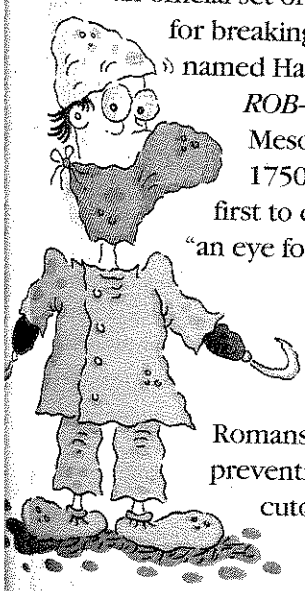
PRISONS AND PUNISHMENTS

Think being grounded is a bummer? Try being marched out to the middle of the town square, tied up, and then pelted with sheep guts as your friends and neighbors gather to watch. Very embarrassing, not to mention smelly! But it could be worse. You could be grounded *for life*—sent to "the big house" (also know as prison, the clink, the pen, the cooler, the joint, the pokey, the slammer, the hoosegow, the jug, and the stir)—a place where the bathrooms have no doors!

A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH

Early man's response to crime was simple. Get even! Revenge was the response to wrongdoing. But as towns grew into cities, things started to get out of hand. We needed some rules! The first person to write down an official set of laws, with punishments for breaking those laws, was a fellow named Hammurabi (*Hahm-uh-ROB-ee*). Hammurabi was a Mesopotamian king back in 1750 B.C.E. and was one of the first to come up with the idea of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."



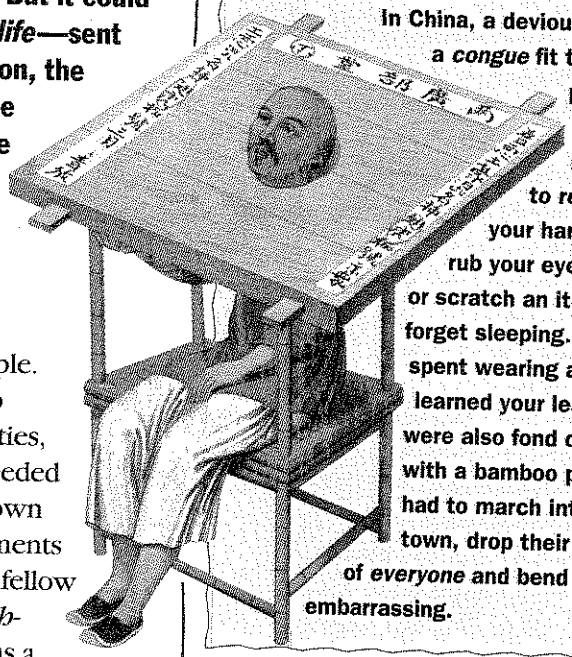
Painful Punishments

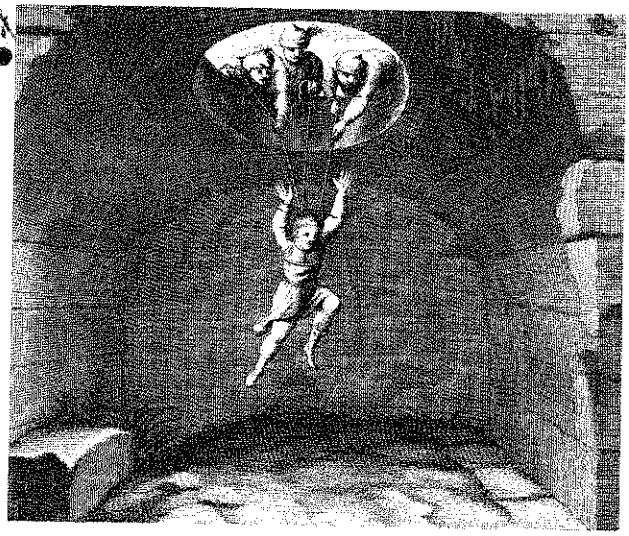
The ancient Greeks and Romans figured that an ounce of prevention was worth a bucket of cutoff hands or noses. They developed strong governments, wrote laws to protect their citizens, and developed punishments for crime. Do something wrong in ancient Greece and you'd be rowing your little hands raw in a slave galley in the middle of nowhere faster than you can say "Row, row, row your boat." The Romans' solution for folks who misbehaved was a hungry, angry wild beast. Many criminals found themselves face to face with a famished lion. (Read more about battling beasts in GLADIATORS on page 104.)

