

Escape of Kenneth Como

MANSON FAMILY ASSOCIATE

By Deputy
Chris Miller (Retired)

Photos provided by Los Angeles
County Sheriff's Museum

Escape from the Hall of Records

In July of 1971, Kenneth Como was transferred from Folsom State Prison to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Hall of Justice Jail to testify in Warren Marchaellette's murder trial. During his short time in the Hall of Justice Jail, he became friends with members of the Manson Family and decided to join them. During this time, due to a shortage of courtrooms in the Hall of Justice, it was necessary to hold trials at the old Hall of Records. While Como and Marchaellette were in a holding cell at the Hall of Records awaiting trial, they were able to tie jail clothing together to be used like a rope. They used this "rope" to climb out a window and down the side of the building to freedom. Como had previously escaped from several Los



1966 Ford van that was used in the robbery.

Angeles County Jails including one occasion, when he escaped from Biscailuz Center Jail by switching wristbands and climbing over a fence.

Robbery of Western Surplus Store

While on the run, Kenneth Como along with Manson Family members Mary Brunner, Catherine Share, Lawrence Bailey, Dennis Rice and Charles Lovett were involved in a robbery of the Western Surplus Store in Hawthorne. As they entered the store brandishing weapons, an employee secretly tripped the silent alarm. The suspects ordered the customers and employees to lay on the floor. While one of the Manson Family members held the customers and employees at gunpoint, others smashed glass display cases removing the guns

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that were inside. They made multiple trips carrying guns to a white 1966 Ford van parked in the alley where Catherine Share was sitting in the driver's seat. When Hawthorne Police Officers arrived at the store in response to the silent alarm, the suspects began shooting at them. Gunshots were exchanged and a long gun battle took place between the suspects and the officers. During the gun battle,

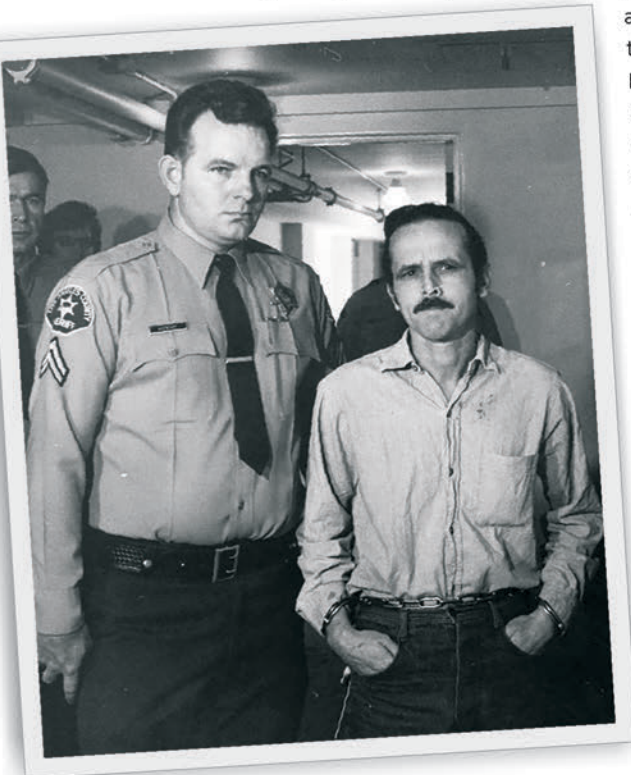
suspect Charles Lovett ran off into the neighborhood. A Los Angeles County Sheriff's helicopter arrived and assisted in the search for Lovett who was located and arrested. As the gun battle continued, officers from surrounding police agencies responded to the call for assistance. By the time it was over, 30 officers were on scene from Hawthorne, El Segundo and Redondo Police Departments as well as deputies from the Lennox Sheriff's Station. Five of the suspects had been wounded. All six Manson Family members and Como were arrested. Officers discovered that the purpose of the robbery was to obtain firearms to be used to break Charles Manson out of the Hall of Justice Jail.

cells and the other inmate was locked in a cell near the middle of the row with several empty cells between them.

On October 21, 1971 at 2 AM, the inmate from the Black Panther Party claimed that he was sick. Deputies removed him from his cell and took him to the jail clinic on the 14th floor. The last security check of Como's cell was done at 2:14 AM. Everything appeared to be normal with Como sleeping in his bunk. By 3:15 AM, Como had finished cutting through the last of the cell bars. He entered the officer's area and removed the ¼ inch security screen from the outside windows.

