

Williams execution

Fewer congregate for this execution

BY ERIN GIBSON
Senior Reporter

When the state of Nebraska executed Harold Lamont Otey on Sept. 2, 1994, the jeers and chants of about 2,000 demonstrators — both for and against the execution — steeped the air outside the Nebraska State Penitentiary.

Like a sea of football fans struggling to appear on national television, some celebrated the execution waving a "Nebraska State Pen 1st Annual B-B-Q" banner. Others arrived drunk and wearing homemade T-shirts.

Other protesters prayed, cried and bowed their heads. One wore a small, white button that read, "Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing is wrong?"

During the July 17, 1996, execution of John Joubert, about 600 demonstrators repeated the Otey midnight celebration, described as "animalistic" by University of Nebraska-Lincoln criminal justice professor and execution witness Chris Eskridge.

The two scenes persuaded state officials to conduct Tuesday's execution for Robert E. Williams during the mid-morning instead of at midnight, with hopes that the gathering would be smaller and more serene.

It was.

About 80 demonstrators gathered outside the penitentiary to mark Williams' execution.

But state officials and UNL criminal justice and psychology experts disagree whether the timing of the execution alone reduced the size of the crowds.

The biggest factor was the short length of time between this and the last criminal execution, some said. The long period between Williams' crimes and his execution also may have made Nebraskans ambivalent to the event, others said.

Still others said Williams' request

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BEN NELSON
Nebraska governor

that Nebraskans refrain from protesting his execution had an effect.

Susan Jacobs, a UNL associate professor of criminal justice, said the timing of the execution was the biggest contributor to the smaller crowds.

"It was not a dramatic time to go, nor a convenient one," Jacobs said.

Williams' execution began at 10:16 a.m. on a Tuesday, while Otey's began at 12:23 a.m. on a Friday. The execution of Joubert also began early one Friday at 12:14 a.m.

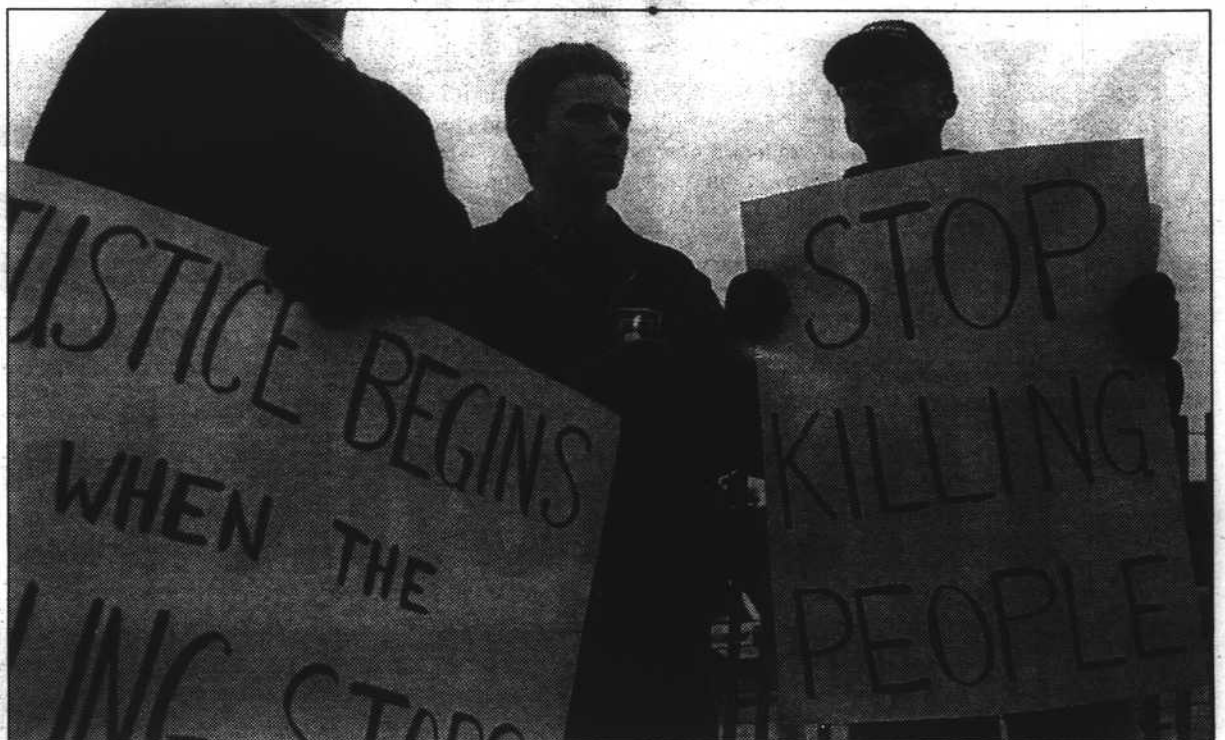
"By changing the time of execution, we were able to avert the carnival atmosphere," said Gov. Ben Nelson Tuesday, adding that "yellow courage" drove protesters from the bars to the past executions.

