

Williams

Witnesses call inmate happy, calm

WITNESSES from page 1

anchorman for Omaha's KETV Channel 7. "When the curtains opened he was grinning, he was smiling, and he looked like he was happy," Stephens said during a news conference following the execution. "It was incredible how calm he was, how at ease he was ... he was ready to go."

Stephens said the last five words in Williams' official final statement — "I'm on my way home" — were maybe the thing that helped set everyone at ease before the execution.

"He seemed very happy at the moment and very eager to get the process under way," he said.

Williams, 61, had been on death row since 1978, a year after confessing to the shooting deaths of two Lincoln women, Patricia McGarry and Catherine Brooks.

In a three-day, three-state crime rampage, Williams also shot to death and raped an Iowa woman, Virginia Rowe. He also raped and shot a Minnesota woman, who survived.

But even for Wayne Earl Rowe, who, in 1977, found his murdered wife in their Sioux Rapids, Iowa, home, Williams' calmness helped.

Rowe, 75, was allowed by prison officials to be one of the 10 witnesses to see Nebraska's third execution in four years. He was also the first victim's family member to watch an execution since the state resumed carrying out the death penalty in 1994.

"Really, the man put us at ease," Rowe said, with his son, Tom, and daughter-in-law, Jan, sitting next to him.

Robyn Tysver, a reporter with The Associated Press, said she was surprised by Williams' final words and motions directed to Rowe.

She said after Williams looked around the witness room for his selected witnesses, blowing kisses to each of them, he seemed to look specifically for Rowe.

"He looked for Mr. Rowe and he said, 'I am sorry, Mr. Rowe. I love you, brother.' And I think Mr. Rowe lifted his hands as if to wave back," she said. "It was an unbelievable moment."

Rowe said he did give an accepting wave to Williams after his apology.

Tysver and Stephens were joined by Omaha World-Herald Lincoln bureau chief, Bill Hord, Tracy Overstreet, news director for KRGI radio in Grand Island and Lincoln Journal Star reporter Butch Mabin as the official media witnesses for the execution.

Williams personally selected witnesses were his spiritual adviser, Marylyn Felion of Omaha, his attorney, Paula Hutchinson of Lincoln, Joy Stevens of Fort Calhoun and Dick Hargshiemer of Lincoln.

After the execution, the five media witnesses and the Rowe family were led into a visitors room filled with radio, television and print reporters.

None of the media witnesses seemed visibly shaken by what they had just seen, but even with Williams' calm demeanor, watching an execution was anything but routine.

"As a human being watching another human being being (second "being" is part of quote) electrocuted and killed," Stephens said, "it's something I'll never forget. It's not easy to watch."

"To see a man strapped in a chair, knowing what he's done, knowing the horrible crimes



ABOVE: EXECUTION WITNESSES BUTCH MABIN of Iowa and his son, Tom Rowe, field questions at execution.
LEFT: VIRGINIA WALSH, a member of Nebraska State Bar Association, is seen recording Williams singing songs and talking to his family.
TOP: A PROTESTER HOLDS a candle in memory of Williams.

he's committed — it doesn't make it any easier to watch."

Hord said the prison's clinical way of handling the procedure helped him get through what he had expected to be a terribly difficult assignment.

Tysver said once they were led into the witness room, she tried to turn off the emotions and immerse herself in the role of journalist.

"It was like autopilot," she said after the press conference.

The calmness and serenity the witnesses felt stopped for a few minutes at 10:16 a.m. when, after the first jolt of electricity, smoke came from Williams' exposed left knee.

Overstreet said she saw no movement from Williams after that.

"I didn't see him breathe after the first six-second jolt," she said, "so he probably died quicker than his victims did."

The witnesses said they also noticed smoke coming from the leg and also the top of the head after a third, 19-second jolt.

The state used four jolts to put Williams to death, but the witnesses all agreed and were comforted that before the first jolt of electricity was given, Williams seemed like a man at peace with himself.

"If he was looking for the grace to get through this," Hord said, "I would say he found it."

Friend notes Williams' Calm

FRIEND from page 1

requested for his execution. He became the fourth person to die in Nebraska's electric chair since 1959.

Tuesday's execution differed from the past two executions in several ways — such as the daytime death and the lack of boisterous crowds — but one of the more subtle was the Christian rhetoric of two witnesses, a victim's son and the condemned.

In his last words, Williams thanked God for all of his blessings. Wayne Earl Rowe, the husband of one of Williams' three victims, said without his faith, he would not have been as calm as he was after the execution. And Stevens said her faith was reaffirmed by watching Williams' peace, even in the face of death.

Smiling and calm, witnesses said Williams was completely at ease having his death warrant read to him and being strapped to the electric chair.

To Stevens, it was Williams' faith in God that gave him his peace.

"You can't fake that," she said. "He had joy flowing from him. You can't fake that. That came from the last 20 years of him getting to know

God and getting to trust God."

Stevens, who describes herself as a deeply religious woman, met Williams in 1995, when for her first interview for a Christian radio show on Omaha's KGBI, she called Williams to talk about his conversion.

From that interview on, Stevens and Williams began a friendship that centered on their faith. Both read their Bibles daily — Williams began his studies at 3:30 a.m. every morning — and both shared passages through their correspondence.

Williams was a deeply repentant man, Stevens said, asking all of his victims' families for forgiveness. One by one, they gave it to him.

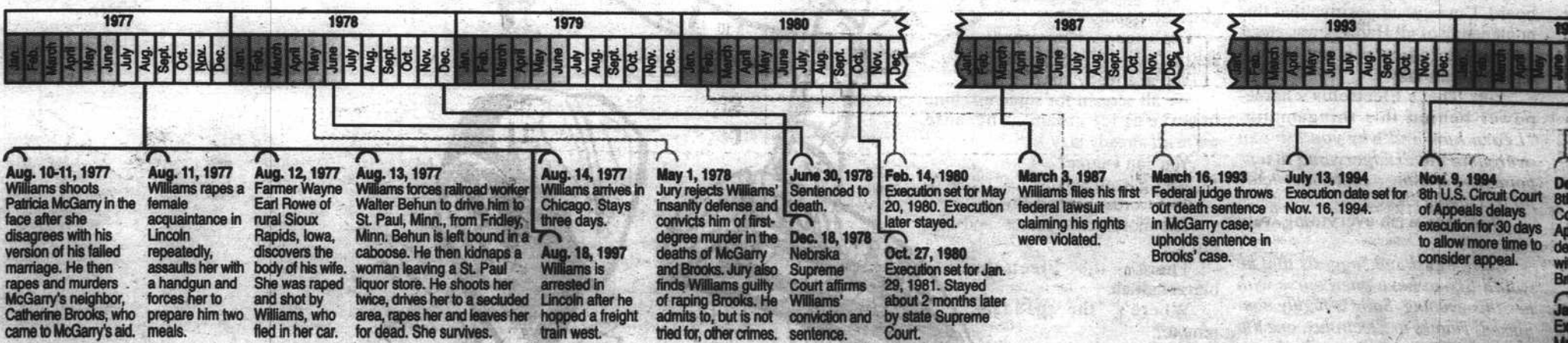
In one of the most dramatic moments of the day, Williams, strapped to the electric chair, asked Rowe for forgiveness.

"I am sorry, Mr. Rowe. I love you, brother," he said.

Rowe told reporters he had forgiven Williams long before the execution.

Rowe's son Tom also said he had forgiven Williams.

"We have forgiven Mr. Williams. We have not, nor will we ever forgive what he did."



SOURCE: AP