TO LIVE AND DIE IN TEXAS

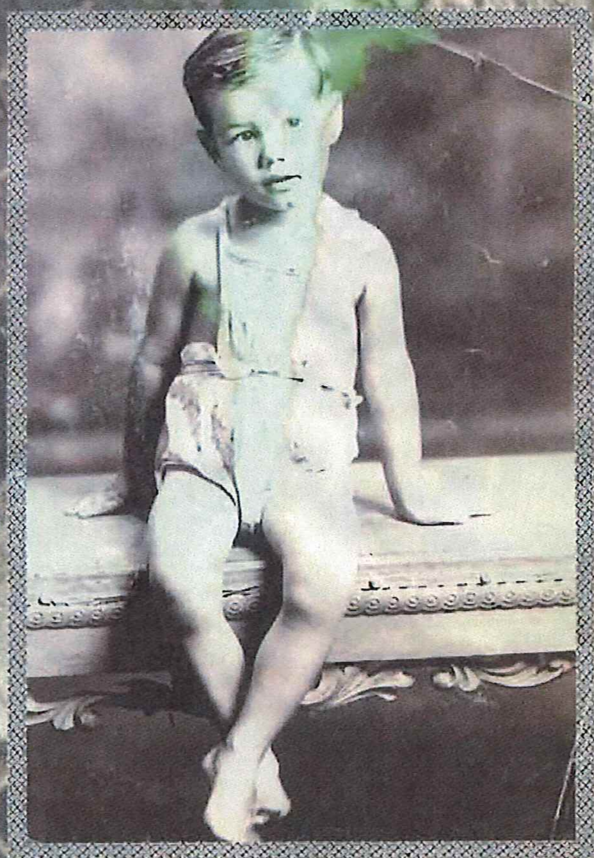
PRISONLIFE

FEBRUARY 1997

$4.95 USA $6.50 CANADA

When I grow up . . .

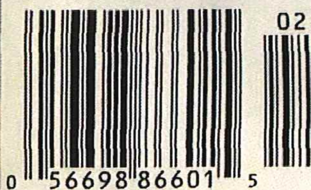
The Story of Ex-Con Entrepreneur Dennis McKee



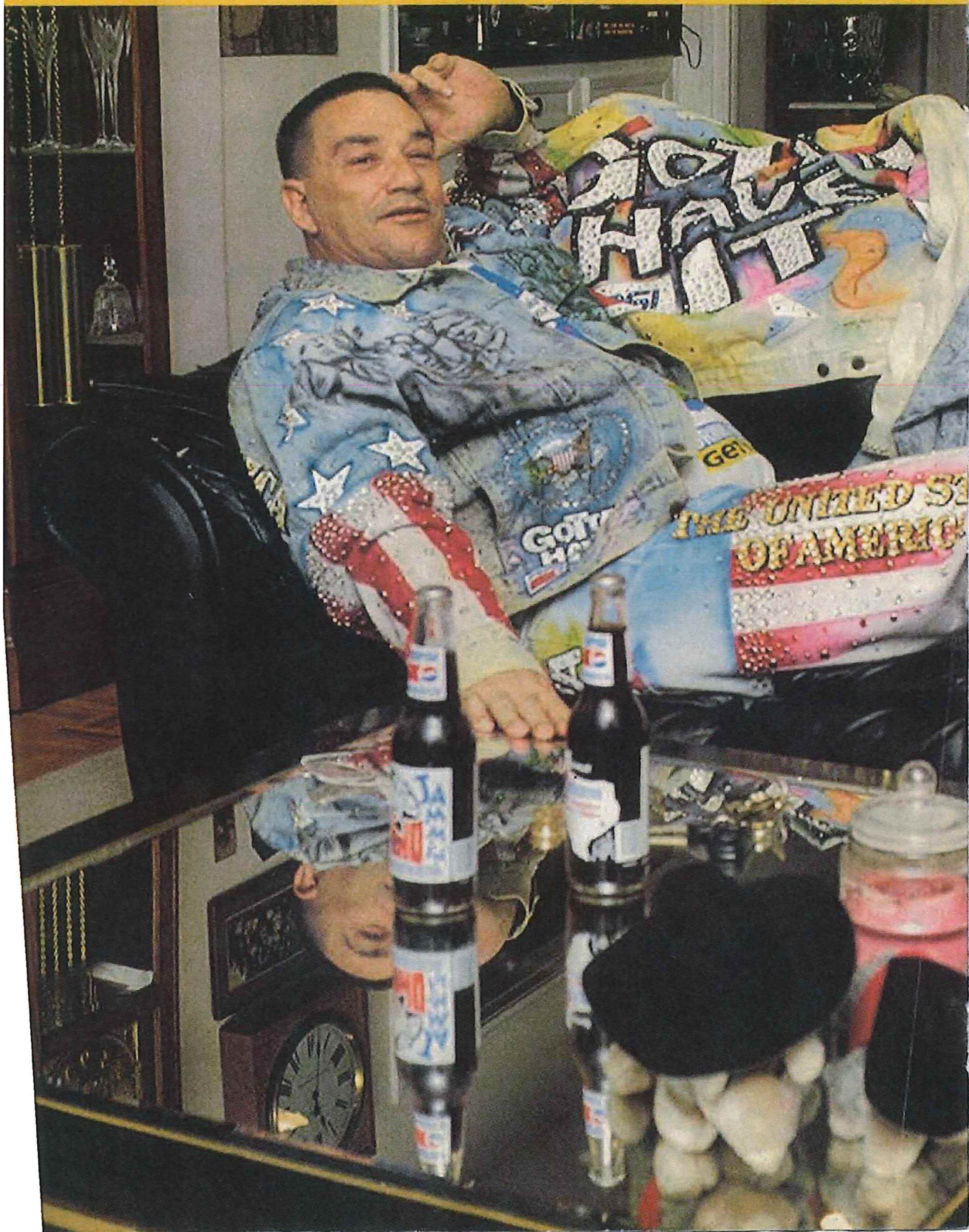
PLUS:

AIDS in the Joint

Ray Hill's Prison Radio Show



Only in America



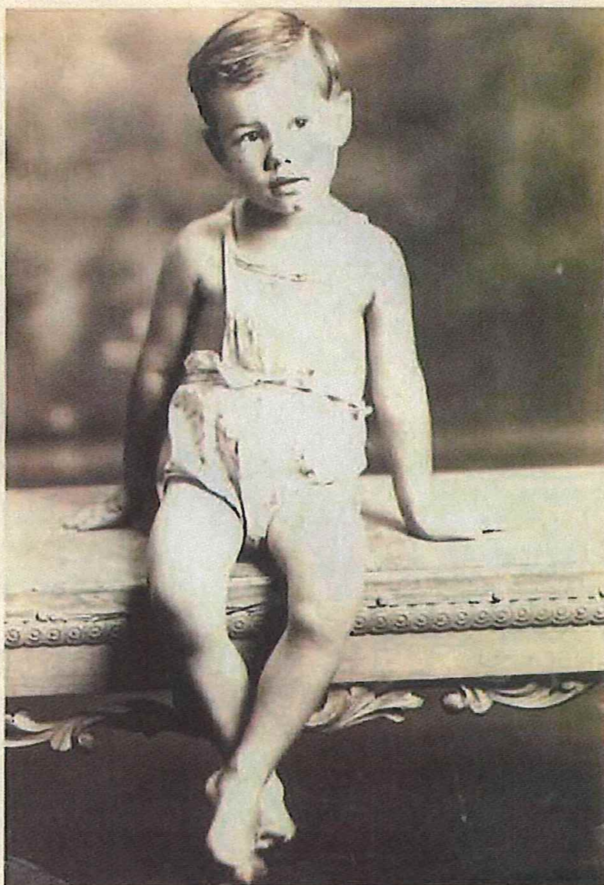
The Getback of Dennis McKee

by Richard Stratton

Photography by Fionn Reilly

Only In America

Many is the convict who lies on a bunk in a cell after lock-down dreaming of what he will do once released. Ah, sweet freedom, goes the fantasy; anything is possible if only I could get out of prison. And even if he may never get out, and if freedom was not so sweet to begin with, he remembers the good times, or he imagines what it would be like to be happy, to be loved, to have a decent job and a good income, friends, maybe even a family.



