Hard Time at Tehachapi: California’s First Women’s Prison
Transcript

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In Conversation with: Ryan Alaniz (RA)
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Description: A transcript of the podcast of the discussion on the book, Hard Time at Tehachapi: California’s First Women’s Prison between author Kathleen A. Cairns of history and Ryan Alaniz of sociology.

Karen Lauritsen (Moderator): Welcome, to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on December 5, 2014, at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Kathleen Carnes and Ryan Alaniz, discussing Kathleen’s book, Hard Time at Tehachapi, California's first women's prison. Kathleen Cairns is a lecturer in the history department at Cal Poly and the author of several books including The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of Nellie May Madison, and Proof of Guilt: Barbara Graham and the Politics of Executing Women in America. Kathleen is joining conversation by Ryan Alaniz, an assistant professor in sociology, who, at the time of the podcast, had just finished teaching a class that included students from both Cal Poly and the San Luis Obispo County Jail. Together, Kathleen and Ryan talk about how the first California women’s prison came to be, the women who lived and worked there, and implications for today’s prison system.

KC: Well, hello there. The book, Hard Time at Tehachapi, is about an experiment in prison reform in California, which started in the early 1900s, and went through the early 1950s. And it was a women's prison. I should tell you that before Tehachapi opened in 1933, women felons in California were at San Quentin Prison with the men. This did not work out so well always. And so starting in the—in the very early 1900s, club women in California began to try to get women separated from men at the prison. There were a variety of problems with this—with this request. First of all, a state didn't really want to cut loose with money for incarcerated women—for incarcerated women. Second of all, they didn't know which kind of women you would incarcerate. Would you incarcerate prostitutes? Would you incarcerate murderers, and [inaudible], and forgers, and, you know, child killers altogether? So there was a real conflict about this. I should tell you that when I started looking at this prison, I had no knowledge of it whatsoever during research for my second book, which was on Nellie Madison, who killed her husband in 1934, and it's a really super good story. So she talked quite a bit about the prison in her—in her writings with—in her letters to journalists and in reporting about the prison. They talked about her. And she talked about this one superintendent that she didn't like very well. And so I was pretty interested in this prison, which sounded like no prison I had ever heard of in my life. And the reason is that it was absolutely 100% run by women and it was totally focused on rehabilitation. The set up of the prison was also unlike any other person I've ever seen or heard about it. It was designed to look like a college campus, only not like a college campus like this but a college campus like say, for example, in the countryside of England where you'd have
[inaudible] village with these big cottages. And this is where these women live, in cottages. Each one of them had their own rooms. They could decorate the rooms however they wanted to. The women were not—were not supposed to stay in these rooms very long; however, they were supposed to be outside working 24/7. Nellie’s job at the prison, once she got off death row, was to—was to tend the garden, and that’s what she did 24/7—or all day long. She tended to this garden. But they also did things like they played sports, they put on plays, they had their own newspaper. And this just seemed so un-prison-like to me. So I started researching how this prison came to be and I learned a lot about how pushy club women were in the early 20th century to get this project off the ground. First of all, it took them almost 30 years to convince the state legislature to cut loose with funds for this. Once they did this then they had to find a place. If you don’t know where Tehachapi is, it’s about 30 miles east of Bakersfield and it’s out in the middle of nowhere, which is—they began to immediately talk about that, and it’s 130 miles north of Los Angeles and about 200 miles south of the Bay area. And so they thought it was perfect for female felons because they couldn’t really escape. And they—this was such an usual prison that they didn’t have a fence there for the first four or five years because they just assumed the women would love this so much they would stay there and not [laughter] take off. Sadly, there was a train station in Tehachapi. So once they got outside the prison they hopped the train and tried to escape. They mostly didn’t get very far. But anyway, so they eventually put up a fence. But the first few years they didn’t have a fence at all. So they got the money for this project. They found a location for the—for the prison. But then they had to figure out who was going to run this prison. And the first—the first thing that caused problems was that the state legislature wanted a man to be the—to be the head of this prison. And so these club women, who had literally spent decades trying to get this off the ground, were absolutely outraged. This is in 1933. Well, so for two years this man operated this—or he was the superintendent of this prison and but by now these women were so savvy that they knew how to contact the media, how to get people out to the prison, and how to shape the story. And so they would—they would contact all these reporters for the Los Angeles Times, for all these other papers, and they