You know about it. The legends began in 1850 and have only grown, so whether by word of mouth, printed page, internet screen, mass media or personal visit—you know about that 12 acre, “mystery-cloaked” rock in the middle of San Francisco Bay—ALCATRAZ. But how much do you really know? Just for fun, grab a pen or pencil, circle your answers to the questions, then read to learn the accuracy of your choices:

The name of the prison comes from a Spanish word Alcatraces. What does the word mean?

Pelican / Mockingbird / Raven / Nightingale

Your discoveries will be many and surprising. You will be even more amazed at how “close to home” this legendary location happens to be to some Texarkana residents. To understand completely requires starting at the beginning—1775. That was the year Spanish explorer Juan Manual de Ayala first sailed into what became known as San Francisco Bay. Ayala and company mapped the bay and named one of its three islands Alcatraces, which has become Anglicized to Alcatraz. Although the exact meaning of the word remains controversial, Alcatraz is usually defined as meaning “pelican” or “strange bird.”

The Alcatraz Island, before it became home to a prison, was used as what?

Airport / Military site / Holiday resort / National park

What was the prison’s nickname?

The Bridge / The Brick / The Rock / The Stone

According to the internet’s “A Brief History of Alcatraz,” in 1850 when California
was booming, a presidential order set the island aside for possible use as a United States military reservation which could protect the Bay as well as its shores. The U. S. Army had plans for positioning 100 cannons on Alcatraz to make it the most heavily fortified military site on the West Coast. Together with its sister islands, Fort Point and Lime Point, these three formed a “triangle of defense” to protect the entrance of the bay. Alcatraz also became the site of the first operational lighthouse on the West Coast of the United States.

Although none of the cannons were ever fired, Alcatraz was never without a military presence, as military prisoners began to be delivered to the island by the late 1850s. For over 100 years, the island fortifications and location proved an ideal prison. In 1909 the Army tore down the Citadel (the prison), leaving its basement to serve as the foundation for a new prison which prisoners constructed between 1909 and 1911. The new prison was designated the “Pacific Branch, U. S. Disciplinary Barracks for the U. S. Army. It was the prison building that later became known as ‘The Rock.’”

Alcatraz had a capacity for how many prisoners? 
336 / 143 / 566 / 1033

Only prisoners sentenced to serve in Alcatraz were incarcerated there, and they were freed only after they had served their full sentences. True / False

Robert Stroud was the convict portrayed by Burt Lancaster in the movie Mayor of Alcatraz / Swimmer of Alcatraz / Bird Man of Alcatraz / Hero of Alcatraz

For over 80 years, 1850 until 1933, the U. S. Army utilized the Alcatraz prison until the island was transferred to the U. S Department of Justice for use by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. “The Federal Government had decided to open a maximum-security, minimum-privilege penitentiary to deal with the most incorrigible inmates in Federal prisons.” Eventually the prison was nicknamed “America's Devil's Island,” but it never actually lived up to its name. The average population of the prison was, at any given time, about 260-275 (the prison never once reached its capacity of 336). Requests from prisoners to be transferred to Alcatraz were frequent, as living conditions—one man to an eight-by-six-foot cell for 12 hours a day, for example, were better than other federal prisons. In addition, Alcatraz had the reputation of having the best food in the prison system. (Is there any environment in which the grapevine cannot grow?) The island's most famous prisoner was Robert Stroud, the so-called “Bird Man of Alcatraz.” Actually, in Alcatraz Stroud never came in contact with birds nor was he the grandfatherly figure portrayed by Burt Lancaster in the movie, Bird Man of Alcatraz. Stroud was transferred from Leavenworth to Alcatraz because of his violent behavior. During his time at Leavenworth he wrote two books about canaries and their diseases, but his studies were discontinued when it was discovered he hid contraband in his birds' cages and used his “scientific” tools to construct a still for “home brew.” He spent 17 years at Alcatraz (most in segregation or the prison hospital) and died in a prison hospital in Springfield, Missouri.

