

# *Just Another One of the Boys from Boonville*

*Jerome White-Bey #37479*



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*and The Road to Prison*

## The Road to Prison

Jerome's great great grandfather, Allen Parker, in all likelihood, was born a slave and died a free man. At the end of the civil war in 1865 Congress passed and President Lincoln signed into law the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the *Bill of Rights*: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime where the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction." Ninety years later, Jerome was born free: he will, however, considering the Amendment just quoted most probably die in slavery.

In 1887, twenty-two years after the end of slavery, when Jerome's great great grandfather was still a young man, the state of Missouri established the Missouri Training School (MTS) for Boys. Located in Boonville, a rural town west of St. Louis, its stated purpose was the reformation of delinquent boys between the ages of 10 and 17. It became, however, a storehouse where children whose parents could not control them were placed and forgotten. Behind its walls these "incorrigible" children became the object of draconian punishment including solitary confinement, beatings, hosing down and chaining. By the 1940's its reputation as a house of horrors was solidly established. Originally intended to house up to 350 youngsters, by 1967 it held over 600 youths. Cots were crowded together scant inches from each other forcing boys to sleep cheek by jowl with one another.

When youths were deemed troublesome to the point of incorrigibility they would be transferred to the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, an adult institution, or to the prison farm at Algoa, a facility for young adult offenders. As a priest told one boy who asked why he and several others were being transferred, "Because you're mess-ups." Though the majority of boys at MTS at any time where white, the majority of those transferred as "incorrigible" were black. That the majority of correctional officers were whites from largely white rural areas in Missouri cannot be discounted as a deciding factor in the decisions as to which youths were deemed "incorrigible" and hence subject to transfer.

By the late 1960s photographs of the deplorable crowding and squalid conditions began to appear in newspapers and legislators were

problem because I had to walk threw an all white neighborhood and, as soon as some white dudes spotted me, the foot race was on. The police would do this once or twice a month. The white dudes never caught me and I became so well known in the neighborhood that I had free passage as long as I did not go wandering around. I remember how my little walks became a joke to them so instead of chasing me through their neighborhood some would laugh me threw it. Even so, I made a friend or two along the way.

The police came up with something new called frame-ups or set-ups, so, at the age of 17, I was sitting in prison. Charged with a robbery I had nothing to do with, on a three year sentence, all certified and legal like. Every one of the boys from Boonville who were transferred with me on the first go around I ended up meeting again in prison. Not once did we, our families, lawyers, judges, news reporters, parole officers, etc., mention what had happened to us. The state of Missouri has been covering this up for way to long and I am seeking a closure to this nightmare; can you believe that from 1968 up until today I have never seen a Christmas, a birthday, a New Year, a Thanksgiving is society (i.e., the free world)?

This nightmare began when they illegally sent me to prison at thirteen years old. I ask you, where is the justice? I am 46 years old now and I have been unjustly condemned to sitting in the hole. I am classified as an undesirable even today because I continue to resist and oppose the injustice and inequities of this state system of social control. I plan to fight the injustice that was done to me until death seizes me or until justice prevails...

This is becoming extremely difficult for me for the pain is real and my mind keeps shutting down; it will have to do until I am able to go deeper into my past. (There is a lot more to tell but) that's a lot to ask; a lot of doors to open that I am not ready to deal with for the pain and suffering is great. I have to really sit down and put my all into this because it involves my revolutionary consciousness... I can see the need to have my experience out there. (consequently), my story will be continued...

In struggle,  
Jerome White-Bey

One day I saw one of my old friends. We started hanging out together but we were not getting into any trouble but I stopped going to school.

One day, as I was walking home, one of the Barry twins, who lived down the street from me on St. Vincent Street, offered me a ride in his car. He dropped me off at my house and we talked for a while. I went in the house, changed clothes and then hit the streets. As I went down the street, I saw Barry sitting in his car. He asked me did I want to go with him over to his girlfriend's house? I said, sure, why not? I never thought to question Barry about his car, so we got in his car and as soon as we turned onto a street named Grand, the police got in behind us with their light flashing. Then Barry told me this was not his car, it was stolen and, to add insult to injury, he jumped out of the car and left me holding the bag so to speak, for I forgot to run. The only thing that helped me some was that the police saw the driver jump out of the car and run. Since I refused to tell who the driver was, I was arrested for riding in a stolen car and, lo and behold, guess what happened? I found myself again being sent to Boonville in July of '71.

But this time things were different for I was the only one sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary, released and sent back to Boonville. Needless to say, the Boonville staff was not pleased to see me once again. Nevertheless, I was able to stay out of trouble: A Food Service Management training school course had been established allowing one to learn a trade in food services. I took the course and completed it.

One day I was called to the Boonville Administrative Building and when I arrived I was ordered to cuff up (be handcuffed) because I was being sent back to the Juvenile Center in St. Louis. I was not allowed to pack my personal belongings (my property) and to this day I never saw my personal property again. When I arrived at the Juvenile Center I learned that Boonville officials sent me back to the Center to have me certified as an adult. The Juvenile Court Judge, however, ordered that I be sent back to Boonville but the Boonville officials refused to accept me back. The Juvenile Court Judge then released me into the custody of my mother in January of '72.