In order to make his descent down the building, Como had torn blankets and mattress covers into strips and braided them into a rope. He tied his makeshift rope onto the window frame. He wanted to climb out the window feet first but was unsuccessful, so he had to go head first. In the months leading up to his planned escape, Como purposely lost weight so that he could fit through the small windows leading to the outside world.

A team of deputies assigned to the Metropolitan Bureau were assigned to conduct surveillance of the Manson girls, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This was due to a plan the girls were working



Deputy escorts Kenneth Como.

Escape from the Hall of Justice Jail

When Kenneth Como was placed in the Hall of Justice Jail, he was isolated in Module 1300A. He was alone in that row of cells until a Black Panther Party member was also placed in the row. Como was in one of the first

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on to free Charles Manson from jail. One deputy was positioned on the roof of the steam towers across from the Hall of Justice on Broadway Street. The other deputy was in the Metro office on the sixth floor of the Hall of Records so he could view where the Manson girls were being held from that location. The deputy on the roof of the steam towers was shocked to see Como using the makeshift ropes to climb out of the jail window on the 13th floor at 3:15 AM. He used the first rope to climb down to the ledge on the 10th floor. The surveillance deputy said that Como then secured the second rope to the ledge and then tied the other end around his waist. He didn't climb down from there, instead, he jumped out away from the building. Somehow, Como knew the exact length the rope needed to be and when he reached the end of the rope, he stopped in midair and then swung in towards the building turning his body around so his feet were facing it. He went through a window on the eighth floor into a courtroom. The Metro deputy couldn't believe his eyes. He picked up his radio and informed the other Metro deputies what he had seen. The deputy in the Metro office called the Hall of Justice Jail to notify them that they had an escapee. However, the deputy who answered the call at the Hall of Justice Jail ignored the call because they had just conducted a count of all the inmates several hours earlier and the count cleared.

The Hall of Justice Jail was located at the top

section of the Hall of Justice building with tight security. However, all of the floors below the jail were unsecured. The eighth floor was composed of numerous courtrooms. Once

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When the van reached Sunset Boulevard, one of the girls jumped out in an attempt to divert the attention of the deputies in the pursuing vehicle. The Manson girls didn't realized there were two vehicles pursuing them. The deputies split up. One vehicle chased the girl who had bailed out and the other kept following the van.
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Como made it inside one of the courtrooms, he was able to exit into the hallway and walk down the interior stairs without any detection until he came to the lobby where a security guard was sitting at his desk keeping watch. The only thing Como had in his pocket at that time was a nickel. He threw the nickel away from him so that the sound of it landing would

distract the security guard. When the security guard got up and walked over to investigate the noise, Como snuck out the door behind him. Como ran out of the Hall of Justice building and jumped into an awaiting van being driven by Manson girl Sandra Good. He told her to get going but she hesitated. Como almost had to punch Good to get her to drive him away from the Hall of Justice.

The Capture

The Metro deputies observed Como jumping into the van and alerted other Metro deputies of Como's escape. The deputies jumped into two Metro vehicles and left in pursuit of the van. When the van reached Sunset Boulevard, one of the girls jumped out in an attempt to divert the attention of the deputies in the pursuing vehicle. The Manson girls didn't realized there were two vehicles pursuing them. The deputies split up. One vehicle chased the girl who had bailed out and the other kept following the van. Since the pursuit continued into LAPD's Hollywood area, LAPD was notified and they joined in the pursuit. Deputies and LAPD officers chased the van until it crashed near a school. Como and Good jumped out of the van and ran. The school had an 18-foot fence along the street which prevented Good and Como from climbing over the fence. Instead, they ran into the adjoining neighborhood. Deputies gave chase. Good was easily recognized because, in her

