

# THE WAYS IN WHICH MEN ESCAPE FROM SING SING

## Green's Success Was Due to Congestion of the Prison---How Roehl and Pallister Escaped--A Rush the Usual Method.



Superintendent of Prisons Cornelius V. Colline.



Diagram of the Escape at Sing Sing.

ESCAPES from prisons are by no means a rarity, and will not be until plucky and energetic criminals have passed from the earth; but there probably never was a more daring and romantic escape than that of William Green from Sing Sing a week ago.

When the delivery is described as that of William Green, it is not forgotten that four other convicts escaped with him. But it was Green's delivery and not theirs. His was the conception, his the execution; the other men simply accepted his invitation to go along with him when he had made the way, beaten down the keepers, and, in the presence of 195 convicts, spent twenty minutes in leisurely carrying out his plan.

But for the crowded condition of Sing Sing Prison he could not have done it—at least, not in just this way. A man of his determination and ingenuity would probably have found some other. For, as a well-known prison official said to a New York Times reporter yesterday:

"It is nonsense to say that any measure that can be taken will be a sure guarantee against a jail delivery. All we can do is to take lessons by the last delivery, whatever it may have been, and guard against a repetition of that particular means of evasion."

"Thereby we can narrow the chances of escape. But we can never have an insurance against it. We cannot, and no prison official in the world has ever been able to, devise a means for guessing what new and clever scheme will arise in the mind of the next convict who has the originality and the cleverness to plan a flight."

Yet the fact remains that if Sing Sing Prison had not been so crowded Green could not have got away and taken his four comrades with him. Sing Sing is built to accommodate 1,200 prisoners. There have been as many as 2,047 there. Its present population is not as high as that, but it reaches to 1,734, which is more than 500 above the limit.

For many years the Warden has recognized this situation as part of the problem he has to cope with, for the prison was overcrowded when Jesse D. Frost, the present Warden, took charge of it, and he accepted this as a legacy from his predecessor. It has been a Sing Sing commonplace that you can't find cells enough for your prisoners.

Therefore the place formerly used as the prison chapel and hospital quarters was transformed into a dormitory. In the chapel alone, the place from which Green led his pals to liberty, there were 195 convicts, all sleeping together in a large room, as patients in a free hospital ward might do, and guarded by only two keepers, neither of them armed except with slungshots.

"What is the reason Sing Sing is overcrowded?" a Times reporter asked a prominent State official.

"Well," he said, "the Brooklyn Bridge was opened in 1883, wasn't it? And after that the transit conditions in New York had to get to the point of unendurability before another bridge was opened, didn't they? And your Subway was opened only when the elevated railroads were absolutely unable to carry the passengers, wasn't it? And your subsequent subway and other transit improvements have come only when the patience of the public was taxed to the last notch, haven't they?"

"That's the answer. You can't get a reform in New York State until conditions have become positively unbearable. It's no use to point out the advisability of a reform; you've got to prove that not a wheel can be turned until the reform is enacted. Otherwise you won't get it."

In 1907 a commission was appointed to relieve the congestion in Sing Sing Prison. It recommended Bear Mountain as a site for a new prison, and work was commenced. It went on for two years, and then J. Pierpont Morgan, Mrs. Edward H. Herriman, the Rockefeller, and other rich people got together, bought up the surrounding land, and presented it to the State as a park, with the proviso that no part of the ground should be used for prison purposes.

The State accepted the gift, with the conditions, and that put to naught all that had been done in the meantime in the way of relieving the Sing Sing con-

gestion and made it necessary to begin all over again.

Probably nobody is to blame. Still, it seems a strange thing that for many years a prison should be notoriously overcrowded and offering opportunities for the escape of convicts, and that nothing can be done.

This escape of Green's was more or less of a novelty. The usual course has been to make a rush. But Green, in the most leisurely manner in the world, attacked the two keepers in charge of the dormitory, laid them out, then took out a saw which he had secured somewhere, sawed at a window for twenty minutes, invited his fellow-convicts to

join him, was reinforced by four of them, dropped out of the window, and disappeared.

Warden Frost said to a Times reporter that in his incumbency there had been six deliveries at Sing Sing, and in five cases out of the six the convicts were recaptured. In one case they were caught before they were out of the prison precincts—that was a case in which four men made a rush. In another case, in which two men rushed the guards while they were at work in the kitchen, the men were caught before they had been gone three hours.

The historic instance of an escape from Sing Sing was in 1893, when Roehl and Pallister escaped. It was an unfortunate escape for them, for a few days later one of them shot the other in a quarrel and then committed suicide. But in the meanwhile they had baffled all the efforts of the State to recapture them.

Thomas Pallister and Frank W. Roehl were both murderers. On April 20, 1893, they climbed out of Sing Sing and left a brace of keepers in their cells. Just as Green did, they could have made a general jail delivery if the other inmates had been willing to join them.

