

ENTOMBED IN ALCATRAZ

Robert Luke

If you disobey the rules of society, they send you to prison.
If you disobey the rules of prison, they send you to Alcatraz.

I have often read the observation that judges, and juries for that matter, should spend a few days in prison to taste some of the medicine that they dispense. At first sight, this appears sensible advice, albeit it comes immediately to the mind that these wise people, to be coherent, should also recommend that judges be raped, mugged and tortured so to taste some of the pain suffered by those victims that they are supposed, if not to avenge, at least to protect. But, both suggestions being impracticable, I propose reading this book as a simpler solution to get the feel of what it's like to be on either side of crime. In fact, the scholars, professors, politicians, lawyers, opinionated ideologists, intellectuals, self-proclaimed free thinkers and believers who philosophize on law, rights, punishment, authority, society, norms and justice should pore over this book to discover what their abstract reasoning will never reveal. Robert's book is moving – as all stories that span nearly a century, from childhood to old age – but it is a story with a happy ending, the rock of Alcatraz being the last stop of his criminal voyage and the sailing port for his new clean life. It is worth reading from many criminological points of view, independently of your perspective on the argument – crime as a socio-cultural definition or crime as a biological anomaly; or, for those uneasy at taking sides, crime as a biosocial phenomenon.

Unfortunately, as most people like to read what they like to believe – and prefer to overlook what may destabilize their certainties – everyone may find ideological support in this biography. Those seduced by the sociological explanations of crime will find in the lower class environment that surrounded the young Robert – and in the traumatic discovery of an illegitimate paternity – the justification of his asocial behavior. Others will see in the same elements the proof of the hereditary nature of his

unrestrainable rages. The utopians who believe in a world without prisons will be comfortingly reassured on their faith that jails are, in fact, a fertile turf to nurture evil plans. The advocates of biocriminology will recognize in Luke and his fellows obvious traits of deviance. Lombroso, not without reason, would have found in Luke clear symptoms of moral insanity, a disease that, after 30 years, had eventually healed. And Luke's epiphany can be easily seen as a celebration of the success of the penological experiment of Alcatraz or the evidence that every human being has in itself the possibility of rehabilitation, prisons being just a useless and brutal retribution. Devout souls, in this miraculous redemption, will recognize God in the act of showing His infinite merciful goodness.

Nevertheless, it would be a shame to read the book under the influence of prejudice, because Robert Luke is blessed by an unusual detachment from the facts that are so deeply entwined with his life – or, perhaps, such dissociation has been his lifelong curse. Such unemotional approach has endowed his biography with an extremely honest – and surprisingly unbiased – perspective on the world of crime, criminals, society and, especially, himself. Therefore, each page of this terse chronicle of a life, as seen from the inside, offers the open-minded criminologist a unique and precious wealth of empirical material free from artifacts. The Rock has become the pivotal point of Luke's life – the place of an epiphany that has changed his destiny. The Rock that the book unveils, if you are perceptive enough, may also define the philosophical divide of your criminological stance.

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To oversee this most unforgiving of penitentiaries, the BOP chose a man who combined strict discipline with a zeal for progressive reform. James A. Johnston, a local Republican banker, had been warden of the maximum security institutions at San Quentin and Folsom. Here he had taken a strong stand against torture, ending the use of the hooks, the Oregon boot, and other maiming devices. Johnston promised the Justice Department that the "confirmed criminals" of Alcatraz would not be allowed to commit more crimes and that "nothing would be done to coddle" such men. Habitual criminals, Johnston felt, were creatures of extreme ego. So Johnston's program for the Alcatraz felons was calculated to chasten them. Big men were to be made small. From the moment an inmate arrived on the Island, it was impressed on him that he was powerless. The warden said:

Insistence on absolute obedience to regulations and the orders of those in authority is essential. I would not make a fetish of rules. I prefer reason. But there are rules of reason and reasonable rules, and prisoners should be compelled to obey them; otherwise no progress can be made toward reformation, because chief of the criminal's faults is disobedience¹.

