

FIVE IN MARION: Remembering the Southern Illinois Jail Break of 1975

“The Fugitives,” “The Fugitives,” “The Fugitives”...

For five extraordinary days in late 1975, “The Fugitives” (as they were collectively known) was all that the residents of Marion County, Illinois, and its surrounding area talked about. But, then again, how could they not?

Today, the prison in Marion, IL, is officially known as the United States Penitentiary in Marion. It was built in 1963 as a replacement for the maximum security facility located on Alcatraz. Over the years, it has held some of America’s most notorious and infamous criminals including mob boss John Gotti, serial killer Robert Lee Willie and various foreign and domestic terrorists.

In 1971, it experienced its first jailbreak when inmate Warren Briggs got over two 15-foot tall fences and escaped from its walls. But he was not free for long; he was apprehended just four days later having made it all the way to Kansas City, MO.

The next far more high profile (and populated) prison break occurred on Friday, October 10, 1975. That’s when five men, each serving lengthy sentences, busted out. The five who escaped were:

--Edward (Terrance) Roche, 43, most recently of Katonah, NY, was serving a 39-year sentence for bank robbery;

--Maurice (Joseph) Philion, 40, was out of California, via Canada, and was doing 50 years for bank robbery and assaulting a federal officer;

--Dennis (Dale) Hunter, 26, was from Ohio and was serving a 26-year sentence on charges of kidnapping;

--Henry (Michael) Gargano, 43, from Chicago, was serving a 100-plus year sentence for a double murder committed during a bank robbery; and

--Arthur T. Mankins, 37, originally from Germantown, NC, was serving life for first degree murder.

Considering their collective crimes, it is not surprising that once these five men were out and on the run, officials labeled the group “highly dangerous.”

Below, early newspaper account of the breakout, complete with photos of the five fugitives...



If the famous Alcatraz prison break of 1962 was intricate and complex, the 1975 Marion escape was pretty straightforward.

The Marion incident began on that Friday night as all five inmates were attending a history lecture, provided by a local historical society, that was being held in the prison's visitor's room. The topic was supposedly on labor conditions in Mexico. The instructor, Loren Dean, was overpowered by one of the five after he was lured into a back room by an inmate who claimed to have cut himself. From a subdued Dean, one of the five seized his set of keys which allowed them to gain access to an exit path.

It is believed that inmate Roche was the key man for the escape's next phase. Roche had worked in the prison's electronics shop and, supposedly, by utilizing a common hand-held transistor radio (which prisoners were allowed to have), fashioned a device to electronically open three different sets of doors/locks. Later newspaper accounts would liken the gadget to something as simple as a garage door opener or even a TV remote control.

Freed from the prison's outer most walls, the five men ran into the nearby dense, pine-filled woods where following them with prison search lights proved ineffective. "Once you get over the hill, it's black. Very black," a prison official later said.

At the time, it was believed that some sort of vehicle, driven by or left by an outside accomplice, must have been waiting for the men not far from the prison grounds. Considering the planning that went into the escape, it's doubtful that the men would have left this part of their getaway to chance. Would they?

Immediately after the escape, the prison was put on high alert. Along with notifying area police, state troopers and the FBI, prison officials also notified all those living in the vicinity to lock their doors and keep them locked. As citizens were told to stay alert and vigilant, various armed guards were deployed and stationed on the Illinois highway overpasses above Interstate 57 and Highway 37. By Saturday morning over 100 law enforcement officers (some sources say 200) were canvassing southern Illinois on the hunt for the five escapees. They searched every home,

shed, barn and boxcar looking for any or all of the men. They were assisted by tracking dogs quickly imported to the area from Philadelphia and by aircraft which continually flew over fields and rural roads looking for the fugitives.

While law enforcement officials created a dragnet over the area, the citizens of the area grew nervous. Many reached for their shotguns and kept them handy. My cousin, Dolores Ford Mobley, one of five children living in a rural house near Alma, IL, during the reign of the fugitives, remembers her parents purposely leaving the keys in the ignition of their car for those nights: if the convicts came by their homestead, let them just take the vehicle and not come into the house.