Pallister had a headache and asked John H. Hulse, a guard assigned to special duty in the death house, to bring him a cup of coffee. Hulse, with a touching faith in the convict's honor, opened the door of Pallister's cell instead of passing the coffee through one of the spaces between the bars.

A stinging blow behind the ears, a tightening clutch at his throat, and Hulse was on the floor with Pallister on top of him. Helpless, and in an agony of pain, Hulse felt himself dragged to a corner of the murderer's cell.

His own pistol was put at his head, and the murderer took from him his keys and his cap and shoes. Then Pallister began unlocking the cells of the other condemned men, and Roehl joined him.

Pallister's capture of the keeper's pistol is responsible for the order now in force in Sing Sing that the officers directly in charge of the convicts shall not carry weapons. The idea is that the danger of having a convict overpower a keeper and take his gun away is more pressing than the need for having a weapon to keep the men in subjection. Hereafter a man will be kept

in the dormitory with a revolver in his pocket, but he will not be one of the regular keepers.

To resume the story of the Pallister escape, He and Roehl lay in wait for Hulse's partner, John W. Murphy, let him into the death house, and shut on him the heavy, iron-bound oak door that shuts the corridor from sound and sight. Then they pinioned and disarmed him and thrust him into Roehl's cell and locked him in.

Two men were caught once under a load of barrel-staves a contractor was

for the tall iron fence was built along the river front prisoners sometimes escaped over the Hudson ice in winter. Once a prisoner constructed a duck-shaped helmet out of felt obtained from a hat factory operated in the prison. He floated out into the river with it drawn over his head, drifting with the tide for a mile, when he landed and made good his escape.

stirred an unpremeditated wanderlust in the hearts of several hundred prisoners. Twelve had the courage of their convictions and broke for liberty, but of these eight wavered and turned back when bullets from repeating rifles in the hands of assembling guards began to kick up the dust about them. The four who kept going enjoyed a period of hunted freedom lasting for fifteen minutes in the case of three of them, and an hour for the fourth.

The break occurred at 9:30 o'clock and the next two hours were the most exciting of any in the big prison since Warden Frost took charge, up to the time of Green's flight. The Warden himself was in the prison yard when the guards began to shoot from the north wall, and he assumed command of the situation, ordering that the north gates be swung to and every prisoner inside marched as speedily as possible to his cell.

All work was shut down, and while the guards pursued the four prisoners outside the 1,832 prisoners remaining—that was the number then, in this prison built to hold 1,200—were locked in their cells, from which they could hear the rifle shots and speculate upon the fate of the four who were missing.

It was not due to the marksmanship of the guards that the prisoners were recaptured. One of them ran a distance of 300 yards under fire and fell from exhaustion. Another made for an ice house in the flat north of the prison wall, and succeeded in reaching it, only to be discovered by a searching party

ply of ammunition, were sent south under orders to overhaul the freight train and cut off retreat into the hills along its left flank.

Another squad was sent directly down the track on foot to see that nobody wearing a prisoner's gray escaped in that direction, while a passenger train was commandeered to rush a squad past the freight and form an advance guard for it.

The freight was ordered stopped by wire from a signal tower and the passenger train speeded past it, stopping immediately afterward long enough to let off Warden Frost's men. They began their search of the freight on a siding just north of Scarborough, into which it had been directed to pull by the railroad officials on request of Warden Frost.

The guards coming from the rear and those who covered the roadways leading toward the hills closed in gradually, while the squad that had come on the passenger train searched carefully through the freight cars.

At first it seemed that their quarry had got away from them, but suddenly he darted out from between two cars and made a break northward up the track, only to find himself an easy captive in the hands of a squad of guards who were too tired from their long run from Ossining to chase him further and were willing to use their repeating rifles.

The prisoner, by skillfully maneuvering between the cars and under them, had escaped detection during the first part of the search, but had finally broken from cover to take a chance on the fleetness of his heels. He was marched back up the railroad to Ossining surrounded by the three squads that came out to make the capture certain. When he was taken to his cell the count stood 1,833, which was the full number of Warden Frost's list.

"I am confident the men did not deliberately plan a jail delivery," Warden Frost said in talking about this case. "They simply saw the open gates and acted on the impulse to get out of it."

"I have never known of an attempted jail-break before in the daytime. There was one man who sawed his way out at night, and once two men employed in the bakery escaped at 5 o'clock in the morning."

"It was very hot inside the prison walls, and we needed some ice to cool us off. I ordered a wagon that was working inside on some dock improvements to go out to the ice house and bring us in a load. Men were working all around the yard and in the shops when the gate was opened to let the wagon out. There were armed guards in the yard and more on the walls, watch towers being located at each side of the gateway."

