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“K-9 Units and the History of Adirondack Prison Escapes”

*Adirondack PEEKS Magazine*  
Sept. 2015

The June 2015 escape of Richard Matt and David Sweat from the maximum-security Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora became a global spectacle shining a spotlight on penal practices from the nineteenth century, twentieth-century law enforcement strategies, and the frenzied cacophony of twenty-first century social media. For North Country residents, Matt and Sweat’s flight from Dannemora, while deeply unsettling, was sadly nothing new. The history of Adirondack prison escapes began mere weeks after Clinton’s June 1845 opening, and if the past is any guide, this most recent episode will not be the last. Excavating the layers of history on display during this summer’s fugitive drama offers some potentially valuable lessons for handling future manhunts. In particular, the barriers posed by the region’s natural environment both to traditional K-9 units and sophisticated surveillance technologies deserve close attention.

State officials seeking to relieve overcrowding in Auburn and Sing Sing prisons proposed construction of New York’s fourth penitentiary in the remote, undeveloped, and sparsely populated Adirondacks specifically *because* of its environment. Heeding the recommendations of an earlier Natural History Survey, lawmakers in the early 1840s planned to use inmate labor to jumpstart a local iron mining trade whose profits would cover the institution’s operating expenses. In fact, New York leaders built Clinton Prison directly atop a recently discovered vein

of iron ore to provide easy access to the worksite both for prisoner workers and their supervisors. Though the jobs were both difficult and dirty, inspectors from the reformist Prison Association of New York (today known as the Correctional Association of New York) heaped praise on the region's clean, mountain air and pastoral landscape as vital elements in fostering the good health and rehabilitation of the penitentiary's unfree inhabitants.

If the story of Clinton's first escape is any indication, not all prisoners sent to the Adirondacks were enamored of the area's restorative qualities. Unfortunately for the prison's early inhabitants, many of whom hailed from New York City and its environs, the putative blessings of life (however unfree) in an untamed wilderness quickly evaporated once they made it over (or under) the wall. Tasting freedom twenty miles away in Canada, Clinton's first fugitives ran north, scaling Dannemora Mountain and surveying their former prison home from above. Without any sense of direction, and lacking tools, roads, and directional signs, the inmates kept running. As the sun set, the duo met a crushing defeat: their daylong journey had landed them a mere eight hundred feet outside the prison wall and nowhere near the recently marked border with British Canada. After spending a night in what they described as a "swamp," the next morning the pair found a road leading east toward Plattsburgh. Along the way, an older woman offered them temporary refuge in her cabin, even providing a lunch of "johnnycake" and a place to nap. Resuming their journey, the prisoners heard gunfire and observed a crowd of men armed with rifles and sticks. One inmate quickly fell after being struck by a rock, while his counterpart fled into the woods. After spending a second miserable, and very likely sleepless night in the insect-infested swamp, Clinton's second runaway surrendered the next day and returned to his cell.

Over the ensuing decades, escapees from Clinton and the area's other correctional facilities learned a lesson local residents and tourists had long since figured out: the Adirondack environment, while breathtaking and awe-inspiring, could be both a blessing and a curse. The region's first environmental protections, including creation of the Adirondack Park in 1892 and, much later, the Adirondack Park Agency in 1971, aimed toward preserving the very natural features that could both provide refuge to fugitives and hinder their law enforcement pursuers. Hence, the striking parallels between the first and most recent escapes from Clinton, where the area's rugged and unpredictable environment stymied officers, K-9 units, and the best surveillance technology available for over three weeks.

New York police dogs played a starring role in prison escape dramas that unfolded across the North Country throughout the twentieth century. Their central role in manhunts only grew as the number of penitentiaries in the Adirondacks increased in the quarter century after 1975. One month after its September 1976 opening, Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook (then known as Camp Adirondack) experienced its first escape as Edwin Cruikshank fled to a Wilmington hunting camp, only to be discovered with the assistance of bloodhounds from Troop B in Malone. The dogs came out again in July 1981 after Dennis Klapthor escaped from an Adirondack Correctional inmate labor crew doing conservation work on Dewey Mountain. (In a twist of irony, while the hounds were searching for Klapthor, residents of nearby Gabriels had to pass through roadblocks to reach Paul Smith's College for a meeting with Corrections officials desperate to persuade locals of the necessity of opening a prison in their community). The K-9 unit, though, couldn't detect a scent. The reason: Klapthor's girlfriend had driven from Long Island, picked him up at Dewey Mountain, and later dropped him at a motel in New Castle,

Delaware, where authorities apprehended him three weeks later. The couple was reunited at their August arraignment in Harrietstown Court.

Two Troop B bloodhounds, Daisy Mae and Barney, acquired minor celebrity status for their involvement in various North Country searches in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to discovering a number of dead hunters and children lost in the forest, Barney worked on the Klapthor escape, assisted in locating an escaped murderer from the Ray Brook Federal Correctional institution (FCI) in October 1982, and in tracking down three Polish fugitives from the FCI in 1983, among other accomplishments. Despite their impressive record, Troop B's K-9 patrol fell victim to state budget cuts in 1986, sending Barney into retirement at a private residence and Daisy Mae to Troop K in Millbrook. The State Police replaced their trusty bloodhounds with a team of German shepherds, so-called biosensor dogs whose multiple functionalities beyond tracking (among other desirable qualities) made them an attractive alternative. To this day, most law enforcement agencies rely on German shepherd biosensor dogs, a fact that was on daily display during the recent Matt-Sweat drama.

In spite of the important contributions of police dogs in recapturing escaped inmates and finding souls lost in the wilderness, both the distant and recent past clearly demonstrate the biggest challenge facing Corrections officials and their civilian leadership is not a lack of technology, poor security, rogue employees, crafty inmates, or even poorly trained K-9 units. Rather, it's the natural environment itself, which for nearly two centuries has been a double-edged sword for inmates seeking to escape, residents anxious to protect life and limb, and law enforcement officers determined to maintain public safety and security. Through it all, the extraordinary physiological gifts of police dogs have proven instrumental in bridging the

significant gap between human-designed technologies, the Adirondack environment, and the men seeking freedom in New York's great north woods.