



PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION, HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Leaves from a Lifer's Notebook

The Tom Runyon Story

by James McGrath Morris

Tom Runyon introduced himself to Iowans wielding a gun, but won himself a lasting place in Iowa history with a typewriter. A Depression-era bank robber, Runyon was sentenced in 1937 to spend the rest of his life in prison. But, despite his confinement to the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison, Runyon did not fade from the public's attention, as one might have expected. Quite the contrary, it was from behind prison walls that he attracted the most notice.

At Fort Madison, the 31-year-old criminal began a new career writing for the penitentiary's inmate-produced magazine, *The Presidio*. Within a little more than a decade, his writing won him national acclaim. *The New York Times*, for instance, called him "a remarkably gifted observer of the passing penitentiary scene." Louis Messolonghites, writing in the *Reporter*, told his readers that Runyon had "become one of my favorite authors." And perhaps most significant, famed mystery writer Erle Stanley Gardner launched a nationwide campaign to win Runyon's release from prison after reading one of his columns. Runyon became, as his fellow inmates were fond of calling him, the nation's "dean of prison writers."

By the time of his death in prison in 1957, Runyon's work had appeared in such national publications as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*; his autobiography had been brought out by a New York publisher and reprinted in at least three other countries; he had written a chapter of a college textbook on criminology; and an Iowa newspaper had enlisted him to write a column.

Despite his fame, Runyon's most important audience remained behind the walls of the Iowa State Penitentiary. There, for 20 years, Runyon championed the inmate's cause in the pages of *The Presidio*. Each month, he invigorated the convicts' magazine with poignant stories of life in the penitentiary. Although Runyon wrote about many of the general themes of prison, he was at his best when he wrote about other lifers and how they faced each day with no hope of ever again being free. As Ernie Pyle's reporting had done for the GI during World War II, Runyon's writings in *The Presidio* became the letter of the inarticulate prisoner to the outside world.

Runyon's efforts are part of a long-running tradition in American penal history. Since 1800, when an inmate of a New York City debtors' prison began publishing a newspaper to campaign for an end to imprisonment for debt, hundreds of periodicals have been published by and for the inmates of America's prisons. From the early part of the 20th century until about

the 1950s, the prison publication, like the one Runyon wrote for, grew into an important cultural institution of prison life. This coincided with a period of great change in Iowa's penitentiary and in prisons across the nation.

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Iowa prison officials—like most across the country—practiced and preached the creed of a progressive prison movement that reached its apex during this era. The apostles of this new faith believed that inmates could be transformed into productive, law-abiding citizens, given the proper conditions, resources, and "scientific" methods. In some sense, the prison keepers' culture had come full swing back to its 19th-century roots, when prisons were first built to create a place in which criminals could repent and achieve redemption. From our vantage point at the end of this century, when a crime-weary public will no longer brook talk of rehabilitating criminals, the 1930s to the 1950s looks like the time in which this notion would breathe its last breath. And Tom Runyon was the last of his kind.

Thomas Jefferson Runyon was born on September 12, 1905, in Nehawka, Nebraska, the older of two children born to native West Virginians. He was close to his sister and loved and admired his mother. She was, he recalled, "the fountainhead of all wisdom and all goodness and all security." His father, on the other hand, repulsed him. "A heavy drinker, he was more than brutal when he came staggering home to his wife-beating and hell raising," wrote Runyon. "I can't remember a day when I neither hated nor feared him."

Years later Runyon's sister told a reporter that her father "didn't treat Tom as he should have treated a son." Because of their father's shiftlessness, the Runyon family moved frequently. Over the years, Runyon's father became a painter, decorator, timber contractor, farmer, and used-car salesman. At first, he was usually successful in each job but soon "wound up with a drunken spree in which he threw away everything he had made, grew disgusted and possibly ashamed, and we moved again," Runyon explained.

It would be easy to blame the father for his son's later criminal life. Runyon, however, resisted that temptation. "Don't think for a moment I haven't tried to find a way to pin some of the blame for afterward on him," wrote Runyon years later. "It would be comforting to be able to blame someone besides me for my troubles."

Runyon quit school a few weeks into the seventh grade and left home to work on road-building crews

Left: Tom Runyon holds his autobiography, October 1953.



An inmate drives carts full of dirt from a hillside near the penitentiary, as part of a 1938 WPA riverfront development project in Fort Madison—a year after Tom Runyon was imprisoned at the state penitentiary.

SHSI (DES MOINES)

in several states. At 18, he joined the navy and worked for three years as a pharmacist's mate before receiving an honorable discharge in 1926. In 1928 he reenlisted for another three years. After completing his second hitch in the navy, Runyon settled in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1931 with his mother and found work as a painting crew foreman.

"You don't stop being honest and become a thief, almost overnight, without a reason," Runyon wrote. His stated reason was the Great Depression. "Within two weeks that season's work disappeared under a storm of cancellations, and insecurity rolled over me like a wave of tumbleweeds," he wrote. "There I was, with payments due on the car, a girlfriend I wanted to entertain . . . and no work to be had at any price." While working as a painter, Runyon had developed a friendship with two brothers, Carl and Ira Dugan. Their real names, as he learned later, were Claire and Ira Gibson.

Now without work, the three talked over their problems. According to Runyon, it was the Gibsons who first suggested robbery. Regardless of who made the first suggestion, Runyon became a member of the "Gibson Gang." For five years the gang terrorized bank tellers throughout the Midwest, rising at one point to the top of the FBI's most wanted list.

The first bank the gang robbed netted each of the accomplices \$1,700—a fortune in the Depression years. Runyon, who still saw bank robbery as a temporary profession, used his portion of the loot to open a restaurant. After it failed, he returned to the gang's fold. "My ethics proved to be remarkably flexible once they had thawed out," he wrote. Now robbing banks regularly with the Gibson Gang, which had a fluid membership of 15, Runyon had cash with which to fall back on when he could not find work or his latest business venture failed.

It seemed as if the charade could continue forever. But early one morning in November 1935, on a small dusty road, it began to unravel. Runyon, Claire Gibson (Ira had died), and Bob Markwood were returning from a bank robbery in Pennsylvania. The car veered off the road two miles southeast of Britt, Iowa, and Markwood was seriously hurt. Coming down the road in the early morning mist were James Zrostlik, a young farmer, his wife, and their infant son on the way to church. Desperate to continue their journey, Runyon and Gibson decided to seize the Zrostlik automobile. The pair ran out onto the road to flag the oncoming car down but Zrostlik refused to stop, according to Runyon's statement in court over a year later. "It was pretty foggy, well, and [Gibson] just dodged in

time to keep from getting run over, then he fired," Runyon said. "I debated for a second shooting the tire off. And I realized if I shot the tire we could not use the car and I tried to shoot the windshield out from in front of the man," he continued. "Right after this shot the lady screamed, that is the first time we knew that there was a lady in the car."

Zrostlik's wife had a different recollection. Runyon and Gibson, she told the court, came up on their car after it slowed down for the wreck and, without warning, fired shots. The men then opened the door on her husband's side of the auto and ordered him out, she said. James Zrostlik, whose spinal cord apparently had been severed by one of the shots, replied that he couldn't move. He was jerked out of the car and died on the road, Mrs. Zrostlik said. In the end, regardless of whose account was accurate, James Zrostlik lay dead on the road and his wife lay by his side, her face permanently disfigured by fragments of broken glass from the windshield.

Runyon, Gibson, and Markwood escaped from that corner of Iowa using the Zrostlik automobile. The incident, however, caught up with them. In February 1937, Runyon was picked up by the Wichita, Kansas, police on charges of car theft and was tied to the Zrostlik murder. One month later, he was escorted into a packed courtroom in Garner, Iowa, to stand trial before Judge Henry Graven. Guards armed with machine guns kept watch in case, as rumored, the Gibson Gang tried to free Runyon or silence him.

