

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Jack Sellers

Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**

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Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we record the oral histories of current and former DOC employees. I'm DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton. This oral history focuses on memories from the October 1989 riot at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. Our guest today, September 27, 2019, is Jack Sellers. Thanks for joining us, Jack.

**Sellers:** Thank you for having me.

**McNaughton:** Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career?

**Sellers:** I started in 1986 as a corrections officer trainee at SCI Camp Hill. Within a year-and-a-half I became a sergeant. As a sergeant, I was working 2-to-10 as the relief E, F and G, K sergeant. I was just entering my days off before the riot and was to come back as the G, K sergeant for the 2-to-10 shift.

**McNaughton:** I know that you mentioned to me that you were not actually at the institution at the time of the riot, because .... Well, explain to our listeners where you were and why you were not there.

**Sellers:** On October 23, I was struck by a drunk driver and [that] basically knocked me into the next week. I was getting discharged from the hospital the day the riot kicked and received a phone call from... at the time Lt. Jeffries, telling me I needed to come in right away. I said, "I am just stepping out of the hospital and walking in my front door on crutches." He said, "Never mind, I remember," and he hung up. I didn't know what it was about at that point.



**Jack Sellers**

**McNaughton:** How did you find out what was going on? Did you turn on the TV and you saw it happening?

**Sellers:** Before I turned on the TV to see what was happening, I'm also a member of the local fire company, and I was president of the Camp Hill Fire Company, and we were dispatched by ambulances and also to assist with the fire company in Lower Allen Township at SCI Camp Hill. That was my first awareness of what was really going on. I didn't know what the phone call was about, and...

**McNaughton:** So, was it scanner stuff that you were hearing or over your fire department radios, or...?

**Sellers:** Fire department radios, but I had a scanner, and I did turn it on. I started listening to what was going on there. I really couldn't call anyone from the institution, because everybody had been called in to work. Being on crutches and the side of my face swelled up like Popeye basically. I was kind of speechless and guilt-ridden that I couldn't help my fellow officers.

**McNaughton:** Yeah, but... and like we discussed... that wasn't your fault that you couldn't be there... because you were the victim of an accident.

**Sellers:** I just kind of hit you periodically, because you want to help your brothers and sisters.

**McNaughton:** Yeah. And since you were a sergeant, too, you were over a number of officers. So, I'm sure felt responsible for them.

**Sellers:** Yes, I did. One of the officers I used to work with, Sgt. Murphy, he came to see me at the hospital the night before the riots, and we had been talking and he said, "You heard what happened up at Huntingdon. What do you think's going to happen down here?" We looked at each other, and we were reading the handwriting on the walls with the inmates being upset, and we said, "It's not a very good time for us."

**McNaughton:** I have talked to other people about some of the signs that things were brewing. Can you just tell me what some of those were?

**Sellers:** The administration was taking things from the inmates. They were going to take away the... what was that visit called?

**McNaughton:** Family Day Picnics.

**Sellers:** Family Day Picnics. They were going to start charging them for calling in for sick line and charging them a doctor's office visit fee on a prorated basis, based on income. They were talking about cuts in hourly wages. The inmates weren't taking too well to it. They were used to a certain way of life and accustomed to it, so to speak, and they felt that their rights were being violated. There was a very strong contingency, and I don't mean to sound bad, but the Fruits Of Islam were very strong at the time, and they were identifying people of importance.

**McNaughton:** They were actually building their military...

**Sellers:** Infrastructure...

**McNaughton:** ... and they had been exercising or demonstrating as a group out in the yard.

**Sellers:** Yes, and we were supposed to make note of different activities that they did when they gathered together. At the time you weren't supposed to have more than five or six inmates congregating in a group.

**McNaughton:** They were marching.

**Sellers:** Yeah, they were marching, and they were exercising together. It was a very worrisome time.

**McNaughton:** Also, some staff members were talking to me about the fact that officers had been writing misconducts, but they were also mostly overridden. So, they felt that they had no power to enforce any policies or procedures.

**Sellers:** Yeah. There was a change in administration at one point, in which it became kind of similar... and I hate to say this... to today, where the inmates are believed over the staff member. Sometimes our administration would walk down the block and they would talk to the inmates, but they would not even ask the officers for clarification to see what was going on. It led to a lot of animosity on both sides, from the inmates to the staff, because nobody knew who could trust who. The staff didn't feel like we could report. I remember reporting to higher ups statements I was hearing from inmates about a planned work stoppage and a planned call-in for sick. I have to admit, I was a young officer at the time, but I was told that you're just a young sergeant and you don't know what you're talking about. My reports probably got burned up in the riots.