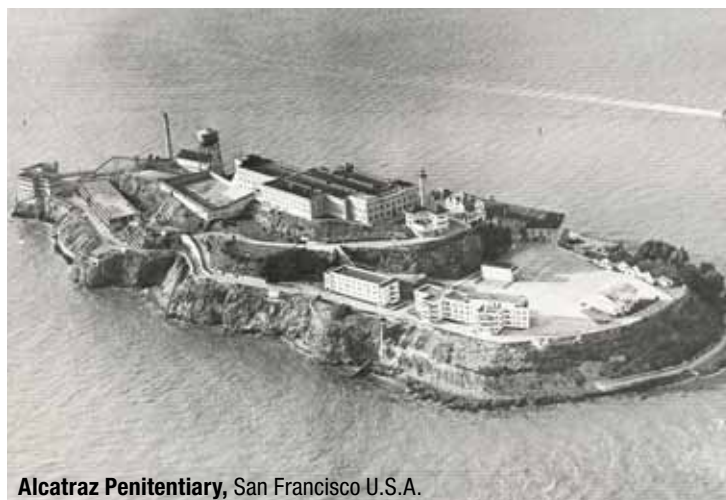
ALCATRAZ

Alcatraz was certainly no myth. Alcatraz was the maximum security federal penitentiary of the time. There were a total of 1,538 prisoners incarcerated in Alcatraz and all the men who were prisoners on Alcatraz were the dregs of society. I believe this, even though I was one of them, and even though some of us changed our lives. This book was written with the recollections of the author and data from the National Archives. Some parts may not be accurate, and may be only the memories of an old man.

HISTORY

I was born May 22, 1927 in Provo, Utah. My family were all Mormons and I was raised in that faith. Two younger brothers were also born in Provo. In 1933 one bed, some furniture, clothes in boxes and all of us were loaded into a flatbed truck and we moved to Lovell, Wyoming. This town was next to the Big Horn River and 12 miles south of Montana. My mother's family all lived there. Three brothers and two sisters. My father got a job as a carpenter. My grandparents had a big firm a few miles north of town and they fed a lot of people during the Depression. We followed my father to Los Angeles, California in 1937, where his brother got him a job in a movie studio as a carpenter. I went to school, which was always easy for me. World War II started when I was 14 and by then, like most 14 year old kids, I thought I knew everything. One thing that I came to a certain conclusion is that a lot of Mormons were hypocrites, and so were a lot of people who professed to be religious and live by the tenets of their church.

In 1942, my parents divorced, and my mother, youngest brother Michael – who had been born in California and was only a year old, and I moved to



Alcatraz Penitentiary, San Francisco U.S.A.

Ogden, Utah. My mother got a job working nights in the train depot as a waitress and I started the 10th grade. That was when my mother told me that R. V. Luke was not my father. A lot of things suddenly fell into place and on that day I became mean spirited and didn't care what happened to me or where I went. After two months, when I learned there was a lot of money to be made working at a US Air Force Base just outside of Ogden, I quit school. I became friends with a boy who worked there from St Louis, and one day shortly after we met he wanted to go home and join the Marines. St. Louis sounded good to me so we hopped on a bus and off we went. Soon after we arrived he joined the Marines. In the meantime I got a job in East St. Louis, Illinois in the stockyards, even though I was only 15. But no one really cared as help was getting hard to find.

I worked on the cattle and horses unloading dock on the swing shift, 4 to 12. There were five of us, two older men in their fifties, and two in their middle twenties. And me, the kid. The two younger guys had just been released from prison and that was all they talked about. To me their conversation sounded like you could steal what you wanted and IF you got caught, then you had to do a little easy time. Soon one of the guys told me that every night after work he prowled hotels looking for unlocked doors and he needed a lookout. I agreed a little too fast, as it sounded exciting. Every night after work we prowled the hotels and the money seemed great to me. We did this for two months. One night I had to work overtime unloading hogs on the other side of the stockyard. The next night Don didn't show up for work. A few nights later the police showed up looking for his partner. They seemed sure it was me and I had about 600 dollars in my pocket. But I was working! They took me to the station. I did not cooperate with them and soon convinced them that I was only 15 years old. They wanted to know where I wanted to go and in a few hours took me to the bus station and I bought a ticket to Los Angeles. I have never been back.

