Inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary’s Camp H load their belongings into pickup trucks on Thursday as they move to Angola’s Main Prison complex.

Camp H inmates have mixed feelings on closure

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ANGOLA — A piece of history was turned over to a purple martin colony Thursday when Louisiana State Penitentiary officials closed Camp H.

Someone posted a discount store “For Sale” sign on the camp’s entrance road, adding the words, “As Is.”

Corrections Secretary Richard Stalder decided earlier this year to close the 325-man satellite prison and its architectural twin, Camp A, rather than spend an estimated $12 million to correct numerous fire code violations.

The camps were built in the late 1930s or early ’40s, although the exact completion dates remain elusive.

Security officers used almost every available vehicle on the prison farm to transfer the last 213 inmates and their personal belongings to their new home in the larger Main Prison complex.

The last group to leave — trusted inmates with coveted prison jobs — had mixed, or mostly negative, feelings about the move.

“When I first came to H, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be here,” said George Witherspoon, a legal counselor.

“Once I got here, I saw how relaxed it was. It’s the closest thing to true freedom in prison.”

Camp H had only a small area for “big stripe” (medium security) prisoners. Trusties didn’t have to be concerned with fences or “living under the gun,” Witherspoon said.

“When the move to Main Prison was rumored, I got a certain sense of depression, but after awhile, I just accepted it and got ready for the move,” he said.

Inmate John Nicolaus, assigned to Camp H as a trusty for five of his 19 years at Angola, said “most of the trusties have been ‘down’ 10 or 15 years. After that time, you establish yourself. Now you’re going back to a point where you have to start from scratch — prove yourself to the free people.”

Douglas “Swede” Dennis, an Angola veteran and staff writer for The Angolite, said the Camp H trusties moving to his “home” in Main Prison are losing the privilege of “being treated like an individual rather than just another sardine in the can.”

Dennis and Angolite editor Wilbert Rideau, also housed in Main Prison, said the security philosophy at
CONTINUED FROM 1B

Camp H represented the last vestige of "old Angola."

Years ago, "if a guy was a troublemaker, you gave him all the trouble he could handle. If a guy was not a troublemaker, you gave him all the latitude he could handle," Dennis said.

"The old breed (of guards), for all their brutality, either helped you or hurt you, based on how you conducted yourself," Rideau said.

"The difference is that you had more freedom of movement," inmate refrigeration mechanic Arnold Conner said. "It was a nice, relaxed place to do your time. It was one of the last places a person could feel like he was a trusty."

"If a person can go home, he can go home here because he's got a good job to do," said Maurice Robinson, assigned to Camp H in April 1972.

Security is not as relaxed at Main Prison, even for trustees, because of the sheer number of prisoners, about 2,300, Rideau said. "The numbers have always been intimidating. It's almost the size of two prisons."

Camp H assignments were not always coveted because it once held a large group of homosexual inmates, Rideau said. "It took a long time to live that reputation down."

The prison hospital once was located at Camp H. When state law allowed health officials to force tuberculosis patients to receive medication, some otherwise law-abiding citizens were sent to the prison hospital, Rideau added. "It has its place in state history."

Warden John Whitley said 120 Angola prisoners were moved to other state institutions Monday and Tuesday to make room for Camp H's inmates.

Sixty employees worked at the camp. Most are being transferred to other areas at Angola, while the remainder will be offered jobs at other prisons.

When Camps A and H are both closed, Angola will lose 87 sergeant and cadet slots, but 50 slots are open in other Angola units, Whitley said.

Inmate Arthur Gene Fisher said the Camp H trustees wanted to relocate an old plantation-style bell at Main Prison "as a symbol of us," but it's supposed to be polished and put on display at the prison administration building.

Guards used the bell to notify inmates of head counts, Fisher said. Shriill whistles are used in Main Prison.

Inmates also lost a special cow bell in the shuffle. It was installed in a dormitory shower, with a cord running through a hole in the wall to a commode. Inmates used the bell to signal an impending rush of hot water when they flushed the toilet.

"A major grabbed it," Fisher said.