"As the wagon went out these men rushed along one side of it. The guards were as quick as they were, however, and opened fire at once, attracting gen-

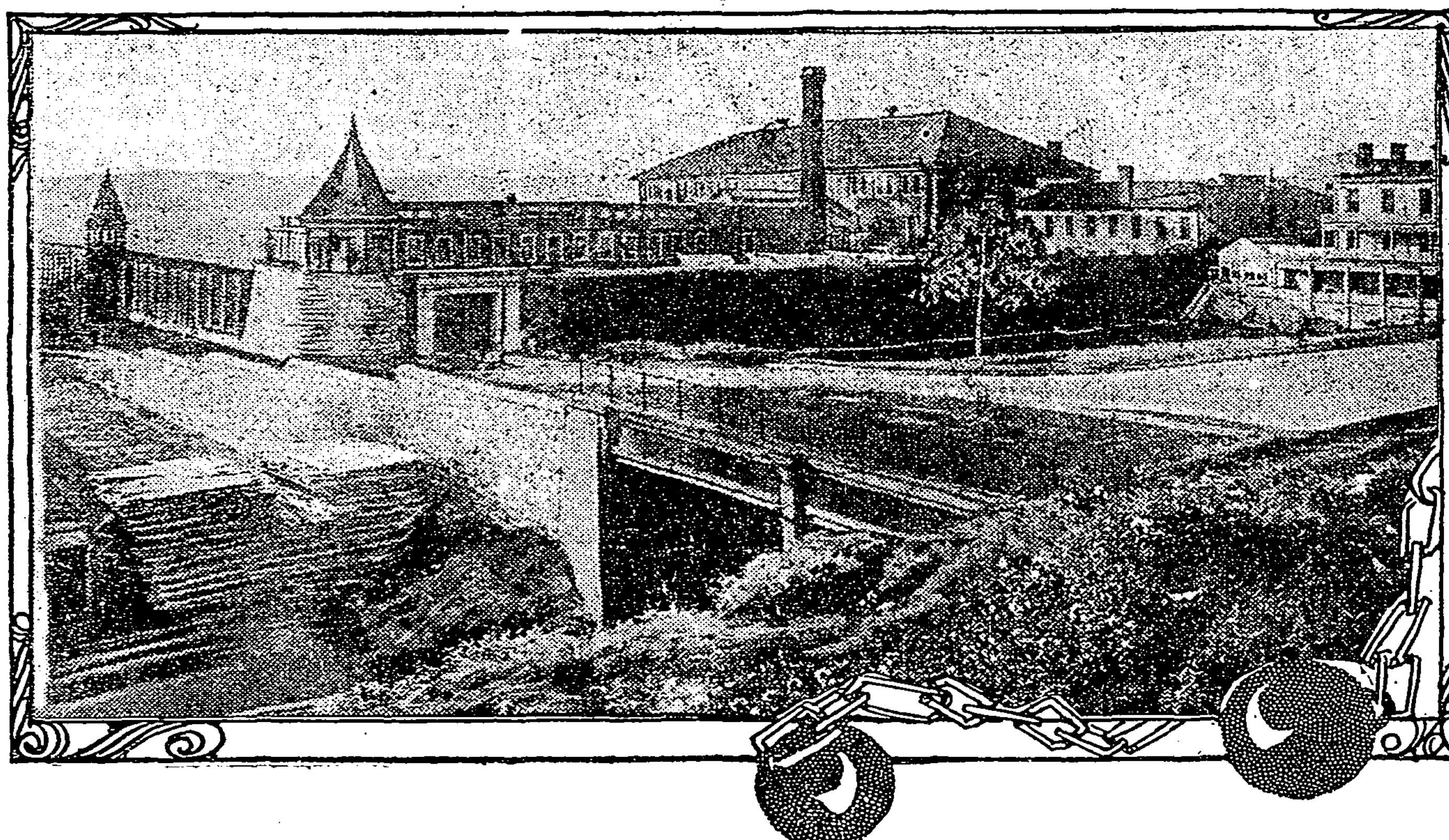
eral attention, and making the recapture of the men practically certain."

Aside from the escape of Roehl and Pallister, the most sensational jail delivery that has ever taken place in this State was the escape of the three Post Office burglars, Henry Russell, Joseph Killoran, and Charles Allen, from Ludlow Street Jail.

That happened on the Fourth of July in 1895. The men were all famous crooks who had been apprehended after a long search for them by Post Office Inspectors. The United States Government has a long arm, and it was a certainty that if they were brought up for trial they would serve long sentences. They knew that, and when they were committed to Ludlow Street in default of bail they apparently decided to take desperate chances.

They had already tried to fool the Federal officials by getting their whiskers shaved and showing up in a trim which violated the description of them. This did not work, although Federal Commissioner Shields severely censured the jail officials for letting them get to the barber shop before their arraignment.

On July 4 the three Post Office burglars took the keys from their keepers, unlocked the jail doors, walked out into an automobile and, with an extra sup-



The Portion of the Prison from Which Green and His Comrades Escaped.



The Warden's Room at Sing Sing. All of the Furniture was Made by Prisoners.