I got a room in a cheap hotel, and in a few days became acquainted with another 16 year kid from Salt Lake City, Utah. He showed me a ring of master keys and skeleton keys. But said he didn't know what to do with them. I did, and we started going into apartment houses. We would knock on the doors and if no one answered we would use one of the keys to gain entry. Whatever we stole we took down to a flea market. This went on for about three months and sometimes we would go into three or four apartments a day. The day finally came when we turned our loot over to our guy in the flea market, and the police were suddenly there, and they had us! After questioning me and getting no cooperation, the police left me in juvenile hall. The judge told me that because I had not been cooperative he was sentencing me to six months in juvenile hall and three years probation. I was sent to a forestry road camp and they had smokers (fights) every Saturday night. I was there about two weeks and challenged the champion after I had seen him fight. He didn't have a chance and only lasted about



Andrea Pistolessi, D-Block

1. Excerpt from Joel Gazis-Sax's website: www.notfrisco2.com/alcatraz



Alcatraz Penitentiary, guard in the control room

two minutes. Four days later three of his friends came up to me while we were working on the road and without a word started kicking me with their work boots. I went down and the pain made me do wild. As it always does. I was working with a short handled shovel and came up off the ground swinging. We all went to the hospital. One of them had a fractured skull and the other two had broken arms. I had to have a hernia operation and had a few other bruised on my head and body.

The only job in that jail was in the kitchen, taking food down to the holding tanks. And that was my job. Within a month, on a weekend, the assistance steward called me into his office and told me a prisoner named Joe Spinelli had told him that I was stealing sugar and pepper and selling them down in the tanks. I went out on the roof and he was sitting on a bench with his head back, legs stretched out and sound asleep. I went up, braced my knees on each side of him, and hit him four times. He didn't make a sound. I walked back into the dorm, asked my buddies "how's that." They said great and then we went down to the dining room and had lunch. Twenty minutes later several sheriff's deputies came into the mess hall and scattered out. One came up to me and asked if my name was Luke. We went down one flight to the hospital and into a treatment room, where a doctor was working on Spinelli. He was a bloody mess, in shock and unconscious. They asked me if I had done that and I denied having anything to do with it, although I had seen several prisoners out on the roof when I took care of the rat. After I was strip searched, they gave me a pair of long johns and told me to get into one of the cells. The door closed and the light went out. I was fed bread and water and every three days a full meal, I can't remember what it was. Six weeks later the door opened. I was locked in a cell and left there for three weeks. I was there for three weeks, and then was moved to a regular holding tank, after getting a shower and more clean clothes.

I was taken back to court and the judge told me he was sending me to a place where I could get some help. The judge then proceeded to violate my probation and sent me to **San Quentin** for the term prescribed by law. I arrived at San Quentin in May 1950. My first cell was in the north block, the fish tank, and I was there for six weeks, for interviews and orientation. I was assigned to the main line kitchen and worked mostly on the main serving

line. I was in San Quentin about 20 months and then was transferred to Chino in southern California. Chino was a medium security prison and we lived in barracks. I played some football and didn't work as I was a short timer. I was released from Chino May 12, 1952, and took a bus to Los Angeles. One evening I was contacted by an old girlfriend who told me some guy wanted to meet me. So I went over to her house and met a guy named Joseph Dellamure from Brooklyn. We talked for a while and then he told me he had been looking for a bank to rob, and that he had found one that seemed suitable. I was interested as I hadn't learned my lesson yet. About four o'clock one morning we parked a car around the corner from the bank. Joe was armed with a German Schmeisser machine gun, (burp gun), and I had a pistol. We put the employees, four women and one man, into the room we had hidden in. The vault had already been opened and it didn't take us long to empty that and the cashiers' cash boxes. Then we moved the employees to the vault and closed the door, but didn't lock it. Joe put the burp gun in the valise with the money and we walked out of the front door, around the corner to the car, and drove off. We arrived back where Joe was staying, very pleased with ourselves, and split the money. And went on with my life as if nothing had happened. Except all of a sudden I had enough money to buy a car and a few other things.