**McNaughton:** Well, there were a lot of people who reported a lot of different things, all the way through the first night of the rioting. We're not sure where any of it went. Another thing that people mention was the fact that Superintendent [Freeman] really never made a presence inside the institution. He really never went inside very much.

**Sellers:** One of the things that I noticed was that the superintendent, kind of, allowed his deputies to run the jail and he didn't question it. The one deputy, who was actually in charge of treatment, kind of overshadowed the operations deputy. And the operations deputy... his famous phrase was, "simply put"... which drove me crazy, but...

**McNaughton:** That's what he would say at the end of every sentence?

**Sellers:** At the end of every sentence, or when he was trying to explain something that he was changing, like when we were with the CERT team and stuff like that, and he would say, "simply put," and we would all just look at each other and say, "yeah, simply."

**McNaughton:** But they [the deputy superintendents] didn't get along.

**Sellers:** They didn't get along, but there was a power struggle there but at the same time, Deputy Henry seemed to overshadow R.C. Smith. It was just a bad time for employees because leadership was weak.

**McNaughton:** Not too long before the riot... and by not too long I mean a year or so... wasn't there some sort of incident where a lieutenant was fired over possible excessive use of force? That kind of set the tone for staff morale too.

**Sellers:** There was a lot going on there. One of the captains... they definitely had their favorites, ok? Some of their favorites were key people that supplied information to them, so they were, in essence, snitches, but one of the captains... I got into a conflict with one of his "children," and he... this was when I was still a CO1... he kind of told me to be aware. Even the inmate told me to be aware, because he was talking to the captain about me. It changed dynamics, because... like what you were talking about... that captain came into our lunch room and there were four of us at a table... and said, "I need you three right now." Those three went to that situation at the RHU. Of course, I was supposed to be highly insulted by it, which I was, and he said he didn't need me. Some of those officers lost their jobs.

**McNaughton:** Thank goodness that you didn't go.

**Sellers:** So, indirectly I was protected.

**McNaughton:** So, there was a lot of stuff going on, and then they also talked about parole violators and long-term offenders not having enough to do... sitting around idle. There wasn't enough programming, and it infuriated the inmates, I guess.

**Sellers:** Yeah. There's nothing worse than idle hands. A lot of the inmates when they're sitting still, they're getting bitter. They're getting angry. They felt they weren't getting a fair shake. They felt they were violated unfairly. I do believe that there has to be consequences for actions. They don't have to be severe, but there have to be consequences. You have to have the answer for your either inactions or your inappropriate actions. Some of these inmates... they're just that entitlement oriented, and that still lives today, so that's not an unusual situation, but it led to a lot of things. I have to get my timeframes right, because we were right around the time of Mudman [Simon], and I think that was after. That really quagmired things back down and started kicking up feelings again.

**McNaughton:** So, let's go back... you've had your accident and you're at home, and you know the first night is happening and you have to sit back and watch that. Then, of course, the second evening, it starts up again. What are you thinking? Are you thinking, "This can't be true?"

**Sellers:** I was still in disbelief. The second night, my pager started going off and they started dispatching all the ambulances to the prison again. So, I called Chip Rice on the phone and said, "You need to get in there. They need you again." He no sooner hung up than ... he said later ... he got a phone call and they were on their way back in.

It was unfortunate, because a lot of the officers kept talking about the fact that the administration wouldn't listen. If they had just listened to them the first night... allowed them to put the chains and padlocks around the doors, the doors would have never been popped open and the jail would have never been lost on the second night. I could hear it from them, but there was nothing they could do to stop it.

When the administration doesn't respect the staff enough, these problems will reoccur. There was just... surprisingly... there were people that were not respected and that were considered, and I'll use the term "white shirt", but after the riot they became fully respected because they didn't panic in the storm. They put their foot down.

There were comical moments where [Greg] Wolfe and [John] Carey joked about the fact that someone said they were sitting there chain smoking a pack of cigarettes on the second floor above control, and somebody said, "Why would you be smoking now?" Carey, being the jokester that he always was, said, "If I'm going to die of smoke inhalation, it's going to be my smoke."

**McNaughton:** So, he was one of the people stuck in the building?

**Sellers:** Yeah. They were... there were several of them upstairs. Bowser was upstairs, and they all managed to get out of control and get upstairs, and then they managed to get saved. I just... the amount of guilt that you feel that you can't help those ... and you knew what they went through. It's just... really hard.