I can remember growing up after I was released from Juvenile, how the police used to go out of their way to harass me. I can remember how the police used to catch me by myself and take me to the Third District Police Station on the south side of St. Louis and make me walk from there to my own neighborhood. This was a

obliged to scrutinize the facility. As a result, state officials decided to utilize smaller schools and to emphasize counseling. The children so unkindly stigmatized as "mess-ups" would hereafter be counseled rather than transferred. Nevertheless, the transfer of youths to adult institutions continued apace until 1971 when the Missouri Supreme Court, in response to a suit begun 5 years earlier, voted 5-4 to find so called "administrative transfer" unconstitutional.

The youths who left the MTS were markedly different from the boys they had been when they entered. Brutalized in such a manner and to such an extent as they had been at Boonville, the paths their lives would now take were nearly entirely determined for them: if they had received brutality for no reason they would dispense it in the same manner. It is, as Jerome expresses it later, as if they had been bred for prison. Most of them returned to the prison system and remained there until they died or were released for perhaps a few years only to return once again.

The MTS at Boonville may no longer exist as it did in the years prior to the mid 1970s but similar juvenile justice systems still exist in many states throughout the country. Today, in fact, we see an increasing amount of sentencing and/or transfer of "incorrigible" youth to adult facilities with all the brutalization such imprisonment implies. As in Missouri, those sentenced and/or transferred to adult facilities are largely youths of color and the poor. Thus we make of our youth fodder for the future wars they will necessarily wage for their own dignity and freedom.

As you read Jerome's account of his time at Boonville you will see first and foremost that he has never relinquished his dignity nor his freedom to think for himself. Given what he has been through, what he is presently living and the future he undoubtedly faces, one can only respect his courage. He has not bowed to what are apparently unbeatable odds. Nor will he.



# Just Another One of the Boys from Boonville

Jerome White-Bey

When I was growing up I was looked upon as a problem child for I was always in and out of the juvenile center. We lived on the south side of St. Louis; I can remember how I used to get into fights in school every day. I never started them but I was always the one blamed. My mother and grandmother were always there for me, the family unit was in place.

I recall that, in 1967, I ran away from home to hang out with my friends who were the bad boys of the neighborhood. I began to love the street life; there were no adults around to tell you what to do or not to do; we stole what ever we wanted or needed. One day my mother caught me and took me back home. I ran away again. The police caught me breaking into someone's house and I was taken to the juvenile center. They called my mother but when she got there she told the juvenile authorities to keep me for a while as she was having problems with me. I kept running away from home for no sound reasons, I was always getting into fights in school and if they kept me maybe it would teach me a lesson.

My mother, father, grandmother and grandfather all-visited me while I was in jail. After about four months my juvenile officer told my mother she would take me home if she wanted to, so I went home. I can remember how happy everyone was to see me and how nice everyone was to me. However, in 1968 I ran away from home again. The police caught me and turned me over to juvenile court. In 1969 the court sent me to the Missouri Training School for Boys in Boonville. That is how I became one of the boys from Boonville. There at Boonville I also began to get the same reputation as a troublemaker, a bad boy, an undesirable no one could control.

I was always into trouble at Boonville because the staff was extremely racist. I had never experienced racism until I was sent to Boonville. The first time I was called a nigger was at Boonville -- by a staff member named Mr. Carmichael. Every weekend it was almost a ritual that I had to fight the duke of the dormitory or another kid there. One day while I was drinking water in the fields digging up potatoes, Mr. Foster, the head man over us, walked up to me and kicked me in

the ass and said, "Nigger boy, get back to work." I lost all control of myself and rushed toward him. I remember knocking him to the ground then I was put in the hole. That was my first time in the hole. Then one day they came and got about six of us and drove us to Jefferson City to the Missouri State Penitentiary. Of the boys, Gary (Fox) Barber, came back to prison and he was killed here by another prisoner in 1986. One other boy, Earl Davis, and I are the only ones alive; Earl is a minister somewhere -- but he to came back to prison.

At the age of thirteen I was sitting in a prison cell called H-Hall crying my head off; I was scared to death. I remember receiving little love notes and candy in H-Hall. I remember telling the other boys that we all have to stick together no matter what. In November of 1969, we were sent to Algoa. Now, Algoa was extremely hard for me because the older prisoners used to always jump on me asking for sex, trying to make a punk out of me and I had to fight each and every day. The guards were of no use to any of us. One day I was put in the hole for talking while in line. I remember beating on the door complaining that my cell was cold. The guards sprayed me with the water hoses and then opened the windows. After a month I was released from the hole.

I'd been sent to Jefferson City in August or September of 1969, then to Algoa at the first week of September, 1970; I can remember the guards coming into my cell beating me with sticks because I would not stop hollering and pleading for help. One day I was released out of the hole, then the following week a lawyer came to see us and asked us if we wanted to go home. We all said yes; we were told to sign some papers and the following week we were put on a bus and sent back to St. Louis. We had not committed any crime, we were given no reason why we'd been sent to Jefferson City.

I have always believed that this horrifying experience is the sole reason that today I am sitting in prison where I have now been for 24 years. Since I understand things much better today I can clearly see now that I was bred for prison life the way on breeds cows, horses, pigs or dogs and as it was then it is now.

As I recall, after my release from Algoa in February of '71 I mostly stayed around the house and enrolled myself back into a school with the help of a juvenile case worker whose name was Mr. Thomas. Mr. Thomas was real cool, I liked him a lot. I used to have to report to him once a week. I was enrolled in Southwest High GED classes.