Walla Walla Hassle,” Northwest Passage (Seattle, WA), October 3-24, '77, p.11
- [6] “In Walla Walla: Prison split in gay dispute,” The Oregonian (Portland, OR), November 15, '77.

commodity like drugs and sex: a bunk must be bought with contraband or, if the inmate was broke and inexperienced at other forms of hustling, sexual favors. And once one started putting out, a pimp would step in.

To disrupt this process MAS, inspired by the outside movement against domestic violence, established “safe cells,” in which particularly vulnerable new inmates or refugees from pimps and dominators could reside. Supporters from Seattle’s prisoners’ rights and queer communities helped raise funds to pay for cells, which MAS bought from other prisoners. MAS members met prisoners on “the chain”—the line from the bus to processing—and took aside the ones who seemed to meet the criteria of exploiters. They explained the situation to newcomers, and, if the person so desired, gave him a cell until he could be absorbed into the prison population from a position of greater security.

MAS met in the PJC’s office until the PJC refused to back MAS in their campaign against recalcitrant rapists, at which point the queer men’s organization stalked out into the cold.

Without housing MAS was forced to meet on the “breezeway,” a roofed walk way lined with chain-link fencing between a cellblock and a mess hall. All the unemployed hung out there: it was where the institution’s black market—clothing, drugs, sex—convened. One portion of the path was known as “Blood Alley” due to the violent disputes which constantly erupted there; blotches on the concrete and the prevalence of scars and mutilations among the alley’s denizens served as reminders.

One island of beauty existed in the prison. It was “Lifers’ Park,” an emerald of manicured grass and carefully cultivated flowers controlled by the Lifers’ Club. The Lifers’ Club was run by a black ex-boxer named Tommy Thomas and his two white lieutenants. Thomas liked to have sexual relations with men and considered himself politically progressive: on one occasion he let it be known that he fancied himself the second coming of George Jackson. Mead didn’t think so highly of him, but he did trust him enough to collaborate. As many MAS members were lifers anyway, MAS began meeting in the Lifers’ Club. They invited in their own guests from outside the prison. For special visitors they were able to make use of a sound proof room with a bed in it in the downstairs of the Club’s two storey building.

MAS members replaced officers in the Lifers’ Club who were released to the streets or transferred to other institutions. Mead became Treasurer, and Atteberry, Harp, and LaRue were all on the organization’s Executive Board. They were conscientious caretakers. They implemented a candy sales program which put money in the Club’s coffers. Decisions on spending the proceeds were made democratically—members voted to buy a foosball and a pool table and made other improvements to the building and garden. They also initiated a letter writing campaign to legislators in which lifers expressed their desire for sentencing reform.

problems were confined to their cells 23 hours a day. The ISU was located in a stand-alone red brick cellblock which convicts called “Big Red.”

Mead’s reputation preceded him. Warden Bobby J. Rhay, overseer of the institution for a generation, had read Mead’s dossier: a burglar and armed robber who had organized prisoner work strikes during previous bids; a self-proclaimed “revolutionary” who, on his last stint in the free world, co-founded the communist “urban guerrilla” organization “the George Jackson Brigade.” It was with this group, named after a prisoner martyr responsible for the deaths of several guards, that Mead placed a pipebomb by the desk of the Deputy Director of the Washington Department of Corrections (DoC) little over a year earlier. Rhay was not comforted by the fact that the bomb was timed to detonate so as not to injure anyone. Contrary to standard procedure he ordered that Mead be placed in the ISU, not for anything he had done, but for what he had shown himself prone to do. One sergeant commented to a reporter from the Walla Walla Union Bulletin: “Any GJB member is going to be ad-segged right off the git-go.”[2]

Mead submitted to the degrading induction ritual along with a younger, more slightly built, prisoner. They ignored each other, caught up in their individual humiliations.

“Remove your clothing.” One guard peered into their mouths and ears as others observed lazily. “Lift your sac.” Another inspection. “Turn and spread ‘em.”

Mead’s cell was disgusting. The walls were painted a putrid green and crusted in fecal matter and mucus. The painted aluminum sink-toilet unit was chipped and emanates the acrid scent of stale urine.

“Guard!” Mead shouted ineffectually. “I want a different cell!”

There was traffic on the tier that evening as certain inmates, briefly permitted out of their cells, made social calls. An inmate with long brown hair and a beard stopped by Mead’s cell. He was a little younger than Mead, similarly built but more powerfully filled out.

“My name’s Danny Atteberry,” he introduced. “Me and a couple other guys are in here for takin’ over the joint on New Year’s ‘74. I know what you’re in for and I know the Brigade. It’s good work you done. The others of us in here are Joe Green and Mark LaRue.” Danny paused, then confided, peering into Mead’s eyes, “I guess you could say Carl Harp was involved too.”

