

Witnessing a State Execution

The State of Arizona is one of 38 U.S. states to practice capital punishment. After a 29 year hiatus with no executions, the state resumed executions in 1992. Since then, there have been 23 executions, two in the gas chamber and 21 by lethal injection. As a death penalty abolitionist John Johnson was present to protest the first 19 executions. Someone suggested that he should go and witness what he was protesting, and he requested official permission from the Arizona Department of Corrections to be a state witness at the execution of Jesse James Gilles, on January 13, 1999.

The execution was scheduled for 3:06 P.M. at the Death House which is located inside of the oldest part of the main state prison in Florence, Arizona, about 60 miles south of Phoenix. The Death House was originally built to accommodate the gas chamber, the state's method of execution between 1933 and 1992, when lethal injection became an option. So the small building was made even smaller by the alterations needed to accommodate lethal injection.

The nearby state and federal prisons make Florence a one-industry town, numbering only several thousand residents at the time of the execution, including the rural cotton and cattle farms. Main Street numbers about two dozen buildings, and there is only one sixteen-room motel, the

Blue Mist Motel, located across the prison on State Road 289, notorious for its northeast corner room where one of the weekend-furloughed men killed his mother. On the day of the execution, there was much activity, with many State Highway Patrol and police cruisers out in force to patrol the area, especially the gravel area near the prison industry store where about 60 anti-death penalty protesters gathered. About 9,400 of the 40,000 prisoners in Arizona are located at one of the prison locations near Florence.

At the prison entrance, photo identification and the official invitation letter were required for entry, whereupon uniformed escorts took visitors to the main prison unit. Upon entering the staff lounge, identification was again required. The official witness list was divided into four groups: official state witnesses, victim witnesses, inmate witnesses, and media witnesses. The four groups were segregated from one another throughout the execution process.

At 2:30 P.M. all witnesses were escorted into a classroom area, inside the main prison unit. Lots were drawn to determine the order of entering the Death House. The main prison yard was early quiet for mid-afternoon, as all of the 9,400 prisoners were on “lockdown” while the execution took place. The official witnesses asked questions during their wait inside the classroom. What did the condemned man eat for his last

supper? Did he have a visit from his mother or family? Did he have a last will and testament? Did he have anything to say to the guards? Whose job is it to insert the butt plug, to prevent the bodily fluids from flooding out after death? Would there be an autopsy? Where will he be buried? Had he expressed remorse for the crimes? How many times did the execution team rehearse the execution? Were they anxious about it? None of the questions expressed any serious issue about what we were about to observe. The sergeant exuded some pride in noting that the execution team had rehearsed the execution five times on the prior day.

The witnesses filed into the Death House, about 35 in all, standing shoulder-to-shoulder on steel risers. When the door closed, things moved quickly. One official read the death warrant, another asked for last words, and then the loud speaker intoned, "The execution shall proceed." The witnesses looked through a Plexiglas window into a white-tiled room which resembled an emergency room at a hospital. All eyes focused on Mr. Gilles, who lay strapped down on a hospital gurney. There were several mild heavings of the chest, and a quivering of the lips. The room remained very silent. There was no sound on either side of the Plexiglas. Everyone waited for what seemed to be a long time, but in reality only minutes, because soon one of the assistant wardens entered and pronounced Mr. Gilles dead. The

execution had taken two to three minutes. In death penalty parlance, this had been a “good execution,” meaning that there were no complications.

In the immediate aftermath of the execution, this is what I recorded in my notes, “Following the execution I did not feel like talking to anyone. But I forced myself to do so, feeling some obligation to learn more about the setting, and those who also witnessed the execution. I learned that about half of the other state witnesses were women who worked for other state agencies, who were given the day off of work in recompense for serving as an official state witness. I talked to some of the witnesses in the parking lot of the prison, and then recorded ethnographic notes on the tape recorder as I made the sixty-five mile trip home. When I finished, I had to pull over to the side of the road, about one mile from my home. I broke down and cried for perhaps twenty to twenty-five minutes. This is what I later recorded:

It was as if, even before the execution, I knew I was going to record these notes, so I managed to hold my emotions in check until after I was done.....(then) I broke down and cried, and everything came gushing out. I really don't think I was crying for Jesse Gilles. I was crying for me. I do not feel good about what I did today.

Whatever part of me that led me to do this, is not a part of me I feel good about.

At the time of my emotional collapse after the execution, I think I felt very confused, and I am not sure I could have identified the strong emotions which had overpowered me at the moment. Over time, however, these emotions were critical for me to grasp a new understanding of the execution I had observed. I thought I was going to be a detached observer, but I later realized that I was only one of the participants, a bit-player actor on this quasi-medical theatre stage, playing my little part in this dramatization of state power vs. evil. The execution and the strong emotions taught me about my own conceits, and that I am implicated in all state killings, where the state kills in my name, whether I am present or not. The execution ritual itself was very mundane and ordinary, performed by a group of actors who were well rehearsed in the ways of bureaucratic rationality. The emotions were very powerful, however, and retain the capacity to bring tears almost one decade later. The bureaucratically rationalized ritual of a state execution is a very degrading one, for all parties concerned; we are rendered less moral and less human because of these actions taken in our names.