Daily life in this “prison's prison” was highly structured and monotonous. Although some of the convicts were well-known—Al Capone, George “Machine Gun” Kelly, Alvin Karpis (the first Public Enemy #1)—most were unknowns whose refusal to comply with the rules and regulations of prison life needed changing. Others were considered violent and dangerous or escape risks. “At Alcatraz, a prisoner had four rights: food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.” Privileges, such as corresponding with or receiving visitors, exploring the prison library or participating in recreational activities like painting or music, had to be earned. Five years was the average time spent in Alcatraz before a more co-operative convict could be transferred to another prison within the Federal

Pat Craven, left, with brother Mike Craven, spent their childhood on Alcatraz.
Dependents, including children, of guards and support personnel lived on the prison grounds.

Life for the prisoners was intentionally predictable and routine, but such was not always the case for the prison personnel and their families who also lived on the island. In 1953 Harrison and Louise Craven transferred with their two younger sons, Pat and Mike, into a third floor apartment of one of the dependent housing buildings on the island. Harrison Craven was a Lieutenant Federal Correctional Officer, and he was moving his family from Leavenworth, Kansas, to Alcatraz. They arrived before their furniture, so Pat Bergen, their dad’s boss, provided them camping gear to survive the transition made more palatable by the terrific views from their new home. One window overlooked the playground while the other provided a panoramic view of San Francisco Bay. The fog horn right outside their bedroom window did prove a bit annoying, however.

Officers and their families occupied the south tip of the island below the crown of buildings housing the prisoners. The four acre residential section was separated from the prison heights by 300 feet of distance “and a barrier of steel towers, concrete walls, wire fences and armed men.” Otherwise, both Craven brothers, Pat, 5 years old at the time of the move, and his brother Mike, who was one, agreed that life on Alcatraz was pretty normal for the 60 families and 69 children who called the island “home.” Of course, they were never allowed outside of the fenced-in play area, the former concrete military parade ground; they never had toys which resembled any kind of weapon (a pointed finger and a “Bang! Bang!” had to get the job done), and they seldom spoke to prisoners—perhaps only if an errant baseball would be tossed back to the concrete playing field. Older dependents understood the necessity of their limitations, but toddlers often required creative explanations. For example, one troubled mother (according to an August 6, 1954, Collier’s magazine story) explained to her three-year-old puzzled by the carefully guarded men behind the wire that “the bad men didn’t eat their vegetables.”

“After hearing the explanation, her three-year-old daughter walked over to a grizzled trusty and sadly inquired: ‘Aren’t you sorry you didn’t eat your carrots?’” According to Pat and Mike Craven, even contact with a trusty was random. Otherwise, their lives were a “normal” these two understood. Medical services were available through prison doctors; a 2 lane bowling alley provided plenty of recreation (and even a job if you wanted to be a pin-setter). Pat briefly contracted for a paper route on the Island. The Officers’ Club fountain, usually manned by off-duty guards, made plenty of sweet treats available, and movies were shown every week in the rec. hall above the bowling alley. Dance lessons were available for any children who wanted them; The Nutcracker was even part of the annual Christmas celebrations. “It may not have been Broadway quality,” Pat laughs, “but we had fun.” Baseball was the major sport, since the only playground was concrete. “Gravel rash was a common problem,” Pat notes. “The concrete had dips in it, too, so we always had to have brooms handy so we could sweep the water off the playing field.” For a younger Mike, the concrete provided the perfect place for tricycle riding. Fishing from either the beach or boats proved a major form of recreation for adults as well as children.

Church services for the Alcatraz families were held in the large assembly hall above the residents’ apartments. The prison’s chaplain and priest alternated conducting the services each Sunday. One would conduct a service for the convicts; the other, for the families. On the following Sunday, the two would swap.

Perhaps the greatest difference for any of the civilian population was the isolation of Alcatraz. A grocery store made staples available while a post office also provided a means of contact. The postmark for Alcatraz was a pelican. Everything had to be “imported” or “exported,” as Alcatraz was solid rock with only patches of green. (No riding the horse-pulled lawn mower driven by prisoners as The Cravens had done at Leavenworth.) School age children attended either public or private school on the mainland. Each school day they boarded either the Warden Johnston or Warden McDowell’s 64-foot cabin cruisers which usually made some 14 round trips a day. School children disembarked at the dock, “… then walked almost a half-mile to the bus stop—unescorted,” Pat explains almost in disbelief. “The older kids took care of the younger ones, and we were never afraid.” Mike observes, “I wouldn’t do that now.”

