

A Half Marathon to Lamasco

Athenaeum Society

By Will Myers

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A Half-Marathon to Lamasco

Completed in 1886, The Kentucky State Penitentiary, also known as the “Castle on the Cumberland,” is a maximum security prison located in Eddyville, Kentucky on the coast of Lake Barkley. In most cases, inmates are not sent directly to the penitentiary after sentencing, but are sent there because of violent or disruptive behavior committed in other less secure correctional facilities in the commonwealth. This is also the Commonwealth’s execution facility.

In 1884, the Kentucky legislature chose a hill overlooking the Cumberland River as the site for the new prison. Construction of the Penitentiary began using massive granite blocks quarried from a site on the Cumberland River. Italian stonemasons were recruited to erect the original buildings, which resemble medieval castles.

A significant amount of inmates do “hard” time at the penitentiary. In this day and age, many use phrases that ask “Where does the time go” or “How can I slow down time?” On the contrary, the prisoners behind those castle walls cannot get time to speed up, and their next best option is to unlawfully leave. But **Sometimes Salvation** is not the answer.

Because the Kentucky State Penitentiary is the state’s only maximum security facility, every inmate is labeled a security risk. Our first security risk is Eugene Jennings.

Jennings was serving a life sentence for armed robbery in the 1960s. Even though the massive stone walls of the penitentiary appear tall and intimidating, they have not been completely effective. Jennings was an expert climber, and his first escape attempt was ultimately not really

an escape. In that time, the letter of the law included an escape as entering or hiding in an unauthorized part of the penitentiary. In the center of the yard at the pinnacle of the hill, stands a water tower that skies some 200 feet off the ground. It offers no means of escape. Simply out of boredom, to protest some administrative action, or for some other reason; inmates have from time to time climbed the long ladder to the catwalk of the water tower. From there, they would shout incentives/expletives and taunt the guards. Not a challenging climb for Jennings, to say the least, he stood aloft on that catwalk for 3 days. Officials and guards were unconcerned about Jennings, saying he will come down "when he gets hungry."

Jennings' more notable escape attempt came in November of 1962 at age 33 when he and James Gordon Fox (age 23 from Hopkinsville) went over the 40-foot wall using a grapple hook. They traveled south down Highway 93 in between the old Cummings Store and Lamasco when they approached the Ramey household. At 7:40am, Mrs. Ramey saw the men approaching their house from the rear. She notified her husband who met them in the yard with a shotgun in his hands. Jennings asked Mr. Ramey for help with getting their "car out of the mud." Mr. Ramey told them that he had seen their pictures and recognized them as escapees from the penitentiary. Jennings replied, "Well, we'll just go somewhere else if you don't want to help us." With that response, Mr. Ramey said that he would shoot the first man that walked away, and right at that time Mrs. Ramey stepped onto the porch with another shotgun in hand. Mrs. Ida Sills, the 83-year old mother of Ramey, came out on the porch and rang a farm bell. James Sills, Ramey's stepfather, brought more assistance with yet another shotgun. Soon after hearing the farm bell, Ramey's nearest neighbor joined the party with a pistol, holding the fugitives at bay until the prison guards arrived. **A Conspiracy** had come to a halt.

Our second security risk is James Bell Yager.

Arguably the most creative and novel escape of the prison happened in 1964. Yager was from Louisville and serving time for some scam. He was a friendly convict and befriended many of the prison guards. Most notably, he was exceptionally bright and was the prison's "legal eagle."

Because there was not an optometrist at the prison, convicts were allowed optometry visits to the nearest location which was in Paducah at that time. Yager convinced the prison administration into setting him up an appointment for May 6th, and he seized the opportunity to the fullest.

Convincing as he was, Yager in the meantime got a prison guard to make an innocuous phone call to a woman in Murray. This woman's father was imprisoned at the Castle as well and was a friend of Yager. The guard let the woman know that her father was receiving legal work at the prison in regards to the legality of his imprisonment. This sounded so legit to the woman that she was "all ears." Furthermore, the prison guard in that phone call instructed her to meet her father's legal counsel in an office parking lot in Paducah on May 6th. As one would guess, this parking lot was located right next door to the same optometry office where Yager had his upcoming eye exam.