NO NOSE-PICKING

The ancient Chinese and Indians had some interesting ideas about how to punish law-breakers. In India, thieves had their noses (or sometimes ears) sliced off to broadcast to all that the now-noseless person had stolen something. After all, you could always hide a hacked off hand by stuffing your sleeve in a pocket. But it was hard to hide a big gaping hole in the middle of your face! As a result, the modern day nose job got its start as crafty doctors learned how to rebuild sliced-off schnozzes . . . for a price.

In China, a devious device called a *congue* fit tightly around a person's neck. While wearing it, it was impossible to reach your face with your hands. You could not rub your eyes, blow your nose, or scratch an itchy head. And forget sleeping. After a few days spent wearing a congue, you had learned your lesson. The Chinese were also fond of public spankings with a bamboo pole. Grown-ups had to march into the center of town, drop their trousers in front of *everyone* and bend over. Oh-so-*very* embarrassing.





It's the pits. *Underground jail pits make escape almost impossible.*

LOCK 'EM UP AND THROW AWAY THE KEY

The Romans were among the first to create prisons—really crummy, nasty places with bars on the windows and doors, and no hope for escape! They were called *carcers* (that's where our word "incarcerated" comes from), and had dungeon-like cages built 12 feet underground. Since people were condemned to death for the teeniest things back then, the *carcer* wasn't used as long-term prison—just a final damp death row.

PAY UP!

Jails didn't become common until the 12th century in England, when King Henry II ordered every county sheriff to build a jail (or gaol, as the English liked to spell it). One of England's scariest "gaols" was called Newgate. Every Monday morning, some of its prisoners were dragged out to the front yard where they were hanged, whipped, or even pressed to death. These public executions were supposed to scare other people away from committing crimes. You can bet it'd make you think twice about stealing!

People sent to "gaol" had to pay to get out, and while they were behind bars they had to pay for their food. Sheriffs figured they had a captive audience, so they charged a lot for the crummy food they served. Visiting friends or family members brought coins to pay. It was either that or starve to death.

WHICH IS WHICH?

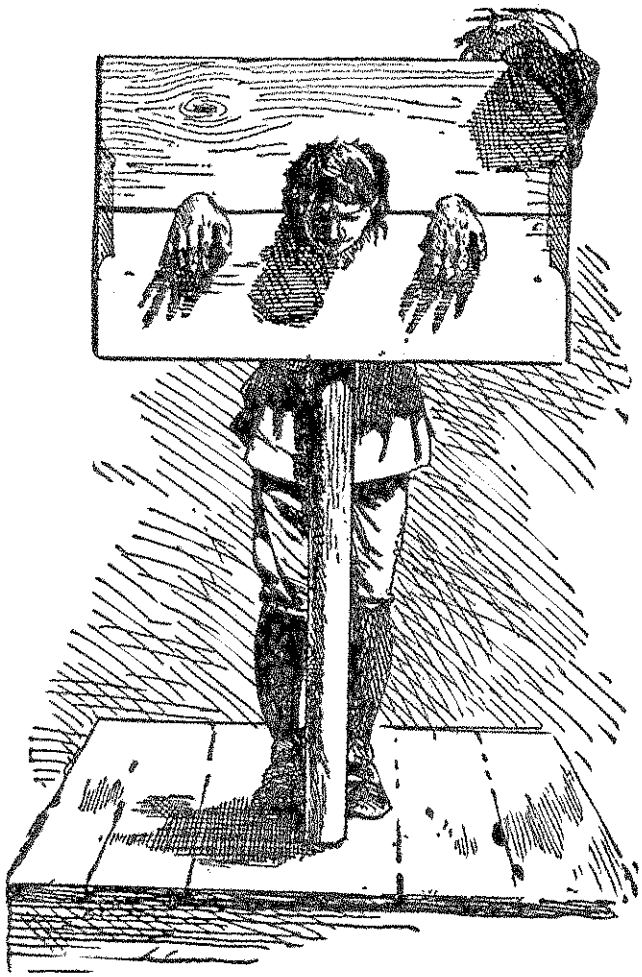
Bet you don't know the difference between a jail and a prison. A jail holds people awaiting trial and sentencing. After a person has been found guilty, he or she gets sent off to prison.