The first school the Cravens attended was Winfield Scott public elementary school in the marina area. “We had the opportunity to be a minority,” both agree, “since Italians, Chinese and Asian kids comprised the largest portions of the school’s population.”

“Do you ever remember the big ships coming in?” Mike asks his brother. They join in remembering the arrival of the U.S. Navy vessels. “When the fleet would come in, we would be dismissed from school to watch the ships.” In spite of their age differences at the time, both remember with nostalgic smiles the lights of San Francisco, easily visible at night from the playground and “going on the boat and catching the spray, if you’re lucky.” One thing’s for sure,” Pat remembers, “your parents always knew when you had to stay after school. ‘He didn’t get off the boat,’ was clearly a conviction.” Children were also required to observe a curfew: 9 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

The Boys’ dad, Harrison Craven, maintained a 1949 DeSoto convertible in a garage on the mainland for his family’s use. “That’s what you had to do,” Mike explains. Pat adds, “There was only one vehicle on the island, and there were only a couple of turns, but it had to back up 2 or 3 times to make a turn.” Every golf game (Harrison’s favorite sport) or shopping trip; weekend outing or family adventure (like a climb to the top of Mt. Tamalpais and a look-down on San Francisco Bay) began and ended in a boat whose ignition keys were hoisted to and from the boat to a bullet proof guard tower. Otherwise, Pat and Mike grew up as brothers do. Mike, the younger, was subjected to the homemade darts of his older brother while Pat endured the exploring of his younger brother—like the time he bought the pull-up ring under the window box. All in all, the 5 years of their residency on Alcatraz were interesting, and, for the most part, without incident…but there were some exceptions...
How many men, in total, tried to escape from the prison?
56 / 16 / 96 / 36

Some men among the prison’s population were impatient. During the 29 years Alcatraz was a Federal Prison, the 1 1/2 miles from the island to the shore; the unpredictable currents in the Bay’s frigid waters, and maybe the rumors of man-eating sharks discouraged escape attempts. In addition, Alcatraz convicts had only sit-ups and push-ups for conditioning and no control over their diets. There were, however, 14 escape attempts involving 36 men (two of whom attempted twice). “Of these, 23 were caught, 6 were shot and killed during their escape, and 2 drowned. Two of the men who were caught were later executed in the gas chamber at the California State Prison at San Quentin for their role in the death of a correctional officer during the famous May 2-4, 1946, ‘Battle of Alcatraz’ escape attempt.” Officially, there was never a successful escape from Alcatraz, although 3 convicts remain listed as “missing and presumed drowned.”
Of those 14 attempts, 2 deserve special mention in connection with the Cravens.

On September 29, 1958: While working on the garbage detail, Aaron Burgett and Clyde Johnson overwhelmed a correctional officer and attempted to swim from the island. Johnson was caught in the water, but Burgett disappeared. An intensive search turned up nothing. Burgett’s body was found floating in the Bay two weeks later.

Pat was old enough at the time to remember the search of the island for Burgett. The departure dock had a space big enough for a man to hide during low tide. “I remember officers shooting tear gas under the dock” during their search. Burgett’s body was found off the island’s beach, and Pat saw the body being removed from the water- both vivid impressions.

On June 11, 1962: Made famous by Clint Eastwood in the movie Escape from Alcatraz, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin vanished from their cells and were never seen again. A fourth man, Allen West, believed by some people to have been the mastermind, was also involved; however, he was still in his cell the next morning when the escape was discovered. The elaborate plot involved homemade drills to enlarge vent holes, false walls and realistic soap and paper dummy heads (complete with human hair from the prison barbershop). The prison itself played a vital role in their escape, as it was turned into a tool by the escapees who used circuitous passages, pipes, prison-issue raincoats to make life-vests and a pontoon-type raft to assist in their swim. A sealed watertight container, later recovered, held personal photos and papers belonging to the Anglins who obviously anticipated their freedom. Years later, when Pat returned for a visit to the prison, he was stunned by the smallness of the holes through which...
the prisoners had crawled. Only one body, too badly deteriorated to be identified, but dressed in what appeared to be prison blue, was ever found. Today the 3 remain listed as “missing and presumed dead,” but U.S. Marshals continue to pursue any leads which may come their way.