Remember as well these were the days before cell phones and internet, the only news updates came from newspapers, the radio and that constant but highly unreliable method--word of mouth, the latter carried by then quite popular CB radios. One erroneous bit of "news" that swept the area was that officials had ordered citizens of the region to evacuate, to flee the area as soon as possible. To counter any misinformation, a local radio station, which had usually signed off overnight, stayed live on the air 24-hours to provide the latest updates.

While the populace of Southern Illinois tried to sort out and make sense of all the information they were hearing, the story of the daring breakout was garnering major attention across the nation. Stories on the escape and manhunt appeared in newspapers from California to North Carolina.

No one knew where the five fugitives would head or if they would stick together. Adding to the panic and unpredictability was that these escapees probably had little familiarity with downstate Illinois; only one of the escapees was from the state and he was from faraway Chicago. Hence, Little Egypt was as foreign to them as the surface of the moon.

At first, the five escapees traveled as a group. At first, they headed south. Crowded into one car, they eluded detection for a full day and eventually made their way about 20 miles south of Marion to the small town of Buncombe, IL. There, on Saturday evening, they forced themselves into the home of 62 year-old Hubert Dotson and took him hostage by putting a knife to his neck. Dotson had stumbled upon the group in his rural home after coming home from a town council meeting. "Pop," one of the escapees said, "If you go along with us, you won't get hurt."

Dotson quickly informed the men that his wife, Mary, was due home from a church service at any minute. When she arrived, she, too, was taken hostage. The couple was eventually tied up in the home with pieces of curtain rod, clothing and a TV antennae. Their captors helped themselves to the couple's food, two of the couple's shotguns, and the couple's car, a 1964 Dodge Rambler. Thankfully, though, other than being terrified and being held for an interminable five hours, the Dotsons were not harmed and eventually, after the five men left, Mr. Dotson was able to free himself with a pocket knife he still had in his pocket. When freed, he called the police.

Abandoning their previous getaway car, the five fugitives got in the Dotsons's car and, for whatever reason, switched directions. Now they headed north.

The next big development in the case occurred in the predawn hours of Sunday morning, on US Highway 50, which runs through Salem, IL. A suspicious car carrying five scruffy-looking men was spotted on the edge of town by Salem cop James Baity. Baity gave chase and immediately called for back-up. Pursued by Baity in his vehicle, the car eventually attempted a high-speed U-turn in front of an area church but, instead, careened into a ditch. After the crash, four of the

vehicle's occupants fled on foot. Police (Baity joined by fellow officer Wayne Friend) fired but no one was hit. All four successfully disappeared into the nearby fields and wooded areas. But one of the men injured his leg in the crash, could not run and was quickly apprehended.



The Marion fugitives were hunted via the air and by every area police force including, as seen here, Clay County's.

That man was 37 year-old Arthur Mankins; he was the first of the fugitives to be caught. Mankins, who had previously murdered an FBI agent and had twice before escaped from other jails, surrendered without incident. He had his wounds treated and was then promptly returned to Marion.

The remaining fugitives were now on foot. They also began to splinter apart—first into two sets of two and eventually each on his own.

And while that meant that they were now largely cornered in Salem, it could also mean they could become more desperate.

Mike Mainer was one of local officers working the search at that time. According to him, at the time the four fled into the woods, many lawmen wanted to run in after them. But FBI man in charge Charlie Kincaid held them back, fearful that the remaining fugitives would only violently panic in response. Mainer says, “He said, ‘Don’t shake them out—leave it to the weather and the bugs.’” So Mainer, who usually worked the midnight shift, and his other men stood watch, waiting for the descending October temperatures to do some of the work.

But, taking precautions, area police continued to parole and set up highway checkpoints. On Route 37, heading into Kinmundy, police made it a point to stop every northbound vehicle. Meanwhile various locals from the area got pulled into the search, mainly as drivers showing out-town law enforcement around the area. Similarly, many locals assisted various reporters who descended on the area.

