

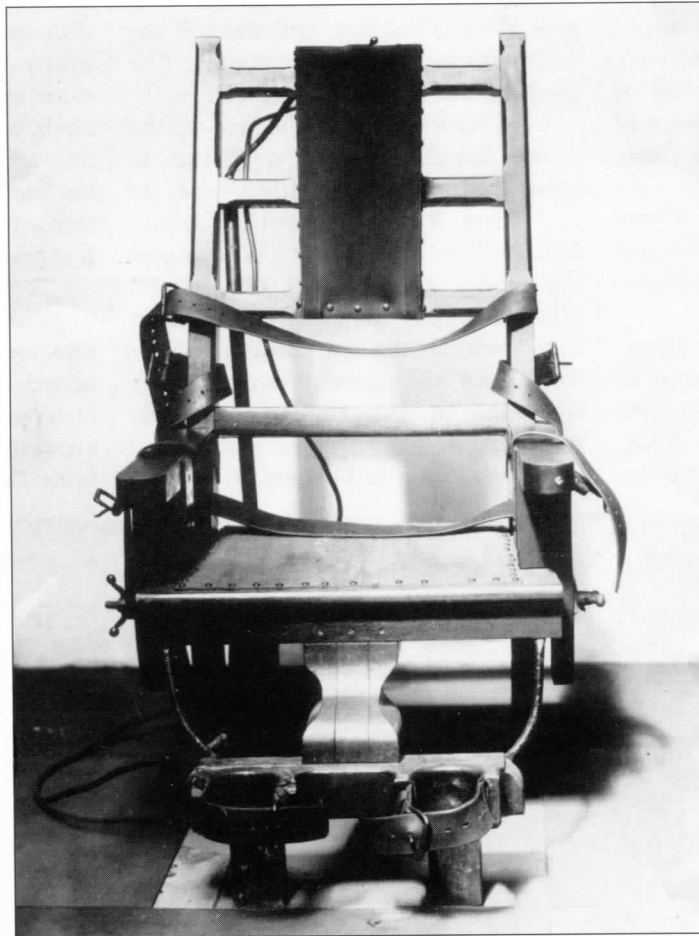
# A Piece of History: The Electric Chair in New York

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**F**ROM JUNE 4, 1888, until June 1, 1965, the lawful method for putting capital offenders to death in New York was the electric chair. In the irreverent jargon of the prisons and the press the device was nicknamed Old Sparky, Yellow Mama and Gruesome Gertie among others. At the time this method of execution was adopted, however, it was hailed as a humane and civilized alternative to methods it supplanted. Until that time, hanging had been the most common method of executing condemned murderers. In Britain, hanging is believed to have been in use among the Anglo-Saxons at the time they arrived from continental Europe. Public hangings, in fact, persisted in England until 1888. English colonists brought the custom to North America where it gained wide currency.

By the late 19th century, considerable public revulsion had developed over hanging in the U.S. The reason for this was that while hanging generally worked, there were appalling instances in which something went wrong. If, for example, the hangman's knot was not properly placed, the subject's

neck would not break as expected. In such instances, the victim strangled slowly, twisting convulsively for as long as 15 minutes before death finally occurred. As one text reported: ". . . there were repeated examples of the fall failing to snap the recipient's



*The electric chair in the execution chamber at Sing Sing (now Ossining) State Correctional Facility.*

neck, leaving the condemned man or woman to dangle from the rope, wheezing and kicking for as long as 15 minutes while slowly strangling to death."

In any event, it was not uncommon for the subject's heart to continue beating for as long as eight minutes after the trap had been sprung. That fact troubled many people who feared that the subject might be experiencing unintended suffering.

All of this led to a search for a swift, painless and humane alternative to the scaffold.

Dr. Alfred Porter Southwick, a Buffalo, NY, dentist and former engineer on Great Lakes freighters, is credited with originating the ideal of legal punishment of death by electricity. "Old Electricity," as he was known, was convinced that this was a much more humane way of bringing swift and painless death to criminals convicted of murder.

