

= Robert Stroud =

Robert Franklin Stroud ( January 28 , 1890 ? November 21 , 1963 ) , known as the " Birdman of Alcatraz " , was an American federal prisoner and author who has been cited as one of the United States ' most notorious criminals . During his time at Leavenworth Penitentiary , he reared and sold birds and became a respected ornithologist , but because of regulations , he was not permitted to keep birds at Alcatraz , where he was incarcerated from 1942 to 1959 . Stroud was never released from the Federal prison system .

Born in Seattle , Washington , Stroud ran away from his abusive father at the age of 13 , and by the time he was 18 , he had become a pimp in the Alaska Territory . In January 1909 , he shot and killed a bartender who had attacked one of his prostitutes , for which he was sentenced to 12 years in the federal penitentiary on Puget Sound 's McNeil Island . Stroud gained a reputation as an extremely dangerous inmate who frequently had confrontations with fellow inmates and staff , and in 1916 , he killed a guard . Stroud was convicted of first @-@ degree murder and sentenced to hang , but after several trials , his sentence was eventually commuted to life imprisonment .

Stroud began serving life in solitary confinement at Leavenworth , where in 1920 , after discovering a nest with three injured sparrows in the prison yard , he began raising them , and within a few years had acquired a collection of some 300 canaries . He began extensive research into them after being granted equipment by a radical prison @-@ reforming warden , publishing *Diseases of Canaries* in 1933 , which was smuggled out of Leavenworth and sold en masse , as well as a later edition ( 1943 ) . He made important contributions to avian pathology , most notably a cure for the hemorrhagic septicemia family of diseases , gaining much respect and some level of sympathy among ornithologists and farmers . Stroud ran a successful business from inside prison , but his activities infuriated the prison staff , and he was eventually transferred to Alcatraz in 1942 after it was discovered that Stroud had been secretly making alcohol using some of the equipment in his cell .

Stroud began serving a 17 @-@ year term at Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary on December 19 , 1942 , and became inmate # 594 . In 1943 , he was assessed by psychiatrist Romney M. Ritchey , who diagnosed him as a psychopath , but with an I.Q. of 134 . Stripped of his birds and equipment , he wrote a history of the penal system .

In 1959 , with his health failing , Stroud was transferred to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield , Missouri , where he stayed until his death on November 21 , 1963 , having been incarcerated for the last 54 years of his life , of which 42 were in solitary confinement . He had been studying French near the end of his life . Robert Stroud is buried in Metropolis , Illinois . Author Carl Sifakis considers Stroud to have been " possibly the best @-@ known example of self @-@ improvement and rehabilitation in the U.S. prison . "

= = Early life and arrest = =

Stroud was born in Seattle , the eldest child of Elizabeth Jane ( née McCartney 1860 @-@ 1938 ) and Benjamin Franklin Stroud . His mother had two daughters from a previous marriage . His father was an abusive alcoholic , and Stroud ran away from home at the age of 13 . His parents both had German ancestry .

By the time he was 18 , Stroud had made his way to Cordova , Alaska , where he met 36 @-@ year @-@ old Kitty O ' Brien , a prostitute and dance @-@ hall entertainer , for whom he pimped in Juneau . According to Stroud , on January 18 , 1909 , while he was away at work , an acquaintance of theirs , barman F. K. " Charlie " Von Dahmer , had allegedly failed to pay O 'Brien for her services and beat her , tearing a locket from her neck that contained a picture of her daughter that was of sentimental value . That night , after finding out about the incident , Stroud confronted Von Dahmer on Gastineau Avenue , and a struggle ensued , resulting in the latter 's death from a gunshot wound . Stroud went to the police station , and turned himself and the gun in . According to police reports , Stroud had knocked Von Dahmer unconscious , and then shot him at point @-@ blank range .

Stroud 's mother , Elizabeth , retained a lawyer for her son , but he was found guilty of manslaughter on August 23 , 1909 , and sentenced to 12 years in the federal penitentiary on Puget

Sound 's McNeil Island . Stroud 's crime was handled in the federal system , as Alaska at that time was still a federal territory , and not a state with its own judiciary .

= = Prison life = =

Known as Prisoner # 1853 @-@ M , Stroud was one of the most violent prisoners at McNeil Island , frequently feuding with fellow inmates and staff , and was also prone to many different physical ailments . Stroud reportedly stabbed a fellow prisoner who had reported him for stealing food from the kitchen . He also assaulted a hospital orderly who had reported him to the prison administration for attempting to obtain morphine through threats and intimidation , and had also reportedly stabbed another fellow inmate who was involved in the attempt to smuggle the narcotics . On September 5 , 1912 , Stroud was sentenced to an additional six months for the attacks , and was transferred from McNeil Island to the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth , Kansas . On March 26 , 1916 , after being there six months , Stroud was reprimanded by cafeteria guard Andrew F. Turner for a minor rule violation that would have annulled Stroud 's visitation privilege to meet his younger brother , whom he had not seen in eight years . With a six @-@ inch shiv , Stroud stabbed Turner through his heart .