Larry and Peggy Storment owned a two-story white-frame farmhouse in Iuka, IL, a small town 11 miles east of Salem. Their home was far from the beaten path and both of them feared it becoming a refuge as local police had told homeowners deep in rural areas to be especially vigilant. The Storments were so concerned that they sat up the entirety of Sunday night with two shotguns, loaded and ready, sitting on their kitchen table.

It would turn out that Mr. Storment and his wife had good reason to be concerned. At about 1am, Mrs. Storment was sure she saw two figures walk across her house's front porch. She was about to reach for her gun when the family's dog barked and it sent the two strangers running. Alerting her husband downstairs, Larry got on his CB radio and notified the police.

Police rushed to the Storment home and found two sets of footprints outside the home, each heading in separate directions.

Yet, despite everyone's quick actions, and a literal trail to follow, neither of the fugitives were found that night.

The next day, as news of the Storments encounter spread, the City of Iuka ordered all its schools closed. Parents were to keep their children home, and indoors, that day.

By this time, the four remaining fugitives had been on the run for almost four days. They were tired, hungry and thirsty. On Monday evening, around 7pm, Virgil Brown, whose home was located about halfway between Salem and Iuka, got a knock on the door of his farmhouse. The disheveled man—who Brown did not know—asked for a drink of water. Brown refused but as he chatted with the man, his wife quickly phoned the police. Denied water, the man walked away.

That man was escapee Maurice Philion, who besides being thirsty was also sporting a bloody scratch on his face from a run-in with a barbed-wire fence.

That same night—in fact, only a few minutes later—that same scene played out again in the garage of local resident Johnny Tolka. Again, a man—Philion—appeared and asked for water. When denied, he walked away. Afterward, Tolka immediately contacted police.

Though on his flight around the rural parts of Marion County, Philion had probably walked by dozens of pump houses, wells and water troughs, he was either too ignorant to drink from them or too scared. Later, it was revealed that all the escapees had been lead to believe that all the area creek water and other “open” sources were either poisonous or contaminated. As one local officer later lamented, “They're city boys.”

So it Philion's fear of the water is what eventually got him caught. Not long after departing the Tolkas's, Philion was nabbed by police as he walked along tracks of the B&O railroad. Norman Rose, a Deputy Sheriff out of Salem, was the arresting officer. He'd been part of the mobilized forces in the area since the escape. He says, “I had been up for three days by that point.”

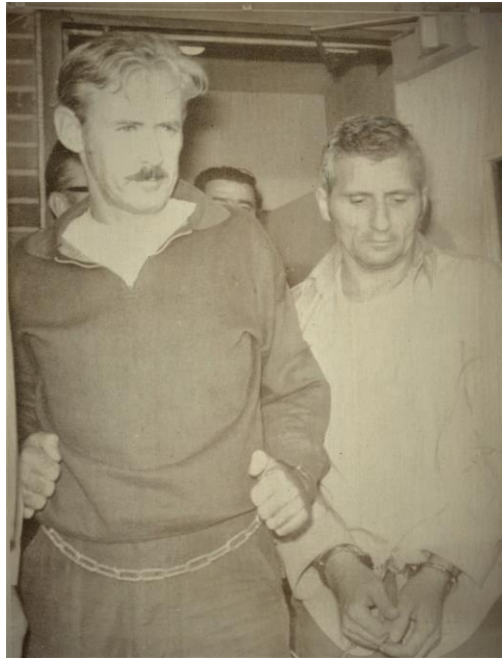
Rose knew of the Tolka place, so when the call came in, he and a fellow officer knew where to head. Though it was dark, when they saw they saw a figure walking along the tracks, Rose says, “I assumed it was him.”

Going alone—his partner stayed near the radio in the squad car—Rose confronted the man and yelled “HALT!” Philion surrendered without a fight. Rose cuffed Philion on the ground and took him back to the station house in Salem.