At his request, New York State Senator McMillan, also of Buffalo, introduced a bill in the 1886 Session of the State Legislature, creating a commission to provide a new death penalty to take the place of hanging. In carrying out its mandate, the new commission researched various methods of execution used down through the centuries and ultimately narrowed the acceptable choices to four: electricity,

prussic acid, the guillotine and the garrote. The commission then solicited opinions on those four methods from judges, district attorneys, and sheriffs throughout the state. The con- ➤

sensus was that electricity be adopted as the lawful method of execution.

On June 4, 1888, New York Governor David B. Hill signed the law which established electrocution as the method of execution in New York State. The law took effect on January 1, 1889. From that day on, executions would be done by "electricizing" the condemned, a method the public was assured would keep the criminal justice system in tune with scientific advances, besides being swift and painless and granting the victim a more merciful end than the hangman's rope.

The new law established strict procedures surrounding executions by the new method. Condemned prisoners were maintained in solitary confinement. Upon completion of sentence, the disposal of the body would be by burial in quick-lime. The press was prohibited from publishing details of executions. Three state prisons—Auburn, Clinton and Sing Sing—were designated as places of execution.

Dr. George Fell, a Buffalo physician, is credited with the design of the chair and Edwin F. Davis, an electrician at Auburn Prison, was designated the first official executioner. Another Buffalo connection to the electric chair was the first individual who died in it—30-year-old William Kemmler. Contemporary accounts of his execution are fascinating and give a real flavor of the public debate that attended the adoption of this method of execution.

The son of a Philadelphia butcher, Kemmler had little schooling. As a

young man, he worked for his father in a slaughterhouse. By age 27, he was married, having eloped with a girl named Tillie Ziegler. However, he was horrified on his honeymoon when he learned for the first time that his new wife had been married before and never divorced.

The couple lived in rented rooms on South Division Street in Buffalo. Practically from the beginning, Kemmler suspected Tilly of infidelity. Always a moody individual, he drank heavily. On the morning of March 27, 1889, he caught Tilly going through his pockets looking for money. He lost control of himself. He picked up a hatchet and hacked the unfortunate woman viciously. She died the next day in a hospital.

All New York was shocked by the crime. Kemmler made no attempt to escape. He freely admitted what he had done. When pressed for a motive, he said, "I wanted to kill her and the sooner I hang for it, the better!" His statement, of course, indicates that Kemmler did not know that New York State had recently built an electric chair in Auburn Prison for the purpose of executing condemned murderers such as himself.

On May 18, 1889, Kemmler was sentenced to be the first individual to die in the electric chair. His execution was delayed by his attorney for a year and a half with appeals. Inventor Thomas A. Edison, who objected to the use of electricity to execute criminals, financed all of Kemmler's appeals up to the United States Supreme Court. The Supreme Court sustained the original verdict.

Kemmler was ultimately sentenced to die in the week beginning August 4, 1890.

At Auburn Prison, final preparations began. Part of the old convicts' mess hall in the basement of the administration building was converted into a death chamber, just a short corridor away from Kemmler's cell. The chair, a square framed, heavy, oaken one with a foot rest, had a high, sloping back, a perforated seat and wide arms. It was fastened to the floor, the feet being properly insulated.

Buckles and straps were attached to hold the victim securely in place and two adjustable electrodes were added. The entire apparatus consisted of a stationary engine, an alternating current dynamo, a voltmeter calibrated from 30 to 2000 volts, an am-

meter, rheostat and switch. Attached to the back of the chair was the head electrode which was finally held in place by means of a spiral spring. The body electrode was attached to the lower part of the back of the chair in order to contact the hollow of the sacrum. The electrodes each consisted of a bell-shaped rubber cup about 4 inches in diame-



View of the execution chamber at Sing Sing. Behind the recessed door on the left was the station from which the state's executioner operated the controls.

ter with a metal disc inside faced with a layer of sponge. The lower electrode had a spiral spring to hold it in place while a broad strap fastened to the back of the chair passed around the lower part of the prisoner's abdomen and rendered the contact secure. The prisoner's head was firmly secured by means of leather straps which encircled the forehead and chin and fastened to the back of the head rest while the chest, arms and legs were secured by broad straps attached to the corresponding portions of the chair.