Three weeks later I was sitting in an ice cream parlor with my girl friend, her mother, and little girl, when about a dozen men, FBI and police, came in with drawn guns, walked right over to me and arrested me. The women were scared but were not bothered in any way. Several days later I was in a federal court room with my attorney, who I had used several years earlier in an armed robbery trial. My attorney had told me that Joe and his girlfriend had been arrested in New Orleans a day earlier. He still had the machine gun, and his share of the loot and he had left the Bank of America wrappers on the money! They were arrested and his girlfriend told the police who I was and where to find me and her sister, who was in Miami. Joe plead guilty to bank robbery and I plead not guilty. My attorney told me a few weeks later that Joe had served time in both Sing Sing and Dannemora prisons in New York for armed robbery. My first trial ended in a hung jury and after a second trial I was found guilty, even though they found no money from the bank or a gun. It seemed one of the employees from the bank made a positive identification of me through a small opening in the vault door. And especially my cold blue eyes, she said. So I was sentenced to ten years in a federal penitentiary. We could have been given 25 years on each count, and Joe and I were soon on our way to McNeil Island on the Puget Sound in Washington State.

McNeil Island was a larger island than Alcatraz and in my opinion would have been much more difficult to escape from. The Puget Sound was a lot bigger than San Francisco Bay and the currents more treacherous. But I was not there long enough to find this out, as I had a disciplinary problem within two months, (fighting and an escape risk), and was transferred to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas.

The trip to Leavenworth, in a prison bus, took two days. We arrived in Leavenworth in the evening and after being searched, showered, clothed, and given a new mug shot, I was put in a big cell with five other prisoners. Another fish tank. I was in that cell for about a month and only went out for showers twice a week, and to the mess hall to eat. We did get books, canteen privileges, and some magazines to read. And of course with six men in the same cell, there were a lot of stories to tell. We had no trouble with each other and the month passed OK. Soon I made friends with three cons who hung out together and they accepted me, after they found out they could trust me. I had one problem soon after with another con. I was coming through a narrow corridor between the cell house and the yard, when I met another con coming the other way. He deliberately shouldered me and said "watch where you're going, punk." In about ten seconds he was on the floor begging me to stop kicking him, which I was doing, after I had knocked him down. The word gets around, and if somebody asks for trouble, they can always find more than they can handle. Including me!

One day Slats told me he had a plan to escape, but it would take two guys. Of course I was interested. I had just started a ten year sentence. This was on January 18, 1954 and it got dark about 4:30pm, especially when it was cloudy. We had been taking turns working on the bars for about five minutes and were making good progress and in about five minutes more would be out the window and on the ground outside the cell house. Then someone, a guard, hollered "what's going on down there." Then he started blowing his whistle and hollering "escape." We came down out of the window and scattered, but it didn't take long before we were caught. I was hustled over to isolation, stripped, and thoroughly searched.

Our escape attempt was on the 18th of January and on the 19th two cons grabbed two guards. They tied them up separately and got their keys. One guard got loose and sounded the alarm. After negotiations, the cons surrendered. One or both of them implicated Slats and me in their attempted escape, or whatever it was. One morning about 4am the door opened and I was handcuffed and taken to another part of the prison. There was a prison train car there, bars on the windows and they were blacked out. I was shackled ankle to ankle to another prisoner we all knew where we were going. Alcatraz!