Runyon's lawyer, Carlos Gotz, proposed a deal. His client would tell all he knew about the gang, still at large, if he were given a life sentence instead of the death penalty. Judge Graven was reluctant to forgo a death sentence, according to a confidential letter he wrote to the parole board years later. But he decided to go along with Gotz's offer. In part because of information supplied by Runyon, Gibson was arrested several months later. He later committed suicide in a jail cell while awaiting trial. Markwood was never located, but authorities were convinced that they found his corpse. They believed Claire Gibson had killed him.

Escorted by 15 armed guards, Runyon was delivered on March 9, 1937, to the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison, along the banks of the Mississippi River. The facility, really a compound comprising a medley of buildings encircled by a stone wall with turrets, had been home to the region's most notorious criminals since 1839 when the territorial legislature created the first prison west of the Mississippi. For the

guards receiving their new ward, it was all in a day's work. For Runyon, on the other hand, arriving at the prison was an unforgettable event.

Taken to his cell after being fingerprinted, photographed, and issued prison garb, the five-foot six-inch prisoner surveyed his new dwelling. It only took a few seconds to make a complete inventory of the small cell. Illuminated by a bare 25-watt bulb, it contained only a bed, a chair, a wash bowl, a mirror, and a toilet. As the cell door closed behind him, Runyon faced the stark reality of what, up until then, had seemed to be only a bad dream from which he would soon wake. "I began to realize dimly that once and for all I was different from others," he recalled. "I was a convict, a convict lifer—I was here from now on."

"I had been told that I'd find a jail smell when I came here, but I didn't find it," he wrote. "Instead, I found an atmosphere of hate and fear so strong it seemed I should be able to touch it." It didn't take him long to learn the routine of prison life, nor did it take him long to understand that he no longer had any rights. "Over and over again that fact was dinned into us," he wrote. "Every single thing that made life bearable was a privilege. It was a privilege, not a right, to eat a meal or sleep or look at the sun or receive a letter, and that galling knowledge was with me every waking moment."

By the fall, Runyon had managed to create his first refuge from prison life. Time in his cell, which he previously feared would be the worst part of prison, turned out to be the only time when he could "escape" his confinement: "With my back turned to the bars so I could ignore passing guards, and with a book on my lap, I could quite often forget my troubles for many minutes at a time."

In time, Runyon also discovered the prison library. It contained a thousand volumes, and he started making daily use of them. Despite his meager education, he had always been an indiscriminate but avid reader. "Now I tried to read with a purpose," he said. Runyon looked to books for answers as to how he had gotten into his predicament. His soul-searching, however, led him nowhere. "Poring over Sigmund Freud and William James and Herbert Spencer like a kid turned loose in a candy store," he wrote, "I succeeded in getting a fine case of intellectual indigestion and little else."

About this time Runyon became wrongly convinced, after hearing a casual remark made by an FBI interrogator, that he could win his release in ten years. It was, thought Runyon, only a matter of passing the time. Hunting for a hobby, Runyon decided to try his hand at writing, for reasons he never fully explained.

"It was just a case of putting one word in front of another until you had an *Anthony Adverse* or *Gone with the Wind*, wasn't it?" he asked. "If they could do it good, why couldn't I learn to do it at least so-so?"

At the time, one of the few inmates he had befriended was the editor of the prison's 32-page monthly magazine, *The Presidio*. Runyon submitted a short article, a "two-chewed-up-pencils, surprise ending four-hundred-worder," as he called it. Not only did it appear in *The Presidio* the following month, but a number of other prison periodicals reprinted it. "I hugged my little triumph desperately, waiting more than a month before risking my writing reputation by showing him another story," Runyon wrote.

He did submit another story and again the editor accepted it, as well as the next and the next. Buoyed with his initial success, the 32-year-old convict began applying himself to the task of learning to write. He carefully read books on writing and subscribed to a writer's magazine. Each month he turned in his effort to *The Presidio*. Years later, after Runyon had gained a reputation for his writing, he would say, "What little I know about writing I learned while writing for *The Presidio*. . . . If not for *The Presidio*, I wouldn't be writing."

Writing challenged Runyon. "I found it the hardest work I had ever tried—because of my meager education—and the most fascinating," he wrote. "Often I would spend half the night with scratch-pad and pencil, propped on an elbow in bed, trying to whip some story problem." Runyon began sending his stories, along with a \$3 "criticism fee," to a West Coast agent. Agent Gene Bolles must have detected Runyon's potential because he told the budding writer to dispense with sending the fee. "Here was someone who thought I could do something," Runyon wrote.

Unfortunately for him, so did the federal authorities. With the announced intention of making sure

Runyon would never again be free, the Department of Justice began legal proceedings against Runyon for his involvement in an Eyota, Minnesota, bank robbery. Because the robbery had included taking hostages, the department invoked the new Lindbergh kidnapping laws. On July 3, 1939, Runyon was taken to federal court in Winona, Minnesota. He pleaded guilty to the bank robbery and was given another life sentence, to be served should he be released from the Iowa penitentiary. Now for the first time, Runyon faced the fact that he might never leave prison. "I began to realize

how hopeless my situation was, and my mind was never far from plans or dreams of escape," he wrote.

At first he stopped writing. "It went by the wayside within a month. It left when hope left. I tried hard to go on with it. I tried desperately, but the press of the load of time I was carrying was too much. . . . Planning escape became my hobby."

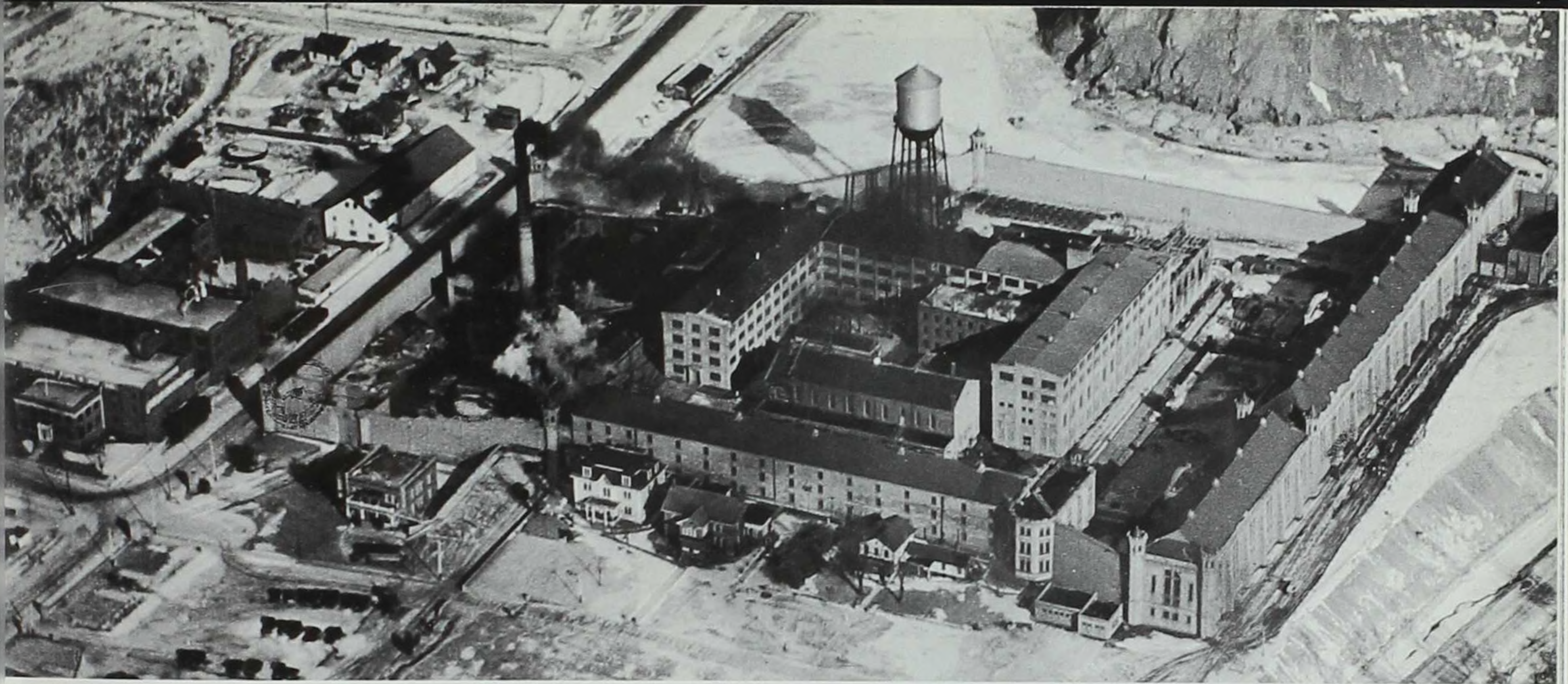
After a while he did resume writing. In 1941 he was made assistant editor of the magazine. Although still bitterly brooding over his imprisonment, Runyon felt *The Presidio* gave him a reason to get through each day. "Where I had been angry about my own troubles, I began to be more concerned over injustices to others, for many a man

