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ZOOM IN ON THE USA

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SO NEAR, SO FAR - ALCATRAZ



Photo © Bozena Grzebien

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ISLAND

Alcatraz, an island in the waters of San Francisco Bay, lies just 1 mile off the city shore. It was discovered in 1775 by Spanish explorers and named after pelicans, birds that have always inhabited the area.

A piece of sandstone rock, void of fresh water and originally also of soil, Alcatraz was not a welcoming place for settlers. However, its military value was recognized by the U.S. Army soon after California joined the United States in the mid 19th century.

Soon a fortress was built there with cannons and guns. Though never extensively used, the weapons were a symbol of military power and a deterrent.

The foremost function of the island was as a prison; first a military one and then a federal penitentiary whose "fame" as an escape-proof, strict jail for the toughest of offenders overshadowed everything else.

Although the federal prison functioned for "only" 29 years and was closed in 1963, this time is still remembered as the most momentous period of the island's history.

Today, Alcatraz is part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The island's turbulent history and mystery is a magnet which attracts a million visitors a year.

LIGHT FROM THE ROCK

The story of the island called “Alcatraz,” began brightly enough – as it was first home to a lighthouse when in the mid-19th century, the growing ocean traffic resulting from the Gold Rush necessitated the construction of lighthouses on the west coast of the United States.

A cottage with a fifty-foot tower protruding through the center of the roof was completed in 1854. Expensive modern lenses – known as the “third-order lens” designed by Frenchman Augustine Fresnel - were installed in the upper lantern room. Unfortunately, an earthquake at the beginning of the 20th century cracked the lighthouse tower, which had already been obscured by the military prison that had been built and extended at the turn of the century. These two factors led to the construction of a new lighthouse, the one we see today.

The new lighthouse was built to be eighty-four feet high. On the north and south part of the island, electrical fog sirens were installed, and the keeper’s house was built next to the quarters of the prison warden.

At the time, the lighthouse keeper’s life was as unusual as the island on which the lighthouse was built. The

keeper not only had the responsibility of monitoring the functioning of the lighthouse and ringing the fog bells, but had to adjust to the conditions dictated by the fact that he shared an island with the strictest prison in the country. For example, he had to crush all the trash from his household so that no weapon could be constructed from it. He also had to confine himself to his quarters when the prisoners were in the campground. He was allowed to receive guests on the island, but for their safety, they couldn’t walk to the boat that would take them back to San Francisco earlier than when the boat whistle was blown - just a few minutes before departure.

In 1963, the year the prison closed, the lighthouse was furnished with a reflecting light and automated. Then, during the All Tribes occupation of the island (see text below) the keeper’s house burnt in a mysterious fire. Today, the lighthouse continues to operate sending streaks of light generated by a 200,000 candlepower optic over the waters of San Francisco Bay.



Photo © Bożena Grzebien



Photo © AP Images



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ALL TRIBES ON ALCATRAZ

Long before Alcatraz was “discovered” by the Spanish, it was known to the indigenous people who inhabited the area. They used the island for gathering food, as a camping spot, and as a place of isolation for those that broke their laws.

On November 9, 1969, six years after the federal prison on Alcatraz had closed its doors, a group of about 100 Indians from various tribes led by Richard Oakes, came to live on the island. This is how the so called “All Tribes” occupation of Alcatraz began.

The Indians (or Native Americans as they are called today) claimed the island as a cultural center and let it be known that they wanted to build a university and a museum there. The action attracted favorable media coverage and soon gained nationwide attention.

The government initially adopted a policy of no intervention. However, in 1971, after 18 months of occupation, the last 14 people remaining on the island were removed.

There were several reasons that the occupation ended. First, there were quarrels among the occupying Native Americans and the charismatic leader of the movement, Richard Oakes. He eventually had to leave the island in 1970 after his 13-year-old stepdaughter died when she fell from a steep staircase. Also, people from the hippie movement and some drug addicts began settling on the island as well. There were complaints about their activities, and as a result the government shut off all electrical power and removed the water barge that brought fresh water to Alcatraz. Soon after that, a serious fire destroyed a few buildings.

Despite the fact that the “All Tribes” occupation ended in failure, it did result in some positive gains for Native Americans in the U.S. For example, it led to a greater awareness by the government and the general public of Native American culture and their right to self-determination.



THE PRISON

It was 1934. The most incurrigible prisoners in various detention centers throughout the United States, including notorious escapees and those who in the times of the great recession had managed to bribe guards to get better treatment, did not yet know that a place whose name would send shivers down their spine was getting ready to receive them. Alcatraz. The old Army prison that had existed on the island of Alcatraz from 1859 to the 1920s was slowly being equipped to become America's most escape-proof prison. Bars of steel replaced the old iron ones. Gun towers were raised in various parts of the island. Cellblocks comprising 4 x 8 feet single cells, catwalks, and gun galleries were built.

The purpose of this prison was to punish the worst offenders. The regulations, the daily routine, and the building itself were designed to serve this very purpose. And serve it they did. For the over 1,000 convicts brought there to do time for their crimes, the

commands and the prisoner counts. There were also sounds from outside; for example, the prisoners often heard the fog sirens which brought a message from the world beyond the barred walls. But the worst sound of all was the cry of inmates who were locked-up and punished for breaking prison regulations.

