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## City Room

Blogging From the Five Boroughs

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### A Man Who Knew About the Electric Chair

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Patrick Burns/The New York Times A view to the execution chamber at Sing Sing, where Lewis E. Lawes, the warden from 1920 to 1941, saw to 303 executions, even as he denounced capital punishment.

Nobody killed more people, with more regret, than Lewis E. Lawes. The New York Times Lewis E. Lawes

The warden of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility for 21 years, Lawes supervised the executions of 303 prisoners, all the while condemning the practice of capital punishment as barbaric, inequitable and futile.

As Hollywood's favorite "fearless, fighting warden," with a soft heart for his "boys," Lawes was in charge of the prison through two turbulent decades, from the Jazz Age and the Great Depression to World War II.

"I shall ask for the abolition of the Penalty of Death," he wrote in 1923, quoting Lafayette, "until I have the infallibility of human judgment demonstrated to me."

Executions at the prison, in Ossining, N.Y., left Lawes physically ill, his trove of papers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice shows. Once, when a condemned man named Patrick Murphy pleaded for a strictly prohibited last drink of spirits, Lawes broke the rules to deliver a medicinal dose of bourbon. Murphy accepted it gratefully and then offered it back to the stricken Lawes, saying, "You need the shot more than I do, warden."

But he was no pushover. "Hell," he wrote in one of his many books, "Invisible Stripes," "the only law in Sing Sing is Lawes."

So with the United States Supreme Court now reviewing the Alabama case of the death row inmate Cory Maples, whose appeal got waylaid in the mail, and weeks after a lethal injection ended the life of Troy Davis still protesting his innocence in the killing of a Georgia police officer, it would hardly be amiss to summon Lawes (who died in 1947 at 63) as an expert witness on the subject of state-ordered death.

Barely one out of 80 killers actually paid with his life, Lawes liked to note. Where was the equity in that? And, he asked, "Did you ever see a rich man go the whole route through to the Death House? I don't know of any."

If the prospect of execution were a deterrent to killing, Lawes asked, how did Thomas Pallister, who helped build Sing Sing's first death house, come to be convicted of murder

and ordered to die there? (He cheated the chair by breaking out and escaping; he was later found dead with a bullet to the head.)

It was under Lawes that the world got its most sensational image of capital punishment: Ruth Snyder and her lover, Henry Judd Gray, went to the chair in 1928 for the killing of Snyder's husband. A photographer for The Chicago Tribune, shooting for The Daily News with a miniature camera strapped to his ankle, snapped a grotesque shot of the hooded Snyder as the current shot through her.

Lawes, a dandyish warden who was known to enjoy a pre-dinner Scotch throughout Prohibition, practiced the redemption he preached. He was shaved each morning by a convicted killer who had slit a man's throat, and he confidently put his 6-year-old daughter in the care of a convicted kidnapper. Of his household staff of 22, he assured his nervous wife, only two were murderers.

Born in 1883 in Elmira, N.Y., Lawes had worked as a guard at Clinton Prison in the Adirondack wilds of Dannemora, N.Y. His education as a penologist came at the feet of a wise old lifer who schooled him in the power of the club. "Carry it as a badge of authority," he advised, "but never use it."

Patrick Burns/The New York Times  
The electric chair at Sing Sing.

He was eventually named to run a new youth reformatory in Orange County, N.Y., where he tamed his wayward charges with camaraderie and trust. When a movie company came through to shoot a silent western, Lawes had his boys serve as extras, putting them on horseback armed with rifles and pistols loaded with blanks. No one escaped.

So he was the obvious choice in 1919 when a scandal-battered Sing Sing, founded on the river in 1825 at the old Indian site of Sint Sinck, or "stone upon stone," sought a progressive new warden and Gov. Alfred E. Smith turned to the 36-year-old Lawes with the words, "It's yours, son."

The first prisoner whose execution was overseen by Lawes — a week after he had taken charge of the prison in 1920 — was a 30-year-old semiliterate man named Vincenzo Esposito, who, in a drunken stupor, had fatally shot a couple during a robbery. After his electrocution, the other death row inmates could hear the whine of the saw cutting through his skull for an autopsy.

The more Lawes learned about capital punishment, the more it puzzled him. If the point was deterrence, why choose the relatively quick end of a sudden bolt of electricity instead of something more grisly? Why not stage executions in public? If criminals feared death, why did they have to be guarded against committing suicide? Why wasn't murder on a rampage in the 12 states that had abolished the death penalty?

In a speech on the new medium of radio in 1923, Lawes explained his practical approach. Most prisoners were eventually set free, so what happened to them behind bars was crucial.

He prescribed music and theater for prisoners, exposure to sunshine, and competitive sports, particularly football. Sing Sing's team was, of course, the Black Sheep. Lawes brought the Yankees in for exhibition games; a homer Babe Ruth hammered over the wall and the New York Central Railroad tracks could have been his greatest swat ever, some 600 or 700 feet.

Lawes clung to his opposition to executions through the fiendish case of Albert Henry Fish, a 65-year-old house painter sentenced to die for the 1928 abduction, murder and cannibalization of 10-year-old Grace Budd. Fish, who was found to have inserted 30 sewing needles into his abdomen, perhaps as self-punishment, was clearly out of his mind, Lawes thought, a pathetic creature whose death would solve nothing. Indeed, Fish went to the chair mumbling, "I don't know why I'm here" and "This is a sad day for me."

Lawes's principles underwent their severest test in 1941 when three inmates tunneled out, killing a guard and an Ossining police officer during their getaway. One of the escapees was shot dead and the other two were soon recaptured and beaten before being convicted and sentenced to death.

Lawes submitted to a bristling inquisition and then announced his retirement.

He was under no illusion that his cause to abolish capital punishment was easy, he had told the General Federation of Women's Clubs some years before, and he urged patience. "Don't expect to do the impossible," he told them. "It is slow work because civilization, if it is civilization we now have, is making very slow progress."