THE BIG EIGHT

Being sent to prison is the pits, but the very public punishments doled out for non-prison offenses in Colonial America were pretty bad too—painful, and worse: embarrassing.

1. The Pillory: Hands and head were held clamped tight between two pieces of wood, always in the center of town, where everyone could see. Folks were encouraged to throw tomatoes or rotten eggs at the pilloried person, which then attracted bugs. With the victim's hands held tight, scratching, or shooing away pests, was impossible. For extra oomph, some folks' sentences included having their ears nailed to the pillory.

2. The Stocks: The pillory's baby brother. In this version, the lucky victim at least got to sit down on a bench, but his or her feet were held in between two planks of wood. One of the first people to ever be held in the stocks in America was the Boston carpenter who made the first stocks, but then overcharged the town for building them.



Pain in the pillory. *A day in the public square was a shameful way to pass the time—and it hurt!*

3. The Dunking Stool: Nothing like a refreshing plunge into an icy river or pond on a freezing cold day! That was the point of this punishment. Women often ended up in this not-so-hot seat, being dunked over and over again, for the "crime" of nagging their husbands.

4. The Whipping Post: Steal a pie, shoot a chicken on a Sunday, throw dirty wash water onto the streets, and you, too, might end up on the receiving end of ten lashes with a whip made from 40 strips of leather.

5. A Scarlet Letter: Did you tell a fib? You must now stand in a public place for three hours holding up a sign that says, "I am a big fat liar." Sometimes, to make it simpler, one big letter was sewn onto your jacket. For example, a B was for *blaspheming (blass-fee-ming)*, which is an old-fashioned word for cursing, especially if you used the name of the Lord. "D" was worn for being drunk in public. A red letter "A" stood for "adultery" and was worn by grown-ups who had canoodled with someone they weren't married to.

6. Branding: A real, honest-to-goodness scarlet letter—burned into your cheek, your back, your thumb, or the back of your hand for the rest of your life. So many letters to choose from—an entire alphabet of crime and pain. L for liar, T for thief, F for forger. (And O for ouch?)

7. The Branks: Take an iron cage. Stick it on someone's head. Attach a spiked plate that clamps onto the tongue. Some models of this torture device even had spikes that pierced the tongue or rang bells to attract the crowd's attention. It was sometimes called the scold's bridle, and many a woman found herself wearing one because she had dared to talk back to her husband.

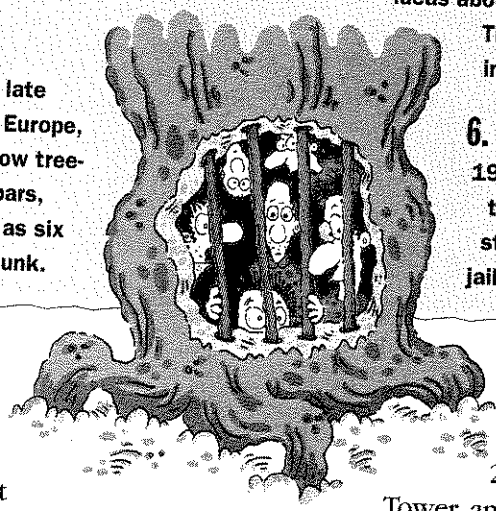
8. The Bilboes: A metal bar with two sliding shackles (kind of like big handcuffs for your feet) that was then bolted into the ground. Someone described it as a prison with only one bar! It was impossible to move with one of these on your feet. Drunks and people who spoke out against the government got to hang out from dawn to dusk clamped in these.

