

Trip 2 – Episode #39 – San Francisco Part Two

The next time we ventured into San Francisco, it was avec Charles and sans Pifko Tour Guides, so we were a little nervous. We had booked a tour to Alcatraz and were hoping we'd get downtown safely and find a place to park in time to get to the pier where we were to catch the ferry.

We made it down to Embarcadero without incident ... but finding parking for Charles was another issue. Most parking lots didn't have spaces big enough. We finally found one that we could fit into, but it had a sign saying RVs weren't allowed – which seemed like discrimination! Finally we found a lot that was big enough and would allow us in, but it was quite expensive - \$40 for the few hours we'd be parked. And then the guy told us that because we were taking up two spots he'd have to charge us double!

We didn't have much choice, so we paid, and we were half expecting to see the parking lot owner in Alcatraz for highway robbery.

We walked along the pier area and got to Pier 39 where there are all kinds of shops and cafes.



We chose Boudin, a bakery in San Francisco since 1849. But somehow I doubt that they made bread in the shape of teddy bears back then, but we enjoyed our snack there.



We got to the ferry and joined the throngs on what was a pretty chilly day. (In fact, there was hail in the city while we were on this tour! Somehow it missed us.)





One of the things that was interesting when we got to Alcatraz was the message near the entrance about “Indians” being welcome. It turned out to be linked to an important exhibit on the island – about an incident that had happened there in the 60s. More about that later.



One of the other surprising things was how lovely the grounds were, which seemed oxymoronic considering the history of the place. But they've devoted a lot of time to beautifying the gardens and maintaining the wildlife there. And the fact that it's an island gives it a natural beauty that creates an odd kind of dichotomy as you're walking through this place that was a horror for both the inmates and the staff who worked there over the years.









But then you go into the buildings and you get a sense of what it was like there, both by walking through the building and from the narration on the audio tour, provided by men who were either prisoners or guards there. It's very effective.







This was one of the isolation cells. The narrators talked about the kinds of mental exercises they came up with to get themselves through it. Quite moving. (As Jim expresses so eloquently.)



This area was the library which helped them “escape”.



Others used
art or music to
escape.



And some – a very few
– actually did escape!
In this cell you see
what looks like an
inmate asleep in his
bed. But when the
guards tried to wake
him, they discovered
that it was a fake head.
And the inmates had
dug their way out
using a spoon!



ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ: JUNE 11, 1962

Using the unlikeliest of supplies, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin made the most creative escape attempt in the history of Alcatraz.

Placing dummy heads made of soap, cement, and paint under their blankets in the middle of the night, the escapees crawled out of their cells through the small vents, scaled the utility corridor to the roof, slid down a stove pipe, and crept to the shoreline.



Clarence was smarter and louder than his older brother and a thief by 14.



Convicted of bank robbery like his brother, "J-Dub" was slow-witted.



Short, wiry, tough and quiet, "Ace" was in jail by 13 and gained a reputation as an accomplished escape artist.

The three men had reached the bay. As they slipped into the water—using a raft fashioned out of a raincoat—they met an icy current rapidly ebbing out to sea. They were never seen again.

*"Possible loss of spoon
at noon mainline. Some
doubt and no trace."*

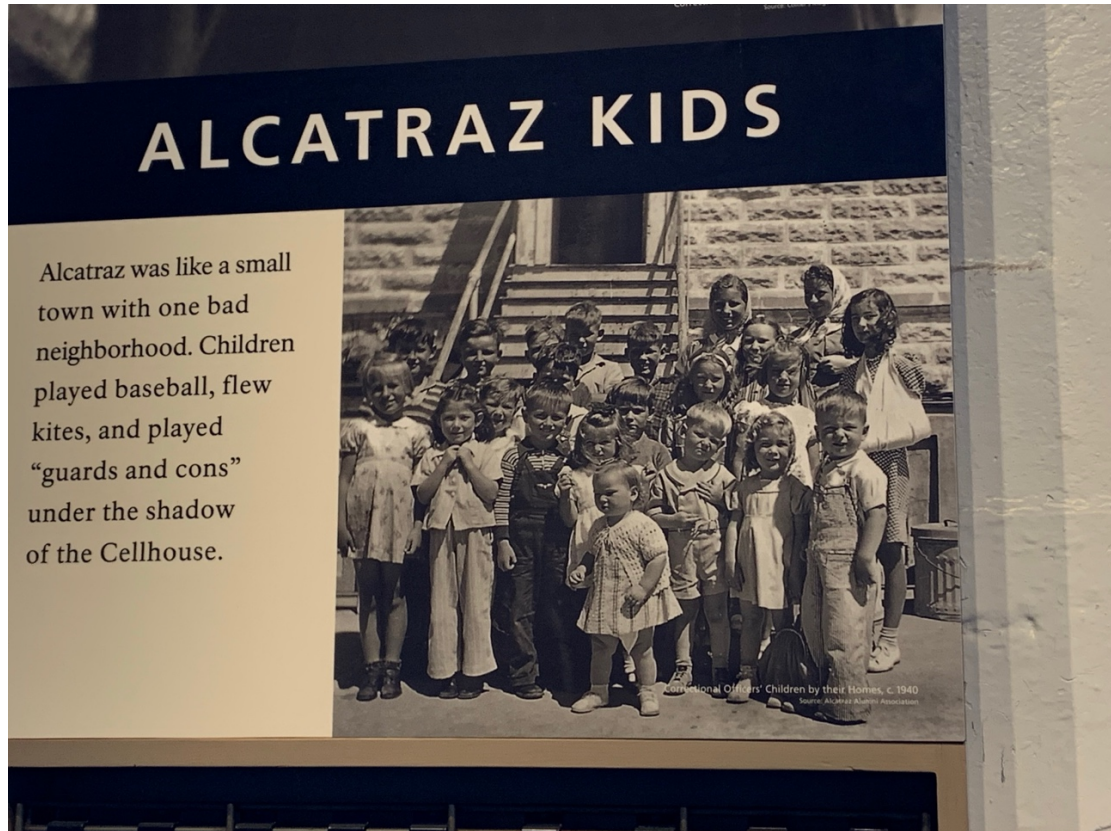
Day Watch Lieutenant
Saturday, December 9, 1962