brought his problems to me, hoping I would help him," he wrote. "Instead of hating wildly and uselessly, I had to channel and control my bitterness and put it into words."

"Full of ideas, I kept my typewriter keys warm," he wrote. "My cry in the penological wilderness was faint but I kept at it so hard I lost track of personal troubles for hours at a time." Not long after Runyon became assistant editor, the editor's post became open and he applied for the job. Warden Glenn Haynes was reluctant to appoint him. Haynes did not question Runyon's talent, but all the previous editors had been trustees with privileges. More troublesome to Haynes



Inmate and guard, Fort Madison, circa 1960.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison in 1938, the year after Runyon arrived.

was that Runyon was marked as one of the prison's two most dangerous security risks. The warden came up with a compromise. Runyon could have the position if he agreed to complete his work during regular hours. He would not be allowed out of his cell at other times. Runyon agreed.

Warden Haynes had reason to be concerned. Escape had never faded completely from Runyon's thoughts, and two events made him consider it again seriously. First, in 1942, Runyon's wife, Winnie, told him that she was seeking a divorce and a few days after Runyon got that news, his mother died. Second, in 1943, he made an enemy of the parole board with an editorial outlining five reasons why parole "is a near failure." The editorial was reprinted in different newspapers around the state, and Runyon believed it doomed whatever slim chance he might have had of eventually being released on parole.

In the summer of 1942, Warden Haynes died. Percy A. Lainson, a former sheriff, was appointed to the post. Lainson, to his misfortune, gave Runyon what Haynes had denied. Runyon would be allowed to be out of his cell in the evening to work on *The Presidio*.

One Monday evening in early September, Runyon dug his way under a heavily charged electric fence and escaped. Authorities launched one of the biggest manhunts in Iowa. For five days Runyon remained on the lam. He held up and terrorized several farm families, took hostages, and stole at least two cars. On Saturday, a lonely and confused Runyon was arrested in Fort Dodge after a brief exchange of gunfire.

His freedom was short lived and bittersweet. "I learned how much prison had hurt me," he wrote

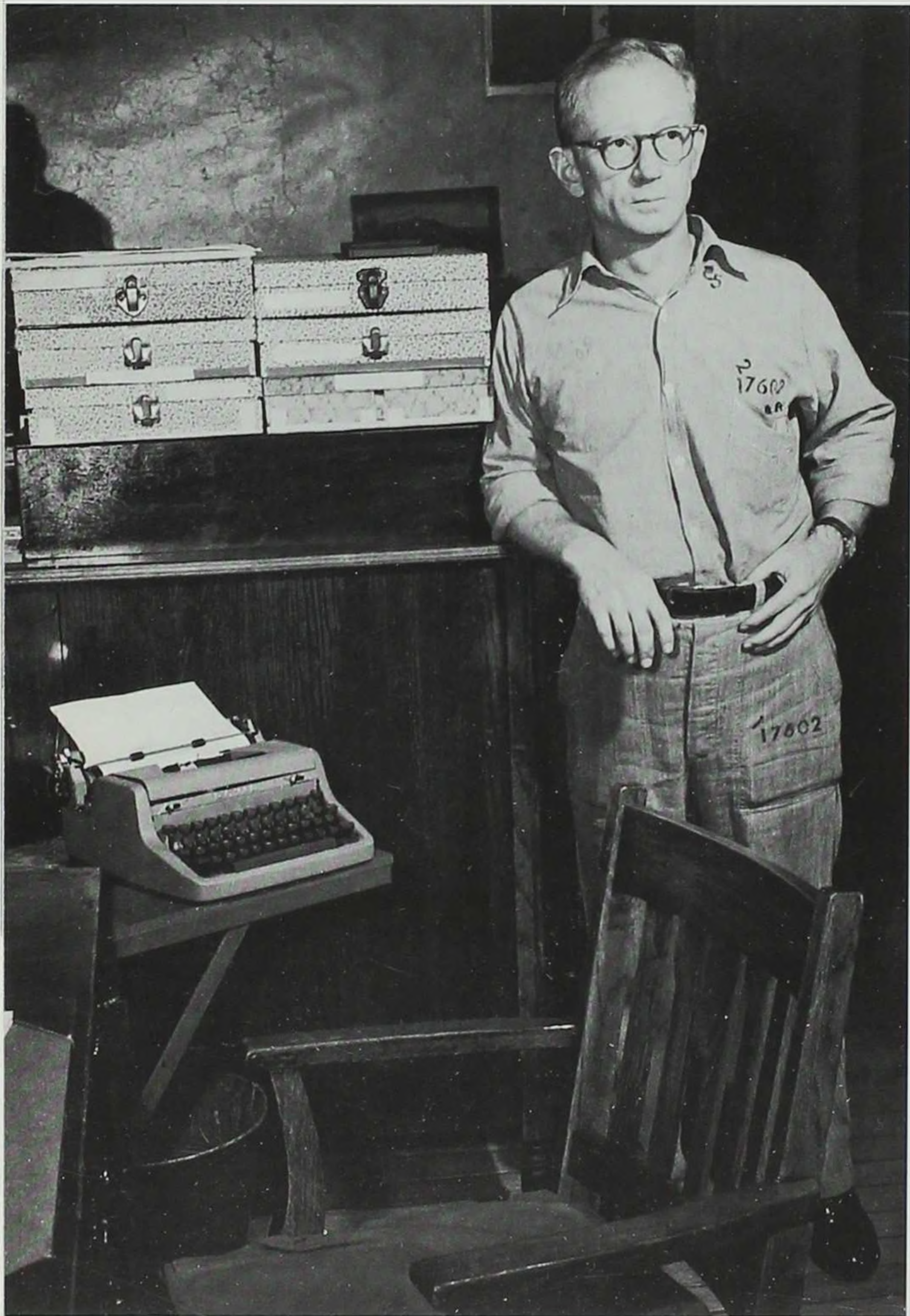
later. "And I found myself in a world almost as alien as prison had once been, for the war had changed conditions unbelievably." Ironically, after his arrest, police officers were able to reconstruct Runyon's journey across the state because, bitten by the writing bug, Runyon had kept a detailed diary.

