

Reunion On The Rock

(Newspaper Article)

I never thought, not in a *million* years, that I'd be sitting here, autographing books for tourists," said Leon Thompson. Thompson, 65, who has an electric chair tattooed on his back, is a former inmate of San Quentin, Folsom, McNeil Island and a North Carolina chain gang, as well as probably the most notorious federal prison of all, Alcatraz.

Last Saturday Thompson was back behind bars, as it were. This time he'd committed no crime. Instead, he was returning for a reunion on Alcatraz Island. Not quite the "Class of '68," this reunion was a gathering of former Alcatraz prisoners, guards, some family members of the prison staff and other former island residents, including a Native American who was around for the Indian occupation in 1969.

The public was also invited for this "cell block party," which happened to be part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area's 15th anniversary celebration. Tourists from all over the country and the world, as well as from the Bay Area, came to meet the people who actually once lived on "The Rock" and to hear their tales. And although most of Alcatraz's most famous former residents — Al Capone, Robert Stroud, George "Machine Gun" Kelly — have passed on, the remaining ex-islanders still had plenty of stories to tell.

Leon Thompson, for example, was once locked up in "the hole," a completely darkened solitary confinement cell. Frank Heaney remembered the terror of being a new, young guard and walking down "Broadway," the main corridor in the prison, to jeers, whistles and threats. Philip Bergen, 83, former assistant warden, hasn't forgotten Robert Stroud — the good and the bad sides of his character. Even Joyce Ritz — who grew up on Alcatraz as the daughter of a commissary officer and who never once talked to a prisoner — was profoundly affected by her experience on Alcatraz: "To this day, I can't sleep without a light on."

"This place is history whether you like it or not," said Heaney, sitting in the dimly lit prison mess hall, which still has bars on the windows. "Rather than bury what happened, these things should be brought out."

Armed with cameras and questions, and with books and programs to be autographed, hordes of tourists descended on the Alcatraz reunioners. A neatly dressed woman in a striped T-shirt and a nylon windbreaker asked Thompson to sign her copy of his book, "Last Train to Alcatraz."

"Could you put, 'To Robert'?" she said. Noticing that Thompson only signed his name, she added, "And your cell number?" Although Thompson

wore a T-shirt that said "Retired Bank Robber," he hardly seemed the criminal type. His blue

Reunion On The Rock

(Newspaper Article)

eyes were clear and he has soft-looking curly blond hair and a soft voice to match. It's only by reading the Xeroxed copy of a newspaper article about him that one learned that Leon Thompson was once known in prison as "the Collector." His job was to force other inmates to make good on their debts. "After we'd collect that debt, the guy would take a nose dive off the railing with his head caved in," Thompson told a reporter. These days, however, the former prisoner is remorseful and full of advice for kids: "I worry about these kids. I don't want them spending half their life in prison like I did. It took me 52 years to grow up." Now Thompson divides his time between giving talks at schools and visiting Alcatraz a couple of times a week to promote his book.

Other former residents of the island have also kept in touch, maintaining membership in an organization called the Alcatraz Alumnus. The group is made up of former employees and family members of employees of the prison. Sixty families lived on Alcatraz when it was operating as a federal prison. Those families made up a tight-knit community. "When we get together, it's like being 16 again," said Joyce Ritz. Save for a frightening three days in 1946 when it took the U.S. Marines to quell a major escape attempt, life on Alcatraz was rather carefree for a child, said Ritz: "We played everywhere." The only interference came when Warden James A. Johnston decided that toy guns weren't a good idea at the federal prison. "It was a very big deal," recalled Ritz. "Guards came down with this big truck to take our guns away from us, and some of the prisoners were helping. After they loaded the truck with the guns and started to drive off, the prisoners in the back of the truck handed our guns back to us- they thought it was pretty silly too."

The weekend's reunion was the first time some former guards have encountered former inmates on an equal footing. The Alcatraz Alumnus group has never allowed former prisoners into its membership. "I don't hate nobody," said Thompson. "I've met a few (former guards) and they've treated me with respect. I treat them with respect. For some of 'em it's like meeting old buddies."

It's hard to imagine the no-nonsense Philip Bergen, former assistant warden on Alcatraz, buddying up to former prisoners. Starting as a guard and working his way up through the ranks, he served on Alcatraz from 1939 to 1955. "I got my teeth knocked out," he said. "I got kicked and I got stabbed and it was usually because (of) some prisoner in his first year having an 'adjustment problem.'"

To the audience of tourists assembled in the prison shower room, once the site of many prison rapes and murders, Bergen said, "I'm what you might call 'one of the few living relics of the early days of Alcatraz.'"

Reunion On The Rock

(Newspaper Article)

Alcatraz was conceived during the '30s by the Federal Bureau of Prisons to be a "prison within the prison system." A minimum-privilege penitentiary, Alcatraz took only the worst problem inmates from other institutions. Prisoners remained alone in their tiny 9- by 5-foot cells from 16 to 24 hours a day.

Whether Alcatraz was "that bad" is the subject of considerable debate among the people who used to live there. Former convict Glenn Williams said, "Most of the men would have given 10 years of their life to be anywhere but here." Williams — who, like Thompson, spends his time trying to convince kids of the horrors of a life of crime — said that part of the pain of being incarcerated on Alcatraz was living so close to yet so far away from San Francisco.

'Sometimes we'd be out in the yard and it was one of these clear beautiful days and you'd see a sail- boat go by," he said, looking out on the Bay through one of the barred windows. "And to me, that sailboat was the ultimate image of freedom. We never said a word. We just watched, but we knew we were all thinking the same thing." -