

AMANDA GRIFFITH

# Execution methods have evolved

Otey, Palmer and now possibly Simpson, head the lists of the most recent to be executed. Harold LaMont Otey's execution date has been set for Sept. 2. He was served the death sentence in 1978. Sept. 16 is the date set for Charles Jess Palmer's execution after being tried, convicted and sentenced to death three times in 1979. And at one point in time it seemed likely to be O.J. Simpson's turn to be seated in the death chair.



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Going beyond the question of should these men be executed and how, why not look at how this form of criminal punishment first came to be and for what purposes. Nebraska's form of execution is electrocution, which may be used on Otey and Palmer in September. As of January 1993, 12 states were using electrocution, 22 lethal injection, five gas, two firing squads and four hanging.

Possibly the first execution to be recorded in America took place in 1608. George Kendall, one of the original councillors for the colony of Virginia, was put to death by shooting. Shooting was favored by the military and Native American tribes for centuries. Next came hanging, which was refined by the British but soon became uncivilized for American society, so soon followed the gas chamber, lethal injection and the electric chair.

Originally the electric chair was invented to take place of hanging. As our society changed so did the views of the American public about capital punishment. It was no longer reassuring to only know that vengeance had been taken by the community, but it now had to be sure that the victim was not suffering.

In the late 19th century New York authorities believed hanging to be outdated. So in 1886, Gov. David Hill set up a commission to find a form of execution "more humane than hanging." Dr. Alfred P. Southwick, a dentist, became part of Hill's three-man commission. In 1881, he had witnessed an accidental death of a drunk-

en man who touched a live electrical wire. This event prompted Southwick to convince his colleagues that electrocution could do the job neatly, cleanly and with little pain, unlike the guillotine and garrote. They began experiments on animals and by 1888 had Gov. Hill convinced.

On June 4, 1888, Gov. Hill signed a bill into law that prescribed death by electrocution for capital crimes committed after Jan. 1, 1889 in New York. On March 29 of that year, William Kemmler murdered his mistress, Tillie Ziegler, with a hatchet and was sentenced to death by electrocution. The execution date was set for June 24, at New York State's Auburn Prison. The state had approximately three months to devise a system in which to induce the electrical execution.

At this time Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse were in a controversy as to who had harnessed electrical power and whose would become the standard system. Edison, an opponent of capital punishment, argued that Westinghouse's alternating current was far more dangerous and would do the job more satisfactorily than his own direct current. This, and the fact that the man who was hired to construct the chair favored alternating current, are the reasons Westinghouse generators were used with the first three chairs.

The state issued an \$8,000 contract to Harold Brown, an electrician, to build three chairs and install them in prisons at Auburn, Sing Sing and Clinton. Brown supplied New York state with three Westinghouse gener-

ators, capable of producing 2,000 volts, connected to chairs made of oak that contained two electrodes, one for the head and one for the lower back.

Kemmler had appealed to the court that his sentence was cruel and of unusual punishment causing the state to issue a stay of execution. This was to become the beginning of one of the classic appeals in capital punishment law. However, on Oct. 9, 1889, the court denied Kemmler's appeal and the execution was set for August 6, 1890.

In a basement room of Auburn's State Prison, Kemmler was put to death at 6:40 am in front of 25 witnesses, 14 of whom were doctors. The man to throw the switch was Edwin Davis, an electrician, who went on to execute 240 people as the official New York State executioner until his retirement in 1914. He was replaced by his assistant, Robert G. Elliot.

Now that history has spoken a person still cannot find some kind of answer as to whether our society is doing something wrong or right. There are millions of ethical questions circling almost every execution, no matter what state it is in or what type of execution is being used. Some states allow the inmates to choose which method they would prefer. Today it is believed that electrocution is faster and less painful than lethal infection or shooting. I guess we should rest assured then that Otey and Palmer will die quickly, cleanly and neatly. Good luck O.J.

Griffith is a senior news-ed major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Divorce helps some

I am not one to respond to an article in a newspaper, but "Divorce destroys family portrait" spurred me to take pen in hand. A number of adjectives like close-minded, immature and absurd sprung into mind when reading this literary atrocity. It is one thing to have these thoughts to yourself or to share them with friends who will like you regardless, but spare the public of your opinions.

I do admit that divorce is not a good thing. It never is. No one should walk down the aisle with the idea of divorce in the back of their minds. If that is the case, then marriage should not be an option. However, divorce does exist, and it does so for a reason.

When people get married, it is just that, two people, two humans. We are feeling, emotional beings who think concretely, not primitive animals who, in the Darwinian way, are living only to survive. You claim that you are from a happy, two-parent home not touched by the concept of divorce. You also claim that divorce has only entered your life via friends of yours and an old high school teacher. Hardly a firsthand, complete look at the

total picture. With this in mind, such a broad statement as "I don't see any reason why people should get divorced, and definitely not if they have children," seems all the more shallow. Little did you know there are reasons — 911 records, shelters for battered women and police files are tangible proof. Sometimes divorce is the only way out of a trapped lifestyle. For many women and probably less often, for many men, divorce is the ticket out of an abusive relationship, be it physical, sexual, emotional or a combination. We all make mistakes in character judgement, some worse than others. Are you saying that we should be condemned to live out our mistakes regardless?

Divorce has touched my life in a number of ways. I am sure if asked, every child would say that he or she would ideally want their father and mother cohabitating. The glitch is the child would want both parents to be happy. No child wants to live in an abusive or "cold" house where either parent is so unhappy that normal, everyday life is painstaking. What a child needs more than anything is love. Divorce is not a doctrine to stop this. If a woman or a man stays in a

relationship that is truly irreconcilable (maybe due to abuse, neglect or some other serious issue) just for the sake of a child, what does this achieve? Well, if they are really good actors, everyone will think the Cleavers are in town. Actually, all you have is one or possibly two miserable adults who are buying time until the child is 18 and out of the house.

I could spend the time commenting on your pseudo-right wing, pro-Bush/anti-Clinton views, but my ink and my time are too costly to waste on such ignorant statements. Yes, Matthew, as I have already stated, divorce is not a good thing, but the definition of divorce is not the loss of a parent. That would be death, and most of the time we cannot help that. Also, a parent does not necessarily have to be of biological relationship to a child. A parent is someone who loves and cares for a child regardless of genetics. Yeah, the term is remarriage. It does happen and often times very successfully.

So do me a favor. Take off your rose-colored glasses and think before you write. If not, I would advise you to change your major.

Greg D. Letendre  
Lincoln



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