

Recollections from hundreds of executions in Texas

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (AP) — About once every three weeks, I watch someone die.

Beginning in 1984 when I arrived in Texas for The Associated Press, I've been just a few feet away as one convicted killer after another took a final breath in the Texas death chamber in Huntsville, where the state's 500th execution in modern times took place Wednesday.

I really don't know how many I've seen. I lost count years ago and have no desire to reconstruct a tally.

While death penalty cases are not the only assignments I cover, those certainly leave the strongest impressions.

One inmate, Jonathan Nobles, sang "Silent Night" as his last words as he was receiving the lethal injection. He got to "Round yon virgin, mother and child" before gasping and losing consciousness. Christmas, for me, never has been the same.

When I walked into the death chamber to witness Bob Black's execution, he called my name, said hello and asked how I was doing. What do you say to an otherwise healthy man seconds away from death?

J.D. "Cowboy" Autry was the first lethal injection I saw, in March 1984. A female friend of his who was a witness loudly sobbed about his "pretty brown eyes." Moments later, Autry's eyelids popped open as he died, revealing for a final time his brown eyes.

Autry's case was a memorable one. Six months earlier he was on the gurney with the needles in his arms when the U.S. Supreme Court issued a last-minute reprieve. To make sure no one had to make the final walk twice again, the prison stopped taking inmates to the death chamber until all appeals were resolved.

I remember Charles Rumbaugh's mangled hand, the result of being shot by a federal marshal he attacked in a courtroom. Henry Lee Lucas, who avoided execution when it was determined he hadn't really committed the hundreds of murders he had copped to, always had orange-tinged fingertips from rolling his own cigarettes. The arms of Angel Resendiz, the notorious "Railroad Killer," were scarred by repeated self-inflicted razor cuts. Markham Duff-Smith, who insisted he didn't kill four relatives, made a death chamber confession.

The death chamber, for 50 years home to the electric chair, has undergone its own changes.

The gurney, once on wheels, is a permanent pedestal-like structure bolted to the tile floor. The simple horizontal bar between the inmate and the viewing area was replaced by a thick transparent plastic wall after a needle popped out of Raymond Landry's arm, spraying the lethal drugs toward me and other witnesses.

The first executions were carried out just after midnight. Years later, death warrants were set to take effect at 6 p.m., more convenient for lawyers and judges and less costly in prison overtime.

Some executions came with raucous public demonstrations outside. When Ronald Clark O'Bryan, known as "The Candy Man," was executed for lacing his son's Halloween candy — a Pixy Stick — with cyanide so he could collect on an insurance policy, dozens of students dressed in Halloween costumes filled the streets. One carried a giant Pixy Stick replica that looked like a barber pole.

One convict, Ponchai Wilkerson, spit out a hidden handcuff key in his mouth as he was about to die. A Houston judge added a smiley face to his signature on Robert Drew's execution warrant. Carl Kinnamon gave a long final statement in hopes of delaying the procedure until his death warrant expired. He thanked me and others for covering his case, then tried to wriggle out of the leather restraints.

The final statements — which some victims' relatives have criticized as providing prisoners with an opportunity their slain loved ones never had — have included songs, poems, prayers and Bible verses. Some inmates have spouted profanity. At least two prisoners thanked the Dallas Cowboys for brightening their lives.

Patrick Knight held a contest dubbed "Dead Man Laughing," encouraging people to send him a joke to tell from the chamber. He said he got 1,300 responses. The "joke" turned out to be Knight's claim that the person being executed wasn't really Patrick Knight. But fingerprints confirmed it was.

Richard Hinojosa repeatedly invoked "Yahweh" during his final words as thunder boomed and lightning crackled outside, adding an eerie backdrop to the proceeding.

Johnny Frank Garrett thanked his family for loving and caring for him, then added: "And the rest of the world can kiss my ass."