It was Friday, August 6, 1890, at 6:30 a.m. All prisoners were in their cells. The warden later stated that from all indications, they had no thought or interest in what was to take place. Likewise the citizens of Auburn. Were it not for all the newspaper reporters, they would not have realized that anything unusual was going on within the prison walls.

Just before Kemmler was brought in to the death chamber, Warden Charles F. Durston asked the 14 assembled physicians how long 1700 volts of current should be applied. Official physician Carlos F. MacDonald thought 20 seconds but agreed to somewhat less when the other MDs claimed that 10 seconds should be sufficient.

The prisoner was brought into the execution room promptly at 6:30 a.m. Already seated in a semi-circle facing the chair were the 25 witnesses, 13 physicians, 1 dentist, 1 chaplain, Cayuga County Sheriff Oliver Jenkins and 9 guards. Next to Kemmler stood Warden Durston who announced, "Now, gentlemen, this is William Kemmler. I have just read the warrant to him and told him he has to die. If he has anything to say, he will say it now."

Kemmler sat down in a chair provided next to the electric chair itself. To quote the official medical witness, Dr. MacDonald, "Upon entering the room, Kemmler appeared strangely calm and collected; in fact,

his manner and appearance indicated a state of subdued elation as if gratified at being the central figure of the occasion. [He was apparently] . . . unable to appreciate the gravity of his situation."

In response to the warden's invitation to speak, Kemmler said, "Well, I wish everyone good luck and I think I am going to a good place, and the papers has been sayin' lots of stuff about me that ain't so!"

With that, he arose, took off his coat without the least show of emotion or nervousness and took his seat in the death chair. He calmly submitted to the adjustments of the straps and electrodes. "Don't be in a hurry, Warden," he said, "Take your time." He then pressed his back against the spinal electrode and requested that the head electrode "be pressed down harder," remarking that he wanted to perform his part to the best of his ability. The preparations concluded with a final moistening of the sponges under the electrodes.

It was now 6:43 a.m., and the first slanting rays of the sun had begun to creep across the floor when the warden, the chaplain and Dr. MacDonald stepped away from the chair. Reportedly, Deputy Joe Veiling stepped up to the chair and shouted, "Goodbye, Willie!" The warden gave the signal (two knocks on the wall) to executioner Edwin Davis in the next room.

Witnesses said that a whistling sound was heard as Kemmler's body was abruptly thrown into a state of marked rigidity, every fiber of the entire muscular system being apparently in that fixed, rigid condition known as tonic spasm. The chair, which, it turned out, was inadequately secured to the floor, began a rocking motion as if the condemned man was straining forwards and backwards to free himself.

At the end of 17 seconds, Dr. MacDonald pronounced Kemmler dead, none of the witnesses dissenting. At that point, the warden signaled to have the contact broken.

The muscular rigidity immediately ceased and was succeeded by one of complete muscular relaxation. The body remained motionless and apparently lifeless for approximately one minute. Then the chest began a series of slight spasmodic movements. The panicky warden sprang to the doorway of the room and shouted, "Turn on the current!" However no current could be applied because the dynamo had been shut off! Now it was hastily turned on again.

Meanwhile Kemmler showed signs of being very much alive. As the witnesses, by now standing around the chair, looked on in horror, his chest moved and he gave a deep groan followed by another.

About two minutes elapsed before the dynamo roared into action again and the current began to flow. The twitching and groaning ended sharply as the body again turned rigid and strained against the straps for 70 seconds. At this time, a small amount of smoke issued from the area of the spinal electrode. One of the witnesses fainted. The smoke was due to the scorching on the edge of the sponge with which the electrode was faced and apparently the moisture in the sponge had evaporated by the prolonged contact of the current.

