‘Doing time’ can also mean doing work

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Gone are the days when all inmates did was make little rocks out of big ones.

Today, state prisoners are involved in a number of business ventures under the auspices of Louisiana Prison Enterprises, which is a division of the Department of Corrections.

Through the business operations, corrections officials hope to save taxpayer dollars on inmate incarcerations by producing goods and services needed by the prisoners and by reducing inmate idleness.

Prior to 1967, the DOC had a “loose organization of individual and farming operations,” according to Ross Maggio Jr., who in that year became the agriculture and industry coordinator under DOC Director David Wade.

The primary inmate enterprise then was sugarcane farming and milling, said Maggio, who this month is ending his career as warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

A few other operations were in business, Maggio said, including the license plate manufacturing plant, but “90 percent of our time and energy went into the cane operation.”

And, Maggio said, the director of that program was pressured to make profits.

Many of the inmates at Angola, which was and continues to be the headquarters of most prisoner businesses, did not work. By 1970, Maggio had eliminated sugarcane farming and put the inmates back to work.

“Back in the ’60s, you had a lot of criticism about making inmates work in the fields, but inmate idleness can be a prison’s biggest problem,” he said. “I worked to eliminate that. If you have a man who’s been hard at work all day, he’s too tired at night to make trouble. If you don’t channel the inmates in the direction you want, they’ll go in the direction they want. And that means trouble.”

Agriculture still plays a big role in prison enterprises, but it is not a moneymaker, and profits from LPE’s industrial ventures help subsidize them, according to Levern S. Meades, LPE’s deputy assistant secretary.

In a 1983 act, the Legislature abolished the Office of Agri-business and the appointive position of assistant secretary. The day-to-day affairs of the different businesses were transferred to the wardens at each institution. LPE also was created, and its objective is to act as business manager of the operations, Meades said.

Industrial operations managed by LPE include the license plate manufacturing plant at Angola; a mattress, broom and mop (See TIME, 10A)
factory at Angola; a sheet-metal fabrication plant at Angola; a print shop at Angola; a silk-screen and plastic sign shop at Angola; a light-garment factory at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel; a janitorial-products manufacturing plant at Hunt Correctional Center at St. Gabriel; and a heavy-garment factory at Louisiana Correctional and Industrial School at DeQuincy.

Agricultural industries include cash crops of soybeans, cotton and corn grown at Angola, along with vegetable crops for inmate consumption. Cattle and swine — some of which are used for inmate consumption and some of which are sold on the open market — also are raised and slaughtered at Angola. The prison also operates a feed mill there. At Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, a feeder lot is maintained for cattle, and inmates also run the slaughterhouse located in Wakefield. Inmates at DCI also grow vegetables for prison consumption.

Inmates also are employed in the dairy barn, said Angola's farm manager, Jerry Sharp. The herd is maintained at St. Gabriel, Leesville, and Bogalusa. The prison's fish farms are operated at either Bogalusa or at a facility near the State Penitentiary at Angola.

The newest venture of LPE is the license-plate plant, which is at Angola. The plant manufactures license plates for Louisiana, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. More than 1.4 million license plates are produced there each month.

The plant manufactures license plates for Louisiana, Puerto Rico and Guam. The two outside jobs were obtained through bids. Probably the second most profitable prison industry and one which shows great potential for growth is the janitorial-supplies operation at Hunt.

Kozeliask said 33 different products are made in the plant by the 25 inmates employed there. Primarily, the plant produces bar soaps, liquid soaps and powdered detergents.

In 1983, some 35,000 blue work shirts, 35,000 towels, 20,000 wash cloths, 30,000 sheets and 10,000 pillowcases were produced by the 48 inmates working in the garment factory at LCIT in St. Gabriel, Kozeliask said. At DeQuincy, 54,000 pairs of blue denim jeans were manufactured at a cost of $168 per pair, he said. Fifty-six inmates are employed in that plant, Kozeliask said.

The mattress, mop and brown factory at Angola burned in June. A new plant is being constructed, and officials said that production is down while operations are being conducted from other facilities. The new plant is expected to produce about 3,000 mattresses per year, Kozeliask said. He said LPE has done extensive testing to develop flame-retardant mattresses.

With the new mattress plant, LPE officials hope to get more business from other state and parish agencies. Twenty-six inmates operate the plant. The silk-screen and plastic-sign shops operated at Angola are growing prison businesses. The 15 inmates assigned there produce all types of decals, road signs and labels for state, parish and municipal agencies. The Angola print shop, employing 23 inmates, produces a great deal of custom work. The shop is run in conjunction with the Folkes Vocational-Technical School.

Presently, in addition to three inmate presses, one each for Straight and Low, and Hunt's Walk Talk — the business prints stationery, envelopes and a variety of other products — for that institution. Renovations are now under way at the dairy to meet health requirements that called for replacement of the 1.4 million dollars spent on the facility.