Back at Fort Madison, an angry Lainson placed Runyon in "solid lockup," a section of solitary confinement, for ten months. Located in a basement, his new cell was damp and cold. "Water trickled down the walls for weeks, and no amount of wiping could get the floor dry," Runyon wrote. "Magazines were limp as rags, and cigarettes had to be dried against the light bulb before they could be smoked."

The escape cemented the parole board's low opinion of Runyon. In January 1944, the board told Governor Bourke B. Hickenlooper that it "will be wise to let him spend the balance of his time" in prison. "This board considers Runyon a very dangerous man, who would stoop to nothing to gain his own selfish ends. We strongly recommend against any consideration of this man at any time," the three-member board wrote.

In June, Runyon was released from lockup and back into the prison population. Assigned to work in the furniture factory, he mutilated his left hand on a spinning saw. For three years, he drifted through the days and months, becoming increasingly absent-minded. "Practically everything I did was ruled by habit now," he wrote. "At times I caught myself wearing what I called the 'old lifer look'—the unseeing, preoccupied stare that seemed to stiffen the faces of so many long termers in the crowded prison yard."

One summer evening in 1948, much like the one five years before when Runyon had made his run for



PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION, HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Runyon in 1953; critics called him "a man worth knowing."

freedom, Lloyd Eddy, *The Presidio's* editor, approached Runyon in the prison yard. Eddy asked Runyon if he would be willing to come back to the magazine. Since Runyon's departure from *The Presidio's* staff, the magazine had fallen on hard times. Runyon's assistant editor, who had taken over as editor, had quit because the magazine had become increasingly censored. The succeeding editor had let the magazine further deteriorate by publishing mostly poor-quality inmate fiction. Eddy, however, had not forgotten the old *Presidio* and wanted to bring it back. Runyon told Eddy the warden would never approve the idea.

"Can you see me asking the Old Man to put me back up there after the way I messed him up the last time?" Runyon said.

"You won't have to ask," replied Eddy. "I'll do the asking. All you need to do is agree to come back if I get it fixed."

In September, Runyon's name was once again on *The Presidio's* masthead. "Five wordless years made a difference," recalled Runyon of his first days back in the magazine's office. "My writing was rusty, but the ideas were there." His first contribution was a short allegorical essay called "In the Shadow of the Walls," in which he urged his fellow convicts to combat the prison's power to stifle their ability to think for themselves. "Like any other shadow, the wall's effect is slow," he wrote. "Its advance is so stealthy that the prisoner may be all but drowned in its painless apathy without being aware of it at all." In the end the prisoner must depend on himself to keep his mind sharp and preserve his ability to make decisions for himself. "No one will drag him away if he chooses to sit in the shadow of the wall," Runyon wrote.

He followed his own advice and threw himself into his work, hogging *The Presidio's* only typewriter. He moved his old desk into a corner of the office, facing the wall. There he remained day after day, "torturing the typewriter" (a Runyonism) from his swivel chair. Walter Lunden, an Iowa State University professor inspecting the prison for the Department of Corrections, met Runyon for the first time that fall. "After you broke the ice and you sort of gained his confidence he opened up and talked quite definitely," Lunden recalled years later. "His writing was an outlet for him. While there was still some resentment at the same time it gave him some satisfaction that he was doing something he was interested in."

In November, Runyon took over a new column, "Leaves from a Lifer's Notebook," to take care of the small random ideas, reminiscences, updates, and other items he accumulated but couldn't find a place for elsewhere. It was, Runyon said, "a rambling kind of dissertation on how little things can have far-reaching effects on a lifer." The column soon became a popular feature of *The Presidio*, much like a personal letter from Runyon to his readers.

But Runyon's greatest skill, the one that distinguished him from generations of prison writers, remained his ability to write profiles. Ever since he first began writing for *The Presidio* in 1937, Runyon had demonstrated an interest in writing about his fellow lifers. "Be sure to write something about lifers, Tom,"

advised Ernest "Ole" Lindquist, a fellow lifer who would later play an important part in Runyon's career. "These others are just visiting the joint. We live here." In the early 1940s, before his escape, Runyon had written, almost monthly, stories about some of the unusual lifers who inhabited the prison. "The Planter," written in April 1943, was a typical example of his work. It told the tale of "Walnut Seed Edwards," who, after spending most of his life in a New York City tenement, now passed his years planting walnut trees in and around the prison.

In 1949, a little after a year back on the staff of *The Presidio*, Runyon returned to writing profiles, choosing Ole Lindquist as one of his first subjects. Lindquist's story was a sad one. On December 17, the month Runyon published the profile, Lindquist was completing his 40th year in prison. During that time he had never received a visitor, or a Christmas package in 30 years, or even a personal letter in 20 years. He was a forgotten man.

Lindquist had been sent to prison for killing a policeman when he was 19, shortly after arriving in the United States as an emigrant from Sweden. In "Christmas Behind the Eight Ball," Runyon told Lindquist's story: "When asked about Christmas, he merely smiled. 'It's just one more day for me,' he said."

Newspapers and radio stations picked up the story and spread it across the country. Soon Lindquist was buried under an avalanche of presents, letters, and cards. The mail crew piled about two hundred packages into Lindquist's cell, while he stood helplessly looking from package to package, unable to de-

cide which to open first. Lindquist's tale did not end with that flurry of Christmas presents. Some people took to writing to the governor. Wealthy correspondents promised to look into hiring a lawyer and others, with less money, offered prayers. Because of the outpouring of support, Governor William S. Beardsley commuted Lindquist's sentence, making him eligible for parole.

Addie Jackson, a widow from Indianola, Iowa, had also read Lindquist's tale. She began a regular correspondence with the inmate. Following a visit to the prison, the two fell in love. In 1952, Lindquist was released after spending 42 years in the Iowa State Penitentiary. Six months later, after obtaining the necessary permission from the authorities, parolee Lindquist and Jackson were married. The now-famous couple—especially after appearing on television's *This Is Your Life* program—settled in Addie's hometown, and Lindquist opened a small shoe repair shop using the skills he had acquired from 20 years' work in the prison's shoe factory. But after getting settled into his new life, Lindquist began suffering from what the doctors diagnosed as rheumatism. On Christmas Day 1954, Lindquist broke his leg while turning over in bed. The doctors had been wrong. Now they told Addie Lindquist her husband was dying of cancer; his bones were as brittle as dried twigs. Addie Lindquist brought her husband home from the hospital so she could care for him. She broke the news to Ole. "Oh,

Fort Madison inmates in the prison yard, 1930s.

SHSI (DES MOINES)





THE PLANTER



By TOM RUNYON

NEARLY EVERYONE has heard of "Johnny Apple Seed," but few have heard of Walnut Seed Edwards. Clifford Edwards has earned the right to that nickname by spending his spare time—the few precious times outside the walls that his status of "Trusty" earns him—planting black walnuts and other tree seeds. And only a born conservationist would attempt to follow an avocation like that while serving a prison sentence.

"It seems like a good idea," said Edwards. "I just stick a few in my pockets, then when I find a likely looking spot it only takes a minute to dig a hole and plant a walnut."

Born in a New York tenement, Edwards was 14 years old before he knew that "Keep off the Grass" signs were not standard equipment on the "Great Outdoors." Central Park was the only part of nature that he knew, except for pictures in books, but even then he loved it. And when he left New York, to wander over most of the U.S., the Red Gods took firm hold of him.