Mead knew exactly who Danny was. Directly after being shunted off to the ISU for his role in the takeover, Atteberry had clandestinely sent an appeal for help out of the penitentiary. It came into Mead’s hands and, after canvassing Seattle’s counter-cultural community for aid without result, he decided that

some propagandistic direct action could be useful. He formed the Brigade and bombed the Department of Corrections.

Mead didn't recognize Green's name, but he had met LaRue in the King County Jail after his own arrest. LaRue had passed him an unsolicited escape plan which a guard intercepted—Mead was quickly placed in disciplinary segregation and his own prospect for illegal release, which did not involve LaRue, was thwarted.

Harp impressed Mead even more negatively than the bumbling LaRue. He was incarcerated after randomly firing at drivers on a freeway—killing one and injuring another—and brutally raping two young girls. When Mead first met him, several years earlier, Harp claimed to be a “political prisoner.” Mead was disgusted.

“I'm pleased to meet you,” Mead declared.

A couple hours later things turned ugly. The cell next to Mead's housed the inmate with whom he was inducted. A rat pack of convicts congregated in front of the cell with the obvious intention of raping its occupant. Mead sprung from the bunk on which he'd been reclining and watched, stupefied, as the scene unfolded.

The officer in the control booth at the end of the tier cracked an ingratiating smile at the menacing convicts and began cranking the mechanical wheel which opened the kid's cell door. These particular prisoners weren't people to cross, even for an outside employee. Curtis Johnson was the leader of the pack. He was a middleweight Northwest Golden Glove champion and, at least until he was slammed into the ISU for murdering another prisoner earlier in the year, the only black in the prison's otherwise white supremacist Bikers Club. He was accompanied by Kenny Agtuca, a small and wiry Filipino-American who radiated danger, and Al Gilcrist, a hulking white inmate whose physique fit more conventional definitions of “muscle.” The kid, terrified, grabbed a book and jammed it between the bars and the wall, preventing the door from opening. Members of the pack tried to snatch the book from him, but the kid snapped it back. The guard cranked the door again, and the kid jammed the book back between the bars and the wall. Johnson went for a pitcher of hot water to throw on the kid, but the scalding was ineffective: a couple trips to the faucet later the standoff continued.

Mead's first reaction was disbelief. ‘What is this place? What is happening to me?’ He witnessed the circling of the sexual target hysterically. He wanted to shout out at the perpetrators: “Stop, you villains!” or something equally chivalrous and ridiculous, but couldn't quiet the fear: ‘If I stand up for the kid the pack might come for me!’

Mead had had his own experience with sexual assault. When he was nine, living in the projects in LA, he and a friend were raped. The two boys had

This campaign was part and parcel of politicized ideas on gayness Mead had been developing since the early '70s, when he began to conceive of male homosexuality as a means of confronting patriarchal oppression. Mead came out to himself concurrent with his conversion to communism; in creating an unorthodox line asserting the “correctness” of homosexuality, he was making an ideology with which he could comply. It also worked as a pick-up line with others in the political community. “Men need to look to one another to fulfill our emotional and sexual needs instead of continually draining women,” Mead once asserted with conviction to Bruce Seidel, the man with whom he co-founded the Brigade. Seidel agreed, but the two were unable to fulfill one another's needs in this regard before Seidel was killed in the Brigade's first ill-fated attempt at bank robbery. In an interview with *The Oregonian* he contended gayness wasn't just about sexual preference, but promoting a desire to develop bonds of affection and understanding among fellow prisoners. “Here you're jammed together. You have to bind up to have buddies. There's a lot of love in here, but men don't give it expression.” [6]

To create a place for love, coercion and fear must first be vanquished. Initially MAS only counseled and comforted victims who had made their escape from their tormenters, but prompted by ravages inflicted on members' consciences, the organization soon assumed the role of saviors of the abused.

The group's first crisis came when a young inmate arrived at the institution and was promptly carried off to a cell and gang raped. The perpetrators then sold their victim to the inhabitants of a different cell. As the product was the whole person, not simply their services, the price—\$300—was significantly higher than a carton of cigarettes. Mead and company, for the first time, felt prepared to intervene. Using a combination of bluff and bluster, dumb luck and moral persuasion, they extracted the victim from his assailants.

Instead of winning the respect of other convicts, this move made MAS members pariahs. The young inmate was a convicted pedophile—the absolute lowest category in the pecking order. “What are you doin'?!” one inmate demanded, infuriated. “How can you take the side of a kiddie fucker over stand-up cons?”

“It's the principle,” Mead insisted. “You can't buy and sell people, no matter who they are.” But principles and moral suasion weren't particularly powerful with this crowd, which was accustomed to getting their pleasure at the cost of others'.

