

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction but
it's all true

Nonfiction

Three hardened criminals attempt to break out of America's toughest prison.

ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ

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, trying to get some sleep.

But not Frank Morris. His heart pounding, Morris waited for the prison to quiet. 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 Alcatraz, a bleak prison perched on a rocky 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 cohorts were determined to prove everyone wrong.

The men had developed an ingenious plan. For months, they had been using stolen spoons and a power drill made out of a vacuum cleaner motor to dig away at the concrete walls of their prison cells.

It was painstaking work, but eventually they made holes big enough to crawl through. The holes opened into the prison’s

ventilation system, where the men set up a secret workshop. Morris and his friends also took up a hobby: painting. That way, no one was suspicious when they ordered brushes, paints, and drawing boards. They used these supplies to create sections of fake wall to cover the holes in their cells.

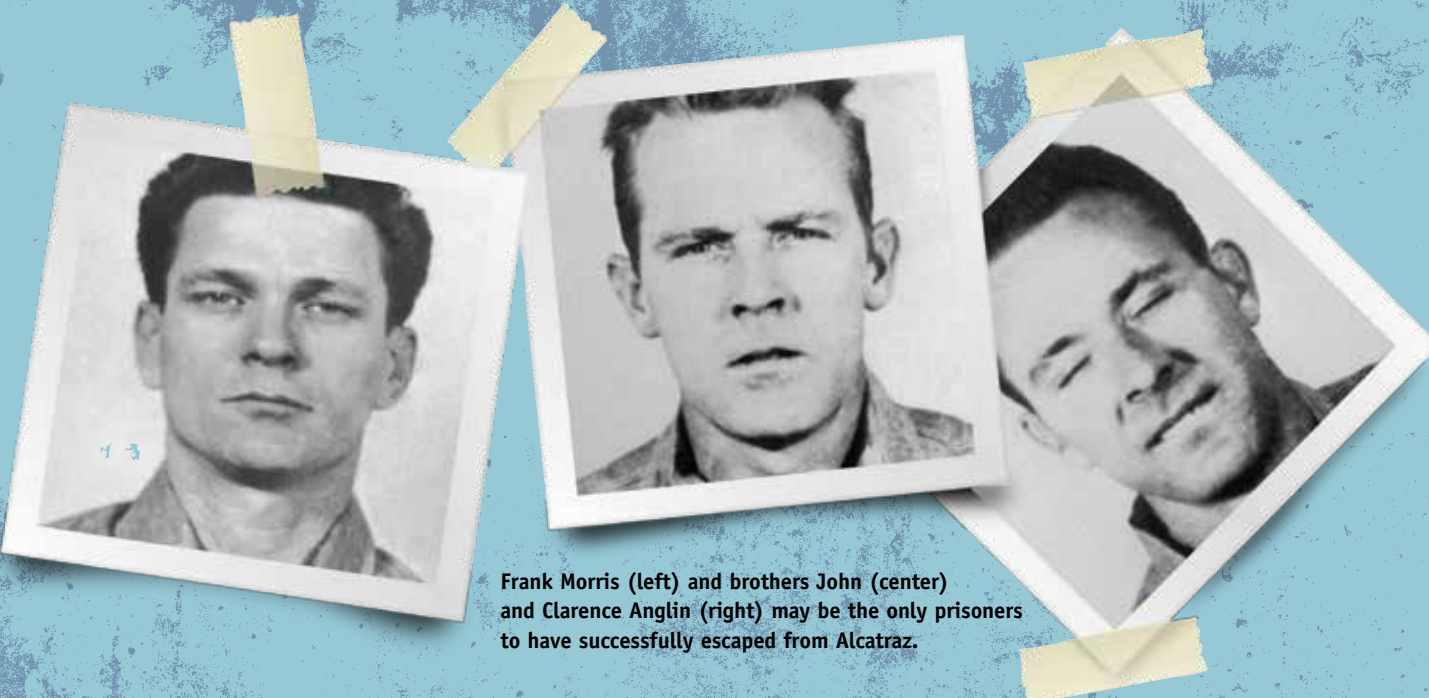
Many Had Drowned

Men had tried to escape from Alcatraz before only to drown 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 jackets and a raft out of raincoats.