From the first he was interested in conservation. He reasoned that if seeds were planted trees were bound to grow, and to him a growing tree was much more beautiful than a pile of lumber or a suite of expensive furniture. Knowing little of methods or plans, he simply pushed a hole in the ground and planted a walnut. "Just think," he says today. "If every hunter would plant a few nut or fruit tree seeds there would be millions more trees. And think of the birds and animals the trees would attract. Or if Boy Scouts

would plant seeds instead of trying to rub fire out of two sticks of wood—can't you just see what a wonderful country this would be?"

It would not be surprising to hear that some American Legionnaire, or an Izaak



Waltonite, had that nut planting hobby. But Edwards is a convict. He is an ex-heister; has served eleven years of a life sentence. He is no native son planting trees to enjoy in his old age. When and if he goes free he will promptly shake the dust of Iowa from his feet. He will not be back to see the trees he has planted, the squirrels and other game that will be attracted to them. There will be no harvest for him—others will reap where he has sown. And so it would surely surprise and please the Ding Darlings of this world to see the wide-eyed enthusiasm in the eyes of this prison-bound conservationist.

Edwards has little opportunity to practice his hobby. Few and far between are the times that he can spend a few minutes in the nearby woods. But there are many men in the free world who might well envy his love for his hobby. He is one of those men blessed with the eternally open heart of a boy. Eleven years behind the walls have not left him a mental cripple. He is one of those rare men that stone and steel cannot whip. Open minded, open hearted, he will go his way with new dreams always in his eyes. The rocking chair may get his body, some day—it will never get his mind.

"Now don't forget," he cautions. "Leave the hull on the walnut. That hull supplies food to start the tree."

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Tom," she wrote Runyon. "It is awful to just have to sit by and watch the one you love die by inches. He has suffered more than any little man should."

Lindquist had always told his supporters who wrote to him not to forget Runyon, whose words had set him on the road to freedom. "He's a lifer, too," Lindquist would say. Lindquist's wish came true. The whole episode brought tremendous national attention to Runyon. His story about Lindquist was bought by *Collier's*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* published a story by Runyon about the inmates who fished unsupervised in boats on the Mississippi to supplement the prison's food stocks.

Runyon's years of sitting behind a typewriter, enveloped in a bluish cloud of smoke from a constantly burning cigarette, began to pay dividends. Some rewards were more important than the \$1,600 in checks the New York editors sent him. "I achieved a kind of precarious peace and shaky courage," he wrote. "Time was when I helped myself to other men's money. Time was when I helped myself to another man's life," Runyon told the audience of Edward R. Murrow's *This I Believe* program. Time had changed all that, he said. "I am even forced to try to be honest with myself, and that has a way of turning into honesty with others. I must help others as I help myself," he said.

Runyon continued to apply himself to his monthly portraits of the Iowa lifers. "When I write about a prisoner I look for the good in him; look for the story that has never been told," he wrote. He was especially attracted to other inmates who, like himself, had retained their dignity and wit and continued to avoid what Runyon had called the "shadow of the wall."

"No doubt I'll go on writing those little stories," Runyon said, "because of those who come to me in the yard with 'Say, I'm glad to see your write-up on Joe, Tom. He's over-due for a break.'" Runyon's stories continued to make a mark on outside readers as well. "His name has become well known around Iowa, the Midwest and the nation for his writing," noted John Reynolds in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

In October 1951, Runyon received a letter responding to a recent column in which he had expressed curiosity about how outside readers reacted to his articles. "You have nothing to worry about," the letter said, "you're doing a swell job of writing." The new fan was Erle Stanley Gardner, creator of fictional lawyer-detective Perry Mason and one of the most popular mystery writers of the time. Gardner had be-

come interested in prison reform and had been reading *The Presidio* for some time. "Here's a pat on the back from one writer to another," Gardner wrote.

Several months later, W. W. Norton & Co. asked Runyon if he would consider writing his life story. "Consider it?" said Runyon. "The typewriter was being practically pecked to death before the editor's letter fluttered to the floor." With permission from Warden Lainson to sleep beside his desk, Runyon worked day and night on his autobiography, leaving almost all else aside.

In October 1953, *In For Life* was published to considerable acclaim. "Since the publication a quarter of a century ago of Victor Nelson's *Prison Days and Nights*, no other convict has written so sensitively of the torments of penal purgatory," said Frank Leary, reviewing Runyon's book in *The New York Times Book Review*. "Runyon," said J. R. Perkins in the *Chicago Tribune Sunday Book Review*, "seems to have lived confused in the world of freemen—perhaps most lawbreakers do—but he walks with understanding among the imprisoned. His portraits of them and of himself have no dim strokes." Penologists and general readers should buy the book, said Stafford Derby, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Both readers will find Runyon a man worth knowing."

Though W. W. Norton refused to release sales figures three decades later (citing company policy), Runyon wrote that only about three thousand readers followed the reviewers' advice. That year readers were flocking not to Runyon's book but to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and to James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*. The money Runyon hoped the book would bring, the money he wanted to earn for his son's college education, never materialized. "I had almost set my heart on its seeing the boy through college and having to give up that dream hurt," Runyon wrote Gardner.

While writing the book, Runyon and his son had ended their estrangement. His son, Thomas Jefferson Runyon Jr., was only four months old when his father had entered prison. At Runyon's request, the young boy had been led to believe his father was dead. One day while visiting his aunt, 16-year-old Runyon Jr. came across a *Presidio* with an article by his father and demanded an explanation. Within weeks he visited his imprisoned father and the two became acquainted.

Though Runyon's book did not sell well enough to even pay for a year of his son's college education, "There were other compensations," Runyon said. One

Runyon's profile of lifer "Walnut Seed Edwards" (left, April 1943 *Presidio*) called him a "prison-bound conservationist."

of them came in the form of letters. *In For Life* had been reprinted in England and translated for publication in Argentina and France. As a result, Runyon received fan mail from around the world.

One series of letters in particular caught Runyon's attention. They came from a woman who had read his book in a British Columbia hospital. Twenty-two years old, she had a two-year-old son whom she could only watch grow up through snapshots because she was confined with tuberculosis. Although the windows of her room were not barred, there was something familiar in her plight, noted Runyon. "She has all the courage in the world, and she faces that world with a smile," he wrote. "But between the lines of her letters is the possibility that Carol will not go home again—that she, too, is serving a life sentence under far worse conditions than I face."

Another reward from Runyon's book was that it became a rallying tool for his growing ranks of supporters outside the prison. The book, Gardner's increasing interest, and Runyon's growing fame all gave rise to the hope that perhaps he might once again be a free man. Since his first letter to Runyon in 1951, Gardner had become a regular correspondent and had journeyed to Iowa twice to visit Runyon. Over the years, the mystery writer had taken on as a personal crusade trying to win the release of rehabilitated or wrongly convicted inmates. For cases that the system would not reconsider, Gardner used his most famous vehicle, his "Court of Last Resort," to rouse public support and publicity. These cases were then publicized in the men's magazine *Argosy*.

In Runyon, Gardner saw a symbol for his campaign. "I think your case may turn out to be quite important because I think it may clarify quite a principle in penology," Gardner told Runyon. "You are in a position where you can probably do more good for more people in prison than anyone I know of." At first, Gardner believed that quiet diplomacy might secure Runyon's release. "I had some faint hope that we could do things the easy way by getting some of these guys to listen to reason, but the [U.S.] Attorney General's office has tried to give me the brush-off," he wrote Runyon.

Instead, Gardner decided to turn Runyon into a *cause célèbre*. To accomplish that, he sought first to enlarge Runyon's readership. Gardner began drumming up subscribers to *The Presidio* with stories in *Argosy*. "If we can build up a greater outside circulation for *The Presidio* and it can tell the story of a modern, practical

experiment in the field of character development, it may do untold good," Gardner wrote to Runyon shortly after publishing the first of his stories about the Iowa inmate.

