



# THE UPS AND DOWNS of Stairs in the Hall of Justice Jail

By Deputy  
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## Stairs

**T**he Hall of Justice was built in 1925. It was a beautiful building with ornate details and intricate carvings. The first nine floors were serviced by six elevators and two main stairways which spiraled through the building. Elevators 9, 13 and the freight elevator traveled to the secured jail floors which were located on levels 10 through 14 and transported jail employees, visitors, inmates and freight. In addition to these, elevator 10, located inside the jail, traveled from the 10th floor to the roof. This elevator, unlike the others, did not have an operator assigned, so if a deputy needed it, he would have to go up or down the stairs until he found it sitting open, wherever it had been left. This elevator was mostly used at meal times to transport food carts to each module so that inmates could be fed in their cells.

Deputies assigned to the jail section of the Hall of Justice found themselves taking the stairs, but it was generally more by necessity than choice, and it seemed there were stairs everywhere. The jail ran from the 10th floor to the roof, which was sometimes referred to as

the 15th floor. Stairs in front of each module on the north, east, south and west side of the building ran from the 10th to the 13th floors. Another set of stairs next to the number 10 jail elevator traveled from the 10th floor to the roof. There were also other stairwells hidden behind locked doors. As if that weren't enough, two towers were built on the outside of the building. The "Smoke Towers" as they were referred to, contained wide stairs and were built to evacuate inmates during an emergency, such as a fire. The doors to the "Smoke Towers" were locked and could be accessed only from the secured jail floors. There were no access doors on the non-jail floors and the only exit was on the ground floor.

During emergencies, it was too time-consuming to take the elevator, so deputies found themselves running up or down the interior stairs to get to the necessary floor. Should a situation occur in the trusty dorm, which was on the roof, a deputy responding from the 10th floor was pretty exhausted after running up five flights.

The inmates spent a lot of time on the stairs as well, getting from their module to visiting on the 12th floor, showers on the 11th floor and

the attorney room on the 10th floor. It was easy to wander up and down and all around, sometimes without being seen, since there was no way a deputy could have all of the stairs or modules in his assigned area in view at one time. As it was, there were only two deputies and a prowler assigned to each jail floor. One deputy was responsible for cells on the north and east side of the building and another deputy for cells on the south and west side. Because of the maze of stairs, the Hall of Justice Jail was the only jail to have a rule against inmates running from a deputy. L.A. County Jail facilities that were built many years later had control booths where Sheriff's personnel inside could simply close a door, thus preventing an inmate from leaving that floor.

## Secret Stairways

Deputy Chris Miller was assigned to the Hall of Justice Jail in 1975 and 1976. While working as a prowler in the trusty dorm on the 15th floor, he became aware of some suspicious activity in the dayroom. An inmate had been posted as a lookout to warn other trusties when a deputy entered the front door, so obviously,

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they were up to something. The dayroom was a very large area where inmates watched TV and participated in other activities. It was kept dark so the TV could be viewed without light reflecting off the screen. Most inmates congregated in the rear of the dayroom so that by the time a deputy reached them, any contraband had already been hidden.

Deputy Miller knew that there were two metal doors on the side in the rear of the dayroom. These doors required a large Folger Adam key, which meant they probably led to hidden stairwells that the inmates didn't know about.

Going down to the 14th floor and locating two concealed stairwells that coincided with the two doors on the floor above, Miller entered one of the stairwells and went back up to the 15th floor. There he discovered a little latched window with a hinged wooden covering. Since the light bulbs in the stairwell were burned out, the ensuing darkness enabled Deputy Miller to slowly, but quietly, unlatch the wooden covering enough to peek inside the dayroom. A group of six trustees were squatting in a circle throwing dice and placing bets. Gambling is against jail rules, since it causes fighting and creates opportunities for con artists to steal money from other inmates. Not only that, but dice are considered contraband. It was never discovered just how these dice were smuggled into the jail. They could have been brought up on a fish line dropped out of an exterior window, or an

inmate could've hidden them in his rectum and snuck them in that way. Deputy Miller continued to watch until he could recognize everyone involved, then left to get other prowlers to assist in taking control of the inmates once they were confronted about their illegal activity.

