Ferguson walked calmly into Death House in 1961

The Associated Press

ST MARTINVILLE (AP) - The last man to die in Louisiana's electric chair walked coolly into the Death House on June 9, 1961, and told the executioner: "Don't let it hurt."

He was Jessie James Ferguson, a 35-year-old black man whose criminal record included six rape charges before the charge that he raped and killed Joyce Marie Thibodeaux, 11, of Opelousas.

Harold Doucet, son of the St. Landry Parish sheriff at the time, remembers that he accompanied his father when he took Ferguson to Angola to be electrocuted. "He was very cool, calm and collected," Doucet said. "We talked, but not about his case."

Prison officials took charge of Ferguson on arrival and when Doucet next saw him he was walking into the Death House, his head freshly shaved. "I remember the chair was behind a rail and there were seats for the witnesses. They brought him down, strapped him around the arms and legs, and the chest. I believe, and then they put this thing on his head looked like a beanie cap with electrodes. They blindfolded him and then pulled the switch."

The official record shows the switch was pulled at 12:23 a.m. A physician checked and officially declared Ferguson dead at 2:32.

Doucet said he believes in capital punishment but could not help feeling sorry for Ferguson. "He asked everyone to pray for him and the executioner told him it wouldn't hurt. It was a sunny day, I remember."

Virgia Lee Thibodeaux, mother of Joyce Marie, had no pangs of sympathy. Twenty years later she still felt that she could kill him with her bare hands. "I know I would have the strength in my bare hands," she said. "I don't think there is no dog could have had a worse death than her."

Joyce Marie was at home on Jan. 6, 1961, when Ferguson stopped by and asked if the girl could come help his ailing wife. "He said his wife was crippled and sick and it would be only for a little while to hand his wife her medicine and sweep the floor," she recalled. "That was his last words, his own words, that I'm responsible for your little girl from the time that she leaves here until the time she returns and that we're all neighbors and that it will be for only a little while and my wife's going to be good to her."

Joyce Marie never came back. She was found dead under a pile of dirty clothes in an abandoned bar, her neck broken, her vagina lacerated and full of blood.

Edward Zerangue, a deputy, said he picked up Ferguson as soon as his name came up during his talk with Mrs. Thibodeaux about her missing daughter. "She told me she had left with Jessie Ferguson and I knew his past record," he said.

The record included an Alexandria rape conviction on which he was sentenced to life in prison, but got out in 10 years. Ferguson committed his body to Tulane Medical School for research purposes.