

## **Time Warner Cable News: The Electric Chair: An Experiment Born in Auburn (With Video Link)**

<http://www.twcnews.com/nys/central-ny/news/2015/06/3/electric-chair-anniversary-in-auburn.html>

By Bill Carey  
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It's something the criminal justice system has struggled with for centuries. What to do with those who have taken another life? Does the state have the right to take that criminal's life in return? New York state is marking an anniversary this year at a Central New York prison. Bill Carey says Auburn prison became home to the nation's first electric chair 125 years ago this summer.

AUBURN, N.Y. -- More than 30 years before the city of Auburn became the city of Auburn, the settlement in Cayuga County was already home to what would become Auburn State Prison.

For many years it was a place where experiments were conducted on the best ways to deal with criminals. The Auburn system involved inmates walking in lockstep, banned from making eye contact with anyone and remaining silent. Officials later decided the system put too much pressure on inmates' psyche.

Another experiment dealt with the worst of the worst, those ordered to be put to death. For many years, the two prime options were to die by firing squad or by hanging.

"A woman was actually hanged and I guess she was a very beautiful young woman. It was a slow death and people thought this was a bad way to execute people," said Kirsten Wise, the curator of the Cayuga Museum of History and Art.

At the Cayuga Museum of History and Art, Wise said prison leaders were soon turning to the greatest inventor of their age -- Thomas Edison.

"Thomas Edison had been working on some technology and they developed the electric chair which they claimed to be a humane method of execution," Wise said.

The first execution in the Auburn electric chair came in 1890. William Kemmler, convicted of killing his girlfriend, was put to death. The first of 56 prisoners to be executed in Auburn's death chamber.

Edison used his new film technology to recreate the execution of President McKinley's assassin, anarchist Leon Golgocz, in 1901.

The work of the chair would go on until events in 1929 inside the walls at Auburn.

"In 1929, there were two riots. One, on the hottest day of the year, in July. One on the coldest day of the year, in December," Wise said.

The first of the two riots, in July, was the bloodiest. It was also the most destructive.

"And, during the first riot, the electric chair was burned up. They destroyed most of the prison -- and the electric chair was actually lost," she said.

The only surviving memento, at the museum, a piece of concrete that had been beneath the chair.