

Retracing a prison break

Eastern State Penitentiary is offering a look at a tunnel used in a 1945 escape.

By Mari A. Schaefer
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The robot looked more like a toy than a sophisticated, remote-control camera, but it gave Eastern State Penitentiary museum officials, archaeologists, and visitors their first clear look yesterday at the secret tunnel dug by prisoners and used in a daring 1945 escape.

"Everybody is curious about tunnels," said Rebecca Yamin, an archaeologist with John Miller Associates. "Especially one associated with [inmate] Willie Sutton." The flamboyant Sutton, who was sentenced to 25 to 50 years for the machine-gun robbery of the Corn Exchange Bank and Trust Co. in Philadelphia, had claimed credit for the tunnel.

Yesterday, Yamin, who helped excavate the tunnel, and other onlookers were eager to see what the Rover inspection crawler might discover.

The search for the tunnel, used by Sutton and 11 other inmates on April 3, 1945, began in the spring of 2005. Using period photos and prison records, the excavation team easily found the entry and the exit points, near Fairmount Avenue and North 22d Street. But it took ground-penetrating radar to locate the exact path of the 97-foot-long tunnel.

"They [prison officials] claimed to have filled in the whole thing," said Sean Kelley, program director at Eastern State. "We now know that is not true."

The narrow, 2-foot-high hole was started in cellblock seven by inmates Clarence Klinedinst, a prison plaster worker, and his cell mate, William Russell. They dug using anything they had, including tin cans for more than a year, Yamin said. The tunnel's entrance was hidden behind a wooden panel painted to match the plaster wall. At first the dirt was flushed down a cell toilet; later, it was pushed into an opening of a sewer found in the tunnel shaft.

"We didn't know how the alignment went across the yard," Yamin said. "We didn't know if it wiggled or if any of it was still open."

An auger was brought in to dig a 10-foot hole to the tunnel and a smaller camera was lowered in to capture a few images of the structure before the team quit for the winter.

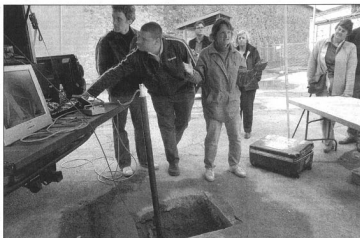
Yesterday, the crowd huddled around computer screens as a pole camera was lowered into the hole before sending in the Rover.

"The robot looks very simple. You don't need decorations to be very interesting," said Jake Simon, 9, from Hockessin, Del., who was surprised by the size of the \$37,000 robot. "I thought it could have been a little bigger."

Until yesterday, Kelley said, pictures only showed wooden planks used to shore up the tunnel. Records indicate that everything had been removed. Yesterday, the group hoped to find evidence of the lighting system the inmates used.

"Is that a string? It looks like wire," said Yamin, eyeing the images on the monitor.

The planks and wires could clearly be seen as the Rover climbed over a mound of dirt and down an incline. But, the light bulbs the team hoped to



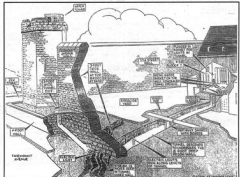
Archaeologist Rebecca Yamin (center) explains how a robotic crawler inside the tunnel at Eastern State Penitentiary provides a live video feed on computer screens (at left).

APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer



View the Tunnel

Visitors can see the Rover in action from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. today as festivities continue for the 61st anniversary of the prison escape at Eastern State Penitentiary, 22d Street and Fairmount Avenue. For more information, call 215-236-3300, or visit www.easternstate.org.



The tunnel is depicted in this rendering produced by *The Inquirer* in 1945. The Philadelphia Inquirer



Wooden planks and wires are shown as a robotic camera travels through the 97-foot-long tunnel used by 12 inmates to escape the Philadelphia prison on April 3, 1945.

Eastern State Penitentiary

find were not there.

"It is amazing it has held up all this time," Kelley said of the 61-year-old, arch-shaped tunnel, which the museum plans to seal after this exploration.

When it opened in October 1829, Eastern State had something the White House did not — running water, according to the prison's Web site.

The prison, set on 11 acres of

what was then farmland, was built with a state-of-the-art plumbing system, sewers and centrally heated cells.

The architecture inspired the design for more than 300 other prisons throughout the world, and tourists flocked to Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s to view the prison, the prison's Web site says.

One of the more famous in-

mates, Al Capone, decorated his cell with antiques, rugs and oil paintings during his eight-month stay in 1929.

In need of repairs in 1971, Eastern State closed. It was purchased by the city in 1980, and guided tours started in 1994.

Yesterday, about 70 people gathered to watch a reenactment of the prison escape. Twelve local actors dressed as prisoners in blue work shirts and striped pants introduced themselves to the crowd.

"Hi, how ya' doin'?" said Philip Jacobson, who played Willie Sutton, complete with a swagger. "I'm the only one here who was someone."

Within minutes the 12 were off, dodging traffic along Fairmount Avenue. After the escapees were captured by police, they were returned to the crowd to explain more about the tunnel's construction and what happened after they broke free.

While the tunnel was well-planned, the escape was not.

According to the statements made to prison officials after their capture, many of the escapees had not made any plans for what they would do once they were on the outside.

"This escape was a mistake on my part, as it was on the spur of the moment and I had made no preparation," Sutton said in his official statement.

It took about two hours to capture Sutton and five other inmates. Two more were captured in Wawa, Delaware County, on April 6. The rest were found by May 22.

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