The execution of Kemmler, from the time he entered the death chamber until the second application of current, took no more than 8 minutes, whereas execution by hanging usually took 15 to 30 minutes.

Dr. MacDonald subsequently contended that electrocution had been proved to be the surest, quickest, most efficient and least painful method of execution yet to be devised. Not everyone agreed with him. The day after the execution, Buffalo newspapers called the event "A Historic Bungle." Another editorial critic called it "Disgusting, Sickening and Inhuman."

After examining the body, Nicola Tesla, an electrical expert who ►

helped develop the electric chair, decided that death by electrocution was "cruel torture" and that the chair should never be used again.

Dr. Alfred Porter Southwick, who had been largely responsible for this new form of execution, was frankly jubilant. "There," he exclaimed, "is the culmination of ten years of work and study. We live in a higher civilization, from this day."

Dr. George E. Fell, one of the medical witnesses, reported, "Death was instantaneous. The apparent gasps for breath were nothing more than a mechanical action of the muscles caused by the relaxation of the current."

The *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* did not agree. Under a banner headline, it stated: "The execution was a wretched failure, both in its scientific and its humanitarian aspects. That it will be the last execution by electricity at least for a long time to come, is safe to conclude."

To say that the newspaper was wrong in its prediction is an understatement. Since August 6, 1890, 4,310 people have been put to death in an electric chair—695 in New York State alone, and 55 in Auburn Prison.

Dr. MacDonald subsequently stated, as might have been expected, that "there were certain defects in the arrangement and operation of the apparatus which will have to be avoided or eliminated in the future. In spite of these defects, the important fact remains that unconsciousness was instantaneous and death painless."

Correctional history had been made and a lot more history started being written down. Among the more interesting and well-informed early writers on the subject of the electric chair was Dr. Amos O. Squire, author of *The Sing Sing Doctor*, written in 1937. His book debunks a number of popular legends that grew up around the chair and death house custom and procedure.

(Though now out of print, a public library should be able to locate a copy of Dr. Squire's book for those interested.) According to Dr. Squire, condemned persons were not allowed a narcotic or even alcohol. It was not a law, just custom. Also, contrary to public opinion, the lights did not dim when the switch was thrown. The entire electrical circuit was separate. He also describes the arrangement of the condemned cells before 1920, which was unique. The little green door leading to the execution chamber was then only a few feet from the cells. Later it was arranged that the condemned could go to his death without being seen by the other inmates.

Squire documented the procedure surrounding an electrocution in considerable detail. The following passage will give the reader a sense of Dr. Squire's style:

After his last bath or shower, the prisoner is outfitted with new clothing and is given a shave and haircut. Contrary to the general impression, the hair is not clipped & shaved from a spot on the top of his head. This is unnecessary, since hair, so long as it is not too bushy, serves as an excellent conductor. So he is just given a normal haircut.

He is then locked in the cell where he is to spend his last hours. The chaplain stays if he is wanted. The prison physician calls on him and the relatives usually spend the afternoon, leaving about six o'clock. In accordance with long practice he is served for his last meal anything he desires. This custom seems to be virtually universal; most prisoners, for obvious reasons, do not have much appetite.

Among the chair's more famous occupants was Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President William McKinley in 1901. After a speedy

trial, he was executed in Auburn Prison and buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn.

On August 15, 1963, Eddie Lee Mays was the last person executed in New York's electric chair. Capital punishment was abolished in New York State on June 1, 1965.

The death penalty, using lethal injection rather than the electric chair, was restored by the New York Legislature. The bill was signed by Governor George E. Pataki in March 1995. It became effective on September 1, 1995.

Today, 11 states continue to use the electric chair: Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Indiana; Kentucky, Nebraska, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Arizona, California and Maryland employ the gas chamber. In New Hampshire, it's still the gallows. Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming all use lethal injection, which is the method that appears to be on its way to supplanting all others. □

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