Once they had freed the inmate from sexual slavery, MAS needed to provide him with a safe cell so that he would not be abducted again; they encountered the same situation with others who came to them in flight from abusive relationships. The housing situation at the Washington State Penitentiary made this a difficult problem to solve. New inmates were assigned cells by the administration but could only stay in them for a few days before being ejected by the cell's “owner,” a powerful prisoner resident. Housing was a black market

In the summer of 1977, MAS made contact with the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), a religious organization for gays based in Los Angeles which claimed 30,000 to 40,000 members. Like many groups committed to social justice at the time, work with prisoners had become an integral part of their mission. John Rowe, an MCC chaplain, served on the National Board of Institutional Services. His only duty was to minister to the institutionalized population of Washington.

On Monday, September 12th, Reverend Rowe came to WSP for the first time and convened a special worship service which was attended by approximately 20 prisoners. In an interview with a counter-cultural paper after the service, he stressed that MCC's programs were open to all sexual orientations: "We are not about to imitate the bigoted exclusiveness so commonly evidenced by most churches to we who are gay... The service held at the 'Walls' bore this out for it was attended by not only our gay and bisexual brothers, but also others who feel deeply about the dignity of all humans." [5]

On the 13th Rowe came in for a meeting with Men Against Sexism, but after two hours was asked to leave the chapel by the Protestant preacher Reverend Gerald Jacobson. In response to Jacobson's concerns, a guard advised Rowe: "You were cleared improperly. Your visit is now over."

Mead, a staunch Marxist-Leninist, included a steady expansion of rights as part of his interpretation of correct communism—economic rights as well as what he called "the standard bourgeois ones," like freedom of religion. He would fight for gays' right to worship with whom they please, and prepared with a clash with the Protestant preacher.

The following Sunday a prisoner ran up to Mead and exclaimed "Jacobson's gonna give a sermon on the evils of homosexuality! He's attacking MCC!" Mead called together runners and instructed them: "Tell everyone to attend the Protestant services, and to wear their Sunday best!" The runners went to every tier.

Mead entered the chapel to a delightful spectacle. Thirty-some queers filled the pews decked out in colorful drag. Thirty was a substantial number, as the church was primarily attended by an insignificant gaggle of protective custody cases and child molesters. Mead imagined that the presence of so many deviants would deter the preacher from his tirade, but Jacobson lit into it regardless: "There is a sacred bond between man and woman which is sanctified before the eyes of God in the act of marriage. Sexual contact outside of the sacred union between a man and a woman is a sin and..." Mead stood, interrupting, and proclaimed "You are persecuting gays and in doing so you are denying us our religious freedom and being un-Christian in your hostility to tolerance and diversity!" Other queers chimed in: "Yeah!" "Tell it!"

A few days after the incident Mead observed, 'Gays are holding their heads a little higher!' He took pride in the change.

been lured into the apartment of an older man by his comic collection and, once inside, smooth talk progressed into physical detainment and demands of compliance at knifepoint. After anally penetrating each boy, the man brandished a rifle and informed the children that he was an ex-convict who had nothing to lose by killing them if they told anyone of what he had done. Mead's friend informed his parents, and Mead was subjected by authorities to a painful rectal plumbing with a tongue depressor—a fruitful search for a semen sample—and an inexplicable two week detention in jail.

Then he was an innocent kid; by the time he reached WSP he was a committed revolutionary obligated to act in accordance with his ideals. As he sought the resolve to intervene, the guard tired of the game. The would-be rapists returned to their cells, unfulfilled and irritable.

Mead shared in the obvious relief of the would-be victim, but he was disgusted with himself for having even considered his own well-being in the face of this heinous crime. His opponents, no doubt, were formidable, but when had he been scared away from fulfilling his commitments? He resolved to right the situation—or, quite possibly, die trying.

The next day the cell doors opened for the one hour recreational period. Mead cleaned his cell, then sought out Atteberry, Greene, and LaRue. "What's going on? Why is this allowed here?" he demanded incredulously.

The trio shared his outrage but displayed an unwillingness to confront the pack members—the toughest cons in the toughest joint in the state. Harp listened in on the conversation. Though obviously intimidated by the prospect, he told Mead "I'll stand with you."

Before returning to his cell, Mead discussed prevailing sexual practices with an old timer.

"Don't get riled up," the convict counseled. "The kid's a punk. What else is he gonna do? He'd be givin' it away if no one was takin' it. People get done in here all the time. Sissies're bought and sold for cigarettes. It's just the way it is."

Mead disagreed sharply and chastised: "You're cannibalizing yourselves! How can prisoners ever improve our conditions when we act this way towards each other?! This has got to change!" He stalked back to his cell.