**McNaughton:** When it's over and your healing, when did you finally get to go back?

**Sellers:** Due to associated injuries... I had a leg, facial injuries and some upper body injury, I was able to go back in January [1990], and I joined the staff working 12-hour shifts.

**McNaughton:** They did that for quite a long time.

**Sellers:** I think we did that right into the summer.

**McNaughton:** Did you return to those four blocks then? Where did you work once you got back there?

**Sellers:** I ended up working a lot on E and F and H and J. I [block] was the infirmary, which was on the other side. So, we were in charge of making sure that the showers were finished, making sure that security checks were done, and different activities through the night.

**McNaughton:** By January [1990], were they back to two inmates per cell, or...?

**Sellers:** They were returning to the two inmates per cell. In fact, in June of 1990, I went over to become a counselor, and later that year... closer to January 1991, we were running some groups and we would actually be still taking inmates out of their cell with handcuffs. We would take up to 10 or 12 to a group room, and they would remain in handcuffs. The only one that may have gotten out of the handcuffs... and this was way into it... was if they were the one carrying the TV set or the equipment for part of the educational series for drug and alcohol.

**McNaughton:** When you say that they were handcuffed and escorted, was state police still on site then to do those escorts, or were they gone by then?

**Sellers:** State police were with us. When I became a counselor, they were pulling out. Some of the state police began to understand the stressfulness of working in a prison. I know there was an

incident where one of the state police officers got tired of some of the stuff and acted like he was chambering a round in the shotgun. That kind of quieted things down a bit.

**McNaughton:** Time for him to be relieved.

**Sellers:** Yes, time for him to get out and get some fresh air. Because right after the riots, everyone was allowed to carry a handgun in.

**McNaughton:** Really?

**Sellers:** Yeah. Some people carried two or three in. Nobody wanted to go back into the jail, because nobody knew whether they were safe. That was a very short-term thing, and as things got control, there was still... but it was...

**McNaughton:** So, they fired the administration. They got rid of the three, and they brought in Beard and Kyler, and since you were a counselor then, you would have had more interaction with McCullough?

**Sellers:** A little bit. I didn't get to deal with him that much, because I was new to it and I had people like Bob Mork, Kirk Kressler were doing my training... and Mike Kazor... Petruccio.

**McNaughton:** So, tell me what it was like to watch the facility be rebuilt. How did that go?

**Sellers:** The nicest thing I saw was... they began to contain the areas. To see the blocks get ripped down... was... joyous but sad, because these are the blocks you were used to.

I remember, this was early, right before the riot, I was on E Block. I was the relief sergeant on the 2-to-10 shift. Kathy Flowers was a little, young trainee, and she's walking down trying to chase guys into there, and I was trying to tell Kathy in a polite way, "Kathy, you need to go up front, because these guys want to talk to you." And they did. She was a solid CO and she liked to do her job, and I'm proud of her to this day and always will be.

**McNaughton:** Was she there during the riot?

**Sellers:** I'm trying to remember the exact time that she started, but it was right around that time. It must have been before the riot, and I say that because she was helping me chase people in after yard. Back then it was the big yard. You had 80 percent of Group 2 was going to the big yard. Usually K was back in the side back yard, and sometimes it would be two blocks, like G and K would go there.

**McNaughton:** So, they kind of kept them separated.

**Sellers:** A little bit, but there was no... the way they treated CO Arnold... there wasn't a nicer person with a nicer spirit than him. For him to put up with that kind of abuse was... not surprising, but surprising. There's a lot of people you could trust, and there's a lot of good people in there, but he was always kind... always polite... never disrespectful, even to an inmate, and... that's the way he got treated.

**McNaughton:** Just being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

**Sellers:** Yes. All of their anger at the administration and staff came out on him, as it did on Hal Mauer, as it did on Tommy Campbell. There's a number of others, but they took some of the severe stuff.

I always had guilt because when I was a CO1, I told Hal Mauer, "Mod 4 is yours. I'm turning it over to you." And that came back to horribly haunt him, because that's where he was at the time the riots kicked off. I think he was working a double that day.

**McNaughton:** Did he ever come back to work?

**Sellers:** He did. He was a certified school teacher. He had all the credentials for school teaching. He tried to come back and go to the Academy... [he was refused and was told he wasn't worthy]. So, Hal came back as a counselor then. Everybody was like... no one could tell the story of a CO... share the importance of safety like Hal could. So, Hal came over and became a counselor. At one point, Hal had to put a guy in restraints, and Hal's arms and wrists were very tender and swollen and re-damaged, and that was the last I saw Hal working in the prison.

