Retired guard remembers rough times at Angola

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ANGOLA — From his porch, Capt. C.C. Dixon has a front-row seat for many of the happenings at the sprawling Louisiana State Penitentiary.

He can witness “death watches” that capital punishment proponents and opponents keep on the nights when an execution is scheduled.

Sometimes things would get real lively, like the night in 1982 when he heard a loud crash at the front gate, followed by gunshots and screams. Dixon hurried over to find one convict dead and another wounded.

The inmates tried to escape by kidnapping then-Warden Ross Maggio and Maggio’s mother, but the warden ran his truck into an iron post, grabbed a guard’s gun and began firing.

However, Dixon doesn’t usually pay much attention to the front gate just a stone’s throw from his porch.

Today, Angola is both a familiar home and an alien world to the 85-year-old retired security officer, who supervised, guarded and chased convicts during almost 40 years of a brutal era that many would like to forget.

Although his word was law and he controlled the guns, whips and chains that kept thousands of criminals locked up in squalid conditions, Dixon is, himself, a survivor.

He survived run-ins with dangerous, desperate criminals. He survived years of political intrigue and general neglect that prevented Louisiana from improving conditions at its largest prison.

He saw a succession of governors come and go.

“I don’t think they paid it (Angola) a damn bit of mind. They’d appoint somebody to run it and then forget it,” he said.

Dixon survived reform Gov. Sam Jones’ purge of top Angola officers in the 1940s, the loss of a job helping pave the route to Angola because someone said he “didn’t vote right.”

He came back in 1945, buying a piece of land near the front gate on which to build a home.

He survived the political and press attention that erupted, then faded, in the 1950s after a group of inmates slashed their heels to call attention to their plight.

He worked the cellblocks and ramshackle dormitories, guarded prisoners who plowed the rich farmland with mules, broke up bootlegging operations, dope rings and prison gangs, investigated murders, foiled escapes and ran the prison’s escapee chase team.

Along the way, he and his wife, Eugenia, reared three boys, two of whom rose to the rank of major at the prison. The third was a wildlife and fisheries agent.

Dixon’s grandson, Johnny Bert Dixon, is following in his grandfather’s footsteps as a member of Angola’s chase team.

Watching his grandson and a bloodhound trail four employees posing as escapees recently, Dixon said, “He’s got to be good. I took him out on chases when he was a kid. We didn’t have anything to do with the chase but we’d just go out and look for tracks.”

He also earned the respect of several generations of security officers who followed him.

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"He's respected by all of the old men," said Col. Billy Travis. "Even if they didn't work with him, they've heard stories about him.

"He's seen just about all of it," Travis added.

About the only thing Dixon missed was a 1971 inmate lawsuit that eventually forced drastic changes in prison conditions, changes that benefited inmates and employees alike.

Angola didn't even have a front gate until 1976 when Connie Conrad Dixon left a 40-acre Ascension Parish farm and walked out of the Tunica Hills to look for a job.

He walked from one camp to another until someone hired him as a night guard at $15 a month. His training was minimal.

Dixon said the captain at Camp A gave him an iron bar and a double-barreled L.C. Smith shotgun. "Boy, you've got to strike that iron," Dixon remembers him saying.

On the hour, Dixon would hit a piece of railroad track in his watchtower with the iron bar - 12 times at midnight, once at 1 a.m., and so on - just to let his two inmate guards know he wasn't sleeping.

Before dawn, Dixon would give his shotgun to an inmate guard and enter the camp unarmed to make the cooks dinner.

"I was the only free man (on duty) at night," he said. "But I didn't think anything of it, because the old inmate was standing there with both barrels cocked.'"

Of all the hardened criminals Dixon encountered, the notorious Charlie Frazier stands above the rest. "He was just a perfect criminal," Dixon said. "But everybody respected him. He'd kill a man quick.'"

Frazier arrived at Angola in 1933 with a life sentence. Within months, he and 11 other convicts blazed their way out of Camp E, killing three prison employees, including a captain.

Texas authorities soon caught up with Frazier and held him for armed robbery, but he eventually returned to Angola to face a murder charge for the captain's death. Years dragged by before he was convicted.

Dixon and another guard drew the job of driving Frazier to and from St. Francisville every day during one aborted trial.

"We had opened up a pistol club here, and I was considered the best shot, so I was the monkey with the gun," he said.

Frazier never said a word during any of the trips, but the convict broke down and started after the trial ended in a hung jury.

Dixon said his partner hushed him with a quick punch to the mouth.

Dixon later took over the Red Hat, a house of prostitution reserved for Angola's worst offenders, where Frazier maintained his silence around free people.

"One day we were out in the field, and a dove lit on my horse's back, about 50 yards away. I was a big shot, and I got my gun from the inmate guard and shot the dove off the horse," Dixon said.

A few minutes later, Dixon walked by Frazier, who looked up and said, "That's pretty good shooting."

"From that day on, he always had something to say to me," Dixon said.

Dixon also remembers another Angola alumnus, folk singer Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly.

"I'd hear him singing every night; 'Goodnight, freese, goodnight, freese.'"

Ledbetter worked in a "long line," cutting ditches, hoeing and other field work until an Angola officer formed a band to entertain his wife at night.

"The first time she heard him pick and sing, he got out of the field," Dixon said.

The practice of flogging inmates for violating prison rules flourished and died during Dixon's tenure. "I whipped a many of them," he conceded without reservation, but agreed the whippings got out of hand.

"When you're doing something, you always try to get a little pleasure out of it," Dixon said, explaining how some guards stepped over the line of human decency as it was drawn in Angola's rough and tumble world.

"I've seen men almost vomit the first time they tried it. Then after a while, they'd seem to delight in it. They'd have to get -- they'd have to get better at the job. That's what run it in the ground.

"If it had started with the right kind of supervision, it may have been all right," he said.

Dixon recalled having his arm broken in a fight with a convict who refused to work. "The mule-drawn plow one morning."

"The captain said, 'Water boy, bring the leather.' He tore his hide up. I got tired of looking at it. I mean he peeled that fowler."

Dixon said he interceded when the captain tried to send the inmate back to the field the next day. The convict's back, buttocks and legs were raw, he said.

Later, the warden asked why Dixon was wearing a cast on his arm. Dixon told him about the fight.

"Is that S.O.B. still living?" Dixon said the warden asked. "If he ain't got enough, I'll give him some more."

Later, after checking on the convict's condition, Dixon said the warden agreed with his assessment: "I think that's enough."

Escapes in Angola's early days were frequent, but an escapee gambled with his life by jumping his fence. No one asked questions if a convict surrendered meekly but a guard decided to kill him. Inmate guards had especially itchy trigger fingers, Dixon said.

"I never killed anyone in a chase. I might have slugged them around or kicked them, but I didn't believe killing them if they gave up. I believed that when a man gave up, you treated him right."

"I might've shot a man in the arm. That was the first time I ever shot a man," he said, explaining he and another guard both fired at a fleeing prisoner who refused orders to halt.

"One of us hit him in the arm. Anyhow, when that bullet hit him, he stopped."

Dixon settled back in his chair, retired his memories, and waited as life near Angola continued to play out in front of his porch.