Freed man glories in 37 years of changes in world

Moreese Bickham is amused as he studies a display for an avant-garde minidress made of zippers in Oakland, Calif.

Former Louisiana inmate spends time with family, explores freedom

By MICHELLE LOCKE
Associated Press writer

Five thousand years after he lived and died, the "Ice Man" was freed from a glacier and thrust under the lights of a 20th-century laboratory.

After 37 years in prison, 14 of them on death row, Moreese Bickham thinks he may now know how that feels.

"I wasn't on ice but I was in a can and they opened the can and I crawled out," says Bickham, who at 78 is a free man again.

When Bickham went to prison, everybody liked his blackness in the South drank from "colored" water fountains, and trips to the moon were the stuff of science fiction, not science.

He resurfaced in an America where jet planes zip across the country in six hours, money spits out of sidewalk machines and a black man can run for president.

"It's wonderful to be out here," Bickham says. "I can't believe it."

Bickham was sent to prison in 1958 for the deaths of two deputies in a small town in Louisiana. Bickham, who is black, said the white deputies were Ku Klux Klansmen out to get him. Prosecutors called it an ambush.

After a trial that lasted 2 1/2 hours, Bickham was sentenced to die in one of the killings. He wasn't tried on the other. He got seven years of execution before his sentence was commuted to life in prison in 1973 after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

Seventeen years later, Bickham's cause was taken up in a radio documentary, "Tossing Away The Keys."

Last March, Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards cut Bickham's sentence to 75 years. Because of time off for good behavior and other sentence reductions, his time was up in January.

He emerged to a world turned upside-down.

Weeks after his release to Oakland, Calif., where he has been reunited with family, Bickham was still relishing his forays into a brave new world.

His first call on a cellular phone: "I heard tell of them, but I didn't know that you could call anywhere, anytime." His first jet flight: "I never thought I'd fly in a jet that fast."

On a recent stroll along Oakland's busy waterfront, some of the deeper changes in society were embodied in the multiethnic lunch crowd milling about.

"I had dreams seeing this. But I thought I'd be isolated somewhere and have to come out and start all over in progress," he says.

Even the mundane had the power to astound - 85-cent sodas and the intricacies of a multistory parking garage. "Boy, the man that invented this parking lot, he was on the ball," he said.

Perhaps the biggest changes in Bickham's world, though, are personal.

"When I first went in, I had only one daughter, now she's got eight children and they got 24 children. All that happened since I been locked up. It makes a man think. How in the world did all this happen and I've got to be away from it?"

But Bickham is far from bitter.

"I live through all this and come out with as much health as I got and the mind that I got, I'm so glad and happy and praising the Lord for it," he says.

"I don't want to go into the other world knowing that I could've straightened something up on this side and didn't do it," he says.

Bickham says that some people were surprised that he was still working at the age of 75. "I didn't feel good about it, you know... (I said) good people die while the no-good live forever, look like... he was a young man."

"The civil rights movement: I was watching that pretty regular. I appreciate what happened. But some way or another, it didn't work out after Mr. King got killed."

"The moon landing: It's kind of hard to believe it yet."

Often, the best source of news was young inmates fresh from the front lines of revolution, political, sexual and cultural.

"I'd get right in the middle with them, you know, and listen and learn things I never seen nor heard tell of," Bickham recalls.

"The elderly officers - aged 68 and 74 - worked part time in Mandeville, then a small town across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. Bickham maintains they came to get him after he argued with one outside a bar. He says he came out of his house holding an unloaded shotgun over his head and yelled to the officers it was empty. He says he got shot in the stomach in reply.

Bickham says he then loaded the gun and shot both officers before they could move in for the kill.

His lawyer, Michael Alcamo, got involved in the case in 1994 at the urging of his friend David Isa, who had produced the documentary about Bickham.

"I knew from the very first page of the trial transcript that there was something fundamentally wrong," Alcamo said. For one thing, prosecutors claimed Bickham was enraged..."
because one of the deputies had refused to give him a ride home.

"I just can't believe that a 41-year-old carpenter would have been so enraged as to form an intent to murder two deputies which would mean the end of his own life," Alcamo said.

Then he found that at least two jurors had not come from the jury pool, backing up stories he'd heard that the judge and a court officer had called on their friends to serve.

Bickham doesn't believe he got a fair trial, but he doesn't spend too much time on might-have-beens.

"The freest person in the world is the one that's satisfied with what they have," he says firmly.

For now, he's satisfied just to be free.

At 78, Bickham doesn't know how long he'll have to enjoy life on the outside, "but what little is it I think I want (to) live it out in peace, doing a few of the things I like, like going fishing."

His reunion with family has been sweet, even leading to a reconciliation with his wife, Ernestine. They had separated before he went to prison.

"It's kind of heartwarming that 38 years later he realized how much he loved the woman he married," Alcamo said.

Graying, lined, but moving like a man 10 years his junior, Bickham is happy for now to be able to "walk down the street with ... anybody you want to and feel comfortable."

He finds plenty to smile about in his new life — from the wiles of a great-grandchild bent on improving his toy collection to a store window display of an avant-garde dress made entirely of zippers.

Sometimes years of captivity re-assert themselves; he writes a letter and starts to list his convict number after his name.

Then he forgets he can seal it without having a guard check the contents.

Reading the Bible, a constant solace in prison, is still a comfort.

But his favorite passage has changed.

In his darkest hours, Bickham sometimes read Psalms 31 three times a day, savoring its mournful eloquence: "I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel."

Now, he turns to the happier cadence of Psalms 30 and its timeless promise that "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

"That's what I see now," he says, a smile illuminating his face. "I see joy."

"Morning's here."