

Alcatraz Freed--Of All But Memories

S.F. News Call Bulletin (Mar. 21, 1963)

By TOM HALL

The last convict left the Rock today.

And the first women ever to see the inside of the grim bell blocks wandered along the corridors of the empty tiers. The occasion was the removal of the last 27 inmates imprisoned on Alcatraz— for 29 years the “Devil’s Island” of America — and the first unrestricted press tour of the island penitentiary.

THE CONVICTS were brought to the mainland aboard the prison boat Warden Blackwell, then transported by bus to San Francisco International Airport to be flown to other prisons.

Last to leave was an Alaska gun-smuggler and jailbreaker, Frank C. Weatherman, 29. The last to be sentenced to the Rock, he arrived there Dec. 14.

WEATHERMAN smiled despite the leg-irons and handcuffs, which he wore, along with his fellow inmates.

How did it feel to leave the Rock? “Good,” he grinned. “Alcatraz never was no good for anybody.”

But Warden Olin Blackwell, who along with Associate Prison Dir. Fred Wilkinson conducted the tour, said: “I’m going to miss the Rock. It’s been a very pleasant assignment. I like San Francisco.”

AS THE prison boat pulled away from the dock, Gordon J. Gronzo, 46, of 49 Holly st., Larkspur, handed down his revolver, carbine, and 30-caliber rifle from the No. 1 gun tower.

He was the last armed guard. From now until the prison is completely phased out July 1, unarmed maintenance men will staff what today became a ghost prison.

Gronzo had to call upon another guard to unlock the steel fence which surrounds the tower.

“I guess,” he said, “I’m the last one locked in.”

THE FAMILIES of the guards who live in apartments on the Island waved and shouted from their balconies.

Earlier in the day, their children had come ashore here to go to their San Francisco schools. Their departure from the other prison boat — the Warden Madigan—held up the unprecedented tour.

About 50 newspapermen, TV, radio and magazine reporters, including three women reporters and Marilyn Silver, fiancée of a Prison Bureau press agent, made the trip.

THE MADIGAN made a clockwise swing around the island, a high tide obscured the shoreline caves where would-be escapers have hidden in the past, and the rocks of “Little Alcatraz,” where Darl Parker was found — the last man to leave the Rock illegally.

For the first time in its 29 years as a federal prison, the cell block doors swung wide.

HERE WAS the Industrial building, where prisoners made brushes (Convict No. 1162 made the last one and presented it to Blackwell), clothing, and gloves—40 hours a week for \$38 a month.

Here was the dread D Block with its “hole” cells—without lights, wash basins, or lavatories—where fractious convicts were disciplined.

Here was the crumbling basement where Geronimo and his lieutenants were held when Alcatraz was an Army prison.

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DEEP CRACKS showed in the columns supporting the main cell block floor, and huge flakes of rust crumbled at a touch from the iron girders.

Blackwell revealed a constant fear—that an earthquake would jam the electric locks. Acetylene torches were kept always at the ready, he added.

It was such structural decay, Blackwell said, and not the recent escape of Frank Lee Morris and the Anglin brothers, which, prompted abandonment of the prison.

AND WILKINSON reiterated his belief that the three convicts, who vanished last June, had drowned.

'I'm more sure than ever," he said. "There's no doubt in my mind that they did."

In the warden's office under a peeling ceiling, Wilkinson displayed the prison record book.

THE FIRST prisoner on Alcatraz after it became a penitentiary, the book showed, was Frank L. Bolt, 45, sentenced in Honolulu for a morals offense. He was one of 32 military prisoners received June 19, 1934.

The first civilian prisoner was Frederick White, 61, sent down from McNeil Island where he was doing time on a narcotics conviction. And No. 85, the biggest underworld "name" ever on the Rock, was Alphonso (Scarface Al) Capone, received Aug. 22, 1934.