

The Secretary,
Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee,
Suite SI 59,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Sir/Madam,

re SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE

I refer to recent discussions with your Department.

Please find attached the submission, and thank you for sending the Senate Report.

Thanking you in advance.

Yours faithfully,


EDGAR RICHARD JOHNSON

People call me John.

My name is Edgar Richard Johnson. I was born on 10.9.38.

At age eight, I was placed in an orphanage at Newcastle, then transferred to Saint Vincents Orphanage, Westmead, N.S.W. 1948

My mother was dying, and could not look after my brother and I. My brother was ten and I was 9 year old. I recall my brother and I running from Redbank Creek, where the orphanage boys used to swim. A runner was sent to fetch us, as we had visitors (the first) only to have our half-sisters tell us mum was dead. That broke me, from then on I was to run away from where-ever I was, and made Ward of the State in N.S.W.

My brother and I were put into the orphanage under a false name - mine being Reubin Twidale. I found out my true name when I was 18 year old. I was fostered out for a short time with a Mr and Mrs Brasier, they were good people, but did not fit into their life. A ward of the State, I was sent to Mittagong Boys Home, where cottage parents looked after 6 to 8 children. I remember asking Mr Saville if he was my new father, he laughed and said "no you are just a ward of the State". Saville was cruel, and used to cane up the hand and across, he opened my wrist on one caining.

We used to march to school about a mile away, chillblains on the toes were bad, as were the fingers - the only cure or relief was to urinate on your hands and feet - to be cained when you suffered chillblains on your fingers was cruel.

There was never enough food to say you had enough. School-lunch very often was cucumber sandwiches. Delousing took place each month with kerosene, ringworm and sores that would not heal were common, shoes seldom fitted, and clothes were thin in winter, and you cooked in summer.

After absconding I was sent to Albion Street, then to Glebe from Glebe to Mount Penang, a high security boys home. At this time I was about 13 year old. Mount Penang is just out of Gosford in N.S.W. Penang was a place of discipline and punishment, groups of inmates with an officer would be sent to break and chip sandstone for use around the home gardens, gutters and so on.

In mates were in painting gangs, garden duties, polishing hardwood verandahs with a holly-stone until the boards were shiney; kitchen duties - peeling vegies etc.

I was once on kitchen duties, and cut too much peel of the spuds. I had the spud peels for tea, boiled as punishment. Standing on the one spot or marking time were common, as were running around the parade ground for hours - many breaches of conduct were met with 24 hours solitary confinement in a cell, one blanket no bed, a mug of milk, and slice of bread threex times in the 24 hours. Fields were planted with cooch and buffalo grass stems by inmates on hand and knees.

Tobacco was issued to older inmates, (fifteen year olds I think). Cigarettes, matches, and sweets were used to buy clothes that were a good fit. Food and almost anything for older inmates, matches and tailor made cigarettts (brought in by visitors) were contraband, but were plentiful.

As I was a known absconder, other inmates were told to keep away from me, I spent most of my time on my own, they were also told I was the worst kind, and no good. If an inmate bolted or ran away during the day or evening, older inmates were sent to run the escapee down, if they caught him, three to six months was taken off their sentence. (Wards of the state were not sent as runners, as they were not under sentence, and could not have time deducted.)

I was transferred to Mussellbrook Boys home, it was a farm environment. I was not accepted by the inmates or the management. I was bad for the place and an escapee, and treated as such, I ran way over night. When I returned next morning aplogised, but was sent back to Mount Penang, from there I was transferred to Tamworth Boys Home, which was a former prison for men - The Govenor was named Johnstone, he took me from the station in his car, there were childrens toys on the floor. I remember thinking - how can this place be so bad.

I was sent to Tamworth to be "broken", thats what it was used for by the Child Welfare Department of N.S.W. The prison housed no more than thirteen inmates at a time. I think there was ten or eleven when I was there.

I WAS ABOUT FOURTEEN AND A HALF YEARS OLD. 1952-1953

I was taken inside Johnstone told me the rules, and with each rule, I was hit across the side of the head with an open hand. I was naked and cold.

Never be less than six feet from an officer or inmate, never look anywhere than straight ahead.

Never when marching have your outstretched thumb lower than your chin.

Never be out of step with other inmates when marching, and never be caught not standing straight.