Morris, who’d been imprisoned for bank burglary, was no stranger

Pictorial Parade/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Frank Morris); Bettmann/Getty Images (John & Clarence Anglin); Arnon.P1/Shutterstock.com (barbed wire); Lina Roman/Shutterstock.com (photos)

THE CRIMINALS



Frank Morris (left) and brothers John (center) and Clarence Anglin (right) may be the only prisoners to have successfully escaped from Alcatraz.

to escape. He had broken out of two other prisons.

But Alcatraz was different. Security was extremely tight. Guards counted the inmates many times each day and night; it wouldn’t take a guard long to notice an empty cell.

To buy some time, the men made dummies out of toilet paper, cardboard, and cement chips. They covered the dummy heads with hair stolen from the prison barbershop and painted faces on them. On the night of their escape, the men tucked the dummy heads into their beds. In the dim light, the heads looked real.

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

Well, almost.

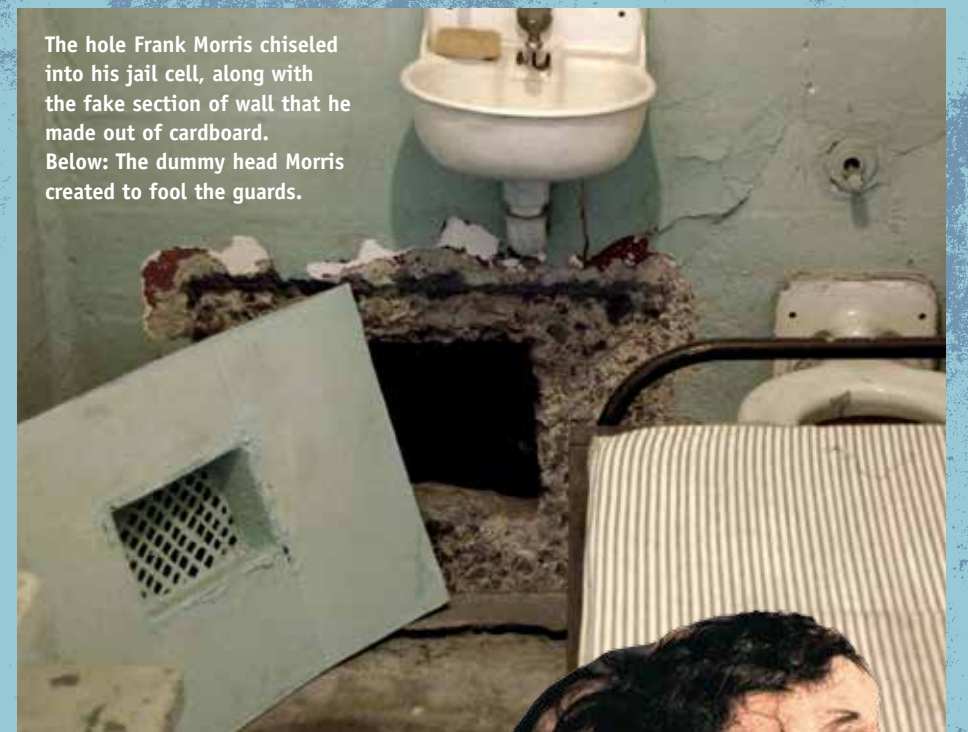
At the last minute, West could not get out of his cell. Morris and the Anglin brothers

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. A salty breeze blew on their faces. Now all that

Arnon.P1/Shutterstock.com (barbed wire); Oil and Gas Photographer/Shutterstock.com (barbed wire); Album/Prisma/Newscom (jail cell); Justin Sullivan/Getty Images (bed); Dorling Kindersley Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo (fake head)

THE TOOLS



The hole Frank Morris chiseled into his jail cell, along with the fake section of wall that he made out of cardboard. Below: The dummy head Morris created to fool the guards.



stood between them and freedom was a 12-foot fence and the crashing, shark-infested waters of the bay.

