



Dreyfus, who served five years on Devil's island before he was found innocent of treason and released.

DEVIL'S ISLAND HAS NO WOODEN PISTOL BREAKS

A Few Convicts Escape Each Year, but Most of Them Prefer French Penal Colony to Horrors of Jungle

By Joseph U. Dugan

THE other day residents of the seaport of Georgetown, British Guiana, which bakes in the glare of the tropical sun on the northeast coast of South America, were excited by the arrival of six famished and exhausted men in a small open boat, burned almost black by seven days' exposure to the pitiless sun and without water or provisions. They were convicts, escaping from the French penal colony of Devil's island, 200 miles to the southeast.

News of this escape brought public attention again to the celebrated place of exile where France sends its most dangerous criminals "for expiation of crime and protection of society." Although the prison has become known throughout the world as Devil's island, that name is a misnomer. The prison colony is divided between the towns of Cayenne and St. Laurent, on the mainland of French Guiana, and the three Iles de Salut, of which Devil's island, or Ile du Diable, is the smallest. The others are St. Joseph and Royale.

The Guiana prison was established by decree in 1852. In 1885 Cayenne was specifically designated as a place of banishment for confirmed criminals and convicts sentenced for terms of more than eight years at hard labor. Since then the prison has become world famous. It has been the subject of innumerable controversies, books, magazine articles, and debates on the floor of the French chamber of deputies.

Prison reformers and socially minded writers and publicists often have cited the Guiana prison as "a pest hole where unfortunates are sent to rot and die." Others, some of them investigators with authentic findings, have contended that this prison is a shining example before the world of proper and efficient penal administration. It is probable that the truth lies somewhere between the extremes of the opposing arguments.

The climate of the marshy lowlands of French Guiana is not the healthiest in the world, and it certainly is true that any convict who attempts to escape faces a high risk of death in the jungles or on the sea, if he elects to try to get away in a boat. About 100 convicts make the attempt each year, but a far smaller number win their way to freedom. The fact that the odds are so high against successful escapes has a powerful effect on the majority of the prison inmates. No matter how great are the hardships of life in the prison colony, most of the convicts prefer it to the certain horrors of trying to escape by sea or jungle.

The Guiana prison, therefore, must be credited with being one place so feared by desperate criminals that its continuance is a definite crime deterrent. The misery of the prisoners undoubtedly has been exaggerated, but on the other hand it is unquestionably true that no inmate of the colony is "coddled." Certainly there are no wooden pistol escapes a la Dillinger.

Celebrated Dreyfus Once Confined There

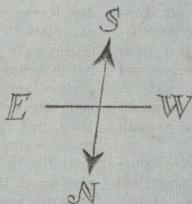
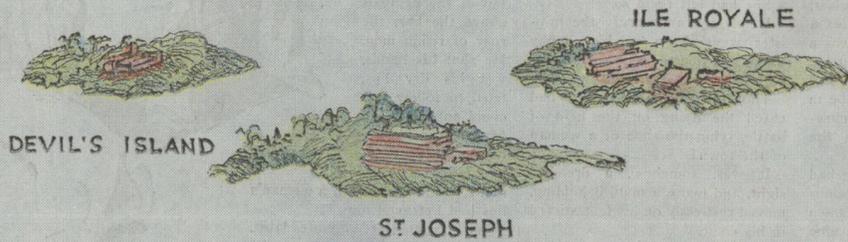
Devil's island first claimed international attention toward the close of the last century in connection with the celebrated Dreyfus case. Accused of selling military secrets to a foreign power, Alfred Dreyfus, then a captain in the French army, was sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's island. He served five years before evidence was uncovered in France proving him to be innocent of the charges against him. He was returned to France and subsequently won a complete pardon and reinstatement in the army. Dreyfus, still alive, is one of few Frenchmen who have been sent to the Guiana prison who ever have returned to France.

One other who spent years of exile in the Guiana prison, but finally won freedom, is Charles Benjamin Ullmo, who recently received a complete pardon. He had been convicted of treason twenty-six years ago and was sentenced to serve the remainder of his life on Devil's island. He had been a lieutenant in the French army. A few years ago a young French woman, Mlle. Porier, became interested in Ullmo's case. She worked tirelessly to win his freedom. She met him when he landed in Havre recently. It was their first meeting, and they decided to marry immediately—to make a fresh start for Ullmo.

A majority of the convicts are sent to the colony for life terms, and even those who have prospects of completing their sentences must spend an equal period of time in Guiana before they can leave as free men. During this second period of exile they must earn a livelihood as best they can. Most of them die in Guiana or in a neighboring country of South or Central America.

The transportation of the convicts from France is accomplished by one of the few convict ships in the world, La Martiniere. In the hold of this vessel are three huge cages. Overhead are pipes containing live steam. If the prisoners attempt mutiny, a guard can quell it quickly by turning on the scalding steam. No mutiny of consequence ever has occurred aboard La Martiniere.