Never talk unless you use these words to an officer -

"Please sir, may I inquire" - any breach of these rules resulted in being kicked in the tail-bone, hit across the side of the head or puched in the back. Speaking was solitary confinement for twenty-four hours, where the inmate had to scrub cell bars with the head of a hoe. The cell had no front wall, just bars which you scrubbed. If the noise stopped you were beaten with fists. I stopped, and Johnstone came upstairs, gave me a beating when he knocked me down he threw the sleeping board on top of me, with the beatings, my front teeth were loosened, and consequently by the age of 23 I had lost most of my teeth.

Food was a mug of milk and a slice of bread, you ate while you scrubbed.

This was normal treatment at Tamworth.

Department of Child Welfare officers devised punishments that I have no words to describe. All inmates dressed by number, made beds by Number, folded clothes by number. The catwalk around the top cells (they were called cabins) was made of steel grate, that is they had thousands of small squares. I was once assigned to cleaning the grate with one square inch of cloth to put brasso on, and another square inch of cloth to take it off. My knees lost feeling with pain. Six pits were dug in the jail yard, each beside the other. one was full with dirt, the other empty - they were the size of a grave. The inmate emptied one into the other. All day you filled and emptied the pits with a shovel. There was a white board at the bottom, when you reached it, "please Sir, may I inquire" "Get out, and fill it in again".

There were logs brought into the jail to be cut with a cross cut saw, officers took the wood home. I stopped sawing one day and swore. I was taken to the front office, where I was beaten, and had my head rammed into a filing cabinet - my right side eye tooth was broken off near the gum. I was put into solitary confinement to scub bars. Some days later I was taken to a Tamworth dentist who took the nerve out and fixed a false tooth into the root of the broken tooth, an officer stood by whilst this was being done. Other inmates made brooms and scrubbing brushes with millet grown at the Mussellbrook Boys Home. The Minister for Child Welfare visited Tamworth - we were told when asked how we were treated to say "well thank you sir" I said "we are bashed and starved", I got solitary, and he was hurried on.

One punishment was called a square meal, the inmate was given a bowl of something with a spoon, he counted under his breath 1 dip spoon in 2 raise spoon to level with chin 3 put food in mouth 4 back level with chin, and so on. (I never ever finished a square meal)

I once saw an inmate carry a half bucket of water on his chest tied with a sock he had not washed properly, he had to march with the rest of us.

I remember an inmate - I think his name was Simons who poisoned his index finger with steel wool to get out of Tamworth. He had part of his finger amputated, and was sent back to Mount Penang.

There was an inmate named Hogan, he was ill treated so much. he would not eat. They had to put weight on him before sending him back to Mount Penang. The officers held him down in front of the inmates, and forced some type of formula down his throat. When he got back to Mount Penang the inmates there called him "Hogans Ghost". I met him when I got back to Mount Penang They had broke his spirit and his heart.

I was transferred back to Mount Penang after eight months. My spirit was not broken, but they had broken all of my trust and all of my faith in the system, and society. From eight to sixteen when I was discharged to work in the bush, I had one visitor.

I was sent to Sydney on my discharge, fitted out with clothes for going out, and clothes for work - a new suit and suit case a pound note, and train ticket.

I was sent to work for a farmer at a place just out of West Wyalong.

Mr and Mrs Dole were fine people, and treated me well.

I would like to finish my submission the only way I know, and that is to speak from the heart.

The years in child care have left me with a blurred vision of childhood.

I don't remember happiness, laughter, nor do I remember birthdays.

The years of my childhood seem to fold together like dough, as I was kneaded into shape. I am sad that I was not left with any fond memories as a child.

The boys homes reformed me to the extent that when I came out I was mentally bugged. The things taken for granted - table manners, how to dress for where you were. Why did people cut a slice of bread in half, what was a butter-knife, why do other boys not fold their clothes before going to bed, or have buttons done up, (things I had been punished for.)

It took me until I was about 34 before I was fairly normal. It's hard to start your life at sixteen, and be too ashamed to ask for help.

My guardians left a lot of dents in my armour, but worst of all they stole a half decent childhood.

Though some of the dates I have given may be a little out, the statements I have given regarding the treatment and conditions while I was a ward of the State in New South Wales are true.

I thank the Community Affairs Reference Committee and all participating members for caring enough to read this submission.


