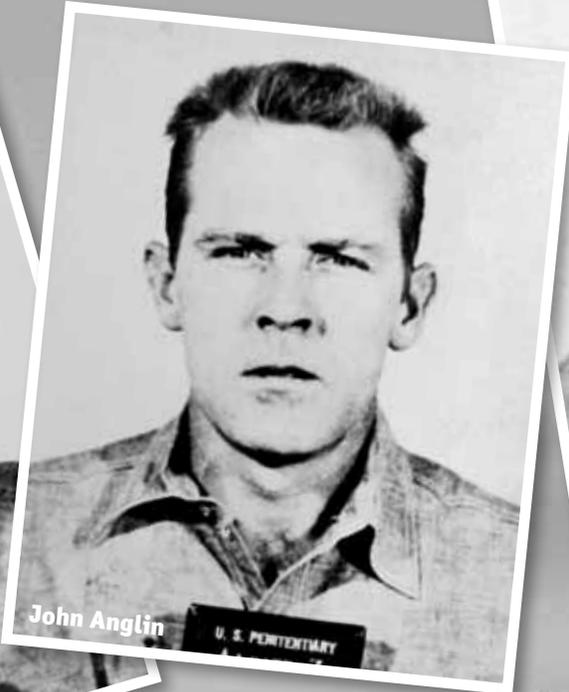


Nonfiction



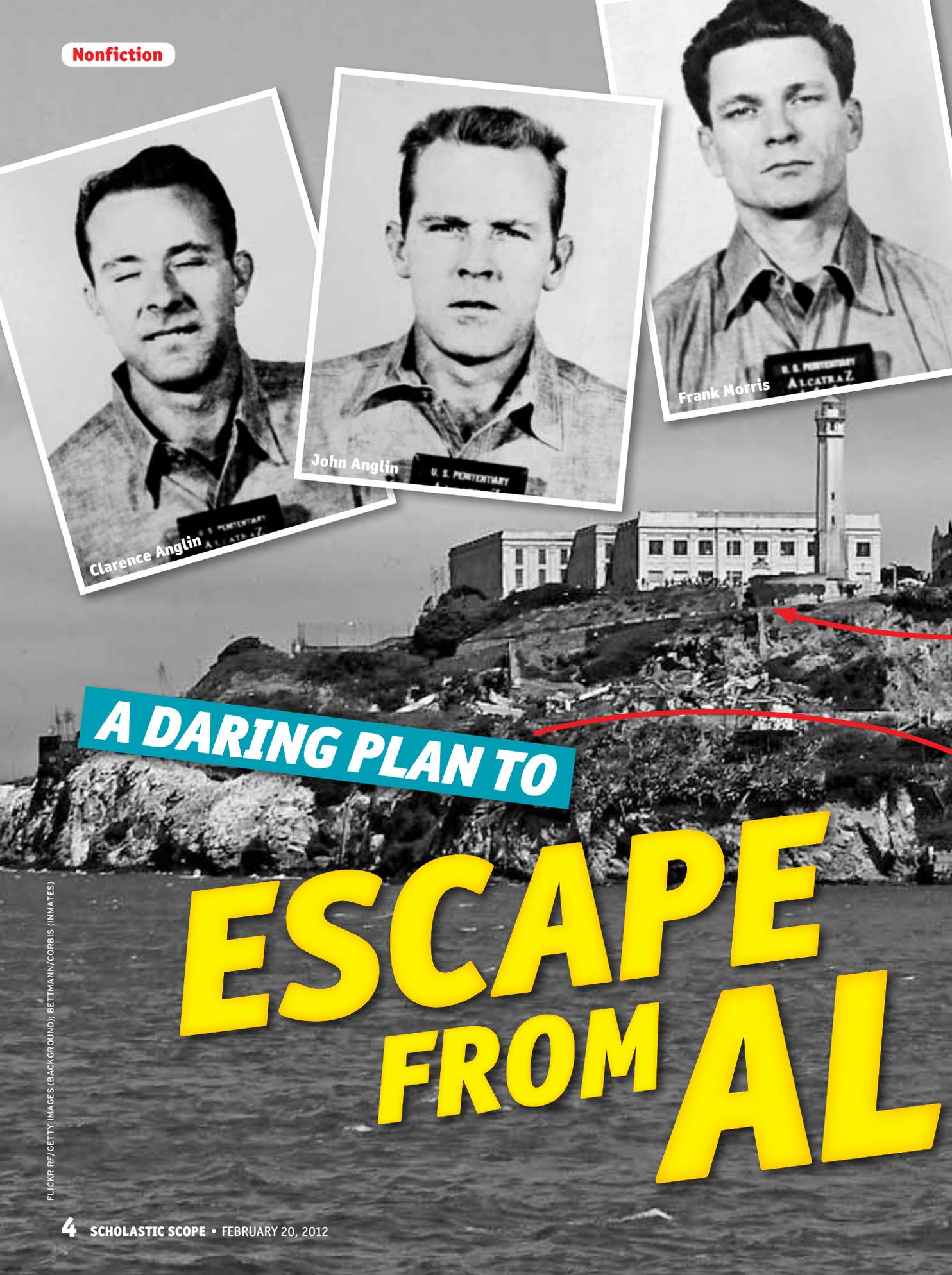
Clarence Anglin



John Anglin



Frank Morris



A DARING PLAN TO

ESCAPE FROM AL

FLOCKER RF/GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND); BETTMANN/CORBIS (INMATES)

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE
A true story from the past

3 HARDENED CRIMINALS

A BRUTAL PRISON

CATRAZ

BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

 GO TO SCOPE ONLINE FOR OUR AMAZING ALCATRAZ VIDEO!



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:
WHY THEY TRIED

This article is about a dangerous escape attempt by inmates at Alcatraz. As you read, consider how conditions at Alcatraz may have motivated them to risk their lives.

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 as they tried to get some sleep.

But not Frank Morris.

Morris waited for the prison to quiet, his heart pounding. 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 the bleak prison, perched on an 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 friends were desperate to prove everyone wrong.

They had developed an **ingenious** plan. For months, they had been using tiny tools to chip away at the concrete walls of their cells. It was painstaking work, but eventually, they made holes big enough to crawl through. Once they had a way out, they climbed up the ventilation shafts behind



Prisoners were brought to Alcatraz in armored railcars carried on ferries.

ALCATRAZ WAS NICKNAMED “UNCLE SAM’S DEVIL’S ISLAND.”

their cells and set up a secret workshop.

Many Had Drowned

Men who had tried to escape before had drowned swimming 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 preservers and a raft made of raincoats.

Morris was certainly no stranger to escape. An armed robber, he had already escaped from several prisons. But Alcatraz was different. Security was tight. Guards counted the inmates many times each day and night. To fool them, Morris and his friends made dummy heads. On the night of their escape, they tucked the 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 couldn’t 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.