LAST STOP: ALCATRAZ

The cons in the kitchen felt this tension and stayed away from me. Soon I wasn't eating enough and sleeping very little. I paced my cell every night for hours. Three steps one way and then three steps back. I lost my interest in reading and my capability of escaping this existence by using my imagination to go anywhere I wanted for a little while. I asked for a work change and was told to stay where I was or stay in my cell and lose all privileges. I stewed about that for a few days, getting more mad and frustrated. So I finally went to my answer for anything I didn't like. Violence! And it didn't matter whether it was a person or an object that I took my anger out on. Then late one night I broke up my cell. I tore the bed off the wall, and then the table. Then I used them to break up the sink and the toilet. Then I stuffed a towel down the toilet, flooding the cell floor and the cell house. If that wasn't enough, I tried to set fire to the mattress and everything else. But it just smoldered!

The cell house was in an uproar and I could hear shouts of "who blew their top?" The cons in the cells across from me, all three tiers, were egging me on, and I started to feel a little foolish as the madness left me because of the strenuous activity of getting rid of my frustrations. It was better this way than to take it out on some con who hadn't done anything to deserve a beating. In about 15 minutes the Captain of the Guard, Bergen, showed up in front of my cell with three or four other guards. The cell door opened and Bergen told me to come out. My prison experience had taught me to never fight the guards. You absolutely could not win! So I came out.

We went around the corner of C-block and headed for a door in the West wall of the cell house. D-block.

D-block was a small block with 48 cells, 16 to a tier. All the cells were bigger than the cells in the main cell house. The two upper tiers were segregation, where some cons were kept for years. The main floor had ten regular cells and down on the far end was the 'hole.' Six cells with a barred front and a solid door outside that had a peephole in it. All six doors of these cells were open and we stopped in front of the middle one. I was told to strip and was thoroughly searched. Then Captain Bergen told me that I didn't need any clothes, because I had tried to burn everything, and to get into the cell. During all this time none of the guards had laid a hand on me. I entered a cell about 7 by 7 feet with nothing in it. There was a hole in one corner that

I was told to defecate and urinate in, but not in those words. The flushing was controlled from outside. The walls and the floor were steel. In a few minutes the doors closed. And then the light went out!

I had been in another dark hole several years earlier in the Los Angeles County Jail for beating another prisoner very badly. I spent six weeks in that dark hole, but at least I had on long johns. And the jail had heat. The main cell house in Alcatraz has no heat, but there were radiators in D-block. Being naked, it wasn't long before I felt the cold, and knew that soon I would have to do something about it. So I started pacing, doing back and front push ups from the bars, pushups on the floor and squats. When I got tired I would lay down on my side, curled up in a fetal position and sleep until I woke up cold. And then do it all over again. I was fed a big chunk of bread with water once a day and every three days, I had a meal consisting of a baked potato, a raw onion, some peas, all mixed up, and water. I didn't get scurvy, but I didn't gain any weight either! From the meal count I think I was in that dark strip cell for 29 days. I hadn't heard a voice and I did not make any sounds while I was in there. I have been told since then that a prisoner could not be kept in the dark hole more than 19 days. Also, for 14 days. But the rule makers in Alcatraz could do whatever they wanted. After all, they made the rules.

One morning both doors opened and I was told to come out. I was taken to a shower and after I dried off was given shorts, coveralls, and some slippers. Then I was moved up to the second tier to segregation. I was charged with inciting a riot and destroying government property, so I was going to be in segregation for a while. This cell was

bigger than those in the main cell house, about 7 by 12, had a steel bed with a mattress, and blankets, sheets, pillow, a writing table, a sink and a toilet. After that dark strip cell I felt like I had been moved to the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. In segregation we were fed three meals a day of regular prison food and had books to read. Also, we got a shower and shave once a week and a haircut once a month. I think we got to go to the yard for one hour a week. Of course, by ourselves. After getting acclimated to my new surroundings I lay down on the bed, covered up, got warm, and used my imagination which I had got back while I was in that dark hole. Then I went on a little trip. In a few minutes I fell into a deep sleep.