would say, “be sure that you point out the really lousy things about this prison when you’re here.” And so they did. And as a result of this, in 1935, the women managed to get the state legislature to qualify an initiative for the state ballot, putting women totally in control of this prison. The voters of California in 1936 passed this—passed this initiative, and so starting in early 1937 women took total control. They had their own parole board. They had their own Board of Trustees. All the women who worked there except for the people who did construction around the prison were women. And they were on their way and it looked really good in 1937 and 1938. Well, low and behold they discovered fairly quickly that the women didn’t get along with each other. There were a variety of problems. The prisoners were not part of—not part of them though. The superintendent was power-hungry. The warders, who were working-class women who often had to take these jobs because they—it was the depression and they needed the jobs, couldn’t get along with the superintendent because she treated them badly. The club women who had put this whole thing together wanted to visit, and the superintendent said really this is—this is an operating prison now. You can’t really just show up and—with your friends and picnic on the grounds. So these problems among the women, which I found very depressing, sort of started to doom this project by the end of the 1930s because it gave the male politicians and others an excuse to take the prison
away from the women. As the 1940s came, you know, World War II starts. Women who might be forced to become wardens at this prison, in this, you know, place in the middle of nowhere where the wind constantly blew, could now take jobs in shipyards and defense plants and they did not need any more to have these prison jobs. And so they had a hard time keeping the women employees. Finally by the end of the 1940s the state secretly started planning to move the women away from Tehachapi to a new place in Corona. And they started building this prison, which is still there by the way, and then when the women found out they were furious about this and they tried to stop the process. But sadly 1952, early 1952 an earthquake hit—a huge earthquake hit Tehachapi and it leveled the prison. And so it was the perfect excuse for taking the women and moving them to Corona. And so—and so Tehachapi sort of was left to sort of languish. One of the things I talk about in the book, is I went out to Tehachapi to find some records. First I went to the prison—the prison, the corrections department in Sacramento and they said oh, Tehachapi would have those records. Well, the corrections department has all the men's records right, but somehow Tehachapi would have the women's records. Well, Tehachapi fell down in an earthquake, right. So it's been rebuilt and it's now a men's prison. So I went out there and I asked the guy who took me around the prison, the public relations guy, where the records were and he said, he pointed to the basement and he said no one's been down there in 50 years. So we have no clue if we would have any records left. So this how much they thought about women prisoners, it's that they didn't even bother to save the records of them. So I had to piece the story together through stories in the newspapers I found at the state archives, records of the parole board, and so I had to paste it sort of that way. But to end the story of Tehachapi, it was rebuilt to a men's prison. It's now a medium security men's prison that holds 6,000 people. At its height in 1952 it held 432 women. So this is the explosion in the prison population. The number of felons who went to Tehachapi in 1933 were 100, and there were 143 I want to say, that's the entire population of felons, female felons in California 1933, were 143. That's because mostly they tried to shunt them off to county jails instead of putting them in prison. Today there are two women's prisons. They are vastly overcrowded. One is in Corona and one is in Chowchilla, and they have 6000 people each in these prisons. They don't have their own rooms, safe to say. There are seven or eight prisoners to a cell. They don't have female—even have female wardens anymore, they're mostly men who are wardens. So I should tell you that this—that this—I think that this—despite all the problems that this experiment worked. The recidivism rate in the 20 year period of Tehachapi was 10%, 10%. The recidivism rate today is closer to 50%. So that's the story Tehachapi. I thought it was a fascinating story, because it was sort of a moment in time when people actually believed that you could— you could help people, you could make prisoners into people that would be productive members of society. They were interested in what they wanted them to do, but today, of course, it's very difficult. I'll end with this piece of information. I have a friend who was in prison in Corona for 16 years for a murder she didn't commit. Her prosecutor was disbarred over the case, and she now runs a prison—a prison reform organization, and she just says it's just that it's just a horrendous experience to be in prison today. No one cares. And when you get out of prison they give you $200, they put you on a bus, and they say find someplace to live with the $200. And then you're supposed to make it to your parole person within the first—the first few days, but how would you get there, you know, you've got the bus ticket, you've spent the money on the place to stay for a few days, and now you have to somehow find your way to the parole
office—or the probation office, I'm sorry. And so what happens if you don't get there in time is they send you back to prison. So this is a—anyway, that's my spiel so [laughter]. Yeah.

