



Transcript
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Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Mark Harvey and Bill Roose | Marquette Prison Pirates

Cynthia Canty: Time again to talk about our state's history with the help of our partners at the Michigan History Center. You have most likely heard that the Detroit Red Wings played their final game at Joe Louis Arena this past Sunday. But did you know that the Detroit Red Wings' very first outdoor game wasn't at a stadium or even in a big city. It was at the self-proclaimed "Alcatraz of the North." Joining us now are the Michigan History Center's Mark Harvey and former sports writer for the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit Red Wings, and current Novi Community Schools Communications Specialist, Bill Roose. Good to have you both with us!

Mark Harvey: Thanks, Cynthia.

Bill Roose: Thank you, good to be with you.

Cynthia Canty: Bill, I want to set the stage here. Here we're talking the 1950s, and the Detroit Red Wings were really at the height of the Gordie Howe Glory Days winning that string of Stanley Cups. So what happened in the off-season, they marched the players out for a media campaign?

Bill Roose: Yeah a lot of times in the off-seasons, what they would do to satisfy advertisers on the radio during the season, they would go out on barnstorming trips. And this particular time, it was General Manager Jack Adams and "Terrible Ted" Lindsay went up to the U.P.

Cynthia Canty: And so what happened when they had that visit in the U.P.?

Bill Roose: Well they were up there for the Stroh Brewing Company, and they visited Marquette, and went into the prison, where they were met by the warden, and they got a tour of the place and met some of the inmates, many of whom quite notorious, were from Detroit in the Purple Gang, if you're familiar with them. They were in there for some hard time, some nasty crimes, some murders and a lot of bootlegging. And so these guys, they were the toughest of the tough, and that place was called the "Alcatraz of the North" for obvious reasons.

Cynthia Canty: Mark, Marquette, as we just heard, the "Alcatraz of the North." Give us some idea of what were conditions like in the mid-50s.

Mark Harvey: Marquette was built in 1889, so it was this Victorian fortress. When you drive up the drive, you're met by this castle-like structure. It was meant to be imposing, and it was. I've visited there myself. Even when you're not supposed to be in there, you just don't want to be there. And cells were small, they do not have toilet facilities in the cells. They were cramped. In some recounts, it was said the wardens wouldn't issue long underwear during the frigid winters, just because if someone escaped they didn't want them to be too comfortable out there in the U.P. woods.

Cynthia Canty: Tough place! So where did this idea of a game begin, Bill?

Bill Roose: Well, it was on that trip in the summer of '53, and the warden, Emery Jacques, had said as the Wings were leaving, "Mr. Adams, I'd love to have you come back here some time and play my prisoners in an ice hockey game." And really at that time, according to Ted Lindsay, Jack kind of dusted it off, as just "yeah sure, it was just pleasantries, hey thanks for having us." He never thought he'd hear him again. He goes, "no but really, we'd love to have you guys up here!" And so Jack kind of played along, and said, "listen, if you pay for our airfare, you put us up, we'll more than gladly come up and play you guys during the season." Lo and behold, a couple months later, the warden calls Jack Adams up, and says, "Guess what, we're all lined up, we can bring you guys up!" And so Jack really had no other way out of this. He had made a promise to him, if he had come through, and he did. So the Wings marched up there. They had a three-day break in between games. It was February 2nd, and they'd just come back from Chicago, and they went up to Marquette, the whole team. Now some of them were a little apprehensive. Red Kelly had told me that he wasn't thrilled about going up there. Like Mark talks about how imposing the prison was, he said his knees were knocking as they were coming up to the prison.

Cynthia Canty: Oh ho ho...

Bill Roose: Ted was a tough guy. I mean, Ted wasn't bothered by it. Matter of fact, on the trip prior, Ted had his picture taken with a fake prison ID, and you know he just kind of reveled in the whole idea. Plus, the prisoners loved Ted, because Ted led the league in penalty minutes. They called him "Terrible Ted" for a reason. If you ever saw him up close, there's countless scars on his face. Those guys loved this. He was a hero. You know a lot of them had never met these people - it wasn't like today with the Internet, and every game being televised. They heard games on radio, and they read accounts in the newspapers. So to see Ted up close, and he kind of looked like they did. You know, just kind of beat up and weathered.

Cynthia Canty: And a fighter. Mark, you came across some information that kind of hints there might be another twist or an added twist to the story of how this game came to be?