Most convicts hope never to return to prison. Contrary to what *Reader's Digest* might say, and what the majority of disinformed Americans might believe, our prisons are not plush resorts where depraved criminals lie around doing bench presses and plotting new assaults on society. They are houses of pain, warehouses of despair, and nearly everyone in prison is in constant emotional anguish, even if they don't always admit it. The duress of captivity and alienation from free humanity will penetrate even the hardest body and soul armor.

If the convict was state-raised, brought up in institutions of pain, the reform schools and juvenile joints that serve as prep schools for the penitentiary, his cellblock dreams are distorted. Chances are he does not know what it is like to be loved; he has no context for happiness except maybe a few cherished childhood memories. Most of these men and women are lost to us. They fulfill our darkest expectations by running afoul of the law, hurting themselves and others and returning to prison. People despise the convict writer Jack Henry Abbott because he got out of prison, after spending nearly his whole life locked up for petty crimes, and killed a man over a perceived slight. Yet that is how he had learned to survive in prison.

The state-raised convict is a special breed brought up in houses of hatred, violence and torture where they have been trained like junkyard dogs to be suspicious, mean, ferocious. They can be some of the toughest, most merciless people you will ever meet. If, through it all, they somehow manage to retain a connection to the human family and are able one day to break free of institutional life, these convicts can be some of the sweetest people you will ever meet. All those years of oppression and strife turn them deep within themselves to mine whatever goodness is there, perhaps a mother who once loved them, then forge a strong character from this meager ore. I usually recognize these men when I meet them; often I feel a respect and love for them that comes from having seen where they spent their lives and knowing what inner work they have accomplished to survive with their humanity intact.

I knew Dennis "Rex" McKee was such a man the first night I met him in Houston, Texas. He was wearing a T-shirt, shorts, a pair of flip-flops with a lot of miles on them, and a cockeyed baseball cap. True to his breed, he smoked pretty much constantly, drank coffee or Pepsi steadily and told epic war stories about his seventeen years in and out of some of America's toughest federal pens: Alcatraz, Atlanta, Leavenworth, Terre Haute, El Reno. Dennis makes no bones about the fact that he is an ex-convict and a former bank robber. He's proud of the transformation he has made, proud

Although he never went further than the fifth grade and he reads and writes with difficulty, he can sign his name on a check for tens of thousands of dollars drawn on a bank he once robbed.

that although he never went further than the fifth grade and he reads and writes with difficulty, he can sign his name on a check for tens of thousands of dollars drawn on a bank he once robbed.

I met Dennis when I went to Houston to do Ray Hill's prison radio show. (See *"Citizen Provocateur"* page 28.) Dennis was introduced to the listening audience as an example of a man who had become a successful self-made businessman despite his checkered past. On the air, Dennis told the story of how he once borrowed $20,000 from University Savings Bank to launch himself in a video trading business he had conceived. He had no credit history, he was just out of the halfway house and working for an attorney who helped him get out of prison–hardly an ideal candidate for a bank loan.

Dennis with his mother and younger brother outside the house they rented for $9.25 a month.

"I went to University Savings, talked to some loan officer, and they turned me down flat," Dennis told the listeners. "So I went higher and they turned me down again. Then I called the bank president, man by the name of Paul Yates, and he listened to me. I went in to see him and asked him for a loan, and when I was all finished asking, Paul Yates said to me, 'Now, Mr. McKee, aren't you the same Dennis McKee who once robbed this bank?' And I told him, 'Yessir, that's me.' And do you know he went and loaned me that $20,000 unsecured because he felt that any man who had the nerve to go into a bank he'd once robbed and ask for a loan to start a business was either crazy or one helluva man." For Dennis, the incident confirmed a fundamental tenet of the convict code he had learned the hard way.

There is a picture that sums up the theme of Dennis McKee's extraordinary rise from the dungeons of our penitentiaries and mental wards to the good life and the realization of those lonesome convict visions. I saw it on the wall of Dwayne Sherlock's room at Steven's House; (see *Knocking On Heaven's Door*, page 34;) and Eddie Bunker has the same picture on the wall of the cell-like room he writes in;(see *PLM* Sept.-Oct. '95). It shows a frog being swallowed by a long-legged, long-necked bird. The frog is disappearing down the bird's throat, but it has grabbed the bird in a choke hold and is strangling it. The caption under the picture says: *Never give up.*

Dennis the Menace

The All American saga of Dennis "Rex" McKee begins in the backwoods of Alabama. Born to a fifteen-year-old mother who worked as a waitress at the

> *"I never had a tricycle, so I stole one. Never had a bicycle, so I stole one. Never had a car, so I stole one."*

time, Dennis was raised by his grandmother in a house that rented for $9.25 a month. By the time he was two, his father was gone, shunted off to the penitentiary. When he was a little boy, Dennis's grandmother beat him so badly he had to be hospitalized twice.

It was a hardscrabble life but Dennis was an enterprising kid who refused to succumb to the deprivations of poverty. His mother worked to support him and pay the rent, but there was nothing left over to buy toys for Dennis and his younger brother. Dennis learned to steal at an early age.

"We were dirt poor," he told me during a visit to his home near International Video in Katy, Texas, one of two huge movie rental emporiums Dennis owns. "I never had a tricycle, so I stole one. Never had a bicycle, so I stole one. Never had a car, so I stole one."

Some of his most vivid childhood memories were of the beatings his grandmother gave him when he acted up.

"My grandmother was a drunk," he said when I asked him why she abused him. "Plain and simple. She was mean, too. She would walk up and down this dirt road in the little town where we lived and she would scream, 'I'm drunk as a skunk and I don't give a goddamn who knows it!' Back then when you died they'd embalm you and then take you back to your house. Two doors down from where we lived they had a dead woman in there and my grandmother took a can of kerosene and went down and kicked in the door. There was a bunch of people in there mourning. My grandmother walked up to the casket, she poured the kerosene all over the body and said, 'Somebody is going to fix me some goddamn soup or I'm sending her straight to hell right now!'

"One time she beat me real bad because I wouldn't come in to eat when she called. She came out on the porch and I was riding a bike I had stolen from

the kid next door. She told me to come in and eat and I wouldn't. I was looking at her and riding and trying to get away but I ran off the damn road, rolled into a ditch and broke my arm. Had a compound fracture with the broken bone sticking out of my arm," he remembered, touching one of the many scars on his arms. "My grandmother came over to where I was lying in the ditch and she beat me. She grabbed the end of the bone that was sticking out and she yanked on it and said, 'You little bastard, you come in the next time I tell you to.'"

