



“MENARD State Prison is a place where people are discarded. It is well designed for the purpose. Located in a remote corner of southwest Illinois, it lies like a fat gray rat at the bottom of a hill overlooking the Mississippi River,” as described in an article, “Inside Menard State Penitentiary,” written by Gary Adkins. Shown above is a rendering of the main entrance to the Administration Building of Menard Penitentiary (courtesy of Lake County Ill. Museum, Curt Teich & Co. Postcard Archives, 1930).

Menard Penitentiary

It was seven o’clock in the morning on Wednesday, August 11, 2004 when Helen and I pulled out of her driveway and headed for Menard Penitentiary. The morning sky was a resplendent mix of orange, yellow, and red. Helen suggested I grab the disposable camera from the glove box and snap a picture—it was the last shot left on the roll.

As we merged off of old Route 66 onto I-55, I began studying the questions I’d prepared for Michael Drabing. We were slightly paranoid about being followed when we left Lincoln, but forty-five minutes into the drive we began to relax. I’d brought along a tape recorder to record the highlights of my visit with Drabing on the return trip. My habit was to document information while it was fresh in my mind. I also kept a daily journal and was religious about my entries.

After a few hours, we arrived in the town of Chester, the home of American cartoon icon “Popeye.” Up ahead, I spotted a towering bronze statue of the “Sailor Man,” and I kiddingly suggested to Helen that we stop somewhere so I could load up on some spinach before meeting with Drabing.

We breezed through Chester, and the road began snaking downhill through trees and limestone bluffs towards the banks of the Mississippi. I began to feel a twinge of queasiness when we spotted a group of inmates in striped garb performing some kind of work detail along the river’s edge. It was only a matter of time before I’d be entering Illinois’ largest maximum-security prison to meet with the man who’d considered killing my family twenty-eight years earlier. I had a feeling of impending doom, and my greatest concern was leaving the prison alive. I took a deep breath.

Off to our right, a sign appeared stating, “Unauthorized Entry Is Forbidden - Violators Will Be Prosecuted.” We rounded a curve, and THERE IT WAS: Menard Penitentiary, the second oldest correctional facility in Illinois.

I was awestruck. “Holy shit, Helen, would you look at that!”

“Oh . . . my . . . God,” she responded, stretching out each word.

“I don’t know if I can go in there,” I fretted.

“Oh, yes you can . . . and you’ll be just fine.”

I muttered, “Son-of-a-bitch.”

We reached the front of the prison and surveyed the nearby parking lot. I was becoming increasingly more nervous. I looked around. “I wonder where I’m supposed to go?”

Helen suggested, “Let’s park first, and maybe we can find somebody who can tell us.”

We pulled into a spot facing a prison wall and Helen shut off the engine. We could hear men yelling from behind the wall, which apparently enclosed a prison yard in front of the building opposite us. The shouting was intimidating and not something I needed to hear at the time.

I gazed upward at some barred windows and said, “I wonder if Drabing’s watching for me.”

Helen ignored my comment. She looked through the back passenger window. “I’ll bet *she* knows what to do.”

A woman with two small children had just gotten out of a car parked nearby. Helen got out and took some long strides over to her. They spoke briefly, then Helen came back and narrated, “She said you have to go into the gatehouse to sign in and fill out some paperwork.”

“Right, I’m supposed to give them my social security number and driver’s license.” I glanced to my right. “So, I need to walk back over there, then, huh?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to walk. I’ll drive you over there, and then I’ll go into Chester and look around for a bit.”

The thought of her leaving the prison grounds made me feel extremely insecure. Once inside that hellhole, I would be at the mercy of my own destiny. I felt it would be better if Helen remained in the parking lot while I was inside with Drabing, but I didn’t say anything.

We drove over to the gatehouse and stopped in front of the steps leading to the door.

I looked at Helen, “Well,” I exhaled, “it’s been nice knowin’ you.”

She reassured, “You’ll be fine.”

“I should be done by three o’clock, so just make sure you’re back here by then because I’ll probably come flying out of there like a bat outta hell.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll be back before that.”

“Good. Okay then . . . here I go.”

“Good luck,” she said in a serious tone.

“Thanks,” I replied with dread. “Say some prayers for me.”

“I will.”

I entered the gatehouse and approached a man in uniform standing behind a large wrap-around counter. “Hello. I’m here to visit an inmate. I guess I’m supposed to fill out some paperwork, and you also need my social security number and driver’s license, don’t you?”

He handed me a clipboard. “Here . . . go ahead and write down your name, the name of the inmate you’re meeting with, and then fill in the time. You’ll also need to sign out and note the time when you leave.”

I wrote down the time (approximately 11:05 a.m.), my name and Drabing’s, and handed him my driver’s license and social security card.

He instructed, "You'll want to put your things in a locker. The only jewelry you're allowed to wear is your watch . . . and your rings are okay. You'll have to remove your necklace."

I presumed the removal of my necklace was to prevent Drabing from choking me.

The man walked over to a locker and pulled out the key. "You can put this key in your pocket and take it with you."

"Okay, thanks." I examined the key and considered its potential use as a weapon should I be attacked, but it was far too small to be of any help. I asked the man, "Since it's noontime, I'm assuming the inmate I'm meeting with might be hungry. Will there be food offered, or is there a cafeteria?"

"There are some vending machines available with a pretty good selection of drinks and sandwiches. You'll need to purchase a vending card. You can't take any money with you either."

We walked over to a vending machine along the wall.

He stated, "You can decide how much money you want to spend, and the card will be good for that amount. If you don't use up all the money on your card, you can use it again the next time you come back."

I fought back my urge to laugh.

He walked away and left me alone to decide how much I wanted to spend. I had no idea how hungry Drabing might be. As for myself, I had no appetite. The idea that I was going to be doing lunch with him was a mind-blower. I began to feel overwhelmed again, and I just stood there staring at the machine. I opened my wallet. I had four bills: two ones, a ten, and a twenty.

A woman, who looked to be in her mid-fifties, walked up beside me and offered, "Do you need some help?"

"Yeah, thanks. I've never used this machine before."

She showed me how it worked.

I thought out loud, "I wonder if twelve dollars will be enough?"

The woman answered, "Depends on how hungry he is. The food's pretty expensive."

I remembered Drabing as a big guy, so I felt it would be better to have extra money on the card than not to have enough to buy him what he wanted. The last thing I wanted was to seem like a cheapskate, yet I didn't want to appear *rich* either. After some consideration, I fed the machine thirty bucks and hung on to my two remaining one-dollar bills. The machine gobbled up my cash and spit out a hard plastic card the size of a credit card.

I turned around, and the woman was gone. I was disappointed because she'd been helpful and had made me feel more at ease. I walked back over to my locker and put my things (which included my cell phone and choke chain) inside and locked it up. I suddenly felt naked without my purse and defenseless without my cell phone—my lifeline to the outside world.

I walked over to the same guy behind the counter and inquired, "What do I do next?"

"You walk up those steps over there, go down the hallway, and then you'll turn left. Someone will meet you there. You'll be searched before you go into the prison."

I did as directed and was immediately met by a woman with a sensor wand. She held it up, pointed to a specific spot and ordered, "You'll need to stand right here."

She seemed to be a no-nonsense gal.

She questioned, "Are you wearing a bra with an underwire?"

I was not prepared for her question, "Uh, yes I am, as a matter of fact."

She looked somewhat disgusted.

I apologized, "Sorry, no one told me what type of bra I could or couldn't wear."

The wand sounded off as it detected the wire, and then she passed it over my other body parts.