Stroud was convicted of first @-@ degree murder , and sentenced to death by hanging on May 2 . He was ordered to await execution of his sentence in solitary confinement , but this was thrown out in December by the U.S. Supreme Court . In a second trial held on May 28 , 1917 , he was also convicted , but received a life sentence , which Stroud appealed , and Solicitor General John W. Davis " confessed error " because he wanted Stroud to receive the death penalty . As a result , Stroud was tried for a third time in May 1918 , and on June 28 he was again sentenced to death by hanging . The Supreme Court intervened , upholding the death sentence , which was scheduled to be carried out on April 23 , 1920 . Stroud 's mother appealed to President Woodrow Wilson and his wife , Edith Wilson , and the execution was halted just eight days before it was to be carried out ; the gallows had already been built and viewed by Stroud from his cell . Stroud 's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment . Leavenworth 's warden , T. W. Morgan , strongly opposed the decision given Stroud 's reputation for violence . Morgan persuaded the President to stipulate that since Stroud was originally sentenced to await his death sentence in solitary confinement , those conditions should prevail until the halted execution could be carried out . President Wilson 's Attorney General , Alexander Mitchell Palmer , saw to it that Stroud was sentenced to a lifetime in solitary .

= = The Birdman of Leavenworth = =

While at Leavenworth in 1920 , Stroud found a nest with three injured sparrows in the prison yard , and raised them to adulthood . Prisoners were sometimes allowed to buy canaries , and Stroud had started to add to his collection to occupy his time raising and caring for his birds , which he could sell for supplies and to help support his mother . According to Stroud , he used a " razor blade and nail for tools " and made his first bird cage out of wooden crates . Soon thereafter , Leavenworth 's administration changed , and the prison was then directed by a new warden . Impressed with the possibility of presenting Leavenworth as a progressive rehabilitation penitentiary , the new warden , Bennett , furnished Stroud with cages , chemicals , and stationery to conduct his ornithological activities . Visitors were shown Stroud 's aviary , and many purchased his canaries . Over the years , he raised nearly 300 canaries in his cells , and wrote two books , the 60 @,@ 000 @-@ word treatise Diseases of Canaries ( 1933 ) , which had been smuggled out of Leavenworth , and a later edition , Stroud 's Digest on the Diseases of Birds ( 1943 ) , with updated , specific information . He made several important contributions to avian pathology , most notably a cure for the hemorrhagic septicemia family of diseases . He gained respect and also some level of sympathy in the bird @-@ loving field .

Stroud 's activities created problems for the prison management . According to regulations , each letter sent or received at the prison had to be read , copied , and approved . Stroud was so involved

in his business that this alone required a full @-@ time prison secretary . Additionally , most of the time , his birds were permitted to fly freely within his cells , and because of the great number of birds he kept , his cell was filthy .

In 1931 , an attempt to force Stroud to discontinue his business and get rid of his birds failed after Stroud and one of his mail correspondents , a bird researcher from Indiana named Della Mae Jones , made his story known to newspapers and magazines . A massive letter campaign and a 50 @,@ 000 @-@ signature petition sent to President Herbert Hoover resulted in Stroud being permitted to keep his birds , and despite prison overcrowding , he was even given a second cell to house them . However , his letter @-@ writing privileges were greatly curtailed . Jones and Stroud grew so close that she moved to Kansas in 1931 , and started a business with him , selling his avian medicines .

Prison officials , fed up with Stroud 's activities and their attendant publicity , intensified their efforts to transfer him out of Leavenworth . Stroud , however , discovered a Kansas law that forbade the transfer of prisoners married in Kansas . To this end , he married Jones by proxy , which infuriated the prison 's administrators , who would not allow him to correspond with his wife . Prison officials were not the only ones perturbed with Stroud 's marriage ; his mother was also incensed . They had a close relationship , but Elizabeth Stroud strongly disapproved of the marriage to Jones , believing women were nothing but trouble for her son . Whereas previously she had been a strong advocate for her son , helping him with legal battles , she now argued against his application for parole , and became a major obstacle in his attempts to be released from the prison system . She moved away from Leavenworth and refused any further contact with him until her death in 1937 .

In 1933 , Stroud advertised in a publication that he had not received any royalties from the sales of Diseases of Canaries . In retaliation , the publisher complained to the warden , and , as a result , proceedings were initiated to transfer Stroud to Alcatraz , where he would not be permitted to keep his birds . In the end , however , Stroud was able to keep both his birds and canary @-@ selling business at Leavenworth . Stroud avoided trouble for several more years , until it came to light that some of the equipment Stroud had requested for his lab was in fact being used as a home @-@ made still to distill alcohol . Officials finally had the wedge they needed to drive Stroud out .

