

Paul C. "Pete" Eitner

Eitner, a native of New Jersey, was born in 1877. He left New Jersey in 1914 when he was told he needed a dryer climate or he would die in six months from tuberculosis. He settled in Montana where he worked on a ranch until he was kicked in the head by a horse.

He also had a heavy drinking problem and finding employment in a liquor store was not a solution. Whether it was his head injury or his drinking problem that led to his forthcoming troubles is unknown. Eitner was living in a rooming house in Miles City, Custer County, Montana, when, on the night of January 21, 1918, he emptied his pistol shooting at Joseph Nugent, a fellow roomer in their home. One bullet took effect and hit Nugent in the stomach. He clung to life for several days before his passing. Nugent was reading a paper at the time and no reason has been determined for the shooting. Possibly, both were courting Miss Hope Mathena who was living in the same rooming house which was owned by Mathena's sister and her husband.

Eitner pleaded guilty to the murder hoping for a lighter sentence. Apparently, his plea was made outside of any plea bargain with the court and he was devastated when the judge sentenced him to life in the Montana State Prison. A model prisoner, he was assigned to tend the prison turkeys. As the years passed, reality slipped away from him. One day a man stopped to admire the turkeys, and Eitner sold him the entire flock for 25 cents a turkey. This earned him one of his nicknames, "Turkey Pete" and ended his farming days. But, it marked the beginning of his new fantasy career as an "entrepreneur and philanthropist." The prison administration humored Eitner and allowed his "Eitner Enterprises" to have printed checks from the prison print shop. He "purchased" the prison and proceeded to "operate" it. He paid all the expenses and wrote checks to the guards for their salaries. Eitner Enterprises involved itself in diverse business activities that performed such financial transactions as saving Brazil's coffee crop; selling pink alligators, grasshopper legs to Fidel Castro and ships to the United States Navy; and purchasing alfalfa seed from Poncho Villa.

As entertainment for the inmates the prison would bring in from time to time professional fighters and have boxing matches in the prison. Eitner was known for his habit of entering the ring and "shadow boxing." He was always introduced to the guest boxers and with the visiting boxers to the audience. He was the honorary manager of the prison boxing team and was always in the prisoner's corner whenever the team fought a match. He would cheer the fighters on and shadow box his way through the match. He would get in the ring sometimes, even in his 80s, to spar a bit and show the boxers, who went along with his antics, who was the boss. I guess that's the reason he always won. And that's how he earned the nickname "The Champ." As a side note, Eitner traveled with the prison boxing team and the prison band on trips outside the prison and was known to 'trip the light fantastic" with the ladies at the dances.



Pete's prison cell. (Author's Collection)

When Eitner died in 1967 at age 89, his cell was retired and converted to a barber shop. When the prison was closed and made into a museum his cell was maintained as he left it. His funeral was the only one ever held within the walls of the prison. He is buried in the Montana State Prison Cemetery which is within the Hilltop Cemetery in Deer Lodge, Montana.

As I went through the prison I discovered that the baseball field was named for Eitner and he had his own special chair in the TV room.



Pete's tombstone

Source: Montana State Prison documentation.