EPIPHANY

One Saturday I was out in the yard, sitting up on the top step of the big steps. I was watching the cons just below me playing handball, looking up to the other end of the yard where they were playing baseball, and watching some of the cons walking up and down between the two activities. I was also looking at the Golden Gate Bridge. The wind was blowing from the southwest, San Francisco, and it was a warm sunny day. Then an odor came to me on the wind that shook me to the core. NEW MOWN GRASS! They must have been mowing the grass on the Marina Green. I hadn't smelled new mown grass for years, but I immediately recognized the odor. Then I asked myself the question, "What am I doing here, when I could be where I could smell the grass?" This question seemed very important to me and the next question was, "Why am I here?"

The answer to that was that I had tried to escape from Leavenworth. And before that I had some disciplinary problems in McNeil Island and I was there because I had helped rob a bank. Before that I was in San Quentin for stealing a car, carrying a gun, and assaulting another prisoner. Before that I had a General Court Martial in the Navy for going AWOL and served a year in Navy prison for assaulting a Marine guard. And before the Navy, I had my juvenile problems, and had left home when I was 15 years old, over my mother's objections and tears. Then it dawned on me, like I had been hit

A Lament
That dark man
Still lives
Deep inside me
Waiting
But his armor
Is rusting
And he will soon
Deteriorate
Into dust
And so will
I

Robert Luke

with a baseball bat to get my attention. That everything I had done to get to this point in my life was BY MY OWN CHOICE. I had chosen to come to Alcatraz! I had actually been moving in the direction to put me in this spot at this time, by my own choice! I was sitting on these steps in Alcatraz looking at the view BY MY OWN CHOICE!

It was an astounding revelation, and it took several minutes to sink in. That instant I realized the truth, that no one was responsible for my actions but me. All the blame I had placed on anybody else was gone. There was no rancor or ill feeling left for anyone but myself. And if, in the end, a person can't forgive himself, who will forgive him? Then my next thought was what to do about it? I had several more months left of my federal sentence and probably two more years in San Quentin for parole violation. So I reasoned that if I had come to Alcatraz by my own choice, then it was certainly my choice to do the rest of my time, get out of prison, get a job, and go straight. I knew it would be a hard row to hoe, but it was my choice. It was a choice between life and death, of staying in one of these rat holes the rest of my life or being out where I could smell the grass. I also realized that I no longer felt like I had any connection to the other cons, and that they were just an infestation to get away from. But I knew that I had to keep all these thoughts to myself because if a con thought I was getting soft, they would do something. But this epiphany only made me stronger in my resolution to get out, go straight and make a new life for myself. I sat there on the yard steps of Alcatraz, looking at the view of San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, knowing that soon I would be over THERE.

WALKING THE LINE

Three days before my scheduled release from Alcatraz, Warden Madigan told me that my hold for parole violation from California had been dropped, and that I would be released directly from Alcatraz. The shock of hearing that I was going to be released in three days almost floored me. Then came confusion and a little panic. I had reconciled myself to going back to **San Quentin** or Folsom for at least two more years. But the confusion lasted only a few minutes, and an immense feeling of joy that I was getting out came over me. On the morning of April 26, 1959 my cell door opened and I was taken down to the shower room. I was given new shorts, sport shirt, pants, sport coat, socks, and dress shoes. And a release mug shot.

The first thing I did when I got to my brother's house was to sit down on his front lawn! I could smell the grass and it was great! They wondered what was wrong with me. And I explained a little of what had happened in Alcatraz on the recreation yard steps. The next day my brother took me to downtown Los Angeles and I checked in with my parole officer. He gave me all the do's and don'ts and told me to get a job right away, or even sooner if possible. I started looking in the paper for some type of work that I could do, as I had no training or experience in anything but robbery, burglary, and beating people up. There were no ads for that.

On the second day I saw a help ad for a warehouse man in an electronics company. I had already made up my mind to be completely honest, as that was to be part of my new way of life. I had come to the conclusion that there was no way I could cover up the last 11 years and my lack of experience and references. The one brother listened and then called his brother into the room, and we went over everything again. They talked it over and decided to give me a chance, and I was hired. Within two weeks after I started to work I almost blew everything with a loss of temper. One of the employees in the warehouse was very bossy, even though he was not the boss. But he wanted to let the new guy know just where he stood. One day he put his face close to mine and was giving me hell about something I had done wrong. The hard con in me came out and I hit him with a short left hook and he went down in a heap. There were several other employees watching and they were surprised at my sudden explosion. I never have believed in arguing. When someone wanted to argue with me, I would think about the best way to get him on the ground to start kicking him. When he came

around, someone had to explain to him what had happened. I never had any trouble there again, and this bossy employee quit trying to be the boss. I was lucky the incident didn't go any further.