On May 6th, Mr. Yager was allowed to wear his civilian clothes to his appointment. While in the waiting room, the friendly Yager asked permission to use the restroom, and the prison guard escort released Yager from his handcuffs. After climbing out of the bathroom window, Yager proceeded to the neighboring parking lot where he met with his inmate friend's daughter. Yager convinced the woman that he was the lawyer representing her father by showing her a stack of

legal documents that included a writ for habeas corpus on her father's behalf. Therefore, she gave Mr. Yager \$350 cash for his services.

From there, James Yager skipped out on his eye examination, went directly to the Federal Court House, and had the gall to file the writ seeking his inmate friend's relief. There is an honor among thieves.

The escape doesn't end there. Yager went to a department store in Paducah to buy a suit. After changing, he visited a nearby funeral home and rented an ambulance to go with him to Nashville to "pick up my wife at the hospital." When they arrived at the hospital in Nashville, Yager instructed the ambulance driver to wait while he went in to "check out" his wife. After several minutes, he returned to the ambulance to let the driver know that his wife would have to stay at the hospital two more days. He paid the driver for his services, and the driver returned to Paducah.

Yager's moxie ran out months later; he was finally picked up in Chicago and sent back to Eddyville with another 5 years tacked on to his sentence. Indifferent because of his recapture, Yager was a very popular inmate and entertained guards and fellow prisoners with stories of his adventures.

There's a legitimate distinction between a security risk and an escape artist. The same difference exists between a butcher and a surgeon. Our third highlighted bolt for freedom was conducted by Don Tate. He was an escape artist. Tate pulled off the most spectacular escape to date at the castle.

Tate, who was housed in Five Cellhouse, was serving a life sentence for armed robbery plus various shorter sentences he had received in prison for escapes and attempts. In 1976, Tate was being taken to Princeton for a doctor's visit, all he wanted was a **Remedy**. During the trip, he escaped, but was soon apprehended, returned to the prison, placed in segregation, and charged for his crimes.

After segregation, Tate was placed back in Five Cellhouse but on the inside of the first floor above the dining hall. Five Cellhouse stood 5 stories tall and was quite the ugly addition to the castle because it appeared sandy brown and not the silvery, medieval looking stone. The windows did not possess bars rather they were covered with metal louvers. His window stood 30 feet above the ground. Underneath his cubicle was the mess hall that took up the entire first floor. The only way for him to escape was out his window, 30 feet to the ground, and then up Four Cellhouse. The 50 year old Tate (who also was a former telephone line worker) would have to be in tremendous physical shape. So in the fall of 1977, he started working out daily. If the resilient Tate were to escape again, the feat would be **Twice as Hard**.

Because Tate was going out the window, he needed a rope. A friend who worked in the prison shoe shop would smuggle him shoelaces everyday for several weeks. Tate collected over 40 laces and stranded them together to make a 100-foot long rope. Of course Tate would need to hide said rope, so he tied one end to a metal washer and flushed the loose end down the toilet.

Tate was waiting for the spring. His window was visible from two guard stands. He noticed that one of the stands was barely visible because a tree limb was hanging right above the line of sight. Consequently, he added doing chin-ups to his workouts. He would do those pull-ups on that low hanging limb in order to block the view of that guard stand. When the spring would

come and full foliage would hit the tree, his window would be totally obstructed by the branch. As for the other guard stand, Tate had to time his escape out of the window during the "changing of the guards".

Spring finally came, and Tate started to hacksaw through the bottom louver on his window. Being physically fit and chiseled, finally on the night of May 4, 1978, he was ready to go. At midnight, the prison guard exchange took place. Quickly, he took out the bottom louver, tied one end of the rope to a makeshift knapsack, lowered it to the ground, he then coiled the rope around another metal louver on the window, and out the window down the double rope to the ground he dropped. Once on the ground, he gathered his knapsack and rope and off to Four Cellhouse he went.

On the wall of Four cellhouse was a copper drain that rose 90 feet all the way to the roof. Once the former telephone line worker was on the top of the cellhouse, Tate was extremely drained and exhausted. Nonetheless, he had to press forward and **Go Faster**. He moved across the roof toward the center of the prison face. Because his rope was not long enough, Tate carefully used the windows to make stops, re-lasso, and shimmy to the ground. Once on the ground, he moved stealthily to Eddy Creek Bay where he determined a home that was unoccupied. Tate broke into the home and went straight to the liquor cabinet.