**McNaughton:** So, you came back, you're now a counselor running groups... what else? What else do you want to share about the riot?

**Sellers:** I talked with several of the officers while we were working as officers, and none of us... we were at a point with the administration where we didn't think we could trust anyone and didn't know that we wanted to trust anyone for that matter.

**McNaughton:** Was this even after Beard was there as the superintendent?

**Sellers:** Yeah. When Beard came in...

**McNaughton:** Because he was a stranger, nobody knew him.

**Sellers:** Nobody knew him and his biggest hiccup, so to speak, was when he just said that, "We're not taking snow days off anymore. Real snow is up at Rockview. They get real snow we don't." What people were trying to tell him is, "Yeah, but when you have real snow you can drive over it. When you have ice, you can't always drive over it." He didn't buy into it.

**McNaughton:** Were there a lot of staff calling off then for snow?

**Sellers:** People would tend to call off when it got a little slippery or icy out. Some people are used to driving in snow, and some people aren't as used to it. We were always reminded that we were essential employees. In fact, I came up with a phrase that I was essentially non-essential until it was essential to be non-essential. And they said, "You're an essential employee. You're coming to work." It is what it is. He was good. Kyler had the utmost respect of the officers and most of the staff. He was known to have gone down the tier back when Huntingdon had the problem, and they restored order. If we had been able to do the same thing... when you talked about administration, we don't really talk about him, but the commissioner at the time...

**McNaughton:** Owens.

**Sellers:** He was another big hand in “don’t go in and disrupt the prison” and “we’re not going to retake the jail yet” and “were going to give them a chance to talk.” With Sgt. Beck... who made that critical decision and he never got in trouble for it, although I’m sure he probably did, but he never spoke of it. He’s...

**McNaughton:** But him letting the state police in is what saved everything.

**Sellers:** He’s like Saint Beck... not Sgt. Beck, Saint Beck. He was logical, kind of a heads-up oriented guy, and he knew what he had to do. Kyler was someone that everybody respected, and they knew that things were going to get done from a security standpoint. McCullough’s hands were kind of tied, because there wasn’t a lot of pro-treatment at that time. There was... there were still a lot of people... we did classification and we tried to determine who needed to stay at Camp Hill. They moved stuff that should have been outside of the jail outside, like the small gas engine repair shop moved out of the Education Building. When those tanks started to blow... they were a sign of things that we needed to pay more attention to details and you know... it just...

**McNaughton:** Have you ever expressed your guilt to any of your coworkers, and did they just say, “Hey, Jack, not your... don’t worry about it. Let it go.”

**Sellers:** We did. We talked a lot about it, and we’d have some time at night during the counts – we jokingly called it “a moment to reflect” -- and we’d talk about it and they would know where my heart was and where my desire was, and they would share with me things that they had gone through. We were able to walk through some of that. We were able to watch each other’s back. It was helpful.

When [John] Ream came in from Psychology and set up the CISM team and they asked me to be a part of it, I was honored. When we first went to the meetings with the officers, everybody just looked at each other like, “Where’s the microphones? Can we trust anybody?” When you felt safe, then you could talk.

**McNaughton:** I think I remember John Ream having the debriefings in the basement of the old central office. Were you there?

**Sellers:** He did some there. He did some over in the administrative building. Central office just wasn’t a good spot to have them, because central office represented authority, and nobody trusted authority. It wasn’t a knock on “the ivory tower,” but it was issues...

**McNaughton:** Asking people to go to a place they didn’t want to go...

**Sellers:** They weren’t sure that they could trust. They were told by most of central office to, “Suck it up, buttercup.” Get over it. But John knew that people needed to have a safe venue to talk.

**McNaughton:** There are a lot of staff who say the debriefings were worthless, but were they in the beginning, but then when John got them, they became more substantial or...

**Sellers:** I think they did over time. Once guys felt like they could talk openly, and they didn't feel like they were being recorded or reports were being written, they began to trust. Sometimes, even though they might not say anything in the meeting, when they got out of the meeting, they could talk.

**McNaughton:** How long do you think those debriefings went on with those individuals? At some point they had to end.

**Sellers:** My memory is a little rough. They just kind of phased out, because... we're a strange kind of breed. We trust each other, but we don't know who to trust in jail. You knew who had your back. Sometimes you were surprised, but for the most part you knew who the ones you could trust were, and you built relationships with them, and you ended up working on blocks together, and you ended up doing things together.