About an hour later, also walking along those same tracks, but in the opposite direction, was escapee Edward Roche. He too was apprehended without incident. He too had forgone water for several days having been spending his time hiding in forests and fields. At the time of his

arrest, which occurred at about 9:30 in the evening, Roche was in possession of a shotgun but no ammunition.

After his arrest, Philion disclosed that he had almost been found several times before his ultimate capture; while hiding, he could often hear officers and the search dogs nearby.



Roche (left) and Philion after their arrest near Salem.

At the Marion County Jail in Salem the two men were each given sandwiches and allowed to shower. According to Rose, they were more interested in food than anything else at that point. Shortly after both were returned to the Marion Penitentiary.

The next day, Tuesday, October 14th. Henry Gargano had made it much further than some of his fellow escapees. But he didn't get away either. He was grabbed, on Tuesday, October 14th, about 125 miles east of Salem, near Bloomfield, Indiana, where he, too, was found walking alongside some railroad tracks. When confronted by police, Gargano attempted to give the officers an alias which they didn't believe. Questioned further, he finally stated, "I'm the guy you're looking for." Described as "sick and foot sore," Gargano had too recently stopped at the office of a lumber yard asking for directions and water. The secretary he spoke to phoned the cops as soon as he left.

Impressively, only four days after the prison break, four of the five fugitives had been apprehended. It was an excellent example of good police work by area forces who were not only not assisted by modern day technology but were seldom (if ever) called into such a high-profile, high-stakes case.

The last of the Marion fugitives was Dennis Dale Hunter. Authorities had hoped that the just-arrested Gargano might be able to lead them to Hunter but Gargano claimed that he and Hunter had split up on Saturday.

While police continued to explore the Salem area, the lack of any new leads or sightings lead investigators to believe that Hunter might have "slipped through the perimeter." Along with

beginning to search parts of southern Indiana, authorities increasingly began to consider the Chicago area where they feared that Hunter might be able to hide among the larger populace.

On October 16th, the Windy City theory proved possibly correct after a truck driver named Rodolfo Mendoza reported to police that he had been carjacked by a man who looked like Hunter and who had forced him to drive him to the Chicago suburb of Elk Grove. Before leaving the truck and its driver, the man took Mendoza's ID, a white construction helmet and a spare jacket.

This incident occurred after a Salem man also reported being carjacked and forced to drive a man from Salem north to Rantoul, IL. That driver, 79 year-old Henry Bollhorst, escaped when the gunman allowed him to stop for gas. When the car stopped, Bollhorst sprang from the driver's seat and ran into the station yelling, "Get the police!" His assailant jumped behind the wheel and drove off.

Though police continued to search actively, they found no sign of Hunter and, on October 17th, one FBI agent was quoted in the newspaper as saying that he "could be anywhere by now." Many, both in the police force and out of it, began to wonder if this last fugitive were ever be caught at all.

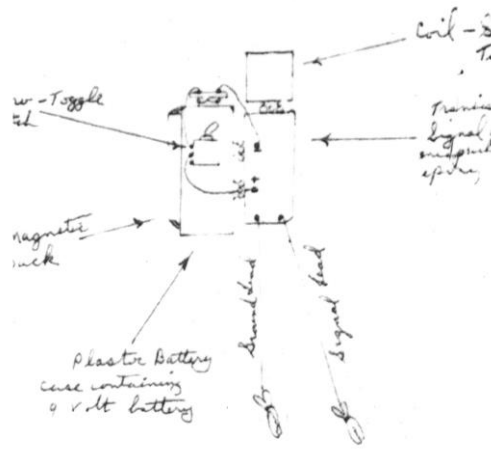
The trail grew cold.

But, then, finally, after being on the run for 20 days, Hunter, who had made it all the way to Canada, was arrested in Winnipeg on October 31st. After the Marion escape, Hunter hijacked the car and the truck and managed to dodge authorities. He "laid low" in Chicago for a few days (though he did rob a cabbie at one point) and then managed to hop a bus to Vancouver. After being in Vancouver for a couple of days, he hopped on another bus and made it to Winnipeg. He arrived in the city about 4pm and in need of money, decided to hold up a bookstore. He got \$119 from the local store before fleeing on foot only to, minutes later, find himself cornered by police inside a men's room of a nearby department store.