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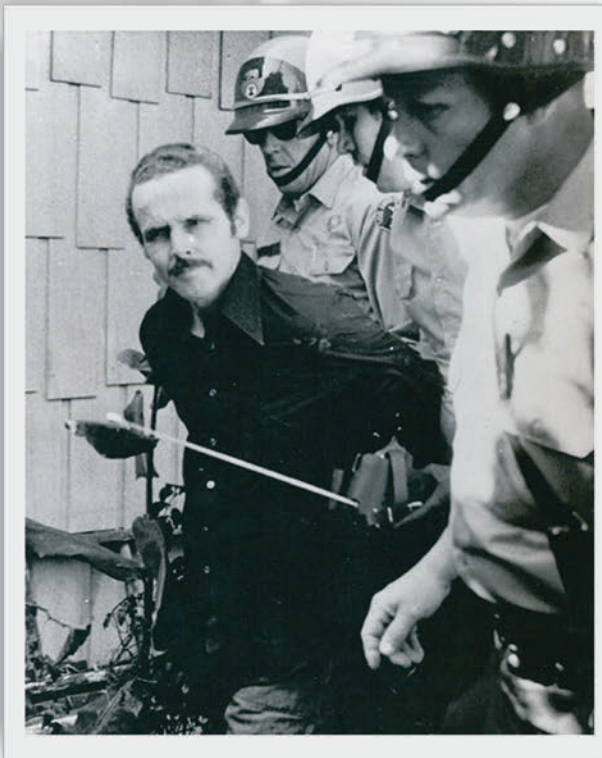
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allegiance to Manson, she had shaved her head and carved an X into her forehead. She was captured and arrested before she made it too far.

Since Como fled into a neighborhood between Hollywood and Sunset, which was in LAPD's area, LAPD units set up a containment of the four-block area. Metro Sgt. Billy Hoffin was at the termination of the pursuit when he notified Metro Duty Officer Sgt. Lee Koury about the escape and containment. Sgt. Koury responded to the containment area as quickly as he could, with lights and siren blaring. When he arrived, Sgt. Koury contacted his lieutenant and area inspector (later his rank was changed to commander) by phone to inform them of the situation. Sgt. Koury explained that he needed all of the SEB deputies at daylight to conduct a search and he needed four units immediately to take over containment from LAPD since they couldn't sit on the containment all night. Four units responded from Norwalk Sheriff's Station and replaced the LAPD officers on the containment. These deputies maintained the containment until dawn.

When the sun came up, Sgt. Koury described it



Como escorted by SEB deputies after his capture.

as a scene out of a movie. Twenty radio cars assigned to Special Enforcement Bureau came speeding up, all with their lights and sirens going. As the deputies were exiting their radio cars, the captain of SEB walked up to Sgt. Koury and asked what he needed. The sergeant told the captain that he needed deputies to knock on the door of every house in the four-block area. If no one was home,

and the neighbors said that someone should be home, the deputies were to force entry and search the house.

Concerned that Como would escape, deputies were not allowing buses to stop on Sunset Boulevard to pick up passengers. The area inspector arrived and told Sgt. Koury that he couldn't continue to stop traffic in the area. It was almost 10 a.m., and traffic was getting congested. Just as the inspector was getting ready to tell Sgt. Koury to shut down the containment, SEB deputies announced that they had arrested Como.

At 9:55 in the morning, SEB Deputies Roger Anderson and Donnie Dunlap located Como in a storage cabinet. Como came out swinging. Little did he know that Deputy Dunlap was also a Hollywood stuntman and Deputy Anderson was a black belt in karate.

Needless to say, it didn't take long for them to subdue and handcuff Como.

Como Tells Some Secrets

When Mike Miller graduated from the Sheriff's academy in 1972 and was assigned to the Hall of Justice Jail, Kenneth Como had