The salty breeze blew against their faces. Now all that stood between them and freedom was a 15-foot fence and the crashing, shark-infested waters of the bay.

Men had made it this far before, only to drown or be turned back by the strong currents. One inmate had hidden in the sea caves, too

ESCAPEE'S TOOLKIT

What it took to bust out of Alcatraz



PATIENCE

At first, the men used nail clippers and stolen spoons to dig holes in the walls of their jail cells. Blisters soon covered their aching hands. Later, they made a power drill out of a vacuum cleaner motor. It took months to dig holes large enough to crawl through.



CUNNING

The men took up a hobby: painting. That way, no one was suspicious when they ordered brushes, paints, and drawing boards—all of which they used to create fake walls to hide the holes in their cells.



CREATIVITY

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 painted faces on them and covered the heads with hair stolen from the prison barbershop.

scared to plunge into the water. He finally got so cold and hungry that he gave up and went back.

Morris took a deep breath. Could they pull off the most daring escape in the history of Alcatraz?

“Island of the Pelicans”

By the night of this “great escape” attempt in 1962, the small sandstone island of Alcatraz had been used as a prison off and on for more than 100 years. But its history goes even further back. Alcatraz was named “Isla de los Alcatrazes” (Island of the Pelicans) in 1775 by Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala.

After 1848, when news of gold in California spread, people worried that San Francisco might be attacked. **Barren** Alcatraz, located a mile from shore, seemed the perfect place to build a fort. During the Civil War, in the 1860s, the small 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 1930s, a crime wave hit the U.S. Robberies and murders were on the rise. Some criminals had become incredibly powerful; they were as famous as celebrities.

