PERSPECTIVES

SOLEDAD, REVISITED

By Jessica K. Feinstein '10

NINETY MILES SOUTH OF SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, BEYOND WHERE U.S. 101 MERGES with El Camino Real and the highway narrows to four lanes, a billboard seeks to lure truck drivers and motorists off the road. • "It's happening in Soledad." • It's an odd sign, immediately belied by the vistas surrounding it: flatlands, asparagus and lettuce fields, speckled with the bent figures of farm laborers. The occasional dust cloud billows here and there, obscuring the tractor creating it. Some way down the highway, an incongruous housing development protrudes out of the fields. In the middle distance, the Sierra de Salinas rises steeply from the floor of the Salinas Valley, overshadowing this moonscape.

This is Steinbeck's California. George and Lennie, the migrant field workers in *Of Mice and Men*, settled a "few miles south of Soledad"—the first line of the novella—to pursue their ultimately unsuccessful and tragic dream of an independent life.

One gets the immediate impression that not only is it not happening in Soledad but it has never been happening.

There are, however, two stops of note in Soledad: the aptly named Mission Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Our Lady of Solitude, circa 1791, and the inaptly named Correctional Training Facility, circa 1951, one of the many prisons that occupy remote towns and cities throughout my home state. These two landmarks are historical bookends; between them runs a particular strain of California's history. This is not the history of manifest destiny, land of recreation and opportunity, where the misfit becomes the mainstream. Rather, it is the underside of that sunny vision: about failed missions, about the gradual erosion of the rehabilitative spirit and the entrenchment of isolation.

A few miles north of Soledad is situated my destination on this trip, the Correctional Training Facility. Today, a fellow law student and I are scheduled to meet our client, a man named Alex. Alex is an inmate at Soledad serving 25 years to life under California's "three strikes" law. What we know of Alex consists of a collection of numbers: eight—the number of years he has served already in Soledad; thirteen—the number of past convictions on his record; zero—the number of violent offenses on his record; sixty-one—his current age; three—the number of strikes it takes to receive a minimum term of 25 years for possession of 29 milligrams of heroin—the equivalent of one cotton ball.

It is mid-morning, and the highway is mostly empty. We drive south past the Correctional Training Facility, past the "It's happening in Soledad" sign and the housing development, and exit to Soledad's main drag in search of breakfast. There are tacquerias and liquor stores, but no diners and few shoppers.

Sleepy from the drive, I stare out at the desolate landscape. I have been here before.

Every fourth-grade student in California learns about the Spanish missions, the beginning of the state's sparse history as an annex of the West. The missions form a chain of 21 outposts from San Diego to Sonoma, founded more than a century ago by Franciscan missionaries from Spain. Today, they are the locations of California's oldest cities. Each fourth-grader makes a report on one of the missions.

Fifteen years ago, in a classroom at Walter Hays Elementary School, just down the street from Stanford, by luck of the draw, I got unlucky number 13: Soledad, saddest and least successful of all the missions.

To help me with my research, my family took a trip to Soledad. A small, beige sign at an exit just south of Soledad's downtown advertised the mission. We followed a road away from the highway, farther and farther into the fields for an almost uncomfortably long period of time. Finally, considerably closer to the foothills of the mountains, we came upon a small, plain church, surrounded on all sides by fields and orchards. The parking lot was dirt.

To my dismay, we were soon informed that the neat little church was not, in fact, the mission but a 20th century replica. Someone directed us toward the front of the chapel to view the remnants of the original.

I remember standing before the melting adobe wall marking what remains of the authentic mission and being overwhelmed by that respectful yet eerie feeling that at-

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tends cemeteries. Only the outline of a building, a disintegrating mud ruin, stood between me and the oblivion of eternity.

"Such an alien place," my mother remarked. We were glad to leave Soledad.

YET BY WHATEVER twist of fate, I have returned to Soledad again.• Unlike Mission Soledad, marked by only a small historical site sign, the Correctional Training Facility, or CTF, has its very own "Correctional Facility" exit off 101. It's a dead-end exit, leading to a "conservation camp" (minimum security detention center), the new Salinas Valley State Prison, and the CTF.

Finished with breakfast, my friend and I drive back north on the highway and take the exit, proceeding past an unmanned guardhouse, sycamore trees, and staff buildings, until the prison reveals itself.

Created in response to Earl Warren's investigation of the state's outdated prison system, the facility was, in 1951, a "model" prison. Consisting of a series of interconnected rectangular buildings, five or six plain-faced replicas in a row, today the white stucco buildings look like mid-century military barracks, unmistakably institutional in character. According to the California Department of Corrections website, inside those squat buildings are housed some 6,667 inmates—more than twice the design capacity. A barbed-wire fence circumscribing the perimeter of the buildings is the clearest indication that the inhabitants of these barracks are not free to come and go.

We check in at the guardhouse and are soon escorted into the compound. Inside the electric gate, we walk past flower beds and rose bushes that line the concrete walkways. These, I think, are the most obvious vestiges of the prison's once utopian intentions.