Men had made it this far before. None had made it to freedom. Some drowned. Others were turned back by the strong currents. One inmate had hidden in the caves carved into the island’s

shoreline, too scared to plunge into the water. Eventually, he was found and brought back.

Could Morris and the Anglin brothers pull off the most daring escape in the history of Alcatraz?

Island of the Pelicans

By the night of this escape attempt in 1962, the



small sandstone island of Alcatraz had been used as a prison on and off for more than 100 years. But its history goes back even further.

Alcatraz was named “Isla de los Alcatrazes” (Island of the Pelicans) by Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala in 1775. After gold was discovered in California in 1848, people worried that San Francisco might be attacked. **Barren** Alcatraz, located about a mile and a half from shore, seemed the perfect place to build a fort.

During the Civil War, in the 1860s, the 22-acre island was used as a military prison. Then, in 1934, the U.S. Department of Justice took it over. Alcatraz was about to become the toughest and most feared prison in America.

Ready for Troublemakers

During the early 1930s, the U.S. was hit by a crime wave. Robberies and murders were on the rise. Some criminals had become incredibly powerful; they were as well-known as celebrities. The public felt that a “super-prison” was what the country needed.

Desolate and isolated, Alcatraz seemed like the ideal place to **incarcerate** the most despicable criminals. Officials set out to build the most escape-proof prison in America. Cell blocks were turned into fortresses meant to hold those who had tried—and sometimes managed—to break out of other prisons.

In August 1934, Alcatraz opened as a federal prison. **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. (All Alcatraz prisoners were men.)

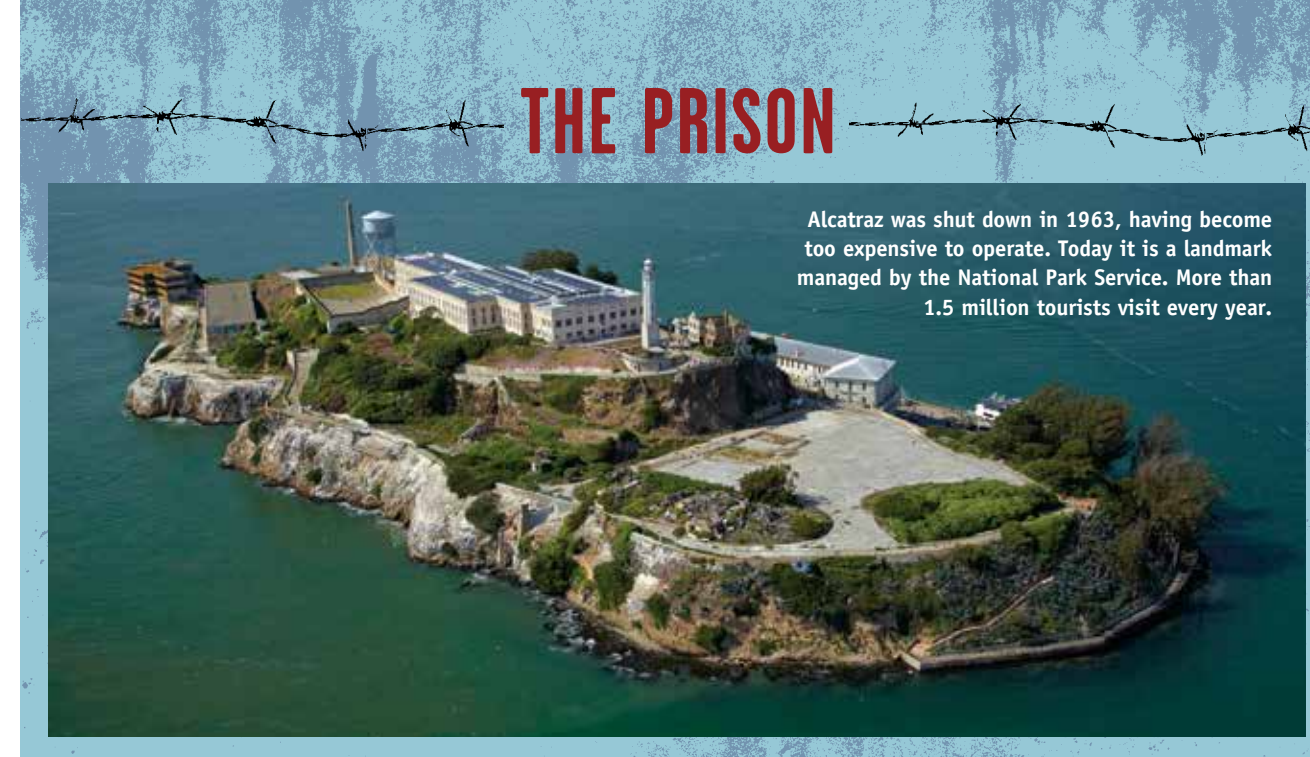
Warden Johnston took every precaution. The prisoners rode in specially designed railroad cars with steel bars across the windows. No prisoner was allowed to leave his seat during any stop.