I'm trying to remember the CERT team. I believe it started practicing before the riot, but it was very chaotic and in the learning stages. Everybody was learning what they were supposed to be doing, and we were doing. We were doing marches, from the military standpoint where you do a wedge and you come in and... or you'd do a "V" formation. The CERT team has come a long way.

**McNaughton:** Pretty impressive... all of the teams actually.

**Sellers:** Some of the people that came through all this... some of the people I look back on have become lieutenants, captains, majors and they retired.

**McNaughton:** ...and one of the hostages is now our executive deputy secretary, Tabb Bickell.

**Sellers:** Oh yeah, you're right.

**McNaughton:** He was in F Block stuck in the switch boxes. I interviewed him. He talked to me about that. Yeah, and there he is in charge of all the institutions now 30 years later.

**Sellers:** There is a lot of good people that were deep down involved and that worked together. You have to have a dry sense of humor ... to deal with some of the things that you saw and had to deal with. Strong people.

I think the administration has learned and taken a lot of that stuff in, and some of the people have moved up into administration so that things would not be lost in the shuffle. We had to learn from it. We had to move on. It was a shame that it was allowed to progress, but at the same time, some of the best people appreciate them. So...

**McNaughton:** What year did you say you retired from the DOC?

**Sellers:** In 2007, I left Camp Hill, and for four years worked at community corrections in Harrisburg. I was a counselor 2, and then I was acting director for a little while. Then I ran into another scenario, so I thought it was best not to have my family exposed to that. I don't mind myself exposed, but my family didn't deserve it, so I retired in 2011 and then went over to Dauphin County to work.

**McNaughton:** But even so... from 1986/87... all the way up to 2007, you saw the facility really change. You saw the tearing down of the old cell blocks. The construction of the new cell blocks, the cordoning off different areas so you can't have a whole lot...

**Sellers:** Some of the block design with the "X" concept... the "K" concept... they were innovative at the time and they were very helpful. It really helped to centralize... that you could be on the block, in the control and be over to see the activities and showers, and that one side of the block was totally locked down vs. the other side. It really made a much safer, more secure atmosphere on.

**McNaughton:** Is there anything else you wanted to recall?

**Sellers:** I'm sure there's a lot. I learned so much from the officers I worked with. They told me amazing stories. Most of them didn't talk about it. It's a lot like being a veteran. They didn't want to talk about what had happened, and it was best left unsaid. If they knew you, they could tell you things. Nobody ever bragged. Everybody just... it was a sharing of the experience. When I read what Joe [Miller] said, I was deeply touched and... quite impressed.

**McNaughton:** We had a bunch of great people.

**Sellers:** We really did. I can think of many people... [he names some here].

**McNaughton:** I talked to McCullough, and he said that Camp Hill really had a lot of great people and great future leaders, but they were being bullied by the two deputies. It suppressed them.

**Sellers:** There was also another factor that went on right before the riots. Frackville and Smithfield had just opened, and there were people that were... some of the "steady Eddies"... so to speak... were being taken to other institutions to help start them up. It left us vulnerable because of that. So, like for me, when I... and I'll just go back way before the riot... I started in 1986, and by June 1<sup>st</sup> I was working in a block and I was the relief officer on 2-to-10... there were days that I was in charge of the block and not even having six months on the job... not even having three months on the job and to be acting... I would think, "This is wild." I shouldn't have been thrown into that much responsibility. I had good officers train me, so I was ok. It was rare that I was going to be in charge, because another officer was there five or six days a week...

**McNaughton:** Well, that's what Joe Miller said. He said that they didn't have an on-the-job training program for COTs. It was like whenever they felt you were ready, they made you an officer.

**Sellers:** Yep. You didn't question it, because if you did, you were thought to be not very good. There were a lot of good training people there. When we started, we went above the gym... that's where you took your academy training and stuff. Then they moved it down to Utley Drive and then from Utley Drive down to Elizabethtown, but there was a lot of good stuff there. I was having to do CPR training for some of the white shirts and they're looking at me like, "You're barely a CO1, why are you trying to talk to me. Just sign my card." They weren't all like that,

but... It was a lot of really good people. Without those people, I don't think the jail would be standing today.

**McNaughton:** Thanks, Jack, for participating in the project.

**Sellers:** Thank you for allowing me. I really don't feel worthy to be in the mix with some of the guys.

**McNaughton:** Well, thank you.

**Sellers:** Thank you.

END