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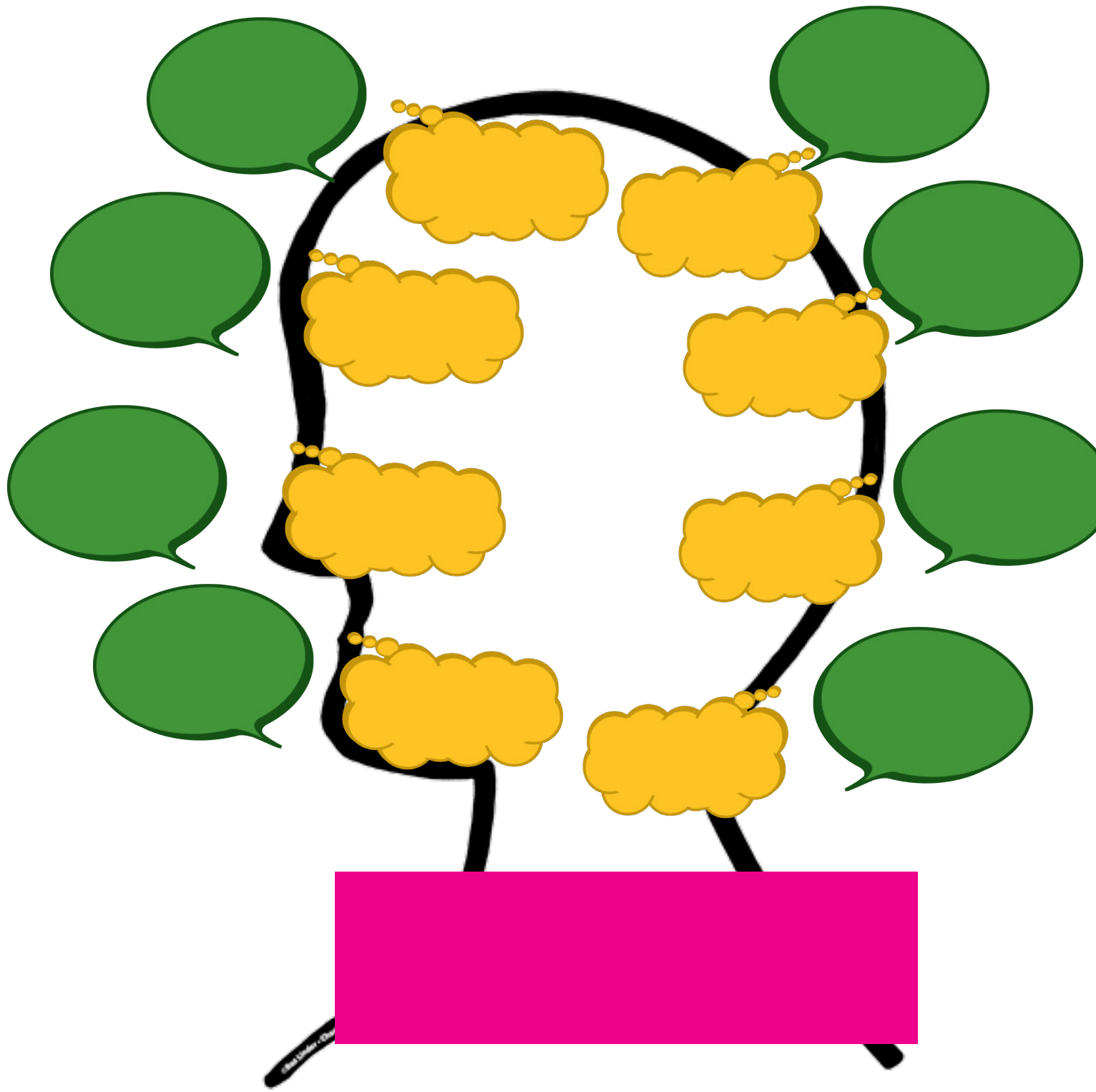