= = Alcatraz = =

On December 19 , 1942 , Stroud was transferred to Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary , and became inmate # 594 . He reportedly was not informed in advance that he was to leave Leavenworth and his beloved birds , and was given just 10 minutes ' notice of his departure ; his birds and equipment were sent to his brother as Alcatraz 's strict policies meant that he was unable to continue his avocation . He spent six years in segregation and another 11 confined to the hospital wing there . In 1943 , he was assessed by psychiatrist Romney M. Ritchey , who diagnosed him as a psychopath , but with an I.Q. of 134 ( although his initial report in 1942 based on Leavenworth states that he had an I.Q. of 116 ) . While there , he wrote two manuscripts : Bobbie , an autobiography , and Looking Outward : A History of the U.S. Prison System from Colonial Times to the Formation of the Bureau of Prisons . A judge ruled that Stroud had the right to write and keep such manuscripts , but upheld the warden 's decision to ban their publication . After Stroud 's death , the transcripts were delivered to his lawyer , Richard English .

Rumors of Stroud 's homosexuality were noted at Alcatraz . According to Donald Hurley , whose father was a guard at Alcatraz , " Whenever Stroud was around anyone , which was seldom , he was watched very closely , as prison officials were very aware of his overt homosexual tendencies . " In an interview with Hurley for his book , a former inmate heard Stroud was always in ' dog block ' ( solitary confinement ) or later in the hospital because he was a ' wolf ' ( aggressive homosexual ) who had a bad temper . " In February 1963 Stroud met and talked with actor Burt Lancaster , who portrayed him in The Birdman of Alcatraz . Stroud never got to see the film or read the book it was based on but did share on one of the problems that prevented parole , that he was an " admitted homosexual . " Lancaster quoted Stroud as saying , " Let 's face it , I am 73 years old . Does that answer your question about whether I would be a dangerous homosexual ? "

During his 17 @-@ year term at Alcatraz , Stroud was allowed access to the prison library , and

began studying law . Occasionally , he was permitted to play chess with one of the guards . Stroud began petitioning the government that his long prison term amounted to cruel and unusual punishment . In 1959 , with his health failing , Stroud was transferred to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield , Missouri , where he stayed until his death in 1963 . However , his attempts to be released were unsuccessful .

On November 21 , 1963 , Robert Stroud died at the Springfield Medical Center at the age of 73 , having been incarcerated for the last 54 years of his life , of which 42 were spent in solitary confinement . He had been studying French near the end of his life . Stroud is buried in Metropolis , Illinois ( Massac County ) .

= = Legacy = =

Stroud is considered to be one of the most notorious criminals in American history . Robert Niemi states that Stroud had a " superior intellect , " and became a " first @-@ rate ornithologist and author , " but was an " extremely dangerous and menacing psychopath , disliked and distrusted by his jailers and fellow inmates . " However , by his last years , he was seen more favorably , and Judge Becker considered Stroud to be modest , no longer a danger to society , with a genuine love for birds . Given his level of notoriety , the crimes he committed were unremarkable , especially as the assaults he committed had a clear cause . Carl Sifakais considers Stroud to have been a " brilliant self @-@ taught expert on birds , and possibly the best @-@ known example of self @-@ improvement and rehabilitation in the U.S. prison . "

Because of Stroud 's contributions to the field of ornithology , he gained a large following of thousands of bird breeders , and poultry raisers who demanded his release , and for many years a " Committee to Release Robert F. Stroud " campaigned to have Stroud released from prison . However , because Stroud had killed a federal officer , his punishment in solitary confinement remained intact . In 1963 , Richard M. English , a young lawyer who had campaigned for John F. Kennedy in California , took to the cause of securing Stroud 's release . He met with former President Harry S. Truman to enlist support , but Truman declined . He also met with senior Kennedy @-@ administration officials who were studying the subject . English took the last photo of Stroud , in which he is shown with a green visor . The warden of the prison attempted to have English prosecuted for bringing something into the prison he did not take out : unexposed film . The authorities declined to take any action . Upon Stroud 's death , his personal property , including original manuscripts , was delivered to English , as his last legal representative , who later turned over some of the possessions to the Audubon Society .

Stroud became the subject of a 1955 book by Thomas E. Gaddis , *Birdman of Alcatraz* . Gaddis , who strongly advocated rehabilitation in the prisons , portrayed Stroud in favorable light . This was adapted by Guy Trosper for the 1962 film of the same name , directed by John Frankenheimer . It starred Burt Lancaster as Stroud , Karl Malden as a fictionalized and renamed warden , and Thelma Ritter as Stroud 's mother . Both the book and the film were highly fictionalized , with former inmates stating that Stroud was far more sinister and unpleasant than the character depicted in them . Stroud was never allowed to see the film . Art Carney played Stroud in the 1980 TV movie *Alcatraz : The Whole Shocking Story* , and Dennis Farina played Stroud in the 1987 TV movie *Six Against the Rock* , a dramatization of the Battle of Alcatraz of 1946 .

In music , Stroud has been the subject of the instrumental " *Birdman of Alcatraz* " from Rick Wakeman 's *Criminal Record* ( 1977 ) , a concept album about criminality , and the song " *The Birdman* " by Our Lady Peace is also about him . Several video games such as *Galerians* and *Team Fortress 2* pay homage to him .