RA: Well thank you, Kathy.

KC: Sure.

RA: I believe this is a particularly timely book, but also topic here in California. We have the highest rate of incarceration in the world, especially of the developing world, multiple times more than England or Spain or the other European countries, and I really appreciated looking at Tehachapi as almost an experiment in rehabilitation. So my work, just this last quarter, we had nine inmates and 12 Cal Poly students, and the 12 Cal Poly students and I would go into the county jail and have a class for an hour and a half each week with the—with the inmates. I would call them inside and outside students. It was a really powerful opportunity to kind of bridge these two—these two very diverse groups. I mean our border here at Cal Poly, our fence line borders California men's colony, and yet they are such an invisible population. So I guess my first question was, going back to a Churchill quote, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Do you think that this Tehachapi experiment was a success, a failure, or both?

KC: Well, you would have to say it was a failure. I mean, because it didn't last very long. And it's also a failure because people didn't pay any attention to it. They didn't even know it was there. That tells you how hard it was to get—to get any sort of widespread publicity for this experiment. But I think it was a success because the women who did this, and thank you for asking that question, because the women who did this were not professional women. They didn't know how to go out when they started this and get the media involved, and get politicians involved, they were so idealistic that they thought if they went to talk to politicians they would just say oh, that's a great idea, here's the check. And so these women were in clubs. They were in the Civic League of San Francisco. They were in the League of Women Voters. They were in the California Federation of Women's Clubs. These were housewives mostly who went into reform because—partly because they really wanted to help other people, but partly because they—this is how they got power themselves was through reform because they couldn't really get jobs. And so I think it's a success because it shows what people who don't have any idea how to work the political system when they start. How they learn how to work their way through the political system, and if these women who had no clue how to do this can, you know, accomplish something like this, it seems like you could do it again. If people had the willpower, you could do it again. So I think it's both a failure and a—and a success—but I'm a historian and we always say everything is a—both a failure and a success right [laughter]. We never have just one answer.

RA: So what lessons do you think that you could bring from Tehachapi to say the criminal justice system now? If you were asked your opinion by Sacramento, or even the local county jail, what would you share with them?
KC: That’s a hard question because there are so many people in prison in California. The death row population California is unbelievable. There's 700 men on death row in California and 20 women. So the prison overcrowding is so bad, but if you just—but if you suggest that you build more prisons, and so that you would have—they would have better conditions, then you’d fill up the—then the towns would fill up because you’d hire more prison guards, and so they become more—they would then find the more reasons to put people in prison. So I don’t—I don’t know, you know, how you could—how you could do something like Tehachapi today, because it was a small—it was so small. And the population was ranged between 130 something and 400 and something the whole time. I mean with 6000 people in a prison, I mean how do you separate them out. And the whole idea that rehabilitation and giving them lots of things to do, the things I've heard about people in prison today and from what I've read, they had very little to do. They just stay in their cells. If you read Pipe Kerman's book, which is a really good book, Orange is the New Black, she talks about—I forgot, where did she get, where was her prison?

