

Jailbreak

Escape artist beats cuffs, jacket, and cell

West Bend—Anthony Martin looked serious but smiled as the sheriff's deputy buckled him into the straitjacket and placed handcuffs around his arms, weighted with thick chains and a 40-pound steel ball.

He didn't flinch as the cell door clanged shut and the deputy pushed the spring-loaded bolt into place, locking him inside.

He could be seen now only through the small slit in the door as the last of the group of witnesses filed out into the hallway.

They would wait in what was once the home of the sheriff attached to the cell block of the Washington County Jail, built in 1886 and now a museum—to see if the Sheboygan escape artist known professionally as Anthony could somehow break out of the jacket, chains and cell.

Jeff Hansen, a friend of Anthony's, started a stopwatch as the outer cell door shut. He would time the escape—if there was one.

“Remember at this point it's an attempt,” Anthony had said earlier as he handed his glasses to his wife before being placed in the straightjacket.

“One can be fairly confident, but it's not a sure thing.”

Anthony began his career as an escape artist when he was 10, having a deep interest in locks and things mechanical.

In 1979, at age 13 he was the subject of a Milwaukee Journal Green Sheet article and labeled as the handcuff king.

“It's been fifty-one seconds,” called out Hansen.

Through the years he's appeared on “Current Affair” and the Dick Clark show and been the subject of a number of “Ripley's Believe it or Not” cartoons. He's escaped from all kinds of dangerous situations, such as being handcuffed and chained and locked in a box with a parachute and tossed out of a plane, and submerged in icy water chained in a cage.

“Fear is an element of what I do,” Anthony said. “When I'm thrown out of a plane or put into a box and 2,000 pounds of sand are poured on top, that has some fear attached to it. But to escape from a jail, that's a different kind of tension. I have 20

years of my reputation on the line.”

Anthony makes one jail escape attempt a year, to keep his abilities keen, like a prizefighter who does an exhibition fight, he explained.

He’s escaped from a Wautoma prison cell that once held Ed Gein and a Kewaunee jail once occupied by Baby Face Nelson, or so the story goes.

“Time is now one minute 42 seconds,” said Hansen.

Anthony’s been compared to Houdini, but he said they weren’t the same.

“I am not an illusionist in the style of Harry Houdini, I don’t trick the audience,” he said. “Illusionists have mimicked escape artists for years. They get a straitjacket from a magic shop and ‘escape’ from that. That cheapens what I do.”

Earlier, sheriff’s Deputy David Klopfenstein had checked over the cellblock and straitjacket.

“I’m here to observe and make sure everything is legitimate and that he has no keys stashed.” Klopfenstein had said.

Watching the event was Shawn Graff, of Graff & Associates, Hartford, a historical preservation consultant.

“Anthony came to us and said he had a strong interest in the jail and old locks and said he’d like to try and escape from our jail, and we said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

Another interested party was Meta Chase, 86 who grew up in West Bend and had been a volunteer at the jail-turned museum for many years.

“I had to come and see how he was going to get out. It’s such heavy iron in this jail,” she said.

Also in the audience waiting was Nicky Stemper 6, along with her twin brothers, Matty and Michael, 5. They all looked worried.

“I saw that ball and chain,” Nicky said. “No, he’s not going to get out.”

“And the handcuffs,” said Matty.

“It’s too hard,” added Michael.

Just then the door opened and there stood Anthony, holding the straitjacket.

“Four minutes 17 seconds,” said Hansen.

Anthony, who looked relaxed, explained that he got out of the straitjacket through manipulating his muscles and bones.

“But the jail cell was different,” he said. “These locks are over 80 years old and have an unusual lock mechanism. I was facing something unusual and I wanted to take my time.”

Many of the witnesses went back to the jail cell and re-examined the lock. They asked Anthony questions and looked over the straitjacket. And all shook their heads in amazement.

“I knew he could do it,” said Ron Mueller of West Bend. “I saw him a few years back and had faith in him.”

Chase called out to the guests as they left to make a donation to the museum. Graff turned off the lights and locked up the jail until next time, and another escape, perhaps.