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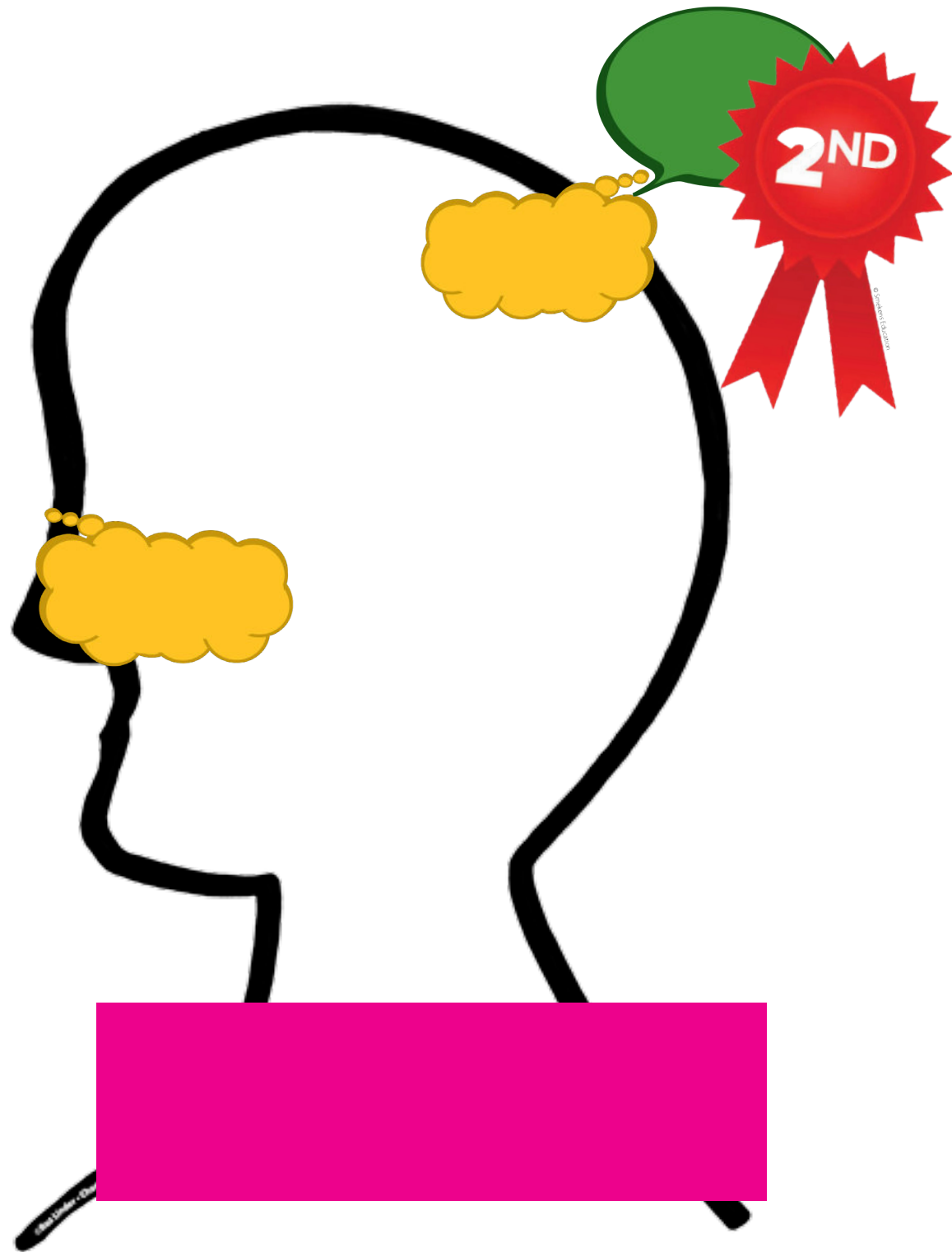


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Nonfiction

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE
A true story from the past



3 HARDENED CRIMINALS

A BRUTAL PRISON

A DARING PLAN TO

ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ

BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

GO TO SCOPE ONLINE FOR OUR AMAZING ALCATRAZ VIDEO!