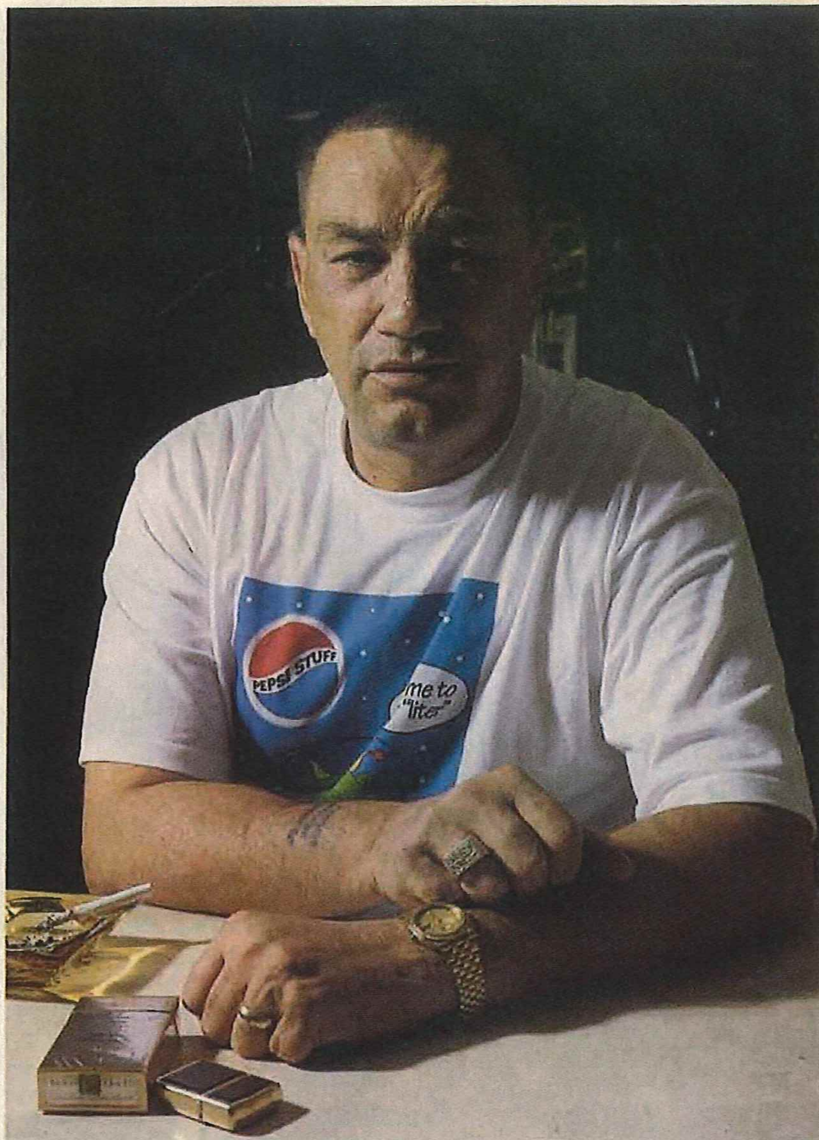
I asked Dennis if he thought it was the circumstances of his youth that caused him to make an early, inauspicious try at crime as a career. Dennis claims he knew what he was doing was wrong but he just didn't give a damn. He wasn't bad so much as he was full of mischief and daring. He takes full responsibility for the choices he made in his life, refuses to cast blame on his family or his background and feels he got into trouble because he was rebellious and he refused to knuckle under. His stealing soon went from play to livelihood.

"One of the first things I stole for money was a car battery, me and another kid, and we wrapped it up in my coat so we could carry it. We took it to the junkyard to sell. On the way, we dropped it and the battery busted inside my coat and all this water—I didn't know it was acid at the time—spilled on my jacket. Next day I wore the same clothes to school and my jacket was all full of holes and just started coming apart. The other kids thought that was pretty funny. I was about 8 or 9 at the time."

When Dennis was 13, the family moved to Phenix City, Alabama where Dennis pulled his first B&E. "I broke into a drug store and stole all the comic books and marbles because back in them days whoever had the most marbles and comic books to trade was king of the hill. But I got busted and they sent me to the Alabama Boys Industrial School in Birmingham. I stayed there for about four months—then I ran off. I got to Columbus, Georgia and stole my first car."

Dennis hot-wired a '52 Ford at a small roadside used car lot, Bill Heard Car Sales, now a major Southern automobile franchise with dealerships in Texas. Twenty five years later, Dennis walked into the Bill Heard car dealership in Sugarland, Texas and, savoring the irony, bought the first of three brand new Corvettes. Over the course of a year he also bought three fully decked-out custom vans for his video trading business, and a Mustang convertible. In total he spent $128,000.

"To this day they do not know that the first car I ever had, I stole from them. So I went from the thief of the smallest magnitude to one of the biggest customers they've ever had and I've always thought about stopping by there and telling them, but I never have."



Dennis documents his war stories by referring to his scars.

For the car theft Dennis caught a bid at a reform school in Alto, Georgia.

"That was the first time I'd been to a place where they had real guards in uniforms, bars on the windows and armed cops watching the fences," he told me. It took him eight months to get out. In what would become a pattern during those years, Dennis stole another car and fled. This time he made it to Houston, Texas. Inspired by gangster movies, he armed himself with a stolen .45 caliber Tommy gun and decided to try his hand at robbing banks. He was just 15 years old when he sauntered into University Savings lugging the machine gun.

"While I was trying to rob the bank," Dennis recalled, "one of the tellers, a lady, looked at me and just sort of patted me on the butt and said, 'Why don't you go home, little boy.' I didn't know what to do so I turned and ran out of the bank with the Tommy gun."

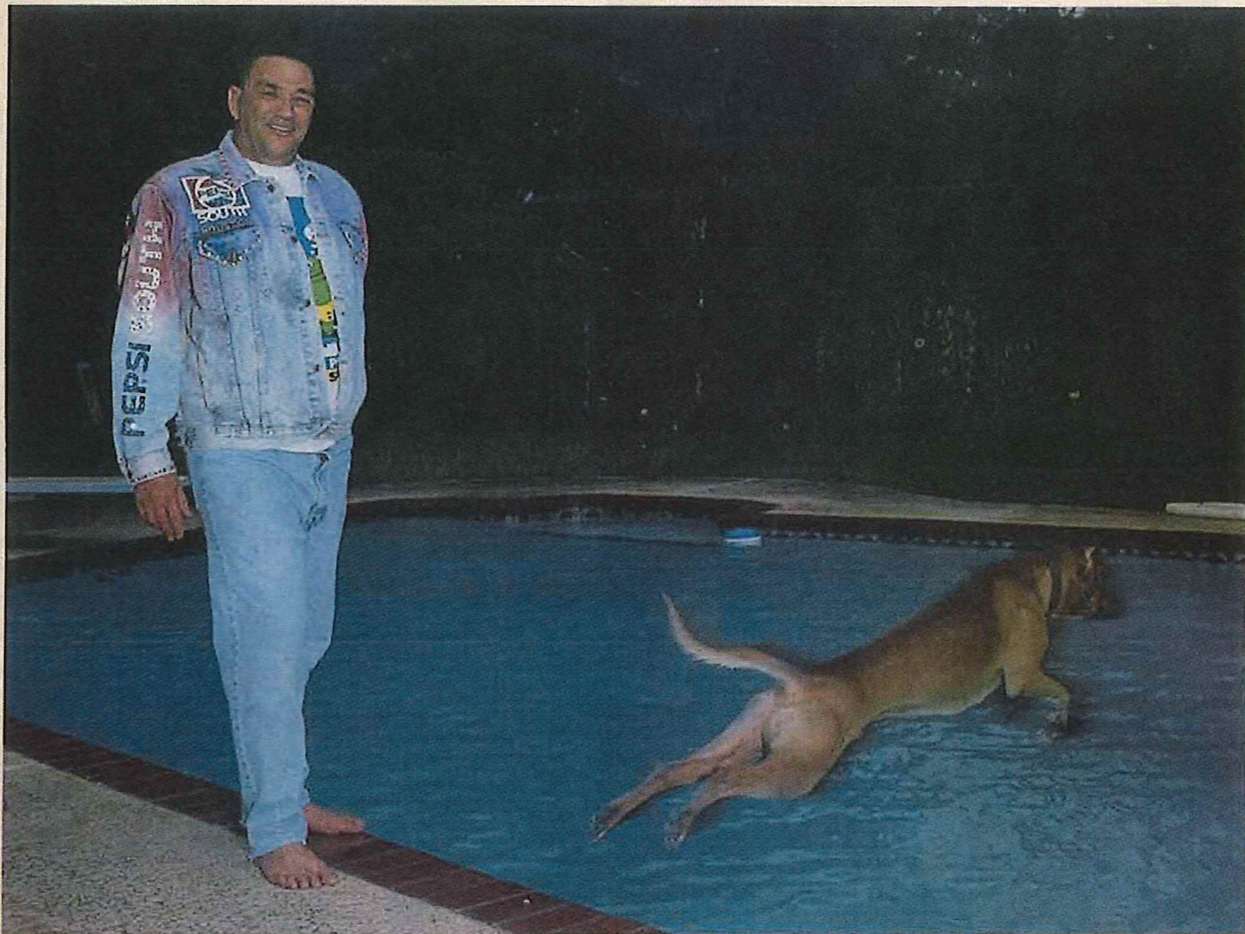
"Was it loaded?" I asked him.