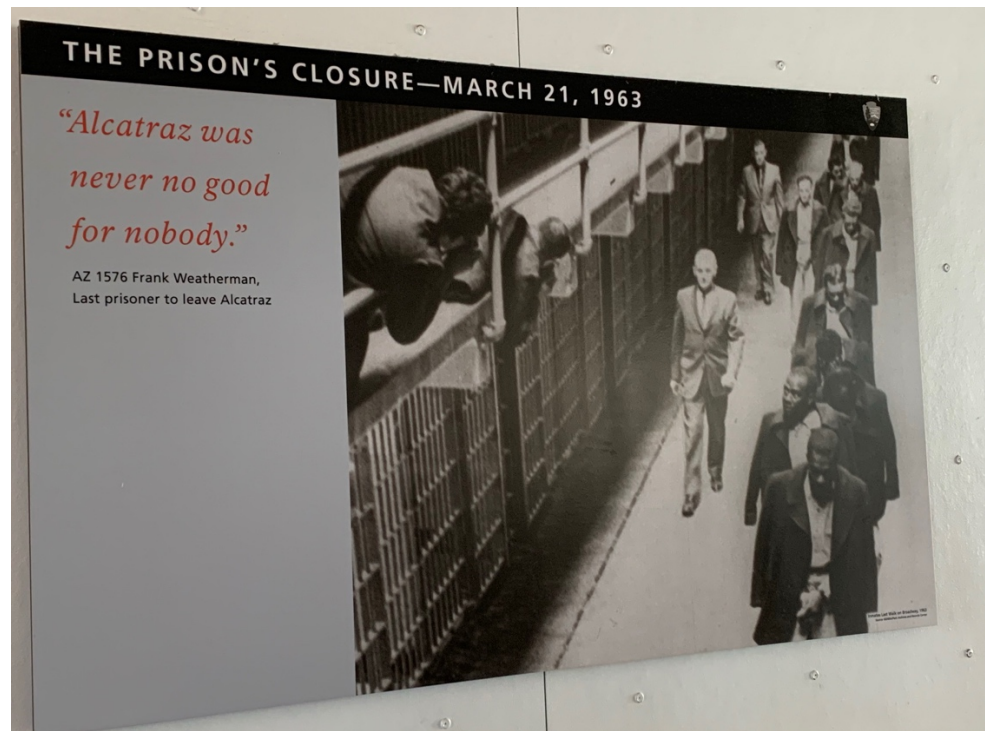
Digging Through: Using homemade drills and spoons to breach crumbling walls, the men used cardboard and tobacco boxes as fake vents.



Surprisingly, the guards and their families actually lived on the island!



Alcatraz closed in 1963 – partly because of pressure from the Attorney General at the time, Bobby Kennedy. It seemed that the staff were as happy to escape Alcatraz as the inmates were.



After doing the audio tour through the main building, we went to the special exhibit called Red Power on Alcatraz.



It tells the story of the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 by Native Americans who were speaking out about the plight of American Indians. I had no memory of their 19-month occupation, so it was fascinating to read the stories and see the photos.



I also hadn't known how Alcatraz had been used as a prison for soldiers who had broken army rules, war resisters, and Native Americans who fought against the attempts to eliminate their language and traditions.

THE MILITARY PRISON

The military prison at Fort Alcatraz held soldiers who broke army rules and committed crimes. The prison also incarcerated Native Americans. These included Paiute Tom, held for two days in 1873 before being shot trying to escape, and Kaetena, a Chiricahua Apache chief who rode with Geronimo.



Fort Alcatraz, 1895 | GOLDEN GATE NRA, PARK ARCHIVES

Other Native Americans imprisoned on the island included nineteen Oraibi Hopi elders from northern Arizona. They were arrested in 1895 for resisting federal policies that forced Hopi children to attend boarding schools where their hair was cut, they were forced to wear western clothes, and they were punished for speaking their own language. Many of the schools were run by Christian churches, whose teachings further eroded traditional culture.

There was a powerful display of photos taken by Ilka Hartmann, who was passionate about covering important social movements.



It gave us a lot to think about as we headed back to the meeting point, where we'd take the ferry back.

Looking back at the watchtower, we couldn't help but feel lucky that we had the option to leave.



Us, and the birds!



The ferry ride back offered one last look at Alcatraz and beautiful views of the city.





When we got back to shore, we hoped to catch sight of the seals that apparently make their presence known in the harbour.

We saw these seals, which were very colourful...



But then we heard these seals, and went to check them out. They gave us a bit of a show.



When we finally rescued Charles from his expensive imprisonment, we drove through more of the city, and marvelled again at its many beauties.











We
even
dared
to
drive
Charles
up...
and
up ...
and
up
up
Market
Street!



Finally, we headed back to our campground in Half Moon Bay, with a better understanding of why Tony Bennett left his heart in this beautiful city.

As a final goodbye, we got this gorgeous ocean sunset view.



And the next morning, we headed north, and yes, of course we had to cross the Golden Gate Bridge, didn't we?



But that'll be part of the next episode.