SIX JUNKY JAILS

1. Bug jail: The Zindan in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, had pits dug in its cellars that were filled with scorpions, cockroaches, rats, and lice. Soon-to-be-stung prisoners in the 1800s were dipped into the deadly bug pits.

2. I really dig jail: Why build an above-ground prison when you can dig one? 19th-century village prisons in Java, Indonesia, dug their own underground, worm-infested holes which were then covered with logs.

3. Nature's jail: In the late Middle Ages in Central Europe, some villages took hollow tree-trunks fitted with iron bars, then squished as many as six prisoners inside each trunk.



4. Dangling jail: Prisoners in the Italian city of Mantua in the 1500s didn't get prison cells. They got stuffed into big birdcages that swung from a tower 100 feet above the ground.

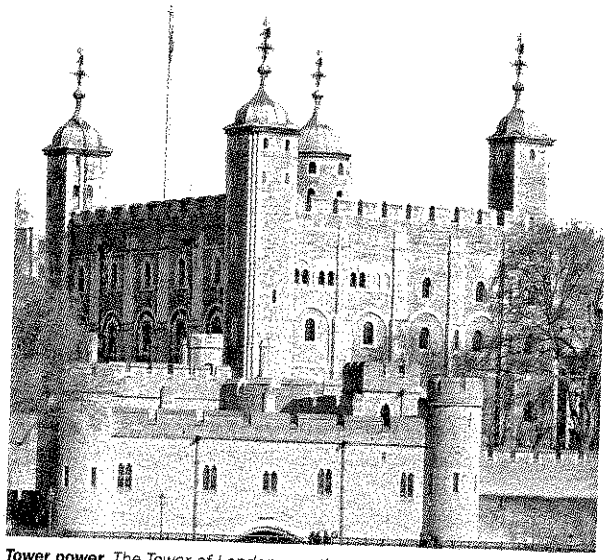
5. Cruisin' jail: In the 1800s, the English took a bunch of abandoned ships, tied them together, and anchored them in the middle of the Thames River. Prisoners wore heavy leg irons in case they had any ideas about diving overboard and swimming to shore. The boats were rat magnets and one in four inmates died. Shuffleboard, anyone?

6. Don't feed the animals jail: In the mid-1940s, during Word War II, all the animals in the Antwerp Zoo in Belgium died of starvation. The empty cages made great jails for German prisoners of war.

THE TOWER OF TERROR

Picture a place that's part royal palace, part jewelry store (the Crown Jewels are kept here), and part prison, and you have the Tower of London, which is actually a whole bunch of towers, a church, and all sorts of other buildings.

Some of the people who were imprisoned here lived pretty nicely. Take King John Balliol of Scotland, who was sent to the Tower in 1296. He came with two squires, a huntsman, a barber, his chaplain, a chapel clerk, and several assistants to the clerk, two grooms, two chamberlains, a tailor, a laundress, three pages, two greyhounds, and ten other hunting dogs. There are no actual cells here. Prisoners were simply stuffed wherever there was room. But not all the spaces were cushy. One nasty space was called "Little Ease." It was so small that a prisoner could neither stand up nor lie down in it. Try living there for months. And with a name like the Bloody Tower you can bet the people who spent time locked up in there did not fare well. Over the years, more than 2,900 people were imprisoned in the Tower, and a whole lot of them had their heads chopped off! (For more, check out EVERYDAY EXECUTIONS on page 76.)