"Yes it was loaded. Hell, it weighed about sixteen pounds."

"Did you get the money?"

"Shit, no. I turned and ran out the bank. I was scared to death. I had never fired the gun, so two days later I decided to try it again. I went back to the same bank and this time when I walked in I decided I was going to pop a roll of caps to get somebody's attention. But I lost control of the gun because it pulls real hard when you fire it and I was popping holes in the ceiling. I finally got it under control and this time nobody patted me on the butt and told me to go home. They gave me the money."

Emboldened by his success, Dennis



Dennis and his pitbull, All Sport, frolicking poolside in back of his home.

packed up his Tommy gun and returned to Alabama a professional bank robber. He always worked alone; he'd steal a car, leave it running outside while he ran in to stick up the bank. In a Birmingham robbery he made off with around 18 grand, more money than he had ever dreamed of, but he was shot by a cop as he fled and, although he got away, he was wounded and needed to find a doctor to patch him up. The doctor called the cops and two days after the robbery Dennis was arrested at the doctor's office.

The Penitentiary Years

Because of his age (he was just 15) Dennis was sentenced in federal court to an undetermined length of time and sent to the National Training School in Washington, DC. His second day there, he walked off and was caught later the same day. This time they sent him to Chillicothe, Ohio to a reform school that was supposedly secure enough to hold him. Again, Dennis took off. When he was arrested a few days later, they sent him to the federal penitentiary in El Reno, Oklahoma.

"El Reno at that time was more like a high-grade reform school, a gladiator school where everybody fought. I decided that I wasn't going to work. They put me in this broom factory and told me I had to work making those damn brooms. My attitude was if I was going to work in a factory, I wouldn't be in the penitentiary to start with. They would roll the cell doors open and tell me to get up and go to work and I'd say, 'Fuck you. I'm a bank robber, not a worker.' They would roll back the doors and get everybody out of the block because if one convict says he won't work then pretty soon two or three others will say they're not working either. They can't have that. So they would beat me unmercifully, throw me in the hole and leave me there. At some point after they beat you enough—because the guards get tired of beating you just as much as you get tired of it—they put you on the 'pay him no mind list.'"

When he refused to program at El Reno, Dennis was certified insane by the penitentiary shrink and shipped off to the U.S. Medical Center in Springfield, Missouri. "I'd never been in a nut house and they have rules there that I didn't know about. When you first come in they put you in a strip cell until a doctor can evaluate you. I got there on Labor Day weekend and there weren't any doctors around. Back in them days at Springfield the guards wouldn't even talk to you. If they thought you was a nut, they just stripped you naked and threw you in a cell. I was maybe 16 years old and I think that is the only time I ever knew fear. I'm thinking, 'What the fuck am I going to do, spend the rest of my life in this cell?'"

It was a small, dark cell with a solid metal door, an observation window that could be shuttered closed and a "beanhole" food trap the guards would open to shove in the food tray.

"The guard would come by and look in on you ever' 15 or ever' 30 minutes. I'd been in that cell maybe an hour when I heard all this commotion out front and I looked out and here was the biggest man that I'd ever seen in my life. He was at least six four and weighed around 300 pounds and there was some fat but it was a lot of muscle. This was the first time that I'd really seen a goon squad in action. There had to have been eight or ten guards in this hallway and they had these pads like mattresses with straps on the backs and they were using them like bodybags and they were pushing this guy and he was whipping guards like you've never seen and they kept stabbing him with these syringes and finally he

dropped. Later I found out that they hit him with Paradol and it dropped him down. So I see all this stuff and then it goes silent again and two hours later they just opened the beanhole, fed me and *adios amigo*, they was gone again."

In desperation, Dennis tried what he called a "sympathy suicide." He worked a piece of metal off of the bunk, waited until he heard the guard's key jingling and knew he would be discovered, then he slashed his forearm. "I figured he would see me bleeding and open the door. I didn't think they would let me bleed to death. But, when the guard got a few feet from my door, some fuckin' convict started banging on his door and hollering and the guard turned back to see what the fuss was and here I am shootin' blood all the way to the ceiling. There was blood everywhere. I hit an artery and it was spurtin' out and there I was just knowing I'm going to die 'cause I've never been around anybody even tried suicide and so I start banging on my door and they come and see all the blood and in a minute or two here comes the same goon squad.

"This doctor threw me on a gurney, took me upstairs and said, 'Son, you wanted to commit suicide, you wanted to die, well, you might as well be dead because I can't do nothing for you.' I became unglued, I begged that doctor to do something and he said, 'I'm going to try but I don't think there is anything I can do.' And they took me to surgery and they put me on this bed that had a board sticking out for the arm and they strapped my arm down to it and this doctor took like two pairs of long tweezers and where I had cut the artery it shot back in the arm like a rubber band and he reached down and got the artery and clamped it off and I'm screaming at the top of my lungs and the doctor said, 'Shit! I forgot to give you anesthesia.' So he stopped and deadened the arm and then went ahead and put a tube in my arm and I think that was the best thing that ever happened to me."

'Fuck you. I'm a bank robber, not a worker.'

"How's that?" I asked.

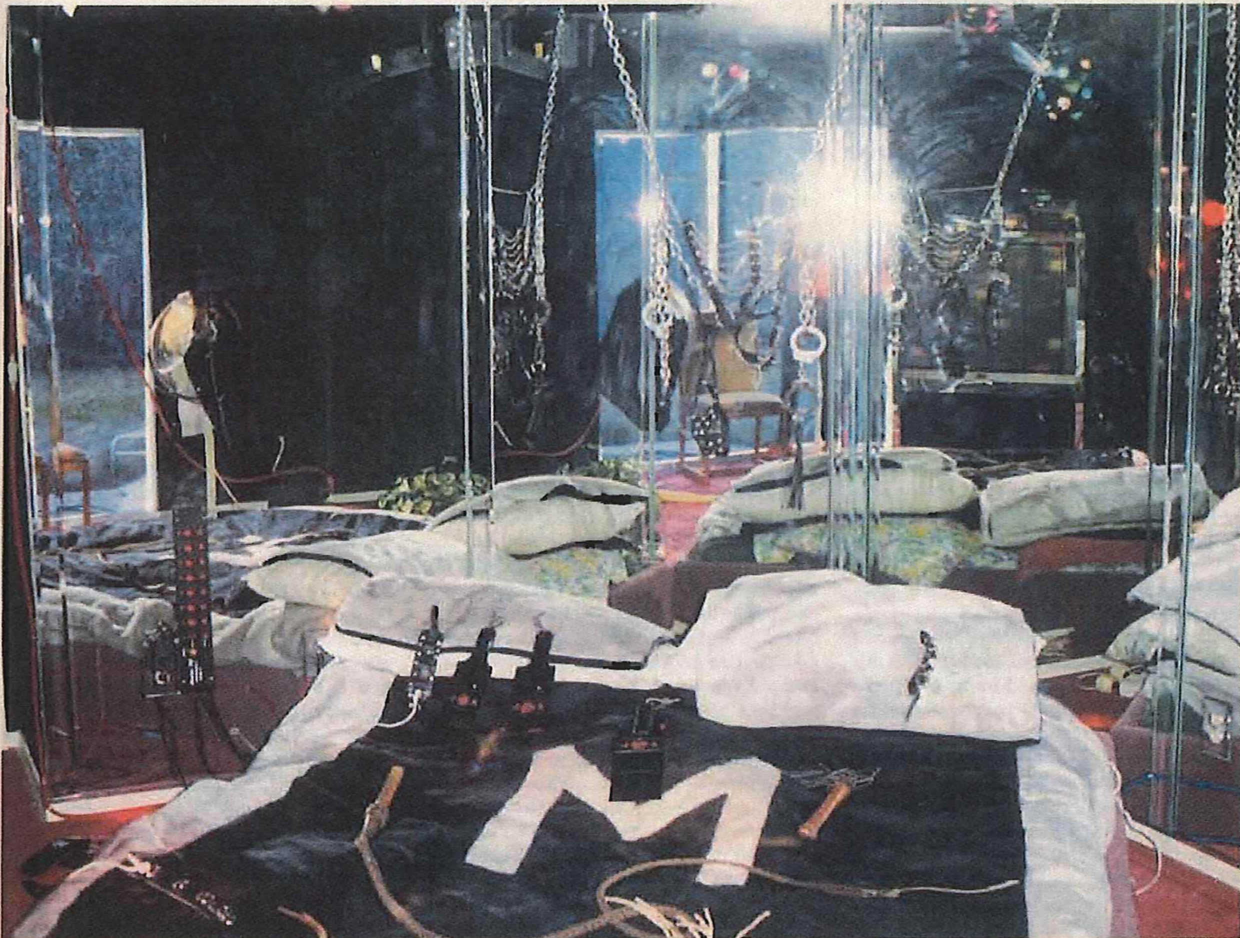
"Well, cured me of ever wanting to try suicide again, that's for damn sure."