On arrival in Guiana, the incoming prisoners are assigned to the various divisions of the prison colony. Political prisoners are sent to the barracks on Devil's island. The others are divided between the prison camps of St. Laurent and Cayenne. St. Joseph island is a place of punishment for unruly prisoners, who are kept there in



The prison colony popularly known as Devil's island actually is divided between Cayenne and St. Laurent, on the mainland of French Guiana; Devil's island, St. Joseph, and Ile Royale. Smaller map indicates position of the colony on the coast of South America. Convicts attempting escape face peril of death at sea or in the dreaded jungle.

solitary confinement. The prison hospital is located on Ile Royale.

French Guiana is located at the northeast extremity of the continent of South America. It is bounded on the west by Dutch Guiana, the river Maroni marking the boundary. The Atlantic ocean is on the other hand boundary, and the Republic of Brazil bounds the country on the east and south. The eastern boundary line is along the Oyapock river, and the southern boundary line is along the crest of the Tumucumah mountains. The area of French Guiana is 34,740 square miles, about one-third the size of France. A great portion of the inland territory is covered by swamps and impenetrable jungle. Free residents of the country for many years have protested to authorities in France against the continuance of the prison in Guiana. It is their contention that the prison labor available to them is worthless, and that most of the convicts in exile after completing their sentences become public charges, either through ill health or indolence.

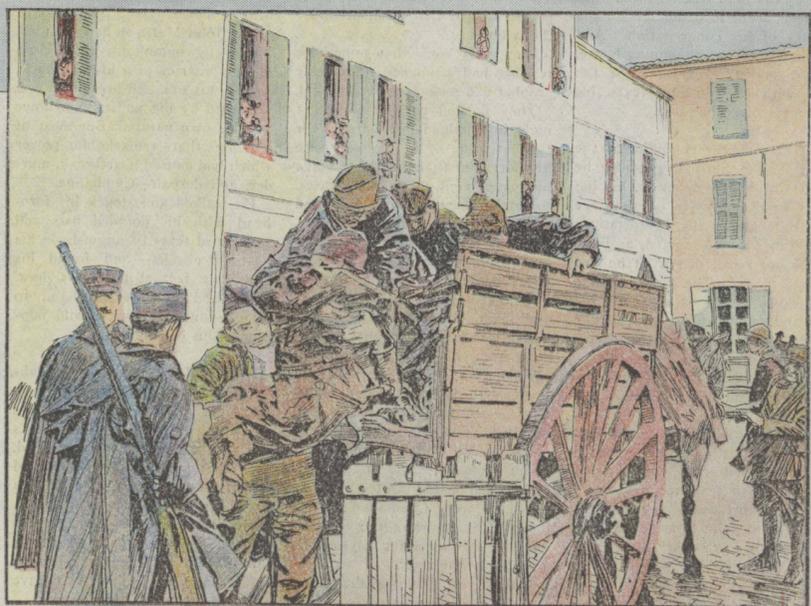
Postpone Action on Removal

As a result of these charges, agitations have been started in the chamber of deputies to transfer the colony to a more remote location. Former Premier Herriot has been a leader in the movement to abolish the Guiana prison. One recent proposal was to transfer the colony to the Kerguelin islands, between the south pole and Australia and Africa. Action on such proposals, however, always has been postponed.

It is the general belief among French officials that, with the exception of the objections of the free colonists of Guiana, the prison has been eminently successful as a solution of the crime problem of France. It is contended officially that prison conditions in Guiana are no worse, and in some respects are better, than those of any major penal institution.

This, of course, is not the picture painted by ex-members of the prison colony and social reformers. They represent the Devil's island colony as a place where men are sent to a living death. The story of one convict who escaped and finally reached the United States is typical. His story was made public a few years ago by Dr. Glenn Hoover, professor of economics at Mills college, California, who vouched for the authenticity of the tale.

"Introduction to hell came with the voyage to Devil's island," said the escaped



French convicts being taken to the prison ship La Martiniere at a French port for transport to Devil's island. Live steam quells mutiny aboard La Martiniere.

convict, "during which many tried to die while herded in the cages of the convict ship. There were 1,070 of us aboard. One man swallowed a broken razor and leaped overboard, but without avail. He was saved for the living death to come.

"Again, some escaped, but in what a way! Live steam was turned into their cages aboard the ship to quiet them, which it did forever.

"Then came Devil's island and the other islands. Their Eden-like appearance from the ship was a mirage."

He then described how convicts on the islands died of fever and starvation, shackled by day and double shackled at night so they could not move. Death, he said, was the only release from the shackles, which were unlocked so the corpse might be placed in a wheelbarrow, to be taken to the sea and cast to the sharks. These, he said, assembled in mass formation whenever the funeral bell was tolled.

"What did we do on Devil's island?" he said. "For one thing, we built a stone wall and then tore it down and then rebuilt it, over and over again.

"They die fast on Devil's island. There is always room for 2,000 new prisoners each year."