



Territorial prison gets a rapid-fire burst of history

BY CHRIS MCDANIEL AND JOYCE LOBECK • SUN STAFF WRITERS May 13, 2011



Photo by Craig Fry/Yuma Sun

Yuma County Sheriff Ralph Ogden fires a replica Lowell Battery gun Friday after unveiling the weapon to a crowd of schoolchildren and city officials at the Yuma Territorial Prison. The weapon, which once stood vigil on the prison's guard tower, was purchased with proceeds from this year's 3:10 to Yuma fundraiser.

As the blazing sun inched higher in the sky the morning of Friday the 13th, the sheriff with a long mustache, cowboy hat and boots opened fire on the portcullis of the prison.

But instead of heading off a jail break in the Old West, Yuma County Sheriff Ralph Ogden was shooting off the new Lowell Battery gun at the Yuma Territorial Prison to the delight of local schoolchildren.

The students, local officials, historians and law enforcement officers were on hand at the historic park to witness the unveiling of the machine gun, which will be on permanent display in the museum.

During the 33 years that the Yuma Territorial Prison held Arizona's worst desperadoes (1875-1909), a Lowell Battery gun — similar to a Gatling gun — stationed on the southeast guard tower provided a deadly deterrent to ward off escape attempts.

From there, the gun could lay down a withering fire across the exercise yards and work area of the prison.

The weapon was even used by Madora Ingalls, the wife of prison superintendent Frank Ingalls, to foil an attempted prison break in 1891.

That guard tower no longer exists, and the fate of the original weapon is unknown.

"When the prison closed in 1909, the gun was taken to other prisons and disappeared," said Charles Flynn, executive director of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, which oversees the park.

In the 1960s, a replica of the original Lowell Battery gun was loaned to the museum after the site was preserved by the citizens of Yuma and it became one of Arizona's first state parks.

"Either the National Park Service or the Army brought one in on loan, so it was here for a period of time," Flynn said. "The prison never owned it, but the community believed it had been taken from them."

Despite the community demand, the museum did not have access to a replacement — until now.

"When we took over the prison in April 2010, there were a lot of things we heard about improvements wanted. The first one was 'Bring back the Gatling gun.' It was part of the lore and experience and they wanted it back."

Upping the ante, the prison park will soon have a second replica gun, due to be delivered and mounted on the guard tower later this summer. In the meantime, the first weapon, mounted on an authentic replica carriage, will be displayed in the prison museum.

Both will be capable of simulating a burst of firepower by means of black-powder caps on special occasions, a feature Flynn predicts will be a favorite with young visitors to the prison.

The second gun is expected to be mounted securely in the guard tower overlooking the property and will be accessible to visitors who will be able to dry fire it, producing a click-clack noise.

"They won't get the gunpowder effect, but kids will be able to crank it," Flynn said, adding the gun can handle the abuse of constant cranking.

"These things are substantially built."

Rat-a-tat-tat aside, the Heritage Area also has more serious work planned for the summer.

Arizona State Parks has committed \$147,000 toward restoration of the sally port, the prison's adobe gateway. Interim stabilization work will begin while a full structural analysis and design are completed and additional grant funds are sought for full restoration.

The guard tower will also be restored. Workers will clean and reseal all of its wood with stain and preservative.

The project will necessitate closure of the park during the weeks of Aug. 8 and 15. The prison otherwise will remain open five days a week through the summer, closing Tuesdays and Wednesdays beginning June 1.

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