Dennis pointed to the scarred gash across his thick forearm. "You see that one scar? You don't see them scars all up and down the arm like you do on somebody who tries a lot of them sympathy suicides. Now, if that doctor had said, 'Son, why'd you do that?' and just sewed me back up, I'd've said, 'Fuck, I'll just do that again.' No, once was enough."

"How did you lose your little finger?" I asked Dennis as he sipped his coffee and lit another Benson and Hedges. He cracked a grin and said, "Oh, that. That's another story. I chopped that finger off to leave the penitentiary because if you lost a limb, they would take you to an outside hospital. So I cut it off with a tin can lid and they rushed me to the hospital and I left. And as you can see it's a real bad job but I stitched my finger myself like Patrick Swazie in *Roadhouse*."

The brush with death at Springfield convinced Dennis he had had enough of the nut ward. He behaved himself long enough to be put in population at the Medical Center and was eventually decertified, pronounced cured and sent back to El Reno. This time, Dennis did not object to working in the broom factory. He studied operations in the warehouse and devised a plan to hide in

The exotic ex-convict S&M bachelor's bedroom from Dennis's wilder days.



The entrepreneur runs the business from his dining room table.

a shipment of brooms.

"I stayed in there, in them brooms, what I think was close to two days. And then when I finally figured I could come out because it wasn't moving anymore and there were no more voices, I busted the case open and got out. I seen this building, this real familiar looking building and it had bars everywhere and, well, I walked around two minutes and figured out I hadn't gone after all, I'd just transferred myself from one penitentiary to another. It turned out I was in the warehouse at the penitentiary in Leavenworth."

"What did you do?"

"There wasn't much I could do. I didn't want to get shot. Back then when a guard got in trouble the emergency code for the telephone was 222. The guard could dial 222 and it activated phones ever'where that indicated he was in trouble. I didn't know what to do so I dialed 222 on the phone and said 'I'm out here in some kind of factory and I've gotten out of El Reno.' And they came over to get me. They thought it was funnier than shit. They didn't beat me or nothin', they just laughed. They threw me in the hole for five months and then they sent me to Atlanta."

Atlanta was a real penitentiary, Dennis, not yet 20, had finally made it to the Big House and he was scared to death. In the '50s and '60s, Atlanta housed some of the most notorious criminals in the country. "It was a spooky joint," he remembered. "Real spooky. Big walls, right there in the middle of town. Long corridors and big cellblocks. They put me in a single cell. They always put me in a single cell, refusing to work and other things in my record like being certified insane. I think it was A block, but I don't remember. I know I was on the top of a four-tier cellblock, but that was over 30 years ago and I've been in so many of those places since then. Later on, they classified me as a security risk and sent me to Alcatraz."

At 21, Dennis was the youngest man at the fed's most secure joint on a rock island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. They were building Marion, the underground super-max joint in Illinois at the time, and getting ready to close down the Rock. In the 18 months Dennis spent in Alcatraz he says he never tried to leave. There were rumors that the Rock was being closed and Dennis bided his time to see where he would wind up next.

"One of the nicest people I met in Alcatraz was a guy named Joe Shultz. He shouldn't have been in the penitentiary in the first place. He was a professional fighter and his manager overmatched him and he got beat half to death. He went to a bank and robbed the bank and demanded an exact amount of money like $397 or something, and then went out to the bank steps, sat down and started counting his money. And they gave him 25 years.

"This had to be around '63 because they recertified me back in Atlanta after we all got shipped out of Alcatraz. I went back to the Medical Center in Springfield and it was a couple of years after the Bay of Pigs with JFK happened. You know that when the Americans decided not to attack Cuba, all the doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs got out and all the doctors, in order to practice medicine in the United States, they had to have one-year internship. That one year of internship ninety percent of them took in public health which is military and which is also the prison doctors and they brought some of the most horrible methods of treatment of insane people back over here. It was awful. Now Springfield quit doing lobotomies back in '57 or '58, but they were doing electro-shock therapy and I wound up getting over 50 shock treatments before they were done with me."

"Good Lord," I said, studying the scars on his head. I imagined him with electrodes stuck to his temples and then I realized who it was Dennis reminded me of: Randall Patrick McMurphy, the malingering hero of Ken Kesey's great novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Dennis hadn't just flown over the cuckoo's nest; he'd crash landed in it and been forced to undergo treatment that would have driven a lesser man stark raving mad.

Dennis had told me about the shock treatments and other unorthodox procedures he was subjected to over dinner at a Mexican restaurant after the radio show. It was then I decided I wanted to do a story on Dennis. For some time I have been doing research and writing about a variety of experiments conducted by agents of the U.S. government on its citizens, particularly prisoners, over the last 50 years—everything from dosing people with LSD and radiation to the latest reports of sensory deprivation, organ harvesting and computer chip implants. If it all sounds like a bad sci-fi flick, remember, prisoners and crazy people make excellent guinea pigs because they can't complain and even if they do, nobody believes them or has any sympathy for them. During my years in the system I met some truly demented people who had been treated worse than laboratory animals. The very nature of prisons turns them into horror chambers no matter how spotless the corridors are and how crisp the uniforms of the guards. Dennis was locked up before Attica, before there was any real scrutiny of what goes on inside these joints. And even now that we know prisoners are subjected to unbelievable abuse and torture right here in our own country, the prevailing attitude is: So what? They are scum and they deserve it.

But Dennis seemed like a good man to me, just a wild country boy who got off on the wrong track. He certainly had turned his life around, proving he had it

By his mid-20s, Dennis had racked up an impressive record of 12 escapes.

in him to do the right thing. During the next couple of days we took a tour of his operation. I was impressed with how his staff at the video stores got along with Dennis and Rebecca, his charming and lovely red-haired wife. Man, I kept thinking to myself, this guy is doing okay. It's a wonder he's even alive, let alone out here taking care of business, driving around in a brand new Lexus, and doing major promotions for Pepsico, one of the largest corporations in the country. And rather than hiding his past, he holds himself out as an example for others. There is hope yet for ex-cons, I thought. Condemn them, lock them in cages and treat them like a subhuman species, then clutch them to your breast once they strike it rich. Only in America.

"What happened in Atlanta that made them recertify you?" I asked. Lives like Dennis's document a dark aspect of recent American penal history that needs to be examined in light of where we are going with our present punishment binge.

"Penitentiaries don't want to put up with you unless they have to," Dennis said, "when all they need to do is get a doctor to come in and spend three minutes with you and say, 'He's crazy,' certify you and send you to Springfield to get you out of their way."

"Plus," I said, "they look at your jacket and say, 'The guy is a nut job. He's already been certified once.'"

