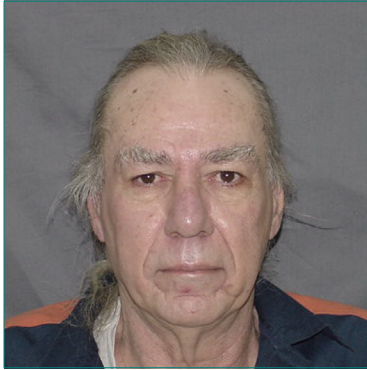


Faces behind the Figures

Are we safer because they're behind bars?



Robert Middleton, 121894

Offense: Second-Degree Murder

Sentence: Parolable Life

First possible parole: 1978

Robert Middleton, now 55 years old, came to prison at age 19. He worked unsupervised in the community when the rules permitted, and has maintained a spotless prison record for the last 11 years. Although the “old” parole board expressed interest in paroling Middleton in 1988 and again in 1992, the current board has continued him three times, for five years each time.

Background and Offense

Robert Middleton was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1948. His parents divorced before he was two years old. By the time Middleton was 18, his mother had married eight times and had seven other children. The family moved frequently from state to state. Perhaps as a result of the various father figures in his life, Middleton had difficulty dealing with authority. By his late teens, he had been expelled from school, arrested for a variety of petty offenses, received an undesirable discharge from the Army and was a regular user of prescription drugs.

When Middleton was 19, he began dating a 17-year-old runaway named Marie. Middleton says he did not know she was engaged in prostitution. He was surprised when, on Feb. 17, 1968, Marie brought a customer to the apartment Middleton shared with another young man, Richard Broughton. A fight broke out. The customer was struck numerous times with a 2x4 and died. It is undisputed that Middleton struck the victim once and Broughton inflicted the rest of the blows. The pair then stripped the body of valuables and dumped it in a field in Oakland County. Middleton says he was high on seconal the night of the murder. Middleton and Broughton were both convicted of second-degree murder and given parolable life sentences.

Middleton carried his difficulties with authority into prison. During the early years of his incarceration, his conduct record was spotty. Periods of adjustment were punctuated by angry outbursts and clashes with authority. He had many misconduct citations. However, by the time he became eligible for parole in 1978, the interviewer wrote, “Seems to have himself together...Seems to have some understanding of self,...the motivation for his offense, and remorse for his behavior.” Nonetheless, the majority of board members wanted further evidence of rehabilitation so they denied parole at that time. Meanwhile, his co-defendant Richard Broughton was paroled in 1979.



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More about the men and women who fill Michigan 's prisons

In-Prison Conduct

Middleton earned an associates degree from Northern Michigan University, discovered his artistic talent, and spent time painting and drawing. Attesting to his improved conduct, in 1984 Middleton was placed in minimum custody. The following year he was approved for the work pass program, where he remained until a policy change in 1989 removed all lifers from community status. During his years at Camp Brighton, Middleton often worked unsupervised in the community. He has several letters of recommendation from staff and work supervisors in that program, including the Village of Pinckney police chief, as well as job offers upon his release.

Parole Board Action

Partly because of his excellent performance in the community, the parole board voted to start the parole process for Middleton in June 1988. It ordered the requisite medical and psychological reports, but the board was backlogged and lifers were placed on the back burner.

Four years later, in 1992, the board requested updated reports from staff, and again voted to proceed. However, before the “old” board could conduct the public hearing required for release under the “lifer law,” it was replaced by a politically-appointed board.

The “new” board, in apparent accord with its policy that “life means life,” has shown no interest in releasing Middleton. Although he has not had a single misconduct citation since 1992, the parole board issued him a 5-year continuance in 1992, 1997 and another in 2002.

Middleton’s next required review will be in 2007. He will be 59 years old and will have served 39 years in prison on a parolable life term.