RA: Connecticut.

KC: Connecticut. She talks about just walking this track all day. There was nothing to do for people. They had their own newspaper at Tehachapi that actually circulated outside the prison. I mean you could do something like that. I've asked people about newspapers in prison and they apparently don't have them. So those are the kinds of things you could do. The prison—the prison borders as she said are big, they're large. You could put like baseball fields and tennis courts and things, and I have a photo in the book about women—of women playing tennis in bloomers behind their cottage. So I don't know that you could. It would be wonderful to think you could do something like that today but, it's a long-winded answer, I'm sorry.

RA: No, no, no, that's a great answer. Do you think—have you ever thought about using your talent to go into the county jail and—

KC: Absolutely, absolutely. I thought about teaching, anybody who's interested in teaching in the prison system, the county jail sounds like it's much more amenable. I contacted the corrections department to find out about teaching classes in women's prison, teaching women's history classes in women's prisons and it's a lot of red tape that you have to go through for the big corrections department. But county jails I would think would be—would be a wonderful way to go. You said, what were some of the classes they teach there?

RA: Currently they're teaching some yoga classes. They're teaching poetry, and—especially at the Juvenile Hall, drawing and art classes, and also music, like guitar.

KC That's great.

RA: Uh-huh.
KC: So is the population—I've always heard that the county jail population is also overflowing. It's too—

RA: Yeah, so it changed with 8109 where all this—because our state prisons were so overcrowded that they moved everybody to the county jail. So now, where county jail used to be less than a year, now people are there for multiple years.

KC: Oh, okay. And so how—where do they find space to have these classes then?

RA: There's small pockets of space for different activities. Like they have AA meetings, but when they're not having AA meetings they use them for these kind of classes.

KC: Yeah, yeah.

RA: But the idea of like one idea I've talked to other people about is like California men's colony they have this huge amount of labor, are people interested—or people that don't have anything to do and we have a huge agricultural school here, so could we use that land to somehow maybe combine the two and use that as a rehabilitative—

KC: Yeah, that's a—

RA: Opportunity.

KC: Right. Well there's so many people in prison. That's the hard thing about the rehabilitation effort, is that you—you have all these—I mean how would you set up enough different kinds of activities for this number of people, so yeah, yeah.

RA: So I was also interested in the choice of your approach to writing this book, because you move between history, kind of the political will of these women in California, who shaped the institution, and then you delve into individuals, like kind of getting to know the women in the prison. I was wondering why you chose that approach versus say another.

KC: I was a journalist for a long time before I became a professor, and—which really makes me old now, but—and so I loved telling stories about people. And so every book that I've written, I always try to focus on the people. The women prisoners were difficult because, of course, there were no records on them. And so the ones that I chose to focus on were either ones that were in the newspaper, who were editing or writing in the newspaper and they had their names, or you could see—you could get their names from—from like I said the parole board records. And—but I tried to focus on just 20 or 30 people who are quite interesting. And so—and so I thought it told a better story than just talking about the people who put the—who put the prison together, well who are some of these women who are in this prison? And they were fascinating women. The prison superintendents always said the murderers were the easiest ones, because they just wanted to do their time and leave. The ones who were really bad were like the forgers, because you knew they were going to get out of prison and they were going to
go right back to forging. And one of my very favorite prisoners was a woman named Jean Dayton [assumed spelling], and she edited the newspaper, she directed and wrote the plays, she played in all the sports, and one—in her last newspaper before she left—her last, sorry before she left was like in 1942, and she said [inaudible] “I'm leaving this place and I'm going off to find a man in the Northwest.” She was back in prison within three months because she was—she was so good that one of the trustees at the prison actually invited Jean to live with her while she got on her feet, Jean proceeded to steal her car, steal her checks, take off and start writing checks, and so she was back in prison. And I just thought that was a much more interesting way to look at it than—as you can see, some of these people are, and they're pretty colorful, a lot of them are pretty colorful so yeah.