"That's right. I've been certified insane five times. I tried to get life insurance with Aetna and about a month later I got a call from a vice president at the company and he says, 'Mr. McKee, I'm working on your policy and I've run into a problem. We find you've been certified insane five times and only decertified four times.' And I said, 'Does that mean I'm still crazy and can't be held responsible so I don't have to pay all my bank loans and ever'thing?' And he said, 'I would think so.' I told him I thought he was kidding and he said, 'No, I'm not kidding. We've even checked with the State of Texas to get you decertified again. You have to commit yourself to confinement for 30 days so you can be observed and they can decertify you.' I just laughed and told him, 'Well, sir, I don't intend to do that.'"

Dennis pointed to his head and said, "There's whole parts of my memory of those years that are just wiped out, fried. Some years I hardly remember. In Springfield they put me in what was called 21 East Section, and people from many years ago will remember what 21 East was. That's where the bad crazies were. I stayed one length of time 17 months in a cell and all I had was a roll of toilet paper. Had a hole in the floor that you piss and shit in. You got out once a week to take a bath and shave and stayed out as long as the guard let you. They gave me all the cigarettes I wanted,

four, five cartons at a time, but no matches. You couldn't have open flame. A guard would give me a light for a cigarette and I would just keep one going off another until I fell asleep. You could smoke all five cartons and just ask for five more and they would bring them to you. You know, sometimes you got decent guards and sometimes you got asshole guards. They had me on Thorazine, 200 milligrams four times a day. All the convicts there was on Thorazine or Stelazine or some shit and I'd be doing the Thorazine shuffle from one wall to another and feel something like a sixth sense and turn and look and there was all these pretty faces of girls and guys looking at me and it turns out they're from the university criminology or sociology department or whatever and if I could, if these people came during feeding time, I would turn and stare and take my paper plate—they fed me on paper plates with no utensils of any kind—and put it on the floor, then I'd stomp my foot down on the food and squish everything between my toes and rub it all over my face. That wasn't insanity. I thought that's what those assholes were there to see so I was gonna give 'em their money's worth.

"They come and got me one day and put me in this bathtub that was maybe four foot deep, two-and-a-half foot wide and they had a net in it because it would be over your head if you sat in the bottom. And they had me on this net and they had canvas covering me and the only thing out was my head and there were three buttons on the wall: hot, cold and empty. And they reached up and pushed the cold button and ice cubes and ice water came in on me and they filled that tub up and let me sit there for three minutes but it felt like three days and you just turned blue. And then they reached up and pushed the button that said empty and what happened the whole bottom of the bath tub dropped out, but you're on a net so you don't drop with it so it emptied in seconds and then it'd close back up and they would push hot and scalding hot water would pour in and you'd sit there till you turned beet red and they did that three times, cold then hot. I couldn't move a muscle in my body for days. Since I've got out and been in a place where I've met doctors and nurses I've asked them about those treatments and ever' one of them says, 'Fuck, Dennis, all that will do is kill you, you know, make your heart stop.'

"When you're like me and uneducated, you come from a real poor background, that's the people they experiment on. I remember they sent my mother a letter on the shock treatments saying I needed it, and it wasn't called shock treatments, it was called electro-therapy, a big name that my mother didn't understand and the letter had all these seals on it and all

At 21, Dennis was the youngest man at the fed's most secure joint, on a rock island in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

these doctors' names and your mother or your father they know that you fucked up or you wouldn't be in the pen so they believe these assholes, because these are doctors and we are brainwashed to believe that when a doctor tells you something it's true. And my mother probably signed the letter. But even if your family wouldn't sign it, then the fuckin' warden will sign it as an emergency. One way or another, it don't matter, 'cause they're gonna do what they're gonna do."

Only Way Out

Dennis's *modus operandi* was to get himself classified insane and transferred to a nut ward, or he would pull the medical emergency ruse, feign injury or illness, or actually maim himself to get moved to a medical facility from which he would immediately begin plotting his getaway.

While out, Dennis would live out his adolescent jailhouse fantasies, packing whole years of intense experience into a few weeks or even a few days as he led the bloodhounds, the FBI and the U.S. Marshals Service on some of the most action-packed manhunts of the '60s and '70s. "Every time, even if it was only for a few days, I got married," Dennis told me. "Real young girls. Always real young. And then I'd go back to the penitentiary and they'd get on with their lives."

Often, Dennis would be apprehended by the feds in some remote Southern town where he would have to be housed in a county jail until the marshal could

Dennis and Rebecca in the sprawling Pasadena video rental store.

transport him to a federal joint. It became a sort of game to see how long it would take Dennis to break out so the chase could be continued.

"One time they took me to the Scottsboro, Alabama jail where I was put into a cell with two other prisoners. I hadn't been in the cell more than a few minutes when one of them said, 'Hey, if you had the chance, would you take it?' I said, 'Shit, yes.' The guy walked to the window and pulled out two of the bars they'd already cut through. 'We were headed out the window and we heard all the commotion when they brought you in.' he told me. He laid the bars on the cell floor and all three of us climbed out that window and took off. I was outta there before the deputies that dropped me off finished filling out the paperwork."

It was to be Dennis's most spectacular flight, and when it was over Rex McKee would be famous locally as the man who led the FBI, the U.S. Marshal, the Georgia State Patrol and the Rome, Georgia cops on a 180-mile high-speed car chase that was broadcast over the radio. On the run from the Alabama, Dennis broke into a Pontiac dealership in Dalton, Georgia and stole a brand-new souped-up Bonneville convertible. He was headed for the interstate when he noticed a pick-up truck following him with its lights off. As Dennis accelerated and hit the entrance ramp onto the highway, the truck braked and pulled a U-turn. Dennis would later learn that the man driving the pick-up was the customer who had ordered the Bonneville; he was on the way to the dealership to admire his new car when he saw Dennis driving it down the road.

The man alerted the police and by the time Dennis roared into Rome there was an all-points bulletin out on him and the Bonneville. The Pontiac was too fast for the cop cars, but they had their radios and were using the local taxis to relay Dennis's location. He left a trail of wrecked police cars and damaged property in his wake as he sped around Rome and environs desperately trying to shake his pursuers, all the while listening to a play-by-play description of the chase on the car radio.

Dennis was one of those outlaws who liked to taunt his trackers. "I was hiding in downtown Rome—trapped because they had all the roads out of town blocked, but they didn't know where I was. I called the police station and spoke to a sergeant.

"'Sarge, this is Rex McKee,' I told him—my usual opening line. 'I'm sure you know who I am.' The sergeant said he did and added he knew I'd left a mental institution. 'Rex, we know you're sick and we want to get you some help. Tell me where you're at and I'll come get you.' I laughed and told him I might be crazy but I sure as hell wasn't stupid. I said I knew the taxis were reporting my location and I told him he better call off those taxis or I was gonna ram my car into the very next one I saw. The sarge told me that if I didn't give myself up, they was going to start shootin' at me."

A few minutes later Dennis was back in the Bonneville with police cars in hot pursuit. When the cops lived up to the sergeant's threat and started firing at him, Dennis sped off. One of the cop's bullets shattered the Pontiac's windshield and glass cut his face. He pulled the car into a driveway, shut off the lights and fled on foot. He ducked into a church during a service and tried to lose himself in the congregation but the shocked parishioners screamed when they saw his face streaked with blood. Dennis ran through the church and jumped out a rear window.

He cleaned his face at an outside faucet, stole a clean sweater off a clothes line and wandered around on foot looking for a way out of the police dragnet.

Dennis went to the door of a home in the neighborhood and convinced the man who lived there to drive him to the emergency ward of the nearest hospital. He ducked out a rear door and was trying to steal a car in the parking lot when he was spotted and chased back inside. The cops finally captured him hiding under a sheet in the morgue trying to pass himself off as a stiff. Two more times during the same spree earned Dennis an all-expense-paid trip to sunny California and a cell with no view on Alcatraz Island.

Return from the Land of the Living Dead

If Dennis's life is like a movie, it's a

Hollywood movie complete with upbeat ending. He's an unsung American hero who survived incredible hardship and abuse and has now prospered by living up to the best of that unwritten canon known as the convict code. He still operates under the tenets of the code that became a means of survival for old-time convicts: loyalty to those who look out for you; refusal to knuckle under to the iron fist of authority; and a kind of tenacity of spirit summed up by the Nietzschean lines: That which does not kill me makes me stronger.