While Mead tussled with his conscience the takeover veterans and the old timer acted on theirs. They joined Agtuca and Gilcrist and discussed permissible behavior in the unit with them. Because of Mead's actions on behalf of Walla Walla inmates, his views bore weight, and his dismay with their conduct injured their pride. The pack members abandoned their leader. It was clear to Johnson who was responsible for this change. In the course of making friends and influencing people, Mead had made an enemy.

First thing the next morning Johnson, shirtless, came with a jumprope and planted himself in front of Mead's cell. He began skipping rapidly, crossing the rope back and forth in front of himself with contained grace. His muscles bulged and rippled; he was not only the peer of professional boxers, but an accomplished weightlifter as well. Johnson was successful in his goal: Mead was petrified. But he met and held his opponent's icy gaze.

Mead was permitted on to the tier next. He took the jumprope and stood in front of his opponent's cell. Clumsy with inexperience, he tripped, hit himself with the rope, but kept skipping. The message was clear: he would fight for his principles.

That afternoon Mead learned that Johnson had had his rec period changed so that the next day he and Mead would be on the tier at the same time. Mead spent the night in agony, barely sleeping, preparing, with the feeble tools permitted him by a religious commitment to communism, to depart this life.

The confrontation didn't come. The next day Johnson ignored him. When the rec period ended, Mead returned to his cell immeasurably lighter. A couple days later Johnson put in a request to be moved to another tier. [3]

Mead didn't understand. Harp explained it to him.

"You bombed the DoC in support of us prisoners. Johnson can't go up against you. He's already lost a lot of popularity by knifing that other inmate. He just had to get out."

Mead was immensely pleased: his words carried weight; those for whom he acted in solidarity would stand with him as well.

After a number of months in the ISU Mead and his likeminded companions were released into general population. They all celled together: Mead, Atteberry, Greene, and LaRue. It was a tight fit—four people in a cell designed for two—but cozy with camaraderie.

Unemployment was high in the densely packed institution, so Mead was not compelled to find an in-prison job. He used his time to orient, talking to other prisoners and getting a grip on the concerns of the dispossessed.

Rape was one of the most prominent issues. Sexual slavery was an engrained aspect of institutional culture. The process of enslavement went like this: an aggressive prisoner picked a vulnerable one who had just gotten off the bus. The victims were often young and sometimes openly gay, though effeminate straights, the elderly, and any others unable to defend themselves were in an equally perilous position. He informed his choice: "You'll turn tricks for me or I'll slit your fucking throat." The inductee now belonged to the pimp. The established convict pleased himself with his new charge for a couple days, then began renting him out. The newcomer's sexual availability was signified by lace sewn onto his sleeve. All that was needed from a customer was several

packs of cigarettes. The whore had no right to refuse anyone. All profits went to his owner. Several people chose suicide over this life. Few convicts took pride in the prevalence of the practice, but none—including the institution's despised and demoralized gays—showed any motivation to fight it.

Mead and his cellmates, in conjunction with other inmate leaders, decided to form the "Prison Justice Committee" (PJC) to improve conditions in the institution. The Seattle chapter of American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker organization with the longest-standing commitment to penal reform in the country, endorsed their efforts. Eddwynn Jordan, a black ISU vet, popular with prisoners and relatively unknown to the administration, was chairperson. Mead was vice chairperson.

The PJC was incorporated under the umbrella of the Resident Governance Counsel, the inmate advisory board, but from the beginning its attendance exceeded that of its parent organization. The PJC divided into subcommittees which concentrated on diverse facets of institutional life, from medical care to visiting policies. One subcommittee worked on legislative reform. Many included the input of outside activists, who were permitted to attend the organization's meetings. The PJC quickly became an independent organization provided with its own meeting space.

Mead insisted that the PJC not only combat institutional oppression and racism, but prisoners' sexism and homophobia as well. Gays joined in and, before long, Mead was chairing a subcommittee which bore the name he dreamt up in the ISU: Men Against Sexism (MAS). The idea was that, in abusing one another, men used sexist concepts such as equating openness with weakness. They insulted one another with misogynistic epithets: "bitch," "cunt," "pussy." Only by rooting out internalized sexism would men treat one another with respect.

To raise the consciousness of the rank and file, MAS started a monthly newsletter. It was called The Lady Finger, after the petite firecracker, in contrast to the crisis-prone clandestine publication The Bomb. The organization's twenty-odd members also watched progressive documentaries like "Men and Masculinity" and various anti-war films, which distributors sent in free of charge.

Bright cultural workers, such as members of Olympia's Theater of the Unemployed, a political satire troupe, and Seattle's feminist prisoners' rights organization Women Out Now, came to visit. MAS members played host, taking new friends, who had traveled five hours to see them, on tours of the prison, feeding them, and otherwise expressing their gratitude for this lifeline of contact. Many outsiders, for their part, were moved by the conditions of their companions' confinement, and deepened their commitment to stand beside them.[4]