In four months, Gardner's efforts increased *The Presidio's* subscription rolls by more than a thousand. With the new readers on his mind, Gardner now counseled Runyon on his writing. His stories would now be read by a number of influential people "who are going to judge your character, your outlook on life, and your rehabilitation by what you put on paper," Gardner wrote. "This means that your writing during the next few months is going to be very, very important. A good many people are going to become Runyon fans if you play it right," he wrote in another letter. "Your writing, Tom, can convince them that prisoners are human beings."

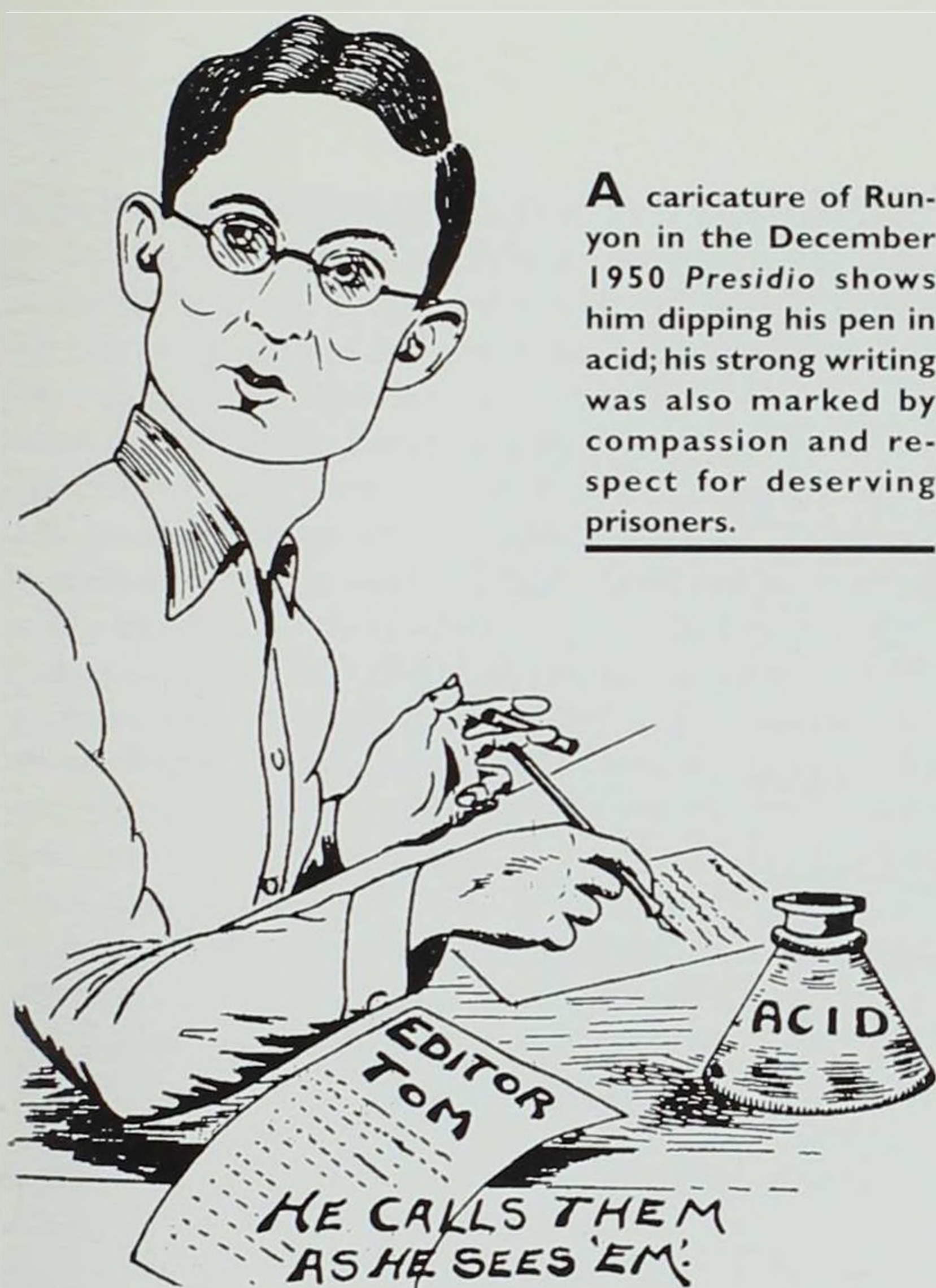
Gardner also began including Runyon's story in many of the speeches he gave around the country and began organizing Runyon's supporters into a committee to work for his release. "I hope by this fall to have gathered a group together who will start slugging, not so much for your case as that of an individual but for the principle involved in your case," Gardner wrote to Runyon in the summer of 1954. "Dammit, if we are going to adopt a sadistic attitude in regards to punishment, we're turning back the hands of the clock by a hundred years."

Twice in 1955, Gardner traveled to Washington, D.C., with his committee in hopes of persuading federal justice officials to remove the detainer on Runyon. The problem, as Gardner saw it, was that Iowa would never reduce Runyon's sentence unless the federal government moved first. If the detainer was removed, said one of the committee members, "we had a chance to help commute the Iowa sentence into a number of years—and then parole."

On his first Washington trip in May, Gardner was accompanied by Iowa journalists Charlie Gebhard and John Reynolds; *Argosy* publisher Harry Steeger; detective Raymond Shindler; Rital Reil of the International Press Alliance; and Negley Teeters, professor of criminology at Temple University and president of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. Despite friendly meetings with a congressman and with White House officials, no progress was made.

In October, Gardner returned to Washington alone and met with James Bennett, head of the bureau of prisons, a White House lawyer, and John V. Lindsay, an assistant to the attorney general, who later became mayor of New York City. Again no luck.

In Iowa, meanwhile, Lainson was making life



A caricature of Runyon in the December 1950 *Presidio* shows him dipping his pen in acid; his strong writing was also marked by compassion and respect for deserving prisoners.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

easier for his ward, who was now a celebrity. After *In For Life* was published, Lainson made Runyon a "consultant" to *The Presidio* so that he could have more free time to write. The warden had become so convinced that Runyon should be freed that he offered to assume "the responsibility of a federal parole" if it would help convince the Justice Department.

Lainson also gave Runyon his first opportunity in more than a decade to see the outside of the prison. In 1954, Lainson began to give Runyon permission to leave the prison to take photographs for *The Presidio* with a camera purchased the year before with royalties from his book. By the end of 1955, Runyon had been outside the prison a half-dozen times. On one of those trips, Runyon realized how much 18 years behind bars had changed him. In his youth, Runyon had been a sharp-eyed hunter and had tracked animals through the hills of West Virginia and the prairie of South Dakota. "On that morning we had driven fifty miles before I noticed rabbit tracks pockmarking the snow at every culvert. Indeed, walled-in years had taken their toll."

On another occasion, the warden allowed Runyon to join other prisoners along the banks of the Mississippi for a catfish fry. Accompanied only by an unarmed guard, Runyon recalled, "We were free to eat or

wander around or sit and soak up the quiet and peace there on the bank as we pleased."

Gardner's campaign, despite its setbacks in Washington, was gaining steam in Iowa. Several newspapers began demanding that at the very least Runyon should be allowed a hearing before the parole board. Runyon's supporters were becoming convinced that their chances for success were growing. Runyon, however, knew better. Even though he had become a model prisoner, he was hardly a favorite of the parole board. First, there was Runyon's 1943 attack on the board that had been reprinted in many newspapers. Second, his escape a few months after the article was evidence for the board that he could not be trusted. The three-member board had written in a 1944 memo to Governor Hickenlooper that "Runyon is apparently one of these 'brilliant criminals' who are more dangerous than many who do not have as good mentality."