Tower power. *The Tower of London was the scene of a whole lot of bloodiness.*

ATTEN-SHUNNED

Soldiers and sailors had a whole different set of punishments to deal with (and heal from). During the American Revolution, soldiers who were drunk, rowdy, or lazy often had to wear signs around their necks that broadcast their crime. Alas, so many recruits didn't know how to read, that the whole shame-on-you thing was kind of wasted so new punishments were invented.

At Yorktown, Virginia, soldiers often rode *The Horse.* Hmm. That doesn't sound so bad until you realize that the Horse was a narrow plank of wood suspended high above the ground. The soldier climbed on and heavy bricks were then tied onto each of the soldier's feet to add to the pull of gravity. The plank dug into all those delicate man-middle-parts. Ever seen a grown man cry? That "horse" usually did the trick. Sailors were always getting flogged by their commanding officers. But one of the most unpleasant fates was keel hauling. How was it done? A rope was run under the bottom of the boat, from one side to the other. The man's hands were then tied to that rope. His legs were tied together and the poor wretch was tossed overboard and pulled under the boat. We are *not* talking small boats here. If the sailor was pulled too slowly, he would drown. Sometimes the temperature of the water was so cold, it could stop a heart. But usually the thing that did the sailor in was the fact that the bottom of the boat was covered with razor sharp barnacles—perfect for shredding a surly sailor to itty-bits. And then, there was that cutting-kitty-cat . . .

YORE

You know how people raise their right hand in a court of law and swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth? That's because in America in the 1600s and 1700s people's thumbs were branded with a hot iron if they were found guilty of doing something wrong. By raising their right hand, a judge could tell in an instant if the person was an ex-convict.

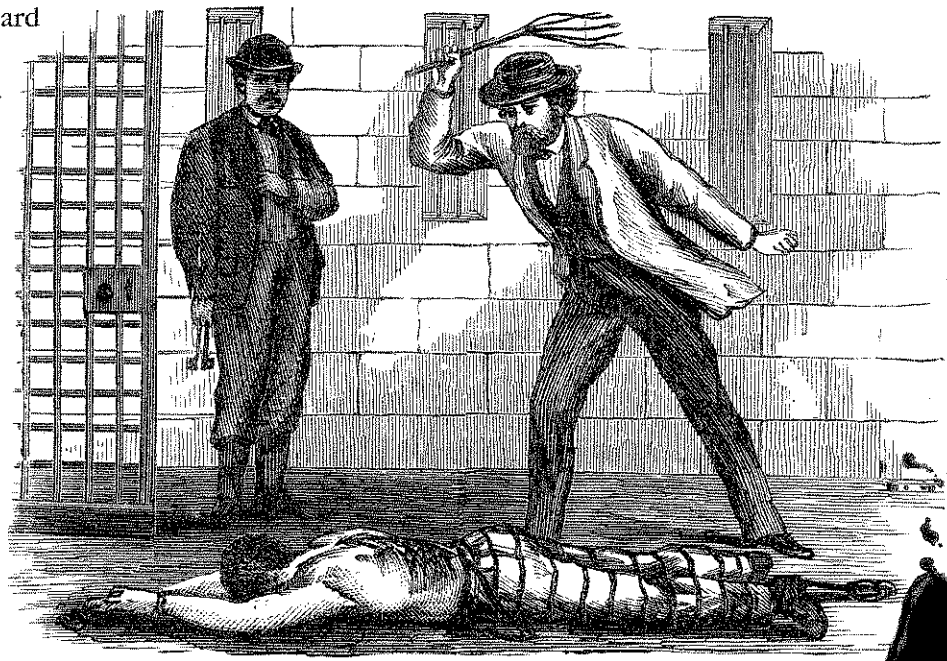
Me-"ow"!

In England's Royal Navy, a favorite weapon of punishment was the cat o'nine tails—a stick with nine strands of braided leather sometimes with bits of barbed wire tied into it. Several hundred strokes with the cat were not uncommon. Afterwards, a bucket of salt water was tossed on the sailor's bloody back, which hurt even worse than the flogging.

