

The following article was taken from the Nevada City, Ca. newspaper "The Union" dated October 15, 1998. The man being interviewed is Cliff Fish.

NC man recalls his days guarding Alcatraz prisoners

Editors note: *At his request. The union has agreed to use a Pseudonym for the subject of this story to protect his privacy.*

By **ALLAN STEIN**
The Union

From 1934 until 1963 America's most violent criminals served hard time on The Rock the famous maximum-security federal prison on Alcatraz Island.

Like a plague incorrigible killers like George "Machine" Gun Kelly, Chicago mobster Al Capone, The Birdman. and Alvin "Creep" Karpis were kept quarantined on the 22-acre island a mile offshore in the cold San Francisco Bay.

Craig Horne of Nevada City remembers vividly these colorful criminals of the mid-20th century.

"Machine Gun was a stupid guy, but he had a smart wife." Horne, sporting a sheepskin vest and a watch on each wrist, reminisced over a cup of coffee at his dining room table.

Karpis? Horne shivered and laughed.

"There wouldn't be a soul in sight. Then somebody would put a hand on the back of your shoulder. It was Creepy," Horne said.

The worst of America's post-Prohibition era felons. Horne knew them all as a prison guard at Alcatraz for 25 years.

Anne Diestel, a historian. with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington. D.C., confirmed Horne was employed as a prison guard at Alcatraz from 1938 until his official retirement in November 1963.

Now 88, Horne spent most of his working years on The Rock, where he and his wife lived in an apartment complex set aside for prison employees.

A native of Aubrey, Kan., Horne grew up during the Great Depression. After high school he studied physical education at Washburn College in Topeka from 1930-32, the year he got married. When he ran out of money to finish college, he supported his family playing saxophone with a six piece orchestra in the Kansas City area. He was paid \$5 a gig.

In 1936, the couple moved to Oakland. She landed a job as a surgical nurse, he as a night nurse in an alcohol treatment center. Later he worked as a nurse in a detox center in Berkeley. A friend there suggested he apply for a job at Alcatraz Federal Prison.

"When I got the call from Alcatraz, it took me completely by surprise," said Horne, who started work as a prison guard at age 27. His salary: \$1,680 a year.

Life on Alcatraz was tedious, he recalled. But the myth of Alcatraz proclaimed it as one of the most dangerous places on earth.

Diestel said that myth persists to this day.

"I have talked with both former inmates and officers who have said that Alcatraz was a safer place to do time and to work than other prisons because all the rules were spelled out for you - black and white. You knew what was expected of you and you knew the consequences if you broke the rules," he said.

Throughout his yearlong probationary period, Horne worked the midnight to 8 a.m. shift in a watch tower. He soon learned a trick to staying awake: You placed a metal wash basin at your feet and stuck a tobacco pipe in your mouth. If you fell asleep, the pipe would slip from your mouth and fall onto the basin with a crash.

In 1939, when Horne earned his tenure, he was reassigned to guard duty in the prison machine shop.

"We had some rough guys down there," he said. One con came over to me and said. "Can I talk to you a minute?"

You're new here, I know it, and you're sitting as if there's going to be trouble. You sit there, and I'll make sure there is no trouble.”

And there was none.

Relations between guards and prisoners on the whole were good, Horne said. But fraternization was strictly forbidden to maintain social distance and control over the prison population.

Horne's greatest trial as a prison guard came on the afternoon of May 2, 1946.

At 2 p.m., he counted the number of prisoners in his area of the lockdown. Then he waited for the 2:05 p.m. phone call to arrive from the gun gallery that all was clear.

When the clock struck 2:05 p.m. the telephone remained silent.

“My sense told me there was big trouble,” Horne said. “I knew in my mind something was wrong.

He was right. At 2:07 p.m., Warden James A. Johnston gave Horne the go-ahead to sound the alarm.

The “Battle of Alcatraz” had begun.

During the clash, six prisoners overpowered 17 officers to gain access to weapons and cellhouse keys. Two officers were killed and 18 injured in the three-day siege. Four of the six prisoners who staged the escape died in the melee: the others were convicted for their role in the bloody escape attempt and sent to the gas chamber.

“I was there two full days,” Horne said. “The third day I got home at 5 p.m. I was so crazy (with fatigue). My wife fed me. I took a sleeping pill and went to bed. Next morning I went back to work.”

Horne's niece, Donita Johnson of Kansas City, Mo., said she used to visit her uncle at Alcatraz as a young girl.

“You were always scared to be there,” Johnson said. “They told me that while I was on that island, your life belongs to God alone.”

Alcatraz Facts:

- A maximum security, minimum privilege prison, it fell under the jurisdiction of the US. Department of Justice for use by the Federal Bureau of Prisons in 1933.
- The prison had 90 guards and was designed to house a maximum of 336 inmates. However, the average number of prisoners never exceeded 275.
- 1,576 prisoners were incarcerated at Alcatraz during its 29 years of operation, from 1934 to 1963. In that time, 36 prisoners were involved in 14 separate escape attempts; 26 were caught, six were shot and killed during their attempts, and two drowned.
- In 1963, prisoners Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin escaped from Alcatraz — the only successful attempt ever — using homemade drills to enlarge vent holes in their cells. They fashioned paper mache heads to fool the guards during the night watch. They built crude life vests and a raft using prison-issue raincoats. Presumed drowned, their bodies were never recovered.
- On March 21, 1963, the Federal Bureau of Prisons shut down Alcatraz — not because of its alleged brutality as a penal facility, but because it was too expensive to operate — nearly three times that of other federal prisons.
- In 1972, Congress created the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. which included Alcatraz prison. Opened in 1973, the former prison attracts more than a million visitors a year.