Jacobs also said Williams' pleas for anti-death penalty demonstrators to avoid the penitentiary during the execution might have kept some would-be crowd members away.

But Eskridge said the time period between the executions was the biggest factor to reducing unruly crowds.

Otey's 1994 execution marked the first time in 35 years the state had executed a criminal, he said. Joubert's execution, with notably smaller crowds, followed the Otey execution by about two years. Williams' execution date fell only 1 1/2 years later.

Nebraskans' ambivalence to



Williams' execution also increased because of the 20-year time period between his crimes and his execution, Eskridge said.

Williams confessed he murdered two Lincoln women in 1977. Joubert and Otey were executed more quickly — Joubert 13 years after he murdered two Sarpy County boys, and Otey 17 years after he raped and murdered an Omaha woman.

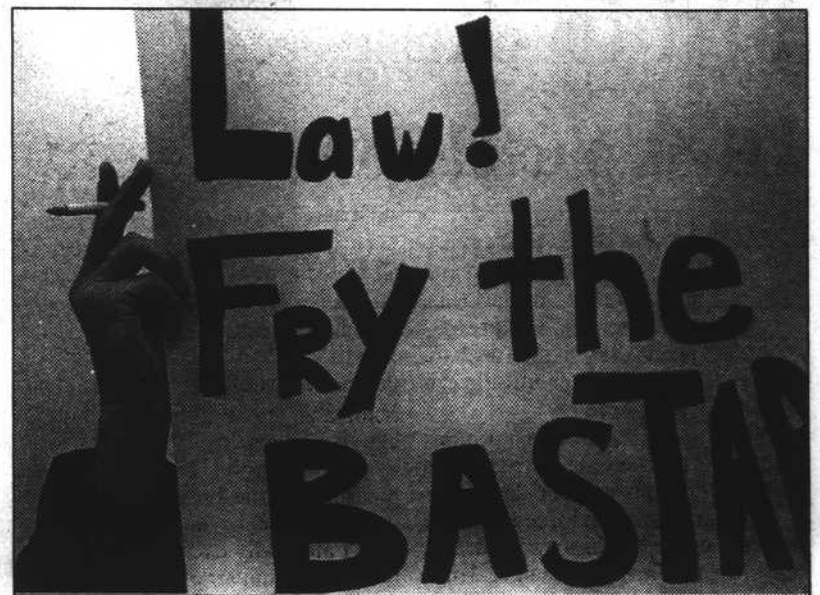
Regardless of their feelings toward the criminals or their victims, people remain equally fascinated by death, said psychology Professor Richard Dienstbier.

"People are always fascinated by power, and taking someone's life is about the most powerful thing you can do," Dienstbier said.

But Nebraskans have adapted to the idea of executions because they have become more common, he said.

"It may still intellectually horrify people, but the emotional response is muted by the repetition," Dienstbier said. "It's very much like war itself. With people getting killed in war, we become tolerant."

For this reason, future executions may draw even smaller crowds, he said.



ABOVE: DEATH PENALTY ADVOCATES show their support Tuesday morning before Robert E. Williams' execution.

TOP: JUSTIN SANDEFUR (left) and Nathan Blake protest the death penalty Tuesday morning outside the Nebraska State Penitentiary.

Family of Iowa victim finds closure in Williams' death

BY TED TAYLOR
Senior Reporter

Twenty years ago when his wife, Virginia, was raped and murdered in their Sioux Rapids, Iowa, home, Wayne Earl Rowe wanted him dead.

Two years ago when the Nebraska Supreme Court granted a stay, three hours before his scheduled execution, Rowe wanted him dead.

On Tuesday, the day he was scheduled to die for the murder of a Lincoln woman — not his wife — Rowe wanted him dead.

And at 10:16 a.m. Tuesday Rowe got his wish. He watched death row inmate and his wife's murderer, Robert E. Williams, die.