RA: I found that in the—in the process of writing I've often been changed and I learn a lot and I wondering what lessons that you learned from publishing this book?

KC: Wow, that's a great question too. I think I learned a lot about how these club women in the early 20th century were, because I always tended to think of them as really bored housewives who just left their homes to do these little dabbling—they dabbled in little things, and then they went home, and then they would go to a party, and then they would come home. These women were seriously professional about what they want to do. The main person was from Alhambra actually. She was—she was—actually she was born in San Luis Obispo actually. Her name was Rose Wallace [assumed spelling] and she moved as a child to San Diego and then she went to college and then she got married and she was a club woman. I mean, she started out—she always signed her letters Mrs. Ernest Wallace [assumed spelling] wherever she was. She'd sign Mrs. Ernest Wallace. By the time she got Tehachapi started, like came into being 10 years later, she was Rose B. Wallace. She was not Mrs. Ernest Wallace. And she was really good. I mean, she would go to Sacramento. She would write in her diary, “I'm going to Sacramento. I'm talking to the legislators up there.” She was—she was tough, she was a politician. She ended up running for—I think she ran for the state legislature from Alhambra and she lost, but I was really impressed with these women, who were not just bored housewives. They were—they turned into politicians themselves. So, and they were absolutely relentless. I mean, they were totally relentless. You couldn't—you couldn't stop them. You couldn’t—you couldn't humiliate Rose. You couldn't—you could really anger Rose but you couldn't—she didn't care if you criticized her. She would say oh yeah, okay thanks and go right on. And so it was just a pretty amazing, you know, learning experience. And so that was one of the really important things, I thought. You know, I went into this book with sort of an idea of what these women were like and was totally wrong.

RA: It's interesting because it's almost paradoxical, because in the book you mentioned how the rehabilitation was to create these women as essentially housewives. They wanted them to leave Tehachapi as being knowing how to sew, and how to cook—

KC: Right.
RA: And how to be a good housewife, and yet the women pushing for this rehabilitation and this new model were very much empowered.

KC: Yes.

RA So how would you—how do you explain that kind of paradoxical goals of the two women being very different?

KC: I don't think you can explain it, because this is what society wanted women to be was housewives in the 1920s and '30s. You were supposed to be at home taking care of your family, and if you taught these women who were prisoners, you know, jobs they could do that would keep them out of the house, well then why would—why would you—why would the legislature—state legislature give you money to have women then not do what they were supposed to do. But also I think these women themselves who turned into real professional politicians, they didn't really understand that what they were doing was not—what they were suggesting wasn't exactly what they were doing themselves. So I think part of it was unconscious. But part of it they were just really—they were canny politicians. They understood that they wouldn't get money for telling these women they could go be, you know, brain surgeons or—

RA: Sure.

KC: You know, they go back and get graduate degrees somehow. So, and that was one of the hard things I found too, is the relationships among the women themselves at the prison—the superintendents they had were always women, they were always educated women. They had been to college, all of them. And then the women they hired to be the warders, the women who ran—who ran the prison, they ate with the prisoners, they took them out to do activities, they had to make sure they were in bed at night, they were working-class women, all of them were working-class women, and they resented being told what to do by these educated white women, white professional women. And so that was sort of—that was a little bit of a depressing thing is realizing that these women who are professionals, not the club women who lobbied the legislature, but the women who actually came in to oversee the prison, they had a sense of entitlement that was pretty depressing. One woman demanded to have a car and a driver to take her everyplace, and she—and she had to have a wardrobe for clothing when she went to talk at conferences. And so these poor women who had to—had to, you know, triple up to get to the train station in a car if they could get one, were really resentful of this woman who got this big budget for clothing and for going to conferences. And so that was I thought a little bit depressing to see how they didn't—the working-class women were sort of shunted aside. Yeah.