I worked there for about four months, bought an old car and got an apartment. I was accepted into my sister-in-law's family and met one of her nieces. Barbara was 19 and knew of my history, as all of her relatives did. We were married in the fall of 1959 at her grandmother's house by a Mormon Bishop. All of her family and mine were present. It was a happy time, even though now I believe, rightly, that some people there had misgivings. They were right to feel that way, because I was a hardened ex-con, with a hair trigger temper, (somewhat controlled), who had survived for years in an environment of suspicion, paranoia, sullen prisoners, guards, and violence. There was no way they could understand my needs nor could I understand theirs. I will take this opportunity to publicly apologize to Barbara, my son Matthew, and all of our families for any mental harm that I inflicted on them. And to thank all of them for their help.

REUNION

SOMETIME IN 2006, Ida and I were watching a program on PBS about Alcatraz. They were talking about a yearly reunion and some ex-prisoner was talking about his experiences. I wondered how Alcatraz looked and how it would affect me to be there again. It was quite an experience! We then moved to a desk just outside the mess hall, where I sat with a man who had been a guard (John HERNON) when I was incarcerated in Alcatraz. Here we were, two old men, 83 and 88, sitting next to each other, being honestly friendly, and answering questions from the tourists. Who could believe that could happen? And perhaps I had finally been really released from a nightmare.

It took two weeks for my wife and I to get over the surprises and emotions of our trip to Alcatraz. And most people I talked to suggested that I write a book. This autobiography seemed to be already written, and was just waiting to be put into words. Within three days I had a rough draft written, with chapters named and the first sentence of each chapter. Then came the ideas for the final two small chapters, and finally the lament at the end. The surprise to me was that after all these years, I was able to put all of this down on paper. I was a month shy of 27 when I became a prisoner on Alcatraz, and a month shy of 32 when I was released. I am now 83 years old and the reunion has opened up a new chapter of my life, and of course, Ida's life as well. And we will take it for what it is, with a grain of salt. A new experience of an old memory. Alcatraz.

PARANOIA

All convicts must have some paranoia to survive prison. It gives us a warning system that lets us feel tension, and see facial expressions and body language that means danger is near. We can then move aside or get ready to protect ourselves. Or attack, which was my way. I have talked in this autobiography about some of the violence I was involved in while I was in prison and have come to a conclusion about the cause. I like to laugh and joke, and laugh hardest when the joke is on me. That is real and not a facade. Only when I am startled or feel threatened, (real or imagined), do I immediately become very aggressive, and a violent reaction is my answer to the problem. This behavior was noticed in every prison that I was in, and also in school and at work. And always the report was that I had a 'bad attitude'. But my instant temper and aggression was known everywhere I went and can explain why I was a loner. Who wants to be around an explosion waiting to happen? I brought this paranoia out of Alcatraz with me, and at first it was very strong, as I questioned every motive for whatever anyone did for me. But gradually as the hard quality of my personality wore off, I started to trust people, and didn't question every move they made. Or what they said. There is still some paranoia in me. But I welcome it for making me more aware of my surroundings. And everything that the universe has provided for us.