According to a September 21-22, 2009, two-part series on NPR, “The U.S. Marshals Service is still actively pursuing the case on the chance that the three men pulled off one of the most daring prison escapes in U.S. history.” Their file remains active, and no one knows that better than U.S. Marshal Michael Dyke, who is still looking for the men, a quarter century after their escape because, Dyke says, “no one can prove they’re dead.”

Mike remembers his father’s talking about the escape—a memory made even more vivid by his wife Caroline and her parents. During the 60s FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wanted the Central U.S. to be represented in the FBI. Caroline’s parents had just graduated from the University of Arkansas and went to work for Hoover in the FBI lab. Caroline’s dad was the FBI employee who received for lab analysis the FBI lab. Caroline’s parents represented in the FBI. Caroline’s parents

The prison closed down because it was too old / expensive / isolated / dangerous

Alcatraz was growing older, and the thirteenth escape attempt appeared to be successful. “On March 21, 1963, USP Alcatraz closed after 29 years of operation.” This decision had been made long before the three disappeared, however. The repair and maintenance of the infrastructure was estimated at $3-5 million, while the average daily cost of maintaining a prisoner was $10.10 compared to $3 in other Federal prisons. Its advantage— isolation— was also its curse. Everything, including water, had to be brought in, and everything from laundry to garbage had to be transported to the mainland. The Federal Government determined it was more cost-effective to build a new prison; Alcatraz was just too expensive to maintain.

What ethnic group claimed the island as their own and occupied it for 18 months (1969-1971)?

- African-Americans / Chinese / Hispanics / Native Americans

After its closing Alcatraz was virtually abandoned while “what to do” with it was a point of contention. In 1969 the “Indians of All Tribes” occupied the island as Indian Land while using this act of civil disobedience to draw attention to the plight of the Native Americans. Groups throughout the country rallied to their support until the Indians got out of hand. Their leaders were unable to control the degradation of the island. A fire destroyed the homes once belonging to the lighthouse keeper and the Warden as well as the Officers’ Club. In addition, graffiti and vandalism defaced and damaged many parts of the Island. In June 1971 Federal Marshals removed the remaining Native Americans from the island.

Alcatraz Island and the former prison grounds are now operated by which government agency?


Congress reacted in 1972 by creating the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and Alcatraz was included as part of the new National Park Service unit. Today, over one million visitors a year from all over the world visit the island. Pat Craven and his wife Connie have visited the island three times. Pat admits his first visit was a real shocker, because of the destruction. When he explained to one of the guards his connection to the island, the guard immediately asked about his memories. “I remember,” he observed, “that the floor knobs were much higher.” For the first time, he was taken to parts of the prison he had never seen before, like a cell block in which the cell doors open and close at the same time. “The gears are amazing.” At one point in his visit to the cell block, the tour guard explained that the children of the prison guards had been allowed to visit in this area. Pat laughed as he also declared “No way that was going to happen.” Mike and Caroline will be making their first visit this year.

For the Craven Brothers, growing up in the prison environment was simply where they lived because of their dad’s job. Perhaps they knew more about what he did than most children know about their dad’s job, but they could be surprised, too. By listening to their dad as they grew older, they learned to appreciate the danger of their environment. Their learning sometimes astonished them, like the time they discovered the most dangerous time in the Alcatraz prison day was at meal time. “They fed all the prisoners at the same time. A Lieutenant and two guards were on the floor of the hall, but they were unarmed,” Pat explains. “Gas canisters were near the ceiling, though, in case something happened, and outside the dining hall there was a machine gun turret armed with, probably, Thompsons. At the end of each meal, every piece of tableware had to be accounted for before anyone could leave.” The Brothers watched their dad faithfully exercise to “keep in shape;” they saw him bleed from an altercation at Texarkana’s FCI (his only on-the-job injury in 25 years of service); they learned the necessity of caution, awareness and responsibility. “When we came to Texarkana,” Pat remembers, “we were like celebrities. We went to the old Liberty School (now C.K.Bender) and no one had ever heard of Alcatraz.”

“For us, it’s just how we grew up,” Mike adds.

Mike and Pat Craven have remained in Texarkana to become vital members of the community, both putting to good use the lessons of their unique history.

How did you do with the questions? Judge for yourself whether you get a gold star, a pat on the back or a Snickers. Hopefully, you understand the subject of Alcatraz is substantial, and you’ll do some more exploring on your own. Thanks for participating.