The cat had other names. There's a song that is still sung called *What shall we do with a drunken sailor?* It has a verse that goes: "Give him a taste of the captain's daughter." It sounds like fun, until you realize that the "captain's daughter" was really that nasty, bloody cat.

ALL-AMERICAN PRISONS

You would *not* have wanted to go to prison in the 1790s in America. Men, women, and kids were all tossed into one giant cell with piles of straw on the floor for bedding. There was no bathroom.



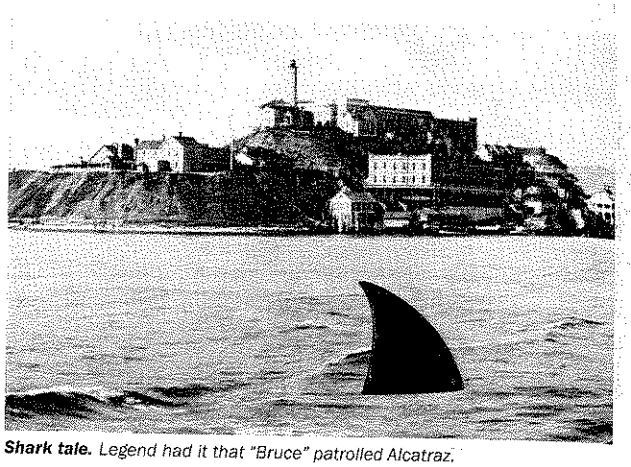
I'll never do it again! *Stop hitting me with that cutting cat.*

Drunks, crazy people, hardened criminals, and innocent people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time were all packed together. It wasn't until the early 1800s that separate prisons were built for men and women, and kids got sent to junior-jail—"ju-vees"—locked-up live-in schools for delinquent kids.

What was it like to go to prison back then?

Sing-Singin' in the Rain

Sing Sing, one of America's most famous prisons, is just a wee bit "up the river" from New York City. The very first prisoners sent there actually had to build the prison, brick by brick, when they arrived in May, 1825. Until it was finished, they slept outside, no matter what the weather. Each of the 800 cells was teeny—standing in the middle, you could touch the walls without moving an inch! Inmates were given a Bible to read and were allowed no visitors. Talking was forbidden in Sing Sing. The convicts, clad in those funky striped prison uniforms, ate and worked in complete silence. Try and talk and you'd regret it, because punishment was harsh and swift. You might be near-drowned in something called the "bath," tucked into solitary confinement, or "bucked"—hung upside down from a wooden pole between your arms and legs, kind of like a human pig roast, without the tiki torches. And to top it all off, Sing Sing was the place that the electric chair was first used (zap on over to ELECTRIC SHOCKS on page 71 for all the sizzling details). A trip to Sing Sing always proved that crime does not pay.



Shark tale. *Legend had it that "Bruce" patrolled Alcatraz.*

Welcome to "The Rock"

In 1934, a train car full of America's worst criminals was taken to a rocky bird-poop encrusted island about a mile from San Francisco. The island was named "Pelicans" by the Spanish settlers who first hung out there (*Alcatraces* is Spanish for pelicans), and for 29 years Alcatraz was the place where America's nastiest criminals were sent to live.

It was cold and damp out in the bay and escape was impossible, although over the years 36 prisoners tried. The waters of San Francisco Bay are a bone-chilling 55 degrees Fahrenheit. John Paul Scott, one of only two men ever to make it all the way to shore (he made water wings from pairs of rubber gloves) was so tired from all the swimming that he was immediately recaptured and sent right back. Prisoners were told that the waters around Alcatraz were infested with sharks, including one, named Bruce, that had been specially bred by the Bureau of Prisons with only one fin so that it would swim continually around the island. It wasn't true, but it sure kept prisoners from escaping.

Prisoners who misbehaved were sent to the "dungeons," which had no windows or lights—just fans that blew the cold, damp air off the water. Really bad prisoners ended up in the "hole"—solitary confinement.