Dennis's persistence in pursuing his first bank loan also comes from a deeply ingrained institutional survival tactic: never take no for an answer until you have gone all the way to the top; and even when the boss says no, keep after him until he relents. His loyalty, perseverance, boldness and imagination—qualities that enabled him to survive nearly two decades in our worst prisons—have paid off handsomely. Dennis has fulfilled many of his cellblock fantasies. He is successful running his own business and doing something he enjoys. He lives well, drives a nice car and has a beautiful home with a swimming pool. He is happily married to an intelligent, attractive woman who helps him run the business. But he is still a country boy at heart, still a convict in the best sense of the word: a man whose true wealth is his character.

Yet, even with his incredible will to survive, even with his pluck and toughness, Dennis might never have made it back from the land of the living dead that is our penal system if it hadn't been for help he got from caring people. Ironically, the man who rescued Dennis from oblivion was a criminal lawyer.

"I was walking around the yard one day and this attorney who had come to see some other convict looked out the visiting room window and saw that I just kept walking around and he said to the convict, 'What the fuck is wrong with that guy? He's been walking around in circles like that since we've been here.' And the convict told him a little about my situation. For some reason the attorney—and his name is Bob Tarrant of Houston, Texas—he told the guard he wanted to visit with me also. And I think he just visited with me because I never got visitors or never got a letter while I was in the pen. And so I visited with Tarrant and ever' time he would come to see whoever he was representing, he would spend time with me. And then Bob Tarrant started to fight the system for me and he pointed out that a lot of the crimes I had committed took place when I was certified insane. I would be certified, I would leave, I would commit the crime—and a lot of them were car thefts and the cars would have credit cards and I would be charged with credit card fraud or interstate flight or some other damn thing. So Mr. Tarrant got my case back in court by saying, 'This is ridiculous. How can you certify this man insane, then decertify him, try him and give him 20 years, then certify him again three days later and send him to the nut house?'

"The government let a lot of the charges go and Tarrant finally got me a shot at parole. Tarrant offered me a job in Houston and I went to work for him to bat for him.

"I had a parole officer by the name of Ray Friedman and he was the kind of parole officer that, after he interviewed with me, he took his business card out and he wrote his home phone number. And he told me, 'Dennis, if your mind starts screwing up—because you're not a bad person—you call me at home. One o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, I'll meet you. We'll drink coffee or we'll

Business is brisk at International Video's Katy location.

for about two months. I was put in a halfway house, New Directions Halfway House, and New Directions had a rule that you could not have a car while you were there. Mr. Tarrant was taking me back to the halfway house one night after work and he stopped at a video store to get some movies for his family. Now I'd never seen a video store. It was something new out there on the market, and at the halfway house I' got to thinking like back when I was a kid trading comic books. I wondered what happened to all them movies 'cause at some point ever'body had seen them or they didn't want to see them in that neighborhood. So ever' time I got the chance I would stop at ever' video store and try to find out what happened to those movies and I found out that nothing happened to them. They just sat there for two or three years. So I came up with this idea to become a movie trader based on the comic book idea.

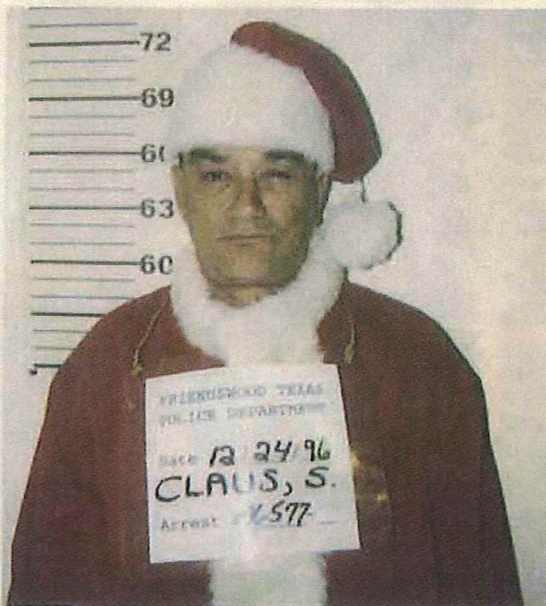
"And Bob Tarrant told me it wouldn't make it, you couldn't make a living doing that. And my parole officer told me, 'Dennis, you can't make a living doing that."

Dennis had been told he couldn't do things all his life, but that had never dissuaded him from trying. Again, he got lucky. He had a decent parole officer who was willing to take a chance and go drink whiskey. We'll do whatever it takes to work with you.'

"The first month I did like $800 in trades. I wound up getting 175 movies and I would go into a video store and say, 'Mister, I'm Dennis McKee and I'm a Texas video trader. You don't know what that is, but I have 175 tapes. You go through these tapes and if you find any that you didn't buy or you've never had, I'll start trading with you for tapes out of your store that haven't rented for a few years and I charge seven dollars to trade. So, when you've rented a movie two times, you're back even.' The idea caught on but both Tarrant and Friedman were sure I couldn't make a living doing it. Bob Tarrant told Friedman, 'Dennis is working his butt off on this. I will continue to keep Dennis on my payroll just like he was working here.' And Friedman said, 'Well, you can't beat that. I'll let him continue.'

"Well, the second month I did like $2,000, and by the sixth month I did $15,000. Before that, I went to University Savings Bank that I had robbed a hundred years ago and I told Paul Yates my story. They give me the loan, I paid them back and they loaned me more money. When Mr. Yates helped me, I opened up my own video store and in neon I would put inside my store, on

each side of the wall or doorway, the big University Savings logo and then the word, 'Thanks.' And it was my way of thanking University for helping me but what happened it was working so well that people thought I was a branch of University Savings and that I had ATM machines in there. And some woman came by, a Regional Manager, and told me, 'Mr. McKee, you have to take those signs down because that's a copyrighted logo.' I called Yates and he said, 'Fuck her. We're proud of those logos in there.' About two days later they called me up and said they wanted to do a pamphlet explaining the logos and the connection."



Dennis's next big break came when he struck up a conversation with a supervisor from Pepsi Cola who stopped by his store one day to rearrange the Pepsi display. Though he had been out of prison less than a year, Dennis had two vans stocked with movies to trade out making the rounds of video stores all over East Texas. He had opened his first store in Pasadena, and he was about to forge a lucrative relationship with one of America's mega corporations.

"I was doing like five or six cases of Pepsi a month. And that's nothing to a big company like that, but I got real loyal to Pepsi because they had stepped up and took an interest in me. They put a Pepsi machine in my store and a new display. With their help I went from selling six cases a month to selling about 130 cases a month. So it wasn't a thing where they was just helping me out. They was helping me make money for them, too. By this time I was making a lot of money and I was getting a little more arrogant. I was trading movies in a 750-mile radius. I had five vans that would go out and I created my own policy."

"Do you still trade movies now?" I asked.

