

Were locked away in  
yuma until 1878;



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Were you aware that yuma had it's very own prison? Although no longer a running prison, it has become Arizona's third historic park! The Yuma territorial Prison first began operating way back in 1876. It continued onward for 33 years, closing down in 1909! The prison's very first 7 inmates entered and were locked away on the first of July 1876 in cells they built with their own hands. This prison would come to hold of total of 3, 069 prisoners; 29 of them being females. These inmates were all there for different reasons, from grand larceny, and adultery to murder, death and polygamy.

The first female would not be locked away in Yuma until 1878; 2 years after the prison had opened. In that same year, The Yuma Territorial Prison would have its first escape, by J. Lewis. From a total of 138 escape attempts, only 42 would actually succeed. Two escaped from the inside walls, 8 on route to a new prison, 24 escaped while on work detail outside, and another 8 escaped in the time the new facility in Florence was being built. The guard tower that gives off an amazing view of the restored riverfront was built in 1882.

One of the very first dynamo-generators was introduced to the west, and then the prison not long after in 1884. This would be used to power a fan system and light up the cell blocks. The following year, a very well running hospital would be added to the facility. Only 24 years after that, the prison would overcrowd, causing it to shut down and all inmates to move to the new facility in Florence, Arizona. Although the prison is now shut down and empty of prisoners, this would not be the end of its use.

For years to come, the establishment would continue to provide for the city of Yuma. In 1909 the Yuma Territorial Prison was no longer an operating prison, but it was, in fact, useful for many other things. Ever since 1910, the year after it closed down, the jailhouse is still up and running to this very day! That same year, Yuma High School had a fire, burning down the building only one year after opening! The school board then decided to take advantage of the abandoned building and rented four structures of the detention center. The cell block were used as classrooms and events like pep rallies, assemblies and other activities were held in the hospital. A newspaper article written in 1913 stated that Yuma High “ stole” a victory from the old Phoenix Union. Because of this and the fact that the school was currently a prison, other school’s began to nickname them “ the criminals”, this is where the High School’s mascot originated. The nickname was officially adopted by the school in 1917. In the 1920s – 1930s, vagabonds that were riding the train would make shelter in the jailhouse cell blocks.

During the same era, families suffering the consequences of The Great Depression also took home in the prison’s structures. Others that were struggling to live in the financial slump would make use of the prison and take it apart to use it as material to build homes. It wasn’t until 1941 that The Yuma Territorial Prison became the museum we know it as today. The following year, the prison guard tower was used for WWII spotting. Then, on January 1st, 1961, the correctional facility was officially opened to the public as a state park. Now, in the present, the prison isn’t very intact due to the fact that it was used up for so much before. However, there is still enough

remaining for one to imagine what it must've been like to be locked up behind those bars.

Still standing is the prison guard tower, which provides a view of the whole facility, the sallyport, the cell blocks and the dark cell. All of this is part of the museum in which anyone can go visit and admire. Although Yuma's penitentiary brought several different advancements and provided different conveniences, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. The prison had its negative effects and defaults.

The prison had technology and other advancements, but before that, the living conditions for those who were incarcerated were inhumane; earning its nickname "The Hellhole". About 111 of these incarcerated men and women died from several different causes like death by another inmate, rattlesnake bites, drownings from the Gila River, suicide, and most popular, tuberculosis. One-third of the prison's overall deaths were because of this disease, which happened to be very popular in the area. Of 111 deaths, only 7 bodies were sent back home for proper funerals. The rest of them were all buried in the prison cemetery. Yuma is known for being very hot and dry, but by the river, it can get really humid.

The correctional facility was outdoors and very crowded, causing all inmates to suffer extreme heat. Temperatures would rise up to 115 degrees and 6 inmates would live in one cell with only a single bucket as a restroom. The prison has a solitary confinement named "the dark cell" and nicknamed "the snake den". Those sentenced to solitary confinement were forced to sleep on rocks and dirt and were stripped to their underwear. Men and

women were incarcerated here together, the women were often raped because of this. Only one woman actually gave birth to a single prison baby. Solitary confinement was for those who did not behave properly.

It was a single structure made of solid rock, making it very dark with the exception of a little light that came in through a shaft during the day. The inmates had no source of hygiene or restroom, not even a bucket. Those sentenced were only given a single bread and one glass of water a day. The prisoners were also punished by the ball and chain, limiting their freedoms, movement and privileges. The incarcerated were treated very poorly but as time progressed, things would become a little better and advanced. The correctional facility was among the first in the area to have technology. The majority of what the prison had was rare to those outside of the prison in the Yuma area.

For this reason, the residents of Yuma called the prison "The Country Club", although they had no idea what it was really like. It had a running water system that was pumped from the Colorado River. This was to provide yet another perk/privilege to the prisoners, hygiene.

The prison had only 2 bathtubs and 3 showers, but that was better than none.