FILCH/RF/Getty Images (background); Bettmann/Corbis (inmates)

What was the main purpose of the federal prison at Alcatraz?

Ready for Troublemakers

During the 1930s, a crime wave hit the U.S. Robberies and murders were on the rise. Some criminals had become incredibly powerful; they were as famous as celebrities. The public felt that a “super-prison” was just what the country needed.

Desolate and isolated, Alcatraz

seemed like the ideal place to **incarcerate** these criminals. So officials set out to build the most escape-proof prison in the nation. Cell blocks built in 1909 were turned into a fortress meant to hold those who had tried—and sometimes managed—to break out of other prisons.

Nicknamed “Uncle Sam’s Devil’s Island,” Alcatraz opened as a federal prison in August 1934. **Penitentiaries** across the country were notified that Alcatraz was ready to take troublemakers off their hands. As Alcatraz **Warden** James A. Johnston later wrote, “They would select their worst; I would take them and do my best.”

At 5 a.m. on August 19, 1934, 53 prisoners boarded a train in Atlanta, Georgia, for the long ride to California. They were to be some of the first inmates at Alcatraz. Officials couldn’t help feeling nervous. These men were going to Alcatraz because ordinary prisons couldn’t handle them.

Warden Johnston took every precaution. The prisoners rode in specially designed railroad cars with steel bars across the windows. No prisoner was allowed to leave his seat during any stop.

The inmates arrived on August 22, 1934. By the end of the year, Alcatraz was housing more than 200 of America’s worst criminals.

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The article states that this “super-prison” was for “incredibly powerful” criminals that “ordinary prisons couldn’t handle.”



The text also states that cell blocks were “turned into a fortress” on this “desolate and isolated” island.

How did the warden & the guards keep order at Alcatraz?

A Bitter Surprise

A prisoner at Alcatraz found himself in a harsh, isolated world, **punctuated** by the clanging of bars and the distant blaring of **foghorns**. No newspapers were allowed. Inmates could only listen to certain radio programs approved by the warden. A morning gong signaled wake-up at 6:30 a.m. The men stood to be counted, then cleaned their cells. At the shriek of a whistle, they marched single-file to breakfast, which lasted 25 minutes. After breakfast, utensils were counted.

During the day, guards marched the inmates to jobs in the laundry, the garden, and the tailor shop. Head counts took place constantly. In the afternoon, inmates had

supervised recreation time. Lights out was at 9:30 p.m.—on the dot.

Men who broke the rules faced harsh punishment. The most feared was solitary confinement. Prisoners hated to be cooped up in tiny concrete cells apart from everyone else, with only a hole in the floor for a toilet. In solitary confinement, a man was allowed a mattress at night, but even that was removed during the day. There was nothing to do but stare at the walls as time ticked by.

The most notorious felons couldn't beat Alcatraz—not even gangsters like Al “Scarface”

Capone. To many, Capone symbolized the collapse of law and order in the 1920s. He made millions running illegal gambling joints in Chicago. He was said to have murdered at least a dozen people. Capone was used to having power, and he was proud of his reputation as a big shot. He figured he'd be able to pull strings to get special privileges at Alcatraz, just like he had in other prisons.

As soon as he arrived, Capone met with Warden Johnston. “I have a lot of friends,” he told the warden. “I expect to have a lot of visitors.”

Capone was in for a bitter surprise. He was allowed to see family, but not friends—or fellow gangsters. Every prisoner at Alcatraz was treated the same, and there was nothing he could do about it. Eventually, Capone had to admit, “Alcatraz has got me licked.”

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The text also states prisoners were counted “constantly” and told when to wake up, eat, and go to bed.

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How do we choose these?

