

# Why do we refer to inmates as ‘jail birds?’

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As Buffalo County prepares to open its \$24.5 million jail, I wonder whether inmates in the current slammer are looking forward to their new digs in the same way folks on the outside get excited about a new apartment or home.

Our new jail is a model of how we mix punishment with rehabilitation.

Among its 205 beds are 40 set aside for male and female prisoners whose sentences allow them to work outside the jail part of the day.

There is a master control area where jailers can safely monitor their guests, and arrangements have been made so prisoners are afforded all their privileges under modern jail standards.

I was fascinated to watch the jail under construction. It was reassuring to see during excavation of the site near the existing jail that there were no escape tunnels.

Each cell in the new jail is self-contained. The modules have four walls, ceiling and floor, and stainless steel combo sink-commodes. I’ve not seen sinks installed over toilets in conventional construction, but imagine the time you could save shaving before work.

Massive cranes hoisted each cell module into place and stacked them like a farmer might load cages of chickens or turkeys on his truck for market. I wonder if that’s why we sometimes refer to inmates as jail birds.

## **Jailhouse culture**

Growing up in Hartington in northeast Nebraska and attending Wayne State College, I had many jailhouse experiences, most from outside the bars.

My college roommate and I shared the ground floor of a home across the street from the Wayne County Jail. On many afternoons I could see prisoners pressed against the windows while I sat on the front porch and played blues on my saxophone.

Do you suppose those sad songs made their time behind bars even drearier?

The Konz house was just one block south of Cedar County's old jail in Hartington. Sheriff John Riibe and his family lived on the top floor and prisoners occupied the ground floor.

Riibe was a colorful lawman who kept a stable of fine horses. He was a hit at rodeos when his steeds pranced into the arena, saddled with sparkling black and silver regalia.

Riibe was a master of public relations, but his fancy saddles weren't enough to allay a kindergartner's fears when he passed the jail on school days. Never mind I had never committed a serious offense, I worried that Riibe might swoop down and toss me in the slammer, so I always ran by the jail.

The years passed and I became more confident it was safe to walk past the jail, but nothing could prepare my innocent eyes for what I would see when I finally stepped inside at age 13.

My time to see the inside came when Hartington's only upholsterer ran afoul of the law and was sentenced to a year in jail. In a 1970s version of work-release, the sheriff allowed the upholsterer to set up shop in his cell, and so Hartington residents paraded their worn-out chairs and sofas to the place to be recovered.

I took two of our family's captain's chairs to be refurbished. I stooped and grunted as I muscled them through the jailhouse door and then looked up to see 40 years worth of prisoners' graffiti.

They had written their names, scratched slurs about jailers, and left intricately detailed sketches of nude women.

I walked out a bit dazed, but convinced an artist must reside in all of us.

Mike Konz is the Hub's managing editor.