## Taking a Gamble

Returning to the hidden stairwell with three additional prowlers, Deputy Miller peeked out the little window to make sure the inmates were still gambling. Five of them were there but inmate Solomon, who had been there previously, was gone. Miller slowly turned the key, unlocking the door as quietly as possible so as not to alert the inmates. On his signal, all four deputies including himself rushed in, taking the unsuspecting gamblers completely by surprise. The deputies confiscated the dice and money lying incriminatingly on the floor while the inmates remained frozen in place, their faces registering a look of total shock. The inmates were then escorted to their bunks where they retrieved their personal items before being taken to the discipline module on the 13th floor. Now Deputy Miller had to return to the dorm on the 15th floor and look for inmate Solomon.

## Eyewitness

When he confronted inmate Solomon, Solomon began crying, saying he wasn't the

one gambling and that Deputy Miller had made a mistake in identifying him. Miller knew it was Solomon and told him to get his personal items; he was going to the discipline module. Once Solomon realized he wasn't going to be able to cry and talk his way out of it, he stopped crying and said, "Okay, you got me." Inmates were only allowed to have \$15 on their person at that time. All other money would go on their books and be used to buy items from the jail store. Solomon told Deputy Miller that he had \$300 hidden in the toe of his shoe and he needed Miller to put it on the books for him. This just confirmed that Solomon had been gambling and made Miller realize that this inmate was a con artist who was used to getting his way by crying and pleading because he looked so innocent.

Both the PM lieutenant and sergeant were upset with Deputy Miller since the six trustees were going to be transferred to Central Jail and this was a big loss to the small force of work inmates at the Hall of Justice Jail. Not only that, but the inmates that would be transferred in to take their places had to be trained.

## Jail Rule: Inmates Cannot Run From Deputies

Deputies working in the jails can search inmates at any time, for any reason. When

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Miller was a prowler, he would search every inmate he came across. There were times when contraband was smuggled in through the visiting area; so, Miller paid particular attention to inmates coming from that area. One day while assigned as a prowler on the 12th floor, Miller saw a trusty leaving the visiting area. The inmate was about 15 feet away when Miller said to him, "Hey trusty, come here." The trusty turned, looked directly at Miller, then turned around and ran. Although he recognized the inmate, Miller still chased after him because he knew he probably had contraband. He chased the trusty up a flight of stairs before losing him when he fled around the corner and up another flight of stairs.

Miller talked to Deputy Dave Fender, who was assigned to the visiting area on the 12th floor, about the trusty who ran from him. Fender told Miller that a trusty working in visiting, who was his informant, explained that the inmate ran from Miller because he had a bindle of coke passed to him through the Folger lock key hole that went all the way through to the visitor's side of the door.

## Eyewitness Reliability

Since Deputy Miller had recognized the inmate, he went up to the dorm where he asked for the trusty by name and was told he was sleeping in his bunk. Miller went over and shook the trusty. When the trusty turned over

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towards him, the inmate actually did appear to have been sleeping. Miller knew the inmate was the man who ran from him. He told him to grab his stuff because he was going to discipline. The trusty said, "For what?" When Miller insisted that he ran from him in violation of jail rules, the trusty argued, but

eventually did as he was told. Just before Deputy Miller and the trusty were going to leave the dorm to go down to the discipline module, a trusty came up to Miller and said, "You're a man of your word so if I can prove that you are wrong, do you promise not to do anything to either inmate?" Miller said, "Sure," because he knew he was right. A minute later that trusty brought in another trusty who, other than being a little taller, could have been the identical twin of the inmate who was in his bunk. Right then Miller knew he was wrong. He had given his word not to do anything to either inmate and he honored that, but afterwards, Miller watched and paid much more attention to the inmate who ran from him, searching him any chance he got.

## Lesson Learned

This incident had a dramatic impact on Deputy Miller. He realized eyewitnesses alone should not be trusted as it may cause an innocent person to be convicted of a crime they did not commit; additional substantiating evidence was needed. During Deputy Miller's time working at the Hall of Justice Jail, he had five inmates run from him. Fortunately, none of the others got away.

