

AL CAPONE'S GHOST TRAIN IN TIBURON

By Susan Cluff & Dave Gotz

In August 1934, a heavily barred and guarded train left Atlanta, Georgia with Chicago gangster "Scarface" Al Capone and 52 other notorious prisoners en route to the federal prison at Alcatraz near San Francisco. Dubbed "The Forty Thieves Special," it followed a secret and often changing route across the country, trying to stay ahead of the press and Capone's gangs. Al Capone, a.k.a. Public Enemy No. 1, had amassed a fortune from gambling, prostitution and bootlegging rackets before he was convicted for tax evasion in 1931 and sentenced to 10 years.

As the train neared the Bay Area, authorities changed plans again, drawing up transit documents to describe its human cargo as "53 crates of furniture." Capone's ghost train then took a 75-mile detour around the north end of the Bay through Martinez, Fairfield, Napa Junction and Schellville, changed onto the tracks of the Northwestern Pacific and headed south. After passing Black Point, Ignacio and San Rafael, it finally stopped at Tiburon.

Early on the morning of August 23, the two rail cars of prisoners and a car of guards were transferred directly from Tiburon's freight yards to a barge waiting at the pier. Locals, who hadn't seen passenger trains arrive in Tiburon in over 25 years, recalled seeing felons in blue uniforms through the rail car windows and guards surrounding the rail cars with drawn revolvers. The late Frank Buscher in Tiburon said his father Fred, the machine shop foreman then, told him that G-men with tommy guns lined up on the viaduct. Railroad workers had to get out of the shops in case of trouble.

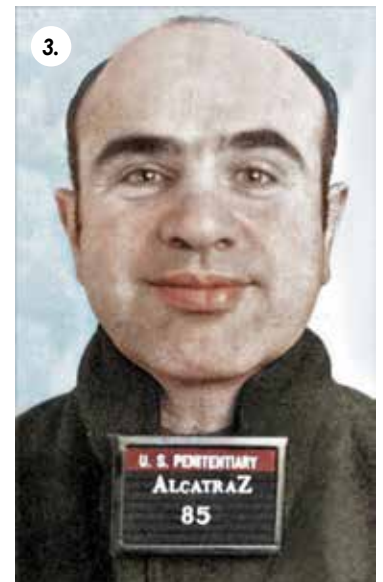
"Awaiting... was the Red Stack Sea Rover under Captain Webster Hargins with 25 special guards and federal operatives with steam up

ready to take the prisoners out to Alcatraz," according to the Oakland Tribune. "Federal guards under the direction of Alcatraz's Warden James A. Johnston kept the crowd of about 200 bystanders and reporters at a distance and an armed Coast Guard cutter escort and more armed guards in small launches prevented any boats coming close to the barge."

Reporters then chartered boats and dogged the barge and train all the way to the island, snapping pictures of the train loading at Tiburon, departing the ferry slip, crossing the bay, passing the partially completed Golden Gate Bridge, and tying up at the Alcatraz dock. There, the felons were chained together and marched up the steep roads past lines of guards to be locked in their cells.

Built in 1933 as a maximum security prison to house the most dangerous federal prisoners, Alcatraz Federal Prison operated from 1934-1963 and held 336 prisoners in individual cells. Cellmate 433 got no special privileges there and was required to follow the rules like any other inmate, working in the prison laundry. In 1939, Capone received early parole and retired to his mansion in Miami Beach where he died in 1947.

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1. Loading three railcars onto a barge at the Tiburon waterfront, 1934.

2. Barge en route to Alcatraz with Angel Island in the background, 1934.

(Photos from San Francisco Public Library, History Center)

3. Al Capone mug shot at Alcatraz, 1934. (FBI/United States Bureau of Prisons)

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