

## **A Story from the Adelaide Gaol**

### **A Notable Escape**

#### **Adelaide Gaol 1897**

On a Saturday afternoon at 3.00pm the Salvation Army were conducting a service inside the gaol Chapel. Thirteen prisoners in the Remand Yard number 4 were not included, they were left in the yard with one warder to supervise them.

Among the 13 prisoners were Edward George, Edward Oliver and John O'Brien.

The three men, along with ten others, were allowed to wander or sit around the yard. The three men, O'Brien, George and Oliver went to a cell door which was open. Here they quietly stripped the rope cord from a sleeping hammock.

O'Brien opened the cell door and called to the yard warder asking him to come and see something in the cell. Warder McNally entered the cell. Oliver and George moved behind him. Suddenly they pushed the warder further into the cell. The three prisoners started to exit the door intending to lock the warder in the cell, but the warder reached out to grab one of the men when he realized what the prisoners intended. O'Brien grabbed the warder by the throat and held him fast while the other prisoners began to tie the warder with the rope they had stripped from the hammock. They used a piece of cloth for a mouth gag. The warder could not offer resistance as he had hit his head in the short-lived scuffle and this had left him dazed.

The three prisoners laid the warder on a hammock before quickly leaving the cell and moving over to the inner wall where they propped a 16 foot long wooden plank against the wall. The plank had been taken from a rest bench in the yard. Then, with a home made rope with a bucket handle as a hook, they commenced to scale the wall. The plank was laid against the wall at a 45 degree angle, making the climb a little easier. On reaching the top of the wall, the 3 prisoners noticed that another prisoner had spotted them.

The prisoner began calling out to them and, fearing that he may raise the alarm, the three prisoners came back down from the inner wall and took hold of the prisoner who had seen them on the wall. They bundled him into the cell with the guard where they gagged him and tied him up.

The prisoners then scaled the inner wall again and dropped into the gangway between the inner and outer walls.

On reaching the guard tower, which was unmanned, they threw the home made rope and hook up onto the bars of the tower window. Then with the aid of the 16 foot long plank placed on a 45 degree angle against the wall, they climbed to the top and over to freedom.

Warder McNally was found unconscious and trussed up in the cell at 4.00pm along with the other prisoner who had been tied and gagged by the escapees.

A quick count of heads showed the officials that three prisoners were missing. The men had nearly an hour's start before a search was instigated.

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The prisoners left Adelaide and headed towards the River Murray. It was later determined by officials that the three men had wanted to head for the town of Morgan as George and another man named Fox had hidden the proceeds of a previous robbery on a reserve in the town.

On their way to the river the prisoners broke into a house in the small town of Springton where they stole food and a shotgun. No ammunition was found for the gun.

The newspapers that night wrote that the men were dangerous and warned its readers to keep a look out for them but not to approach them.

The men were seen near Annadale and Roonke stations. Mounted Constable Shanks from Blanchetown, accompanied by 2 civilians, Mr Crabb and Mr Corcoran, headed to the place where the prisoners had been last sighted.

The police constable and the two civilians spotted the escapees who were sitting around a camp-fire. The police party crept up on the men. The escapees were taken by surprise at gunpoint and offered no resistance, even though they were armed with a stolen shotgun. The police party only then found out the shotgun was not loaded.

The men were taken into custody and lodged in a cell at Blanchetown police station.

One hour later the policeman's young son told his father that he had seen three men rush past his bedroom window. The policeman ran to the cells where he found a large hole in the cell wall.

The three men had once again used a handle from a water bucket, this time to dig a hole through a soft wall, which was 2 feet thick.

Police stations along the river were telegraphed of the latest escape. Constable Shanks, accompanied by Mounted Constable Schmidt and Tracker Jim Morris, set off on the trail after the men.

The next morning at 8.00am the police party came across O'Brien and George 8 miles from the town of Morgan. The police surprised them once again at gunpoint. Two of the escapees were taken to the Morgan lockup but Oliver was still missing.

At midnight that night, two fishermen came into the police station with Oliver trussed up in chains. They had caught him at gunpoint by using a shotgun which was not loaded, near a cave on the river 20 miles away. Oliver did not attempt to use the shotgun he had. (Oliver had previously broken into the fishermen's home and had seen the shotgun there but did not take it. Now it was being pointed at him and he was called upon to surrender. He didn't know it wasn't loaded.)

The next morning the three escapees were placed on the train for Adelaide under police escort. In Adelaide the authorities did not want a large crowd to gather at the train station so they took the men off the train at North Adelaide station. Despite these precautions, a considerable crowd had gathered.

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The men were taken back to Adelaide Gaol. Two days later they were taken to court for sentencing for the crimes they had committed prior to the escape.

Edward George received 10 years, Edward Oliver 7 years, John O'Brien 5 years, the first 3 years to be spent wearing leg irons around their ankles, and the first month of each year to be spent in solitary confinement. (This was O'Brien's second escape. O'Brien had escaped from Yatala Prison in August, fleeing the gaol under gunfire and was quickly recaptured.) The men were returned to the gaol to await trial for the gaol break.

In December that year the Crown Solicitor advised the court that in the matter of the gaol break of the three men he would enter a *nolle prosequi* as the sentences previously given were sufficient.

The court approved.

Later the Gaol officials had steel mesh placed across the guard tower windows so that a rope and hook could not be thrown up and attached to the bars.

The 16 foot plank used as a seat in the yard was still used as a seat until the gaol closed in 1988. It is still there.

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*Note:*

*In 1953 one of the watch towers was converted to hold the gallows and used for that purpose until 1964. In 1900, the portable gallows was dismantled, the parts were numbered, and they were shipped to the Northern Territory.*