A man and the world can change in 41 years

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The high sheriff of Tensas Parish is the doctors at East Louisiana State Hospital to know just what a cunning man he had delivered to them on June 20, 1949.

Because the next week, on June 29, Sheriff E.D. Coleman wrote the superintendent of the hospital to warn that he considered James Robertson "one of the most cold-blooded, brutal, fearless and one of the shrewdest criminals I have encountered in my 40 years in criminal work."

At about the same time, a staff doctor at the state mental hospital compiled something else about Robertson.

After evaluating his patient's intelligence, the doctor gave Robertson an IQ score of 61 and labeled the man squarely within the "jow moronic group," at the perpetual mental age of "9 years and 1 month" — not exactly the stuff of which "shrewd" criminals are made.

Undaunted by either analysis, Robertson learned different trades in prison, learned to read and write, and except for a handful of disciplinary write-ups, spent a relatively uneventful, non-violent 41 years beyond bars, the last 29 years as a trusty.

Robertson, in fact, spent more time in Angola than any man in the state's history.

At 63, a free man now for the first time since Harry Truman was in his first term, Robertson misses a lot, looks forward to a lot, and looks back reluctantly.

Despite the early prognosis from the sheriff and the mental hospital psychiatrist, Robertson is obviously no moron, and his prison record indicates, as does a 518-page sentence that runs for 41 years, he has been neither violent nor bloodthirsty.

He still maintains he never raped a white woman and he was the victim of race and bigotry in Tensas Parish. If Robertson is telling the truth, it's a tale he's repeated a lot of ways.

He's lying, he said, and he still did more time than any of the murderers or child abusers or armed robbers who came and went while he stayed behind. He claims almost unable to comprehend that he spent so many years in prison.

He illustrates: During the early 1960s, Robertson met a man at Angola known as "Two Life Bob," because he was serving two life sentences plus 40 years.

"He say, let me tell you something. He say, I got two lives and 40 years. He say, I'm going home next year. I say, with two lives and 40 years you going home next year? He say, I'm going home next year. I say, if you can go home with two lives and 40 years, I know I ought to go home with one life. I just had got there."

At Angola, at the dead end of La. 65, the 1960s passed James Robertson by. The 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s passed. What he saw of the world, he saw on television. The Korean War, the Vietnam War, spray deodorant, leisure suits, men on the moon, Monday Night Football, McDonald's, assassinations, radial
tires, integration, Teletype, all went by like a dream from another universe.

He worked hard in the fields, in the factories of the prison.

Now he works for his cousin during the day doing manual labor and walks a beat at a grocery store as a uniformed security guard at night.

He also does some work for his sponsor, circus agent Robert Steege Sr. And for at least part of the time he has left, he'd like to tell kids about prison.

"I would let them know what the place looks like and I'd let them know it's not a place for them. I would let them know that they wouldn't want to go there. Because you got to be a man to go there and we got a lot of youngsters, not no man. They proclaim to be, but they not a man and it take a man to stay there."

He said his story could maybe stop some kids from going to prison.

"I got some little cousins over there and I'm talking to them about the place and I constantly talk to them because I wouldn't want them to fall into the same place that I just come from."

To Robertson, the lesson was clear.

"Whether you guilty of a crime, if you go to the penitentiary, you guilty of the crime. Because if you went, you guilty. You didn't do the crime, but once you go to do time for the crime and they done put you there, it's just like you done done it. They say you did it and you can't say you didn't do it because you don't have no word. Your word is nothing, because I know in my case I done 41 years for nothing.

In my case I done 41 years for nothing and it hurt me. But when I went to the penitentiary, I just got on my knees and asked God to help me with the time and God helped me with that time."

He is grateful he was finally set free, to come back into society, to try to make his society know that I could live out here like a human being. I could get a job and work like a person and take care of myself and help others.

This is what I want to do from here on.

Robertson knows he's missed a lot. One of the things he missed was shrimp gumbo, which he had when he was released. Another of the things he's missed was his youth. That he can't make up, he said.

And he knows a lot, a "terrible lot," has changed. Besides the obvious things, the superficial changes in the last 41 years, Robertson notices one thing that has changed the most.

"I was sitting over there at my cousin's house yesterday, where we fixing up where we going to move... and right across the road from a school, all my little cousins they goes there and some white kids go there, too. And I just sat out on the front porch yesterday and I just looked at them, how they played together, how successful they acted with another. They're not acting, they don't want to play with you, because they mingle together. I was standing there looking at them, you know, and I liked the way, I seen. I got kinfolks over there, too, and all of them is mingled together.

"I was just looking at them little white kids and black kids playing together. And it's just something wonderful, I look at this. That couldn't happen when I was coming up. This is what I'm saying, how it's changed, you know, and it makes you feel a lot better, you know, looking at things that have changed like this here."