Mark Harvey: The other important thing to remember is that this wasn't the Department of Corrections sponsoring this game. In fact, once the warden, you know, put the invitation out there and it was accepted, he took that to heart, and was a little afraid of what he had just promised to do. So he had to quickly scramble and connect with the local Marquette Sentinels semi-pro team, get the business leaders in the community to help raise those funds to get the team up there. So part of that three-day trip, they did play the prison game first, and then that same evening, and again, this doesn't usually happen nowadays in professional sports, they had dinner at the prison, went back to their hotel, and then showed up for an evening game with the Marquette Sentinels.

Cynthia Canty: Something tells me that the "Alcatraz of the North," Marquette Prison, did not come equipped with a hockey rink. So Bill, how did this thing all come together?

Bill Roose: Well the prison had a director of physical activities, his name was Oakie Brumm, and Oakie was a former University of Michigan hockey player. When this whole idea came about, he was kind of tasked with the duties of putting this rink together with a lot of material that would have otherwise been thought of as being used to escape such a place. And so he couldn't use a lot of inmates to help them, not until a lot of the boards and a lot of the infrastructure was already in place. So there was a lot of concern about who he could use to help put this rink together. But once

he put that rink together, and the Wings stepped on that ice, Gordie Howe famously said that that was the best ice he had ever skated in his entire career.

Cynthia Canty: Wow! So they did a great job. So, game day arrives, and I love the name: the Marquette Prison Pirates. Were they able to keep up with the likes of Terry Sawchuk and Gordie Howe and Ted Lindsay?

Bill Roose: Well, I'm gonna guess that your guess would be no, and you would be correct.

Cynthia Canty: Ha! Ha! Ha! I would guess no.

Bill Roose: Yeah, according to Ted, the score was 18-0 after the first period, but everyone was having such a fun time that they just kind of switched jerseys. There was a prisoner who ended up being a centerman between Gordie and Ted. And Terry Sawchuk joined the Prison Pirates, he put on their jersey and went into their goal. So it was just a fun afternoon after that. And after the 18-0 first period, nobody continued to keep score.

Cynthia Canty: Just, let's have fun. Mark, you found some records that perhaps point to a little maybe gamesmanship from the warden?

Mark Harvey: Yeah there's day books that are filled out by the warden and their office, and we have no real proof, but there's some suspicious transfers prior to the game, and then the same prisoners go back out. The other thing that's really funny is that there's a lot of prisoners that were coming up for parole, and they just didn't want to get parole before this game. You know, this was the highlight of the year or years of these people being here, so they didn't want to miss it by, you know, something silly like getting freed. So, they're trying to figure out how to not get parole but not be there for years further.

Cynthia Canty: Ha! Ha! Ha! Kind of stacking things a little bit there...

Mark Harvey: Yeah... And I think another little fun tidbit is that after the game, the Prison Pirates became to be known as Emery's Boys, named after the warden.

Cynthia Canty: Oh boy, I just love it. I'm interested Bill, as you talked to Ted Lindsay about that game, what did they think about it in hindsight? What did the players think about that whole thing? I mean, you had some players saying their knees were knocking as they walked into Marquette.

Bill Roose: Yeah well like Red Kelly was worried because he remembered murders that had taken place not too far from Ma Shaw's place off of Grand River, and those were committed by Purple Gang members that he knew were now imprisoned up in Marquette. So he had a real phobia about that. But afterwards, talking to him and Ted both, everybody won. They loved the fact that these guys just came out as perfect gentlemen, as Ted described them. They all respected the game, and, like I said, everyone just had a lot of fun that afternoon.

Mark Harvey: As an odd postscript to the end of the game, here are the Stanley Cup champions, and after they won they were brought to center ice and they were presented with the prison's version of the Stanley Cup, which was called the "honey bucket," which was a chamber pot.

Cynthia Canty: Ha! Ha! Ha!

Mark Harvey: They also were each gifted a hand-tooled leather wallet with the winged wheel logo on it that the prisoner arts department had made for them.

Cynthia Canty: This is an awesome story, the Wings' very first outdoor game in prison at Marquette. Thank you so much for sharing that story with us! Mark Harvey with the Michigan History Center and former sports writer for the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit Red Wings, Bill Roose.

Mark Harvey: Thanks Cynthia.

Bill Roose: Thank you very much.