RA: It makes me think, you know, often in history we look back and we say oh, how could we possibly have done it this way? So how could we have possibly been thinking that the goal of training women and rehabilitating women is to train them into being housewives, and I almost wonder in 20, 30, or 50 years when we look back at the rehabilitation of women today in the
prison system, what would we say about, oh my gosh I couldn't believe that we weren't doing x, y, and z.

KC: Yeah, I don't think they're doing anything for women today very much. It's unbelievable. I mean these women had rooms with doors that shut, and many of these had their own private bathrooms. And they had a dining room where they had—they had like white tablecloths and napkins and they had, you know, they grew their own food. And Tehachapi was also used as a farm. They grew their own food, they made their own meals. There were not drug offenders here. The drug offenders were in county jail. These had to be felons. And so—and so that was—that was the difference. They didn't really have drug treatment programs or anything like that. But they did have AA meetings there at Tehachapi. And so—and they wrote about it in the newspaper that they have these AA meetings and lots of people went to them. So I think the drug issue is so significant, that starts to change the 1970s with the—with the war on drugs, coming in with Nixon and Reagan as governor of California, and the whole war on drugs. And I should also mention one other thing, I know you wanted us to open it to questions, but the indeterminate sentencing. We have determinate sentencing in California now. And some people think it's a good thing, I don't think it's such a good thing. The women and the men who are in prison had indeterminate sentencing, which meant that you had a range of a sentence when you went in there. So for example, if you were sent to prison for murder you had a life sentence, but it was that you could—you could be eligible for parole after I think was eight years, I can't remember. And so the woman I wrote the book about who killed her husband was an abused wife, and she got the death penalty and then after massive lobbying campaign by women's groups actually to get her off death row, she was—she was given a life sentence and she got out after seven more years. And so what that does is that—is that it frees up space in the prison for people, and you have to behave a certain way to get out. And believe me, they look at you carefully. You have a demerit if you—if you talk back to somebody. You have a demerit if you, you know, if you—if you don’t take your dishes to the sink. And so you have to be on your best behavior for seven whole years. And then you go before the parole board and they—and they will let you out. But they ended indeterminate sentencing in the 1970s. And so that really has changed a lot of—and actually it was Jerry Brown who ended indeterminate sentencing in his first term as governor, 40 years ago. So outsiders must look at Jerry Brown and think has he been governor all that time [laughter]? Because he's back. You know, it's like wait. So yeah, so that was.

RA: Yeah, I'll share a quick story too. We read a short chapter called [inaudible] and what the women, many of them hadn't had even a high school education, so what they did was try to make sense of this kind of difficult text written by a Brazilian. And so one of the women what she did was she crossed out all the times that it said oppressor, and she wrote her husband's name. And every time they wrote oppressed she wrote her own name. And then she shared her story as that she was physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by her husband, that so in order—she had eight kids with him, and it was just a really bad situation. In order to cope she turned to drugs and then she was caught with drugs and that's how she ended up in jail. And really at the end of hearing all these stories at the end of this class what I learned is that, like the old quote, but for the grace of God not I, that had I grown up, or had I been in the situation,
not that they can't take responsibility for their actions, but it's much more understandable when you try and put yourself in the shoes of what they had to go through in order to make the choices that they did. So I think that's a very good point.

KC: Yeah.

RA: So in terms of your writing, I thought that it was, you know, you've been very prolific, and I think all of us would like to write, more students, staff, and faculty. Do you have any suggestions that you could share with us about how you've been so successful in getting your books out?

KC: I have no hobbies [laughter]. Writing is my hobby. Yeah. I just love to write, and I was a journalist. And so when I went to grad school at UC Davis in the late 1980s, I decided that that's when I went to grad school, is I wanted to write books. And just sit yourself in the chair. That's what my—I tell my one friend who always has a book she's going to write. And then like six months later she has another book she's going to write, and I'm always like just sit yourself in the chair and start writing.

[Music]

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