The public felt that a “super-prison” was just what the country needed.

Desolate and isolated, Alcatraz

seemed like the ideal place to **incarcerate** these criminals. So officials set out to build the most escape-proof prison in the nation. Cell blocks built in 1909 were turned into a fortress meant to hold those who had tried—and sometimes managed—to break out of other prisons.

Nicknamed “Uncle Sam’s Devil’s Island,” Alcatraz opened as a federal prison in August 1934. **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.

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

A Bitter Surprise

A prisoner at Alcatraz found himself in a harsh, isolated world, **punctuated** by



WHAT ELSE DID THE ESCAPEES NEED?



TOP: The hole that Frank Morris carved in his jail cell, along with the fake wall he made out of cardboard. **LEFT:** Legendary Alcatraz inmate Al Capone was known as “Public Enemy Number One.” **RIGHT:** Famous Alcatraz Warden James A. Johnston.

Capone. To many, Capone symbolized the collapse of law and order in the 1920s. He made millions running illegal gambling joints 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 like 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, and there was nothing he could do about it. Eventually, Capone had to admit, “Alcatraz has got me licked.”

Daring Escapes

By 1963, the island prison had become too expensive to operate, and the government decided to shut it down. Today Alcatraz is a landmark managed by the National Park Service. More than a million tourists visit every year. So do about 100 species of birds, including gulls, cormorants, and pelicans.

So what about escapes?

Alcatraz was a federal prison for 29 years. During that time there were 14 escape attempts, involving 36 men. Twenty-three were caught, seven were killed, and one drowned. Two others attempted

the clanging of bars and the distant blaring of **foghorns**. No newspapers were allowed. Inmates could only listen to certain radio programs approved by the warden. A morning gong signaled wake-up at 6:30 a.m. The men stood to be counted, then cleaned their cells. At the shriek of a whistle, they marched single-file to breakfast, which lasted 25 minutes. After breakfast, utensils were counted.

During the day, guards marched the inmates to jobs in the laundry, the garden, and the tailor shop. Head counts took place constantly. In the afternoon, inmates had

supervised recreation time. Lights out was at 9:30 p.m.—on the dot.

Men who broke the rules faced harsh punishment. The most feared was solitary confinement. Prisoners hated to be cooped up in tiny concrete cells apart from everyone else, with only a hole in the floor for a toilet. In solitary confinement, a man was allowed a mattress at night, but even that was removed during the day. There was nothing to do but stare at the walls as time ticked by.

The most notorious felons couldn't beat Alcatraz—not even gangsters like Al “Scarface”

escape in December 1937. Officials believe they were swept out to sea.

That leaves three men: Frank Morris and John and Clarence Anglin. After the night of June 11, 1962, they were never seen or heard from again.

After the men were discovered missing, a massive search was conducted. According to some records, a raft was discovered on nearby Angel Island. There was also a report that a car was stolen that night, which could have been used by the escapees. But in the end, officials concluded that the men had drowned. Indeed, a body was found floating in the bay, but it was never identified. If the men had gone overboard, survival would have been unlikely. **Hypothermia** would have set in right away, and the powerful current would have easily dragged them to their deaths.

People have **speculated** about their fate for decades. To this day, rumors still circulate that they are alive. There have been many sightings; 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? ●

POETRY CONNECTION

A MODERN POET IMAGINES THE PLIGHT OF ALCATRAZ PRISONERS

Vow

By Irene Latham

Inside, we endure relentless
routine in a concrete cage.

After countless crimes,
we stand to be counted—

twelve times a day.

We're an island of masters.

We dodge brawls
and block handmade blades.

At night we battle
through dark seclusion

and silent, deadly wars.

Torture thrives

in surprising places:
from the top tier

we watch gulls wheel
across paintbrush sky.

Tugboats cry, *Escape!*
Distant windows wink like stars.

We will not die on this rock.

CONTEST

Why Did They Try? What was it like to be an inmate at Alcatraz? How could the conditions have motivated Frank Morris, John Anglin, and Clarence Anglin to risk their lives attempting to escape? Draw on the article as well as the poem in your answer. Then send your answer to **ALCATRAZ CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko. See page 2 for details.

GET THIS
ACTIVITY
ONLINE