A manhunt had begun. Tate realized that he needed to flee the area soon, so he grabbed some necessities from the home which included clothes, food, water, and alcohol. Twenty four hours from when he entered the home, he left in a metal john boat. His destination was the shoreline of the Land between the Lakes roughly four miles away from the Eddy Creek Bay house.

Tate drug the john boat on the gravel shore, pulled it to the edge of the woods, turned it over, and concealed it with branches and driftwood. From the bobcats to the coyotes, the skunks to the beavers, and the bald eagles to **The Black Crows**, Tate was not deterred by any animals indigenous to the LBL. He covered up and slept in the underbrush. When he awoke, he took out a map of the LBL which he ripped out of a tourist magazine from the prison library. After assessing his location, he set out on a hike toward the Trace which ran 40 miles south into Tennessee. Tate was **Only Halfway to Everywhere**.

To remain undetected, Tate would only travel at dark. To add to this arduous journey, the spring weather was not accommodating. Tate hiked for two days searching for the Trace. Hot during the day, cold at night, and rainy, the trek was taxing on Tate. He became disoriented and confused. After two days and two nights, he found himself on the shoreline across from the penitentiary. He basically spent those two days in the LBL going in circles.

The next morning Tate noticed a fisherman in a motorboat off the shore. No longer fearing detection and knowing that his food supply was low, Tate was at the end of his rope. The 60-year old fisherman in the boat locked eyes with what seemed to be a crazed animal in human form, and he jumped off his own ship. Tate commandeered the vessel. Don Tate found him a ride to Tennessee and sped away **Soul Singing**.

For the history of the Kentucky State Penitentiary, usually only one or two inmates escaped at a time. However, a few times a warden's worst nightmare occurred...a mass breakout.

The most significant mass break out in the history of the Penitentiary occurred in the early morning hours of June 16, 1988. Three Cellhouse lodges the segregation unit of the prison. It's

where the most incorrigible of criminals spend their entire days locked up, with only short respites for showers and exercise.

After cutting through the bottom track of their doors which enabled them to push it out far enough to squeeze out the bottom, twelve inmates on the upper floor of Three Cellhouse broke out. Small fires were set by prisoners on the bottom floor of the cellhouse as a diversion. The escapees quickly cut through the windows at the end of the walk and lowered themselves to the ground by the use of an extension cord that they took from a floor buffer. Three of the hopefuls were caught on the walk outside their cells, and another one was apprehended while hanging from the window. That left eight of the most dangerous criminals in the Commonwealth loose upon the land.

Within forty-eight hours, three of the fugitives were found in the surrounding countryside and taken back into custody. Almost a week later, two more were arrested in Taylor County after a brief exchange of gunfire. With mathematical principles applied, that leaves 3 still at large. Billy Hall, Derrick Quintero, and James Blanton stole a pickup truck from a neighboring house about a half mile from the prison. The three had gone to Dover, Tennessee, where they broke into 6 residences over the course of 4 days. Most notably, they brutally murdered an elderly couple during one of their break-ins. There, they exchanged their stolen pickup for the victims' maroon Pontiac and headed toward Memphis.

Two weeks later, Billy Hall's then girlfriend notified the authorities that she had agreed to wire him money at a Western Union branch in El Paso, Texas. On July 6th, Hall was apprehended by the FBI when he entered that Western Union. The following week, through remarkable police work and international cooperation, Mexican authorities arrested Quintero and Blanton in

Juarez, Mexico, and brought the two felons back to the U.S. border checkpoint where FBI agents took them into custody. Through a lengthy extradition battle which was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, the three were brought back to Lyon County. Most importantly, Hall and Quintero were tried and convicted in Tennessee for the murder of the Dover couple in which they received the death penalty.

One common thread running through all humankind, regardless of one's station in life, is the yearning to be free. Once those doors slammed shut for the first time, prisoners began plotting for that **Wiser Time** and way to escape. Many were caught; some were not. The bottom line was that doing time was not luxurious, it was very **Hard to Handle**.