Though Hunter was, of course, facing charges in the US, Canada wanted to first put him on trial for the bookstore robbery. For that crime, Hunter was found guilty up north and was sentenced to seven years in a Canadian jail. Hunter was serving that time in a Winnipeg jail when he, on December 9, 1975, managed to escape that prison too! His freedom this time, though, was quite sort lived, he was recaptured within an hour.

Not surprisingly, in October of 1975, about one month after the prison break, Marion Prison announced a major overhaul to their electronics systems, including replacing all electronic locks with mechanical ones. They also built a new guard tower, forbade inmates from meeting in the visitors room and locked down any in-house copies of the prison's blueprints.

About a month after his re-arrest, prison break mastermind Edward Roche sent a lengthy, pencil written letter to the AP describing how he constructed his escape device. He even included a diagram! Various newspapers published the drawing and excerpts from Roche's letter where he detailed some of his life now in solitary confinement and rallied against the alleged corruption of the federal prison system.



The diagram by Roche of his device; published in various newspapers.

In late 1976, four of the five former escapees were sentenced to between five to 10 additional years in prison for their escape. (Hunter was not among this group as he was still serving a different sentence, for a different crime, in Canada.)

In late 1977, Joe Garner, then of “The Southern Illinoisan” newspaper, journeyed to Marion to interview three of the original five one-time fugitives—Gargano, Mankins and Roche—about their daring escape made two years prior.

According to them, the plan to break out of Marion had had its genesis in the spring of 1975. But the inmates had to wait until later in the year and an earlier nightfall to actually attempt it. In prep, all of them regularly attended the historical society lectures at the prison as a way of building a cover. Roche, meanwhile, continued to work along in the electronics shop and tinker with the device that would eventually set them free.

As the men in the article often ruefully recounted their escape, they explained or dispelled various myths/assumptions about their story. First, the five had no outside help with their escape, namely there was no vehicle, and no one, waiting for them that outside of the prison walls. They traveled only on foot and—as time would soon prove—had no “plan” once they got out of Marion. In fact, a couple seemed as surprised as the authorities would later be that their home-made de-locking device actually worked!

Once imprisoned again, the ex-fugitives found themselves to be minor celebrities—mainly among people outside of the jail. All the ex-escapees got letters—some from devout Christians hoping to save them, some from people congratulating them on their escape! Mankins claimed to have received over 400 missives since his return to prison.

As mentioned, Roche saw five additional years slapped onto his sentence for the escape but he was released from prison at some later point. He was arrest again however in 1988 in Pennsylvania due to various parole violations. He was paroled again in 1991. He is believed to have died in 2011.

Eventually, Maurice Philion was paroled and he traveled back to his native Canada where he continued to have frequent run-ins with the law. He died in 2009 in Ontario while in police custody for yet another offense.



A mid-life mugshot of Henry Michael Gargano

Henry Michael Gargano was probably the most notorious of the five Marion escapees. He had been running afoul of the law since the age of 14 and was a two-time cop killer. He killed two police officers during a bank robbery gone bad back in 1967. He remained largely unrepentant about all his crimes throughout his incarcerated life. Yet, despite that, in 2010, at the age of 78, he was almost paroled until news of his release became public and caused an outcry from the surviving families of the officers who died and among various police unions. Gargano died the following year in a North Carolina prison.

Arthur T. Mankins passed away, still in prison, in 1988.

Meanwhile, Dennis Hunter, the one who made it out of the country before being caught, returned to the US in 1980 after serving time in Canada. Back in the US, he pled guilty to the Marion escape and faced an additional five years being added onto his sentence. He was paroled in 1993. If he is still live, today, he would be in his early 70s.

In 2006, after many years as a “supermax” facility, Marion was downgraded to a medium security institution. Though America’s most hardened criminals are now housed elsewhere, Marion is still said to be the home of almost 900 inmates.