In 1950 the board again reviewed Runyon's case after being requested to do so by Governor Beardsley. "Despite considerable political pressure brought from relatives and friends outside the State of Iowa," wrote the board members, "we see no reason why this man should receive any consideration for executive clemency." In 1954, Beardsley again asked the board to re-examine Runyon's case. The board's reply was terse. "We gave considerable time and thought to this case because of the widespread publicity this man has had as former editor of *The Presidio* and because of articles contained in the prison magazine and published in magazines of national reputation," the three-member panel replied. "This Board believes, in spite of his apparent ability and his brilliant writing, that he should be required to serve his natural life within the Penitentiary as ordered by Judge Graven. We feel he was very lucky not to have been hung," the board wrote in its seven-page opinion.

Runyon had been realistic about his chances, so perhaps he was less disappointed than those who held unreasonable expectations. Nonetheless, he was becoming rancorous about the walls that continued to surround him. "Every now and then I'm told that my writing is too bitter. Some readers seem to feel that I should be more mellow," he noted. "Perhaps they're right. But, the fact is, quite often I *am* bitter."

"I've stood aside and watched the blundering herd parade into prison—and usually out again—and very seldom indeed have I seen a convict helped by imprisonment," he wrote. Surely, he said, society could find a better way to handle people who broke the law. "But I see few signs of a really determined hunt for that way." In his case, for instance, the parole

board had never even taken the time to meet Runyon in the eleven years that had transpired since it first looked at his case. This was about to change.

In 1955, the Iowa Legislature enacted a law requiring the parole board to review the cases of lifers who had served more than 15 years and interview personally each of these inmates. After years of attacking each other in the pages of *The Presidio* and newspapers of the state, Runyon and the board would meet. The press could not wait for the hearing, insisting on prompting board members to comment on the case. Feeding the frenzy was the apparent feud between Warden Lainson and the board's most senior and most vocal member, Virginia Bedell, of Spirit Lake in Dickinson County. A former county attorney, Bedell regularly attacked Runyon in public forums and belittled Lainson's efforts to win his release. "If Warden Lainson will take care of his work and let us do ours, the state of Iowa will be better off," she said in a public meeting.

In January 1956, testifying before a state assembly committee, Bedell said that Runyon had shown no evidence of rehabilitation. Parole board chairman O. H. Henningsen, three weeks later, added his opinion that Runyon "will never be fit to enter free society again." In part, Runyon's fame seemed to work against him in the eyes of the board. A frequent target of their annoyance with Runyon was his autobiography. "You can search Runyon's book from cover to cover and find no real expression of remorse or contrition—nor can you find any positive statement about no further wrongful act," said Bedell. "If he were reformed, would he still be so full of venom?" The book, said Henningsen, "doesn't exactly lie, but it is filled with half truths."

The public comments of the board members enraged Runyon's supporters. In March, the *Belmond Independent* wrote that the "parole board's attitude toward Runyon is completely inexcusable." The *Des Moines Register* joined the fracas with an editorial and two long articles by Gilbert Cranberg addressing the question of granting parole to Runyon. Runyon had shown himself to be an unusually gifted and creative individual, the *Register* said in its editorial. "The board owes it to Runyon and to itself to make certain that the unfortunate hostility that has developed between Warden Lainson and the board, and the board and Runyon over some of his writings, does not figure in its decision."

On October 24, Runyon finally met the board. The

interview lasted all of 15 minutes. Bedell sat well off to one side, Runyon wrote in an account mailed to Gardner the next day. A transcript of the interview is missing from the state files, but references to the encounter exist in the board's recommendation to Governor Leo Hoegh against commutation. "In his interview before the Board he [Runyon] had a shifty appearance which did not impress us as showing any earnest desire to attempt to show any reformation of spirit or attitude," the report stated. "The Board of Parole does not wish to appear to be vindictive in this matter," the report said, mindful of the press attention to the Runyon case. Nonetheless, the pages of the report echoed many of the public statements made earlier by board members. For example, one can find Bedell's criticism of the book: "One can search Runyon's book throughout and find no indication of remorse;" or Henningsen's charge that Runyon was untruthful: "Many of those stories are not true to fact and entirely and falsely colored."

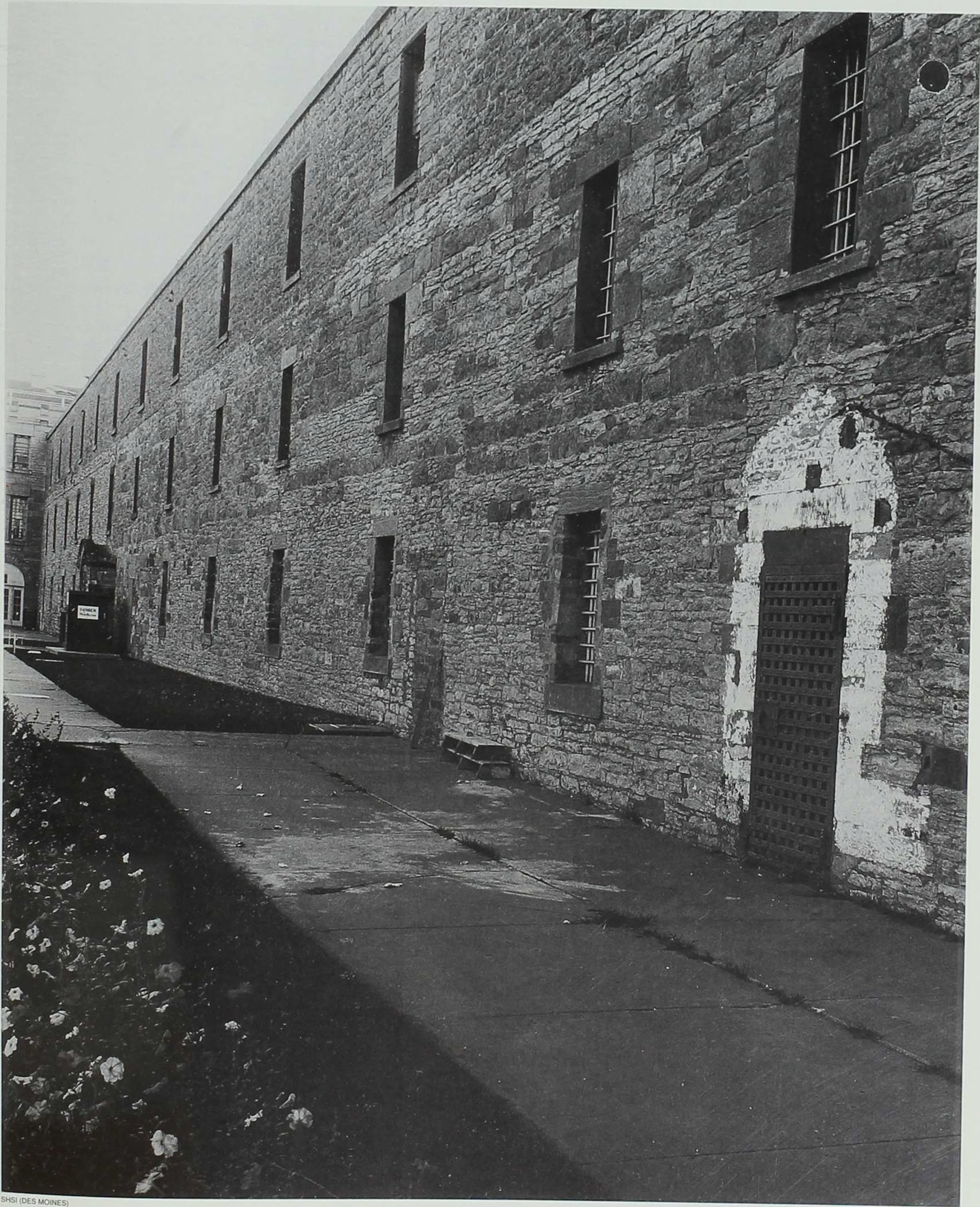
Moreover, much of the report was devoted to Runyon's original crime and to rebuffing the board's critics, rather than addressing the merits of Runyon's case. For example, the board tried to discredit Gardner's articles faulting the board for not having released Runyon, by pointing out that he had never met with members of the board. It is a deeply ironic retort, considering the board never cared to meet Runyon. Runyon took the board's inevitable decision as best as he could. "I'm neither worse off nor better off than before. I'll just go on plugging and see what the future brings," he wrote to Gardner.