The 53 inmates arrived on August 22, 1934. By the end of the year, Alcatraz was housing more than 200 of America’s most feared criminals.

Harsh Punishment

A prisoner at Alcatraz—or “Uncle Sam’s Devil’s Island,” as it came to be called—found himself in a harsh, isolated world, punctuated by the clanging of bars and the distant blaring of foghorns. After a gong signaled wake-up at 6:30 a.m., inmates cleaned their cells, then stood to be counted. At the shriek of a whistle, they marched single-file to breakfast, which lasted 20 minutes. After breakfast, utensils were counted.

During the day, guards marched inmates to jobs in the laundry, the garden, and the



tailor shop. Head counts took place constantly. On Sundays and holidays, inmates had supervised recreation time. No newspapers or radios were allowed. Lights-out was at 9:30 p.m. sharp.

Men who broke the rules faced harsh punishment, the most feared of which was solitary confinement. It was agony to be kept apart from everyone else, cooped up in a tiny concrete cell, some with only a hole in the floor for a toilet. In solitary confinement, some men were allowed mattresses at night, but others had no mattress at all. There was nothing to do but stare at the walls as time ticked by.

A Bitter Surprise

The most **notorious** felons couldn’t beat Alcatraz—not even gangsters like Al “Scarface” Capone. To many, Capone

symbolized the collapse of law and order in the 1920s. He made millions running illegal gambling and alcohol-selling operations 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 as 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, even Al Capone. Eventually, Capone had to admit, “Alcatraz has got me licked.”

Daring Escapes

As tough as Alcatraz was, some prisoners still attempted to break out. During the Rock’s 29 years as a federal prison, 36 prisoners attempted to escape. Twenty-three of the men were caught, six were killed, and two drowned. Two others were never found but are assumed to have drowned.

That leaves three men: Frank Morris and John and Clarence Anglin.