"I've been waiting 20 years for this," the stoic, 75-year-old retired farmer said during a news conference after Williams was put to death in the electric chair. "I didn't think it could be true that it was happening."

Rowe was one of 10 witnesses to watch Williams' execution Tuesday morning. Harold Clark, director of the Nebraska State Penitentiary, said Rowe took the place usually reserved for a prison staff member.

After witnessing the execution, Rowe was joined at the news conference by his son, Tom, and daughter-in-law, Jan.

Rowe said it was important for him and the family to be there when Williams was put to death.

"I know it's complete, I know it's over," he

said. "I can now go back to my own community, with their blessing, and live a very decent life."

Tom Rowe said Tuesday was a time for his family to reflect on his mother's life.

"This is a day when we have to experience and share, and a day we probably looked forward to 20 years ago," he said, "when he took my mother's life for no reason at all."

The Williams' case had been one of many murder cases closely watched by the Iowa Legislature in its discussions of possibly reinstating the death penalty.

Iowa is one of 12 states that currently does not have the death penalty.

And in the years since his wife's death, Rowe and his family have hoped to change that. But in recent years, he said, his testimony in support of the death penalty has gone unheard.

The family members said they were satisfied with Williams being found guilty in Nebraska and sentenced to death here.

And while media witnesses indicated they were impressed with Williams' calm demeanor, Tom Rowe saw no glory in it.

"I can assure you that on that day 20 years ago, it was not serene and not peaceful," he said.

The elder Rowe said he felt "relaxed" after the execution and after Williams' apology.

Both Rowes said they accepted the apology, but could never forget what happened.

"We have forgiven Mr. Williams," Tom Rowe said. "but we will never forgive, nor forget what he did 20 years ago."

"Justice has been served."

Inmate calm at end, witnesses say

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"I am sorry, Mr. Rowe. I love you, brother," Williams said, according to witnesses. He then waved, with his hands strapped to the electric chair. Rowe waved back, and said later that he accepted Williams' apology.

Williams' death warrant went into effect one minute after midnight Tuesday, but prison officials decided to hold the execution during the morning hours to avoid the large crowds and drunken disturbances of past executions.

The execution of Harold Lamont Otey in 1994 and John Joubert in 1996 were held minutes after midnight. Otey's execution brought more than 2,000 protesters and revelers to the penitentiary, and the scene was a carnival of tears and drunken death chants.

Joubert's execution brought more than 600 people, and was different only in that the state patrol separated the pro- and anti-death penalty groups.

The scene outside the penitentiary Tuesday morning was eerily silent. More than 50 protesters and supporters were present, and only a few signs were hoisted.

Inside, the scene was also calm and quiet.

Witnesses said Williams was smiling throughout everything before the execution. The five media witnesses said Williams' calm and almost cheerful demeanor set them at ease.

"It appeared as if he was ready for this," said KETV Channel 7 reporter Brad Stephens. "It was incredible how calm he was."

Associated Press reporter Robynn Tysver said "he was unerringly polite. Calm, composed, serene."

Bill Hord, Lincoln bureau chief for the Omaha World-Herald, Tracy Overstreet, news director for KRGH radio in Grand Island and Butch Mabin, a reporter for the Lincoln Journal

Star also witnessed the execution.

Williams was strapped into the electric chair shortly before 10 a.m. The first of four 2,400 volt jolts of electricity started at 10:16 a.m., and the last was finished at 10:17 a.m. Williams was pronounced dead at 10:23 a.m.

Witnesses said that on the first and third jolts of electricity, smoke appeared from the right side of Williams' head and on his left knee area. Electrodes from the chair are placed on both areas with a wet sponge separating the skin from the electrode.

For Rowe, Williams' death signaled closure to his wife's death.

"The book is closed. The chapter has been finally ended," Rowe said. "I will go on with my own life."

Attorney General Don Stenberg, in a written statement, said his office was extending sympathy to the families of the victims.

"We also express our sympathy to Williams' friends and family," he said. "It is a great tragedy that Williams' many crimes brought so much grief to so many good people."

Gov. Ben Nelson, in a press conference in his office shortly after the execution, said there was no pleasure in his role in the execution.

"It was a somber experience," Nelson said, who has been governor for all three executions this decade. "It doesn't get easier with time. In a sense, it's cumulative and becomes more difficult."

Tysver said that the execution offered little to all involved.

"It's a lose, lose, lose situation today. Mr. Williams lost, his family lost, his friends lost, the victims lost," she said. "Nobody won today."

Staff reporter Amanda Schindler contributed to this report.