First use of electric chair: Aug. 6, 1890

SLICE OF HISTORY

For the first time, a man sits in a chair designed to kill him with electricity. His name is William Kemmler and he has been sentenced to death for killing his wife with an axe. Two years earlier, the state of New York had become the first in the U.S. to legalize death by electricity because it was thought to be a more humane form of execution than hanging.

The top advocate for the electric chair, a dentist from Buffalo, New York named Albert Southwick, is among those in the room where Kemmler will die. Ever since witnessing an old drunk man killed by touching an electric generator, Southwick has campaigned for execution by electricity because he believed it would be painless. He tells the other witnesses there at Auburn Prison that day that “This is the culmination of 10 years work and study. We live in a higher civilization today.”

Southwick had actually sought the help of Thomas Edison in finding the best way to electrify a chair. At first, the famous inventor didn’t respond to his letters, but eventually he referred Southwick to the technique used by his chief competitor in the burgeoning electricity industry, George Westinghouse. The two men had very different theories about the best way to transmit electrical power. Edison believed that using a direct current (DC) was necessary; Westinghouse felt an alternating current (AC) was the answer. So Edison thought if AC current was used in the electric chair, the public would associate it with danger and death. Edison went so far as to say that executed criminals would be “Westinghoused.”

For his part, Westinghouse did what he could to stop the execution. He contributed $100,000 to help cover Kemmler’s legal fees when his lawyers took the case all the way to the U.S Supreme Court. They argued that death in the electric chair would be cruel and unusual punishment. While Edison opposed capital punishment, he did say that if you were going to kill criminals, using electricity was a good idea because it would be “so quick the criminal can’t suffer much.”

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case with Kemmler. After he was strapped into the chair and had electrodes attached to his head and back, he was jolted with about 1,000 bolts of electricity. After 17 seconds the power was turned off and Kemmler was declared dead. But several of the witnesses noticed that he appeared to still be breathing. Prison officials rushed to shock him again, this time with almost double the voltage. As a New York Times reporter in the room wrote, “An awful odor began to permeate the death chamber, and then, as though to cap the climax of this fearful sight, it was seen that the hair under and around the electrode on the head and the flesh under and around the electrode at the base of the spine was singeing. The stench was unbearable.”

Several witnesses fainted, others vomited. A little more than two minutes later, Kemmler was declared dead again. The physician who did so, Dr. Edward Spitzka, would later predict that “there will never be another electrocution.”