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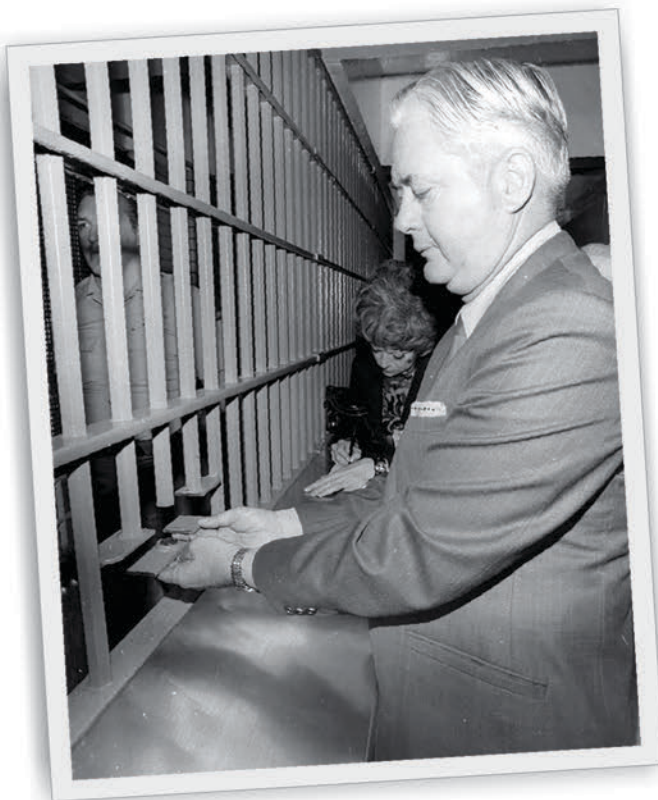
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already escaped from Sheriff's Department's custody several times. This last escape was broadcast widely on the news which was an embarrassment for Sheriff Pitchess and the Sheriff's Department. Since he was such a high escape risk, he was confined in module 1310,

which was a high security cell built to house Sirhan Sirhan (Sirhan Sirhan was convicted of the 1968 assassination of U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy). Como's partners in crime, Lawrence Bailey and Dennis Rice, were also confined there. Deputies were assigned 24

hours a day to watch their every move. One deputy sat right outside of the cells and the other sat at a desk in the officer's walkway so he could keep an eye on the other deputy and the inmates. While deputies were assigned to the position just outside of the inmate's cells, they spent a lot of time engaged in conversation. After a while, Como just couldn't help himself and began to brag about how he accomplished his escape. Como told the deputies, including Deputy Miller, about having several short pieces of hacksaw blades that he would use

to cut the bars of his cell in the early morning hours. Unlike normal hacksaw blades, the blades he used were made with carborundum which helps to harden steel and were sharper than a normal hacksaw blade. Como attached the blade to the handle of a razor to get a better grip. He spent days cutting the bars until he finally could fit through the opening. Each day, after he finished cutting the bars and before a deputy returned, he would fill the cuts in the bars with soap so that deputies wouldn't notice them. Prior to cutting the bars, Como had begun a rapid weight loss program so that when he was ready to escape he would be able to fit through the narrow window opening leading to the outside. Como had numerous hacksaw blades smuggled to him. This allowed him to continue cutting the cell bars even after one or two of the hacksaw blades were found in a cell search. To ensure that he had hacksaw blades to work on cutting through the bars so he could escape, he hid the blades in different locations. His favorite place to conceal a blade from deputies was to place it in a crack in the concrete floor. Como said that he took a strand of his long hair and tied it to a hacksaw blade. He inserted the hacksaw blade into a crack in the concrete floor next to the base of the toilet. He would lick the piece of hair and stick it to the ground so that it couldn't be seen unless a person was looking for it. During a search, deputies would easily bypass the



Bars cut by Como during his escape.

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strand of hair that was stuck to the floor. Como knew exactly where the hair was and could easily retrieve the hacksaw blade. Another place that Como found to conceal hacksaw blades was to stick them to the underside of the metal support near the floor that was connected to each vertical bar. Unless a deputy was looking specifically for a hacksaw blade they usually wouldn't search this area.

Como didn't say how the hacksaw blades were smuggled into the jail but some deputies think that his attorney brought them in since he was the only outside person who had contact with Como. It is also possible that the hacksaw blades came in through the soles of Como's shoes. At that time, some shoes had a strip of metal in their soles to reinforce the shoes. Some deputies thought that the metal strip was removed from the shoes and replaced with hacksaw blades so they could be snuck into the jail undetected.

A Visit from Sheriff Pitchess

One day, Sheriff Pitchess entered module 1310 and attempted to talk to Como. Como completely ignored the sheriff and wouldn't talk to him. Sheriff Pitchess began to leave and when he got to the doorway, Como called him back. When Pitchess returned to Como's cell, Como said, "I'd like to commend you on your selection of jail blankets." Sheriff Pitchess just walked away.

Como was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. Prior to leaving for state prison, Como turned to Deputy Miller and said, "I'm off to do my 15." He was escorted out to be transported to state prison. Como never escaped from the Los Angeles County Jail system again, he died in 2004.

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