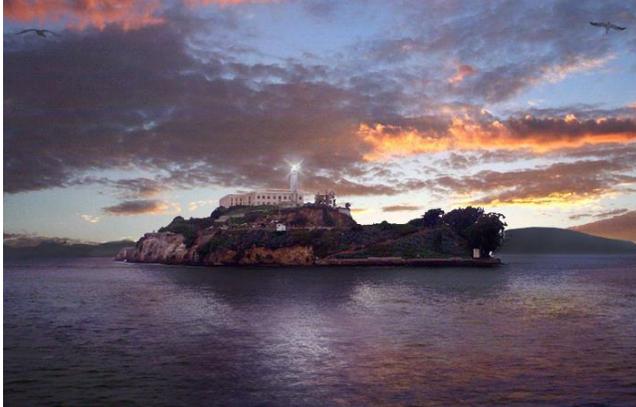


The Secrets Of Alcatraz

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Alcatraz, the Rock. Photo/Digital Illustration by Centpacrr

It's fifty years since the world's most secure prison shut its doors. Alcatraz had, in its short stint, housed some of the most notorious criminals of the 20th century.

"The Rock"

Lying just 1.5 miles off the coast of San Francisco on the West coast of the United States, Alcatraz was once slated to be a lighthouse and then a military prison (during and after the Civil War). In 1933, the Rock (as it came to be called) was converted into a Federal prison.

For about 29 years, before it shut its doors in 1963, Alcatraz was a Federal prison – likely the most secure in the world, and one from which no one had ever managed to escape. Or had they? Hold on to that question for a bit.

In 1972 Alcatraz became a recreation area which is today part of the National Park Service (NPS). The old prison still exists as does the lighthouse – which is the oldest operating lighthouse on the west coast. The other military installations and abundant natural life are also draws in the Rock today.



The vent dug out with spoons to reach a corridor behind. Photo: Wikipedia/Superchillum

The Prison

The most famous avatar of the Rock is when it was a Federal prison. It held within its austere walls some of the most notorious names in US criminal history, like Al Capone, George “Machine Gun” Kelly, and Robert “Birdman of Alcatraz” Stroud. In its three decades, several attempts to escape from the Rock were made. None successful. Or so the authorities like to think.

The Daring Escape

In June 1962, the most famous of the attempts to escape from Alcatraz was made. Frank Morris, and two brothers: John and Clarence Anglin dug a tunnel from their cells with a spoon for over a year. The tunnel reached an unused corridor from where they climbed vents that led to the roof. From the roof they scaled the walls and the fences down to the waterline and inflated a raft made from raincoats. The three then used wooden paddles to make their escape. But how did they manage to dig and do all this without the guards noticing?



Dummy head found in Frank Morris's cell. Photo: FBI/Wikipedia

They made plaster heads with soap, toilet paper, and real hair (from the prison barber) and used them as dummies to fool the guards into thinking they were in bed. They had an accomplice called Allen West, who is supposed to have made the raft and paddles for them. But he could not escape from his cell as the tunnel ran up against an iron bar-grid and by the time he dismantled that, the others had fled.

The Mystery

Authorities to this day have not found evidence either of their death or of the convicts. Their daring escape may have been a success, or they may have perished in the cold waters off San Francisco, before they reached the mainland. We'll likely never know.

Fifty years after the prison shut its doors, that mystery remains unsolved.