Demand for Runyon's writing did not abate. Editor L. Dale Ahern of the *Decorah Public Opinion* asked him if he would write a regular column about prison life. Other newspapers had reprinted his articles, but this was a crowning achievement. He was not yet a free man, but he was being offered an open, unfettered podium.

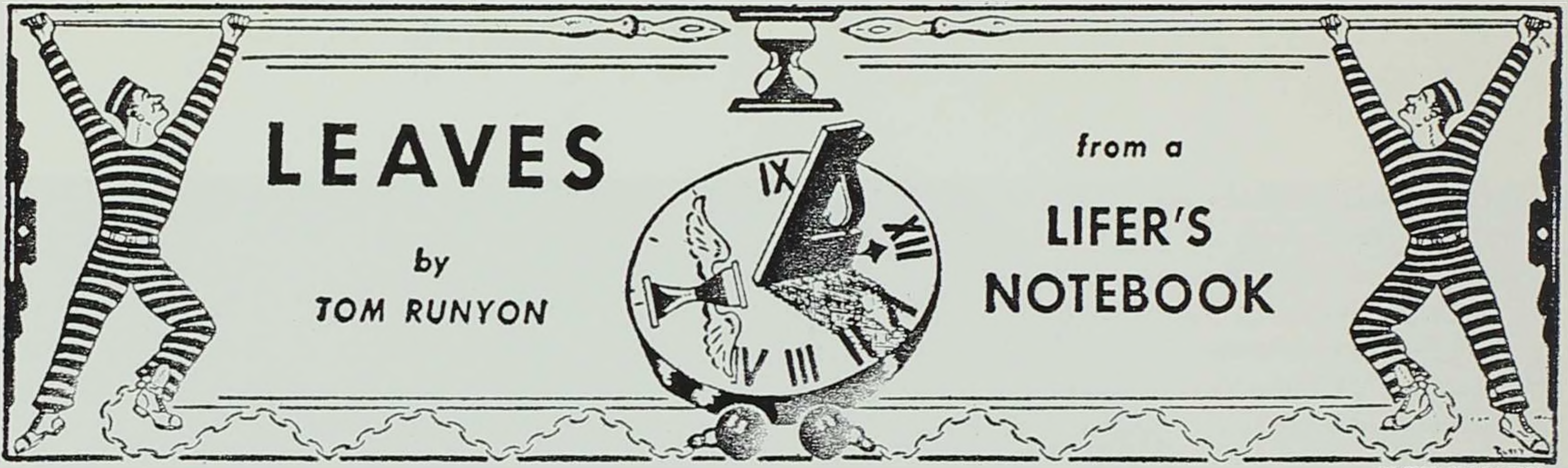
By the beginning of 1957, Runyon had become the country's best-known prison writer, and that March he observed the 20th anniversary of his imprisonment at Fort Madison. "Thinning hair and bi-focals those years have brought," he wrote, "but other things as well—they have brought some satisfaction and a great deal of hard work and a kind of concentration that at times make a man unconscious of passing time."

"Where did those years go?" asked Runyon. "They went into a battle for what I believe, and the

Exterior wall of cell block at Fort Madison, circa 1960s.



SHS (DES MOINES)



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Above: Heading from Runyon's popular *Presidio* column.

other editors believed, was right." Runyon was now 51 years old. To his fellow prisoners he was a calm, confident veteran prison lifer whom everyone knew. But underneath the polished exterior, Runyon was one of the loneliest inmates. His only steady companions over the years had been his typewriter and the acclaim it won him. Aside from Gardner, he had no friends in which he could confide. During all of the events of 1956, Gardner had again taken the time to come to Iowa and visit Runyon. "While I by no means live in a dungeon, somehow or other the world suddenly seems much larger when you're in the room," Runyon wrote after the visit.

In April 1957, Gardner was worried that perhaps Runyon had lost hope. "I think the most tragic thing that could happen on earth would be to give you any false hope," he wrote Runyon. "But I think it would be equally disastrous to have you feel the fight was lost." Less than a week after Gardner wrote those words, in the early morning of April 10, Runyon suffered a massive heart attack. The prison physician, "Doc" Peiper, attended to him, but there was nothing that could be done.

The *Des Moines Register* said, in an editorial about Runyon's death the next day, that "Gardner had hoped to make of Runyon a nationwide symbol of his campaign to emphasize prison rehabilitation." Now gone, Runyon would not be that symbol. "But through determination and the aid of a sympathetic prison administration he did show that prison need not be a

place of punishment and hopelessness," the editorial continued, "but of accomplishment and hope."

News of Runyon's death traveled far. In a tribute to his influence, his obituary was carried in newspapers from the *Oskaloosa Daily Herald* to *The New York Times*. Friends and supporters wrote to Lainson and Gardner. Gardner closed his file on Runyon with a terse memo: "Tom Runyon is dead. . . . There was no excuse for letting Tom Runyon die in prison. . . . Heaven knows how many persons will be discouraged from putting their feet on the comeback trail because of society's vengeful determination to get its full pound of flesh in the case of Tom Runyon."

Runyon had won his reprieve from imprisonment only through death. But in all his years, he had never succumbed to the shadow cast by the prison's walls that he so feared. And, in the end, it was his magazine, *The Presidio*, that had the last word. "Thanks to Runyon lifers in Iowa are no longer forgotten men," wrote fellow lifer Warren Bianco in its pages. "For a man carrying two life sentences it must have been a struggle to see so many men he helped leave prison. Men like Ole Lindquist and so many others. He could help everybody—except himself." ❖

James McGrath Morris, a high school history teacher in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., is the author of Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars, to be published this fall by McFarland & Company (PO Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640; 1-800-253-2187). Portions of this article are excerpted from the forthcoming book with permission of the publisher.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Besides *The Presidio*, published at Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison (1934-1977), a fairly complete collection of which is available at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., other major sources include Tom Runyon, *In For Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1953); Tom Runyon, "Prison Shocks," *Criminology*, ed. by Robert G. Caldwell (New York: The Ronald Press, 1956); correspondence between Erle Stanley Gardner and Tom Runyon and to various recipients regarding Runyon at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; documents of the Iowa Board of Parole, State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines); "The Multiple-Property National Register of Historic Places Statement of Historic Contexts for Iowa Corrections Institutions" by Joyce McKay, loaned to me by Marvin Bergman. In addition to Mr. Bergman, thanks are also owed to Edward N. McConnell, former state archivist; the late Walter Lunden, of Iowa State University; and Kathy Henderson, of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Annotations to this article are in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files. Further bibliographical information is also available in James McGrath Morris, *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., forthcoming in 1997).