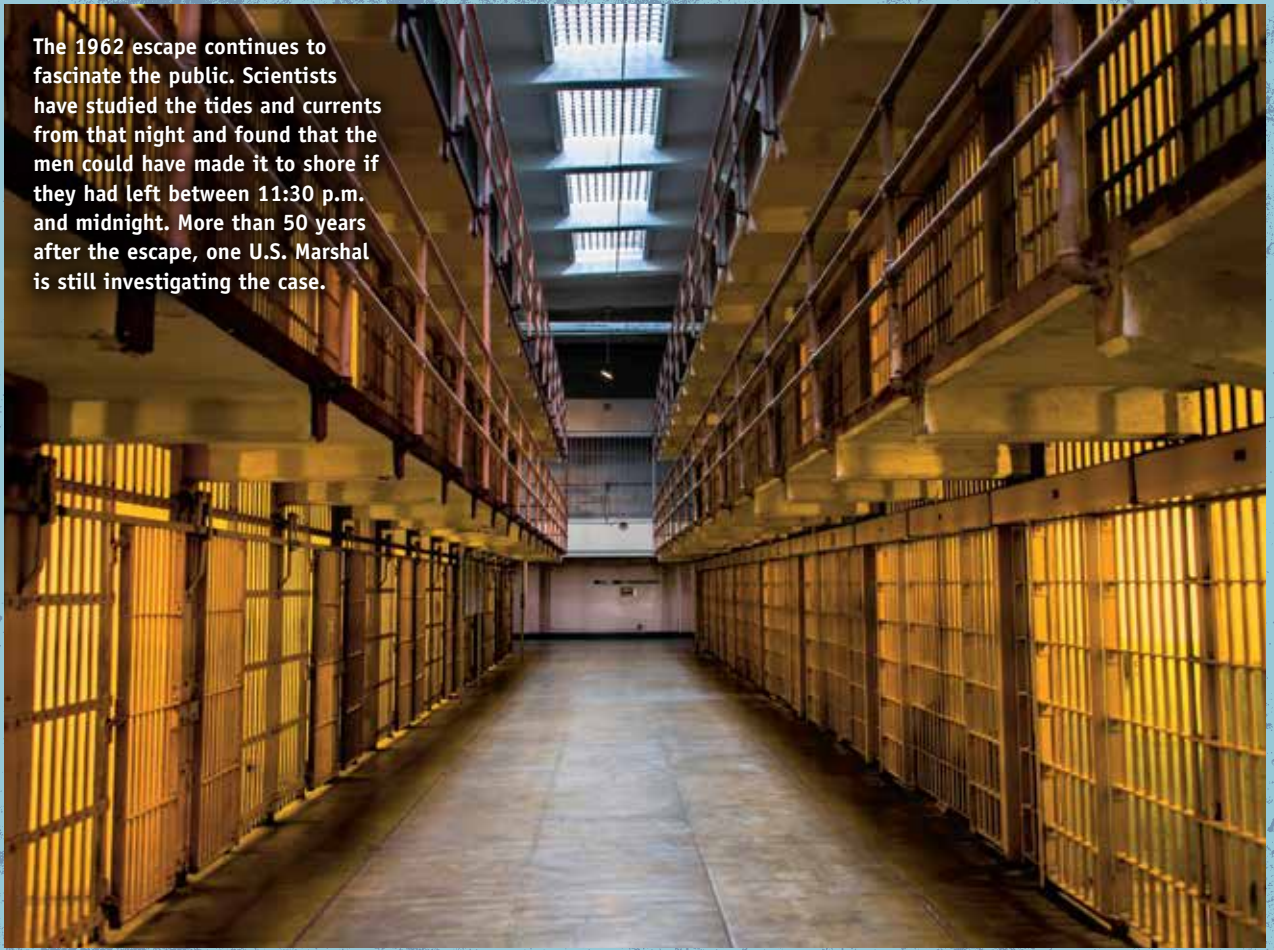
After the night of June 11, 1962, they were never seen again.

When Morris and the Anglins were discovered missing, a massive search was conducted. A body was spotted floating in the bay—but it was never identified. According to some records, a raft was found on nearby Angel Island. There were rumors of a stolen car, which could have been used by the escapees.



THE MYSTERY

The 1962 escape continues to fascinate the public. Scientists have studied the tides and currents from that night and found that the men could have made it to shore if they had left between 11:30 p.m. and midnight. More than 50 years after the escape, one U.S. Marshal is still investigating the case.



In the end, officials concluded that the men had died. The powerful currents in the Bay could have dragged their raft out to sea. Even within the Bay, survival would have been unlikely had the men gone overboard. In the frigid water, they would have quickly succumbed to **hypothermia** or—

had their makeshift life jackets failed—drowned.

Not everyone has accepted the officials' conclusion, though. People have speculated about the fate of Morris and the Anglins for decades. There have been many reported sightings. The family of the Anglin brothers insists that the men made it out

and ended up in Brazil. In 2003, the show *MythBusters* re-created the escape and determined that it is possible the men made it to shore. But 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? ●

Writing Contest

Which evidence do you find more convincing: the evidence that Morris and the Anglin brothers made it or that they did not? Answer in a well-organized essay. Send it to **Alcatraz Contest**. Five winners will get *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko. See page 2 for details.

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