A DARING PLAN TO ESCAPE FROM AL
HISTORICAL NARRATIVE
A true story from the past

A BRUTAL PRISON

3 HARDENED CRIMINALS

CATRAZ

BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

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At exactly 9:30 on the night of June 11, 1962, the lights at Alcatraz Prison went out. Most of the inmates shivered on their thin, narrow beds as they tried to get some sleep.

But not Frank Morris. Morris waited for the prison to quiet, his heart pounding. If all went according to plan, he would never sleep behind bars again.

For months, Morris and three other prisoners, Allen West and brothers Clarence and John Anglin, had been secretly plotting to escape from the bleak prison, perched on an island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. People said it was impossible to break free from “the Rock,” as Alcatraz was known. Morris and his friends were desperate to prove everyone wrong.

They had developed an ingenious plan. For months, they had been using tiny tools to chip away at the concrete walls of their cells. It was painstaking work, but eventually, they made holes big enough to crawl through. Once they had a way out, they climbed up the ventilation shafts behind their cells and set up a secret workshop.

Many Had Drowned

Men who had tried to escape before had drowned swimming in the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay. Morris and his friends did not intend to swim, though. Using stolen and handmade tools, they’d managed to fashion life preservers and a raft made of raincoats.

Morris was certainly no stranger to escape. An armed robber, he had already escaped from several prisons. But Alcatraz was different. Security was tight. Guards counted the inmates many times each day and night. To fool them, Morris and his friends made dummy heads. On the night of their escape, they tucked the heads into their beds. In the dim light, the heads looked real.

Now, as darkness settled over Alcatraz, everything was ready. Well, almost.

At the last minute, West couldn’t get out of his cell. Morris and the Anglin brothers went on without him. They wriggled out of their cells and climbed up plumbing pipes. Finally, they stepped onto the roof. Carefully avoiding the prison searchlight, they crawled silently across the roof and scrambled down a drainpipe.

They were out.

The salty breeze blew against their faces. Now all that stood between them and freedom was a 15-foot fence and the crashing, shark-infested waters of the bay.

Men had made it this far before, only to drown or be turned back by the strong currents. One inmate had hidden in the sea caves, too
seemed like the ideal place to incarcerate these criminals. So officials set out to build the most escape-proof prison in the nation. Cell blocks built in 1909 were turned into a fortress meant to hold those who had tried—and sometimes managed—to break out of other prisons.

Nicknamed “Uncle Sam’s Devil’s Island,” Alcatraz opened as a federal prison in August 1934. Penitentiaries across the country were notified that Alcatraz was ready to take troublemakers off their hands. As Alcatraz Warden James A. Johnston later wrote, “They would select their worst; I would take them and do my best.”

At 5 a.m. on August 19, 1934, 53 prisoners boarded a train in Atlanta, Georgia, for the long ride to California. They were to be some of the first inmates at Alcatraz. Officials couldn’t help feeling nervous. These men were going to Alcatraz because ordinary prisons couldn’t handle them.

Warden Johnston took every precaution. The prisoners rode in specially designed railroad cars with steel bars across the windows. No prisoner was allowed to leave his seat during any stop. The inmates arrived on August 22, 1934. By the end of the year, Alcatraz was housing more than 200 of America’s worst criminals.

A Bitter Surprise

A prisoner at Alcatraz found himself in a harsh, isolated world, punctuated by...
Capone. To many, Capone symbolized the collapse of law and order in the 1920s. He made millions running illegal gambling joints in Chicago. He was said to have murdered at least a dozen people. Capone was used to having power, and he was proud of his reputation as a big shot. He figured he’d be able to pull strings to get special privileges at Alcatraz, just like he had in other prisons.

As soon as he arrived, Capone met with Warden Johnston. “I have a lot of friends,” he told the warden. “I expect to have a lot of visitors.”

Capone was in for a bitter surprise. He was allowed to see family, but not friends—or fellow gangsters. Every prisoner at Alcatraz was treated the same, and there was nothing he could do about it. Eventually, Capone had to admit, “Alcatraz has got me licked.”

Daring Escapes

By 1963, the island prison had become too expensive to operate, and the government decided to shut it down. Today Alcatraz is a landmark managed by the National Park Service. More than a million tourists visit every year. So do about 100 species of birds, including gulls, cormorants, and pelicans.

So what about escapes?

Alcatraz was a federal prison for 29 years. During that time there were 14 escape attempts, involving 36 men. Twenty-three were caught, seven were killed, and one drowned. Two others attempted
escape in December 1937. Officials believe they were swept out to sea.

That leaves three men: Frank Morris and John and Clarence Anglin. After the night of June 11, 1962, they were never seen or heard from again.

After the men were discovered missing, a massive search was conducted. According to some records, a raft was discovered on nearby Angel Island. There was also a report that a car was stolen that night, which could have been used by the escapees. But in the end, officials concluded that the men had drowned. Indeed, a body was found floating in the bay, but it was never identified. If the men had gone overboard, survival would have been unlikely. Hypothermia would have set in right away, and the powerful current would have easily dragged them to their deaths.

People have speculated about their fate for decades. To this day, rumors still circulate that they are alive. There have been many sightings; nothing has been proved.

What do you think? Did Morris and the Anglin brothers make it—or did they perish in the merciless waters of San Francisco Bay?

**CONTEST**

**Why Did They Try?** What was it like to be an inmate at Alcatraz? How could the conditions have motivated Frank Morris, John Anglin, and Clarence Anglin to risk their lives attempting to escape? Draw on the article as well as the poem in your answer. Then send your answer to ALCATRAZ CONTEST. Five winners will get Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko. See page 2 for details.

**POETRY CONNECTION**

**Vow**

By Irene Latham

*Inside, we endure relentless routine in a concrete cage.*

*After countless crimes, we stand to be counted—twelve times a day.*

*We’re an island of masters.*

*We dodge brawls and block handmade blades.*

*At night we battle through dark seclusion and silent, deadly wars.*

*Torture thrives in surprising places:* from the top tier we watch gulls wheel across paintbrush sky.

*Tugboats cry, Escape!* Distant windows wink like stars.

*We will not die on this rock.*