The regulations were very strict. For example, at the beginning of the inmates' internment, the inmates could not talk, whistle or even hum, except for a few minutes on weekdays and two hours on weekends. The prisoners had four basic rights: to food, clothing, shelter and medical care. Through good conduct, prisoners could earn the status of "good standing" which gave them privileges such as reductions in their sentence, better work assignments, and cell changes.

The cells were furnished with a single fold-up bunk, a toilet, a desk, a chair and a sink. However, the strictest punishment cells were stripped of all but a hole in the floor which served as a toilet. In those cells, the



Photo © AP Images

federal prison of Alcatraz became "the end of the line."

When they first arrived, the prisoners were put on the second tier of Cellblock B. During the first three months there, they were put "under quarantine" and they were not entitled to any of the "privileges" that other prisoners stood a chance of earning through good behavior.

Every day was the same. They were divided into strictly measured amounts of time: 20 minutes to put the cell in order upon waking up in the morning, then 20 minutes for breakfast, then off to work, then 20 minutes for lunch, and then back to work. The prisoners received 2 eight-minute breaks during the day and lights-out was at 9:30 pm every evening.

Just as they were measured out by routine activities, the long days on Alcatraz were measured out by sounds: the steps of the guards walking down the main corridor (which the prisoners named "Broadway"), the metallic clicks of doors being locked or unlocked, the shrill voices of guards shouting out

mattress was only given to the prisoner for the night and was then removed during the day. An opening in the bars allowed food to be passed to the prisoner, but other than that, the prisoner was left in complete darkness.

In spite of its fame as an "escape-proof" prison there were over a dozen escape attempts. The best-known, owing largely to the film "Escape from Alcatraz", starring Clint Eastwood, was a carefully designed plot by Frank Lee Morris, John and Clarence Auglin, and Allen West. Although West was considered the "brains" behind the plot, he ironically never even managed to leave his cell. The others placed life-like dummies in their bunks and escaped through vents to a ventilation duct. Then they climbed over a fence and made it to the edge of the island. Once there they boarded rafts which they had made from life vests and raincoats stolen from their workshops, and then they disappeared. Nobody knows if they ever made it out of the cold waters of San Francisco Bay.



ACTIVITY PAGE

Win a Prize!

December 2008
CONTEST

How long was the federal prison on Alcatraz Island in operation?

Send the answer (with your home address) to:
madridIRC@state.gov

Deadline:
January 15, 2009

Win a Prize!

The answer in the November 2008 Contest was:

Lincoln

Thank you for participating

ZOOM

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■ Exercise The photos below tell more about the past and present of Alcatraz Island. Read the captions and add a word of your choice to each blank. Then, working with another student, tell him/her what you remember about the history of The Rock.



Photo © AP Images

Warden James A. Johnston of the federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island points to the (1), May 4, 1946, of the main cell block which kept rioting prisoners from escaping two days previously because a guard, held by the rioters, threw away the key. Five people were killed in the riots: three convicts and two guards.

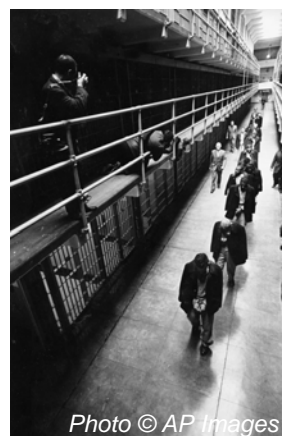


Photo © AP Images

A line of handcuffed prisoners, the last of the convicts held at Alcatraz prison, walk through the cell block as they are transferred to other (2) from Alcatraz Island on San Francisco Bay, Ca., March 21, 1963.



Photo © AP Images

An exhibit about a 1962 prison escape made famous in the (3), "Escape from Alcatraz", is shown in the new cellhouse museum store on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, Tuesday, April 24, 2007. The former Federal penitentiary and visitor destination on San Francisco Bay has just benefited from a multi-million dollar restoration and renovation that has transformed and improved the iconic national park. The project has taken place over the past two years and has revamped the way that visitors experience "The Rock."



Photo © AP Images

A group of Native American Indians, part of the Indians of All Tribes Inc., occupying the former prison at Alcatraz Island, stand under (4) welcoming Indian occupiers to United Indian Property on the dock of Alcatraz Island, Nov. 25, 1969.



Photo © AP Images

Photographer Al Greening takes a (5) of reunion attendees with a camera made in 1917, Saturday, Aug. 14, 2004, on Alcatraz Island, California, during

the annual Alcatraz reunion of ex-cons, ex-guards and people who grew up on The Rock as families of guards.



Photo © AP Images

Indian peace pipe ceremony on Alcatraz Island. The ceremony consecrated the start of a 3,000 mile trek from Sacramento to Washington D.C. where they hoped to (6) with a meeting with President Carter. Feb 11, 1978.



Photo © AP Images

Competitors (7) into the San Francisco Bay's chilly waters at the start of the Accenture Escape From Alcatraz Triathlon on Sunday, June 4, 2006. Around 1,800 participants braved a 1.5-mile swim, 18-mile bike race and an 8-mile footrace.

■ Glossary - (in the order of appearance)

void - empty
deterrent - something that prevents people from doing something
penitentiary - prison
escape-proof - inescapable
momentous - very important
turbulent - involving change and disturbance
protruding - sticking out
obscure - prevent from being seen
indigenous - people who belong to a country
incorrigible - that cannot be improved
notorious - well-known for something bad
tier - a layer or a row
inmate - prisoner
revamp - give a new form, make better