

1933, The Summer of Prison Breaks By Josh Custer

On a Friday afternoon in late June 1933, Anthony Baises, 34, escaped from the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg, marking the first ever successful escape since the opening of the penitentiary in 1932. Baises, while on work detail, walked away from the group of other prisoners unnoticed. It was over an hour before guards realized that he was missing and could sound an alarm. Baises had earned the trust of the guards and was about to have his sentenced shortened for good behavior. He had been working as an electrician at the penitentiary as well as in the farms.

One week later, two more prisoners escaped from Lewisburg Penitentiary. Kile Rudy King, 28, and James Lee Inglis, 35, were also both trusted prisoners and were rewarded for their good behavior by being put on work detail in the farms. Both prisoners walked away unnoticed. A torrential rainstorm struck as the convicts were escaping, serving as a cloak and preventing the police and guards from pursuing them until the next morning.

There is little doubt that the successful escape of Baises prompted King and Inglis to attempt a prison break as well. After all, all three men were highly trusted prisoners who worked out in the fields. In fact, Baises, Rudy, and King were all set to have their sentences shortened due to good behavior. Only those convicts who had earned considerable respect of the guards and who had maintained a perfect record were permitted to work outside the prison. These men had to have been highly trusted indeed. On a normal day at the penitentiary, approximately 240 prisoners would work the fields, spread out over 950 acres with only two guards on duty. Furthermore, the guards often did not preoccupy themselves with watching the prisoners, but organizing and managing their labor.

One month after the escapes, none of the prisoners had been found despite word being spread via teletype to all police stations, highway patrolmen, and newspapers throughout central Pennsylvania. Reports of their whereabouts had been sent to the prison, but no substantial information was discovered.

News of the escapes spread like wildfire out of the prison, prompting yet another escape a few weeks later when James Swift escaped from the county jail at Lewisburg. His attempt proved to be a poor effort as he was apprehended quickly and returned to prison.

Even up to a year after the escapes, the convicts remained at large. Perhaps they lived out the rest of their lives as free men.

The Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg was opened in the November 1932 and within 6 months held more than 1000 inmates. This was the first facility designed by the then-new Bureau of Prisons, reflecting the goal of providing progressive and humane care for inmates in a positive environment. There had also been the need to house the increasing prisoner population, then confined to only three federal penitentiaries: Leavenworth, Atlanta and McNeil Island. A full account of the history and philosophy of the Penitentiary can be read in the Union County Historical Society's publication "The History of the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg," Heritage Volume XX, 2006.



Prisoners transfer from train to bus enroot to Lewisburg Penitentiary.