As far as I can tell, the Correctional Training Facility does very little correcting or training. Although the website speaks of vocational and academic programs, inmates serving indeterminate sentences like Alex are placed at the bottom of long wait lists for programs, even such basic rehab services as Narcotics Anonymous. The onetime single-inmate cell no longer exists, as the system strains under an entire population of men behind bars. In such a system, a sentence of 25 to life translates into wasting as few extraneous resources as possible: The state has already deemed such inmates beyond the reaches of rehabilitation.

It was not an accident that the CTF was built a few miles from the ruins of a mission named for the solitude surrounding it. Isolation, wrote Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punishment*, is the first disciplinary principle around which the modern prison is organized. Alcatraz is surrounded by water; Soledad, by fields. Society thus safely exiles its miscreants. And, in a sense, the California missions were themselves intended as correctional facilities—stations for the recruitment and transformation of the native Indians from heathen hunter-gatherers to Catholic laborers.

And the mission baptism logbook amounted to a careful statistical record of souls saved. The missions saved many souls during their prosperous years, in the process transforming the California landscape.

California prisons keep detailed logs, too—of souls incarcerated: Each prisoner

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has a “C-file,” some larger than others, filled mostly with checked boxes and unintelligible handwriting. Alex has a large C-file. From the age of 29 to the age of 61 he has served multiple prison terms, totaling more than 21 years of incarceration.

We finally meet our client, Alex, in a small interview room inside one of the barrack-like buildings. The room is bare except for one desk and three chairs. There is one window, high above eye level, through which the noise of the prison yard filters.

ALEX WALKS INTO the room unhandcuffed, shakes our hands, and gives a slight nod of the head. His face is wrinkled but pleasant; his goatee is grey. He wears baggy blue state-issued pants and an oversized grey sweatshirt, through which the outline of his body appears surprisingly fragile. He recently had hip surgery, so we chat about his health for a while. Although criminal activity is a pastime of youth, our prisons today are filled with old men.

When he was a young man, Alex was drafted to serve in Vietnam. Before that, he worked as a field hand to help support his family in Bakersfield. He served 12 months of active duty in Vietnam and returned home a changed man. Nightmares and paranoia soon translated into a heroin addiction that would come and go for the next 30 years. Like many men of his generation, Alex fell through the cracks. The institutions that were supposed to catch his fall—the Army, the prison doctors—never did. In the 1980s, he was caught twice stealing toolboxes from open garages. These were his first two strikes. It was only in 1997 that the Veterans Administration finally diagnosed him with severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Two years later, he locked himself into a bathroom in his sister's house; police officers found him with a syringe and a cotton ball with heroin residue. For this, he was sentenced to life: collateral damage of indifferent bureaucracies.

Alex is a subdued, quiet man. His reactions are always muted, as if someone has turned the volume down on the television. He answers our questions directly, pausing to search for words and phrases. He is not stupid: He earned his GED during one of his stints in prison and writes coherent letters in sloping cursive. His smile emerges once or twice throughout the interview, like a lone bar of light breaking through grey clouds.

His greatest frustration with prison, he says, is the empty stretch of time.

“As long as I keep busy, I do all right,” he tells us. “It's hard to get a job here, hard to keep busy.”

Where I would scream, where I would cry, where I would throw chairs, or laugh with relief, Alex is silent. We are undoubtedly the first visitors he has had for a solid six months. He has not seen a family member in more than eight years. His two children are estranged. Three of his brothers passed away while he was in prison. Only his older sister sometimes calls.

I think that once, many years ago, Alex was not so inured. In the 1980s, he wrote a jailhouse letter to the Veterans Administration: “I am desperately seeking your help. Please show me the way that I may have peace of mind, that I may better myself and get away from all these nightmares. I sincerely hope to hear from you as soon as possible and pray that I'm not forgotten.”

Popular culture is full of stereotypical images of prison life: of fights in mess halls; of knives hidden between bed planks; of escape plans, iron bars, locking doors, and catcalls. But a more basic reality of everyday prison life, the one that movies don't depict, is an intangible yet all-permeating loneliness. A prisoner can do his best to avoid the violence, avoid the large disruptions. But he cannot avoid the isolation. If he faces an indeterminate term of years, there is almost no punctuation. Roommates come and go. Family members stop driving the miles to visit. Sons and daughters stop writing, grow up, move on.

I wanted to come away from our trip to Soledad with some knowledge of Alex the person, not Alex the conglomeration of numbers. But what struck me on our first encounter and would remain in my mind throughout his case was the sense of a man whose character had been twisted by solitude. He is a man entombed by years of calcified loneliness, layer upon layer.

“A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody,” says George in *Of Mice and Men*. “Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick.”

A man can be very alone among 6,667 inmates. He can be obscured and smothered by the numbers from which he can never break free.

I don't believe it is too late for Alex. I hope, despite doubts, that he might someday obtain that “independent life.”

The two trips to Soledad have framed my own formal education. It is unrealistic to expect, I know, that one day I will revisit Soledad once again and see twin ruins: melting adobe wall, rusted wire fence. SL

Last spring, the clinic was successful in its efforts and Alex was resentenced to time served and released from prison. This is an excerpt from Criminal Defense Clinic student Jessica Feinstein's longer essay, which can be read at www.stanfordlawyer.com.