

Prison: Town takes good with bad

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TAMMS, Ill.—Finally, things are looking up here at the southern tip of Illinois.

After a long, soggy summer, the Mississippi flood waters have slunk back in their banks. The sweet gums and maples in the Shawnee National Forest are at their glorious peak of color.

And just last week, word came from Springfield that 500 of the state's most notorious

felons are moving to the little town of Tamms, population 748.

"It's fantastic," said Sherman Dodson, the one-man police force in this tranquil town 20 miles north of Cairo. "We're looking for all kinds of good to come from this."

To an outsider, Monday's announcement that Tamms is to be the home of the state's newest supermaximum security prison might not seem like good news.

The \$60 million lockup, to be

located at the foot of the red clay cliffs on the edge of town, will house the worst of the worst offenders, those murderers and rapists and drug dealers so difficult they cannot be controlled in other prisons.

But residents of Tamms aren't scared. In this forgotten town in a poor and forgotten corner of Illinois, even a prison represents progress and the promise of economic salvation.

"We would have liked a nice

SEE TAMMS, PAGE 16

Tamms

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

big General Motors plant instead of a prison," confides Carl Hilleman, a longtime Tamms trustee who might be Jimmy Carter's cousin with his fair looks and gentle drawl. "But we've been down on our knees for a long time begging for something.

"Until this came along," he said, "this town had no place to go but down."

Tamms has had nothing but bad news for a long time. It was once a major north-south railroad switching station, founded by playboy businessman Oscar Tamms around the turn of the century. But soon after he died, the town's landmarks—a brick opera house, the three-story Alexandria Hotel and the Silver Moon saloon—burned.

In 1955, passenger rail service to the town ended, and by the late 1970s freight service also dried up, and the rail line was abandoned, except for a spur to the town's one remaining factory, Unimin Specialty Minerals Inc. The company's 75 workers manufacture fine silica for cosmetics and paint.

Today only a handful of businesses line the two-block downtown along Russell Street. The main intersection is so quiet there's scarcely a need to look both ways before crossing the street. Nobody locks their cars.

Most of those who have hung on in Tamms are retirees. And for the few young people who have stayed, welfare is the major source of income. Alexander County ranks as the poorest in the state, with an unemployment rate of 18 percent and an average property tax bill of \$300.

"I'd say 50 percent of the high school graduates are on the public aid rolls," said Hilleman, the town's retired postmaster. "I've been around long enough to see three generations on public aid. They used to ask me for jobs, but there weren't any."

"Things have gotten so bad in fact that Dodson, the town's chief of police, is now sleeping in his squad car and eating his meals at the Butcher Block convenience store.

The family's landlord recently sold the house they had been renting, he confides, and they haven't been able to find another suitable house in town to rent. His family has been able to stay with relatives in a neighboring community, but he must sleep in Tamms or lose his job.

"We need some new housing, affordable housing," he said. "There isn't really anything around here."

Over the years, the town has tried plenty of times to reverse its fortunes, offering incentives to factories and businesses to locate on the sorghum and soybean fields that surround town, just beyond the Mississippi's flood plain.

But "they'd always hop across the river to Missouri or Kentucky," Hilleman said, fleeing Illinois unions or attracted by other offers there.

"We were always on the verge and then it'd be gone," he said.

"We got so we were scared to hope," said Marilyn Martin, who owns a florist shop across from Village Hall. "We'd been disappointed so many times."

But when the state announced it was looking for a home for its newest prison, Tamms—which had lost the competition for an earlier prison—threw its name and its hopes in the ring again.

Village officials didn't expect to win. The town was offering a good package: A free 80-acre site, free sewer and water for two years, and \$1 million in low-interest home loans to prison employees with the financial assistance of neighboring Johnson, Massac, Pulaski and Union Counties.

But Tamms was one of the smallest towns among the 50 vying for the project's 300 jobs

Chicago
Tribune
10/24/93
p. 1



Chicago Tribune

and \$11 million payroll. The town's housing stock was mostly old. And, possibly worst of all, the county's voters had rejected Gov. Jim Edgar in the gubernatorial election.

But Tamms made the cuts, first to the final five, then the final three. All 750 students at Egyptian School, at the edge of town, wrote last-minute letters to the governor, begging for his support.

When the announcement came last Monday, the town went wild with disbelief and delight. Workers at Village Hall, housed in the town's lovingly restored train depot, set off the emergency sirens. Martin rushed across the street from her florist shop and gave Mayor Walter Pang a bear hug, then stayed to help Village Clerk Sharon Abercrombie answer the phones.

"In my 53 years here, nothing this big's ever happened in south-



Tribune photo by Laurie Goering

Carl Hileman: "We would have liked a nice big General Motors plant instead of a prison, but we've been down on our knees for a long time begging for something."

ern Illinois," Martin said. "Heck, even Sharon got excited."

"I was really surprised," Abercrombie said. "Nothing this big ever comes down here in southern Illinois."

Since the announcement, rumors have swept through town about new restaurants, motels and

housing developments coming to serve the prison.

Real estate agents are fielding calls from investors interested in buying rental properties and a bank in neighboring Dongola is making expansion plans. Hileman's planning a carwash. And town officials predict Tamms'

population will double in the next five years.

"I think this is the first step on the road to economic recovery in southern Illinois," predicts pharmacist Larry Brymer, who with his wife Marjorie runs Tamms' drugstore. "The optimism might do as much for the area as the

prison itself."

"This gives back hope to people," said Janette Dumas, 15, a junior at Egyptian School. "It's the first chance for something positive here."

Even families right at the edge of the prison site are for the most part enthused about felons living in their back yards. Wilma Miller worries a little that her dally walks on the quiet gravel road leading to the site will have to end once unfamiliar cars begin passing by. But new development, she hopes, might mean she no longer has to drive 25 miles to Cape Girardeau, Mo., for a Big Mac.

Her neighbor, Ozla Steele, who lives across the street from the prison site, calls the project "the best thing that ever happened around here."

Escapes don't worry him. The Shawnee hills are so full of briars and rattlesnakes, he said, that any sensible prisoner would turn back. And "I got a pretty fair security system down here," the retiree said. "I got a Doberman. If some guy should get out, he don't want to come over and have coffee with me."

The prison, he said, "don't do nothing for me. But I have nieces and nephews growing up here. Maybe in the future one of them can get a job in a fast-food joint or a hotel or something. Don't have to make no hundred thousand dollars. Just enough to live on and you're doing good."

"For a long time there wasn't nothing here," he added. "It didn't look like we was going to get nothing. But this time, thank the Lord, we got a chance."