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EDGAR RICHARD JOHNSON

TAMWORTH Hospital

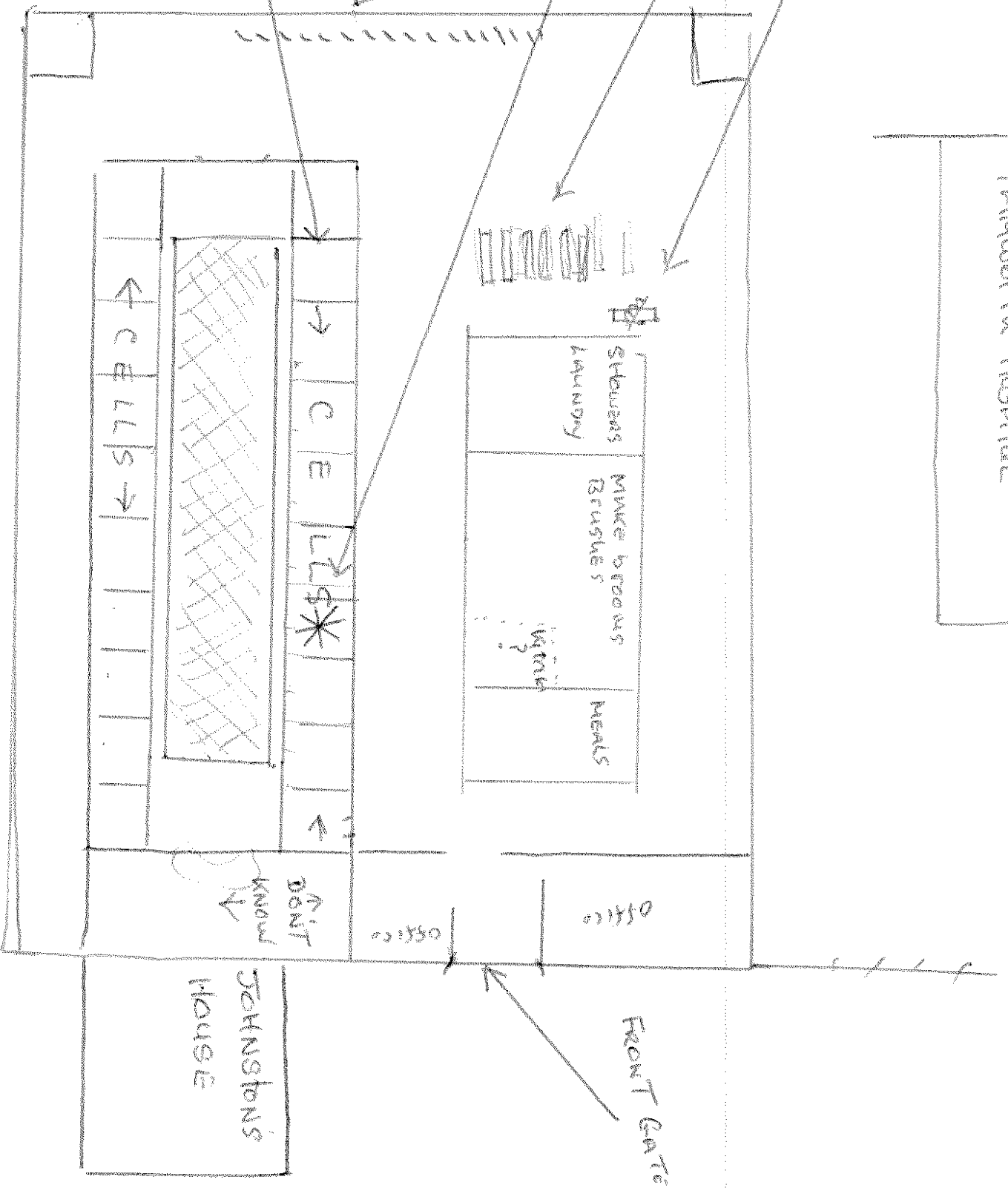
SPACE
Logs

DIG PITS

CELL 17 OR 27?
MY CELL

PIT GRAVED IN ON
BOYS THEN FILLED IN
AND NOT USED.

SO LITARY
CONFINEMENT
SCRUB BARS



TAMWORTH BOYS PRISON TOP VIEW

1953-54