In 1962, four prisoners decided they wanted *out*. They made fake plaster heads with real hair swept up from the barber shop floor. They left the fake heads in their beds to

fool the guards and crept through the ventilators in their cells into a corridor and up to the roof. They used spoons stolen from the kitchen and an electric drill made from a fan to make escape holes. One guy was too chubby to fit through the hole and ended up staying behind, but the other three swam off toward San Francisco. The only trace of any of them was a wallet filled with cash that washed ashore a few days later.

No cell-ebrating here. *Sing Sing's cells were teeny-weeny.*

YOU'RE OUTTA HERE!

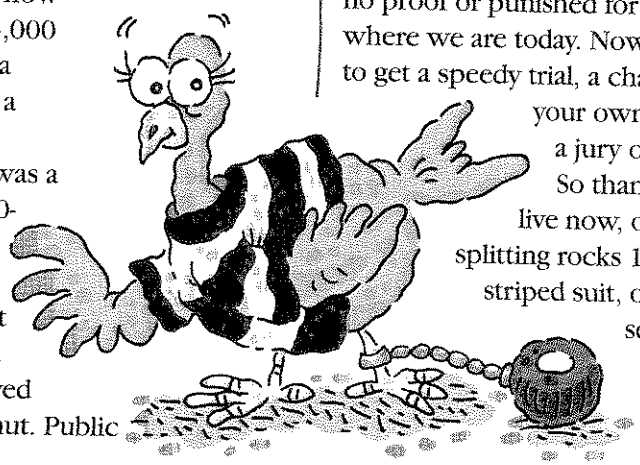
There are other kinds of prisons that don't involve high walls or bars—penal colonies in a far-off (usually nasty) place. Beginning in the 1600s, Russia sent prisoners to Siberia—the vast, northernmost part of the country. Freezing cold in the winter and buggy as heck in the summer, it was a gigantic natural prison. Bigger than Canada, Siberia is so vast that a person standing on a beach in Maine is closer to Moscow, the capital of Russia, than a person standing on the eastern coast of Siberia. Between 1923 and 1986, close to 20 million people were shipped off to Siberia, many of them for disagreeing with the government.

Australia, the "Land Down Under," was once nothing more than a giant prison for folks from England. In the 1800s, the first shipload of British convicts—mostly young men charged with forgery, picking pockets, and the occasional murder—landed in what is now Sydney. All in all, about 165,000 prisoners made the long sea journey and one in six was a woman!

Just getting to Australia was a trial. After all, it was a 15,000-mile boat ride. Once there, it was a life of hard labor—building bridges, making salt and bricks, mining coal, and clearing farmland. People lived twenty to a small, hot little hut. Public floggings were common. Convicts quickly learned that the only relief from a session with the leather cat o'nine tails was to pee on the ground and then lie down, exposing the wounds to the damp soil.

For 400 years, Robben Island off South Africa was a truly hated prison. Its most famous inmate was Nelson Mandela, who was jailed for trying to get equal rights for black South Africans. Mandela spent more than a quarter of a century imprisoned. He was allowed one a visitor a year—but only for 30 minutes. He could only receive one letter every six months. Toilet paper was rationed to eight rough little squares a day. Mandela had no running water and no toilet—just an old iron bucket. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner was porridge—for 25 years! For ten hours every day, he smashed stones. Baths were taken in a bucket of ice-cold sea water. But Mandela never let prison break his spirit. He went on to see his people regain their rights and eventually became the president of South Africa and the winner of a Nobel Peace Prize. Amazing, huh?

Nelson Mandela.

EAR YE, EAR YE

It took centuries of injustice—people jailed with no proof or punished for no reason—to get to where we are today. Nowadays you are supposed to get a speedy trial, a chance to bring evidence on your own behalf, and be judged by a jury of ordinary, everyday folks. So thank your lucky stars you live now, or else you, too, might be splitting rocks 16 hours a day in a silly striped suit, or sitting in your town square with your ears nailed to the stocks and a big ripe tomato dripping down your face.