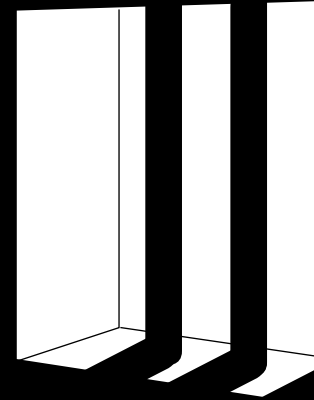
SUMMARY

It has been 51 years since I was released from Alcatraz, and I have forgotten most of the five years I was incarcerated there. Most of the events I do remember have been laid out here, but some are just vague memories. The last 51 years of memories have blurred the old ones. For instance; there were two escape attempts while I was there, and although I remember the events, I have no memory of the convicts involved. There were three convicts involved in two attempts. In 1956, Floyd Wilson left his work on the dock and hid in the rocks until he was found. In 1958 Aaron Burgett, and Clyde Johnson overpowered a guard, tied him up, and went into the water. Johnson was plucked out of the water and Burgett disappeared and his body was found floating in the bay two weeks later. I may have known these men, because of the small prison population, but cannot put names with faces. I always thought that Alcatraz would be very difficult to escape from. But a long sentence can make any prisoner desperate enough to try.

There were a lot of rules and regulations in Alcatraz. The prisoners' lives were completely controlled. When to wake up, be counted, eat, shave, have a haircut or a shower, work, and have the yard time. The rule book we received was long and was meant to be implicitly obeyed. Of course, there has to be a realization that the guards, who enforced these rules, also were completely controlled by this regimen while they worked in the prison. So everyone on Alcatraz had to follow some kind of rules, which was dictated by the very act of keeping control of the prisoners. So over the years my time spent in Alcatraz has been condensed to several instances that I was either involved in or witnessed. The rest of the time is a blur, and seems to be only a very short moment in my life. Even the memories of loneliness, boredom, and dejection have diminished to the point that they are almost not viable. My time in Alcatraz seems like a bad dream!

I spent a total of 1838 days incarcerated in Alcatraz. If 5 days a week were spent exactly the same way, then all I had to remember was one of those days. The rest were the same. And if I spent every weekend (2 days) the same, that also was one memory. That means the fights, riots, killings, jobs, hospital stay, and any other activity that I have written about in this book are the only memories that I need to remember. That number comes to about 18 days. And as I have written about those memories, then my conclusion is that my memory of Alcatraz is very good after all. Incarceration in any prison afforded the inmate a certain freedom of movement. But Alcatraz allowed none of that, as every aspect of our lives was controlled. So two things happened because of this unnatural control. Boredom and violence. Other than the boredom, the only part of my incarceration that I remember about Alcatraz was conjoined with some type of violence. And I remember all of that.

Looking back on the lost 12 years of my life and thinking about the 'could have beens', absolutely becomes a meaningless past time. It's much better to dwell on the 51 post Alcatraz years and to rejoice in that new life. The first 15 years of my life was filled with family, school, church, boy scouts, and sports. The last 51 years have been lived with marriage, work, fishing, golfing, and finally retirement. The 12 years I spent in prison was a little side trip that I took by my own choice. But I did know the difference between right and wrong, and I finally went right. I don't know why I was sent to Alcatraz. I was not one of the notorious criminals of the 30's or a famous mobster. I was just an average bank robber, burglar, car thief, and assaulter. I did try to escape from Leavenworth and was considered to be an escape risk, and I thought of escaping from a few other prisons. But I was like any person who was ever in prison and wanted nothing more than to be out in the free world and do whatever they wanted. And smell the grass! Instead my choice, and theirs, was to finally be entombed in Alcatraz. Also my choice was to get out and stay out!



SAN QUENTIN

*San Quentin, you've been livin' hell to me
You've hosted me since nineteen sixty three
I've seen 'em come and go and I've seen them die
And long ago I stopped askin' why*

*San Quentin, I hate every inch of you.
You've cut me and have scarred me thru an' thru.
And I'll walk out a wiser weaker man;
Mister Congressman why can't you understand.*

*San Quentin, what good do you think you do?
Do you think I'll be different when you're through?
You bent my heart and mind and you may my soul,
And your stone walls turn my blood a little cold.*

*San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell.
May your walls fall and may I live to tell.
May all the world forget you ever stood.
And may all the world regret you did no good.*

San Quentin, you've been livin' hell to me.

Johnny Cash