"No, because the movie companies dropped the prices on the movies to put people like me out of business. But in the year 1986, the second year I was out of the penitentiary, I deposited $1,300,000 into University Savings from trading and most of that was profit. You leave home with 1000 movies and you trade 500 of them at $7 apiece and you've still got 1000 movies. Then I started telling people, 'I can't trade movies with you if you have a Coke machine in here or a Dr. Pepper machine in here. I just won't trade with you.' And I actually have pictures where I had 27 Coke and Dr. Pepper machines taken out of video stores because I was the only video trader in the country. Pretty soon the people at Pepsi was getting calls from video stores saying Pepsi can't tell us we've got to do this or that and after several calls they knew who it was doing this and they would tell people, 'Dennis McKee is an individual person and he doesn't represent Pepsi Cola nor does he work for Pepsi Cola and we can't tell him what to do.' Around then I started doing bidding on promotional stuff for Pepsi. If Pepsi was going to buy 2,000 T shirts or 50 or 100 TVs or bicycles or whatever, I'd say to them, 'I can beat them prices. Let me bid on some of this stuff.' And I would beat the prices Pepsi was getting anywhere from 20 to 70 percent. I've had other major companies come to me and ask me to price for them but I won't do it because I'm loyal to Pepsi. You see my video stores, my cars' license plates, I got Pepsi 1 for me and Pepsi 2 for Rebecca. You see my house. I got a Pepsi machine in my kitchen. Pepsi Cola became like my father because they were straight with me. Even when they found out about who I was—and I never hid it; there was stories in the newspapers and ever'thing—they called up and said, 'Dennis, is that you we've been reading about?' and I said, 'Yes, sir, that's me.' And University Savings became like my mother 'cause when you're kids you always go to your mother to get money to buy candy or whatever. And I've had 51 loans with University Savings, which is now Nations Bank. At least eight of them have been six-figure numbers. In 11 years I have never missed a payment. Sometimes my payments have been $27,800 a month. Never been late on a payment. I'm pretty much where people know that what I tell them I'm going to do, I'll do. One of the Vice-Chairmen of Nations Bank called the main branch and said, 'I'm new here. Dennis McKee wants to borrow six-figure numbers. I know he was a bank robber but I know he's done business and you were his loan officer. Tell me who Dennis McKee is.' And they told him, 'Sir, if I was his loan officer and hadn't been transferred, I would give him the money because Dennis McKee would go out and rob a Texas Commerce Bank to pay Nations Bank before he would even miss a payment'."

The last day I was in Houston hanging out with Dennis for this story, I had a vision of a cover for the Christmas issue of *Prison Life*: Santa in the slammer. "But who to get for a model?" I wondered aloud, eyeing Dennis. I said I needed someone with a face that would be believable peering out of a jail cell. Dennis got the hint and said he was game. We spent the next few hours tracking down first a Santa suit, which proved easy enough, then a location—not so simple. Dennis cracked that it had never been hard for him to find an accommodating jailer back when he was stealing cars and robbing banks. He was reminded of the story of how he had once been captured by the FBI, who warned the sheriff running the jail in Huntsville, Alabama, where Dennis was to be housed for a few days, that Dennis was an escape artist.

"They put me in a bullpen and there was a convict in there I had done time with at one of the pens. We were deep into old stories when the sheriff showed up and asked for the federal prisoner. He called me over and said, 'McKee, I thought you were some kind of Houdini. What the hell you still doing here?' and he laughed and walked away. Ever' so often he would come around and laugh at me and say, 'McKee, you still here? The way those feds been talking about you, I thought you would have gone by now.' Then he looked at his watch and said, 'You been here three whole hours,' and he thought that was funnier than shit. Finally, to shut him up, I told him, 'Sheriff, I just drove all the way from Miami and I'm dog tired. But if you'll let me get a few hours sleep, I'll make you happy. I'll get out for you.' He didn't like that. He got red in the face and yelled at

"McKee, you son-of-a-bitch, I promise you one thing: your soul may leave from this jail but your body never will!"

me, 'McKee, you son-of-a-bitch, I promise you one thing: your soul may leave this jail but your body never will!'"

Early the next morning Dennis left using one of the oldest known ruses. He got hold of a hypodermic needle from his jailbird friend, extracted several syringes full of blood which he held in a peanut butter jar. He drank the blood, keeping the last gulp in his mouth, then smashed the peanut butter jar and smeared blood and broken bits of glass all over his face. His friend shouted for the guard, and when he showed up Dennis duly puked more blood. His friend told the guard Dennis had tried to kill himself by eating glass. They rushed him to the local hospital and Dennis fled through an emergency ward window. He stole a car in the parking lot and headed out of town. "A few miles down the road I stopped at a phone booth and called the sheriff. 'Hey, buddy, this is Rex McKee,' I said when he answered the phone. 'Where the hell are you, McKee?' he shouted at me. I said, 'Well, sir, since you don't have telephones in those cells, I guess that means I must've escaped. Body and soul.'"

Finally we located a suburban lock-up where the cops agreed to let us borrow a jail cell. The sergeant on duty told us that last year they actually had to tank Santa and a couple of his elves for imbibing a few too many egg nogs. Dennis was a good sport throughout the photo shoot. He hammed it up for the camera, he put up with my whims and photographer Fionn Reilly's relentless quest for the perfect photograph.

Unlike the biographies of most state-raised convicts, the Dennis McKee story has a happy ending. In the last year-and-a-half Dennis's life has taken another major turn for the better. Dennis is the kind of person you want for a friend if you are going through a tough time—another characteristic of the best long-term convicts. Rebecca, whom Dennis had known for years, was involved in a nasty divorce from an attorney she had met through Dennis. In an effort to help her through her difficulties, Dennis wired her some money. Rebecca refused the money but she accepted Dennis's moral support and after a courtship of long, heart-to-heart phone calls, Dennis told Rebecca he felt they were good for each other and they should get together and keep each other company. Rebecca came to Houston to meet Dennis, took one look at his exotic S&M ex-convict bachelor's bedroom complete with wall-to-wall mirrors, chains and handcuffs suspended from the ceiling, whips, and even a fog machine for added atmosphere, and she understood that what Dennis needed was a woman who loved him instead of some sex toy to fulfill his erotic jailhouse fantasies.

The final ingredient in any formula for happiness is love. Dennis had lost all contact with his mother and brother during the dark years he was doing the Thorazine shuffle in prison cells or out leading carloads of cops on cross-country car chases. One of the best times in Dennis's life took place last Christmas when Rebecca got in touch with Dennis's mother and brother and had them come out to spend the holidays at the house in Katy.

"Well, sir, since you don't have telephones in those cells, I guess that means I must've gone. Body and soul."

"She's 74 years old now," Dennis said of his mother. "She lives in Columbus, Georgia. We went back to where I was born, where all the stuff happened, and I went to see my grandmother's grave. Then my mother and brother came out to spend Christmas with us and it was the happiest I've ever been. My mother is a real good person, basically she was always a real good person. She was just a kid when she had me and she didn't have no fuckin' money."

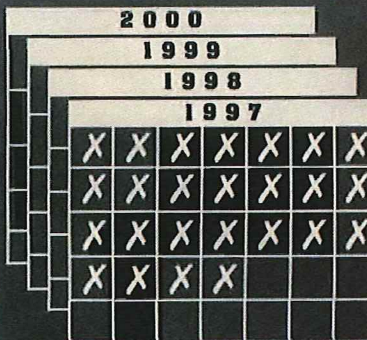
Money and success haven't changed Dennis McKee. He's been out of prison a little over 11 years now and has made enough money in that time to live comfortably without ever having to work again. But like the little boy who started out as a comic book thief and then graduated to robbing banks, Dennis keeps coming up with new ideas for money-making ventures. All those years in the slammer taught him to survive by using his wits. The American entre-preneurial spirit that has turned imprisonment into a business and prisoners into a product ultimately becomes a survival tactic for the prisoners. As the gonzo ex-convict capitalists hit the streets, all I can say is: Watch out corporate America.

Marriage by Phone

Ask us How?

THE ULTIMATE IN EASE AND PRIVACY.

Call toll free (888) 461-7799
or
Call collect (310) 673-6578
Mon.–Fri. 10:00 a.m.–8:00 p.m.
PACIFIC STANDARD TIME



ARE YOU SERVING TIME BECAUSE OF A STING, REVERSE STING OR DRUG BUST?

Was your arrest due to the efforts of an "INFORMANT"?

If the answer is yes to any of the above, and your arrest DID NOT INVOLVE VIOLENCE OR WEAPONS,

we want to know your circumstances.

Help us gather research so we may be better informed to help YOU.

Have someone you know, who is familiar with the facts of your case call us at

1-900-772-8620

This is not endorsed by the government.

$3.99 PER MINUTE / AVERAGE LENGTH 5 MINUTES
AVERAGE COST $19.95 / MUST BE 18 YEARS OR OLDER

For participating in our research you will receive names of persons who may be able to assist you in sentence reduction and to change unjust laws.

RASHCO RESEARCH, INC.
Miami, Florida 33186
(305) 254-9434