The Man Who Cheated The Chair... for awhile

by Bob Hamm

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series. Part II will run Monday, April 26.

Electrocution is no longer the legal method of executing the death sentence in Louisiana. Lethal injection, the recently adopted approach to capital punishment, may be more humane. Hopefully, it will be more efficient than earlier methods often proved to be.

Willel Francis went to the electric chair in St. Martinville for the first time in May 3, 147 years ago. Coincidentally, May also marks the 100th anniversary of the hanging of the Too Tall Man in that same serene and historical town.

Of all the times that the justice system's death machines have failed in their depressing duties, these two examples of bungled executions may be the most bizarre.

This is the story of Willie Francis and his two trips to the chair, but some see a parallel between it and that of the awkwardly executed hanging that took place behind the St. Martin Parish Courthouse over a half-century earlier.

The Too Tall Man cheated the gallows only for a matter of minutes — which to him must have seemed like eternity in hell. His name and some of the details of the hanging have been forgotten, and there are differing accounts of what happened on that day in May of 1895.

The most colorful — if not the most accurate — was the one often told by the late Mac Greig, St. Martinville's premier raconteur. According to Greig, the man was strung up for a double murder, but the length of his lanky frame exceeded the distance from the gallows to the ground.

He dropped, as planned, from whatever they stood him on, but his legs were long, and his feet reached solid earth. As astonished as the crowd that had come to see him die, he stood there on his tip-toes with his nose slack around his neck — like a dancer in a macabre ballet.

Hands bound behind, nose still in place, he watched as the executioner placed a bag under his feet to support his weight, and, in an unburdened, business-like fashion, proceeded to dig a hole beneath it. Greig said of the executioner, "he started to work, but was too late."

When the executioner was content that the hole was deep enough, he laid inside his shovel and calmly kicked the board away. The accused killer danced frantically for a second on the unresisting May air, the lusinman's notice pulled tight, and the soul of the Too Tall Man shuffled off to Glory.

The tale parallels between the bizarre incident and the failed electrocution of a staggering black teenager in St. Martinville just over a century later?

When Willie Francis walked away from the electric chair after the executioner threw the switch twice, he, too, dangled for a while before his plunge into eternity. He was held up, also, albeit by legal documents rather than a rough piece of lumber.

And, like the Too Tall Man, he watched as the ground was figuratively, but just as surely, dug out from under him in courts of law. It would be because the wheel of justice move much slower than did the executioner's shovel, but the result was the same.

A half-century had made a lot of difference. In 1995, no one considered whether the leisurely dispatch of the Too Tall Man constituted cruel or unusual punishment. No argument was made that he had been convicted by an Act of God, and should not be set free.

No one came forth to claim double jeopardy or denial of due process. The cry of racism was not raised. Juries from Louisiana to the U.S. Supreme Court did not ponder his fate.

All this and more did occur after Willie Francis walked away from the electric chair. Unlike the Too Tall Man, Francis was given a long time on his board... time to hope, but also time for dark and terrible memories no one else could share — of the dark and terrible straps, the electrodes, the black hood falling over his face and the tune of the switch that followed the executioner saying, "Goodbye, Willie."

He had a year to wonder if it would all happen to him again.

The Willie Francis drama, which riveted the attention of the world on Louisiana, began in St. Martinville on a November day in 1944.

Andrew Thomas, owner of a local pharmacy, had dinner that evening with Dr. and Mrs. Earl Easterling and their daughter on Bridge Street. It was apparently a sumptuous meal. The 54-year-old珏 was the end of the '40s and 1950s, well known for his work as a pediatrician.

As he walked to his car, he probably looked toward the home of his brother, just across the street. Claude Thomas was chief of police in St. Martinville. Another brother, R.L., was secretary-treasurer of the parish police jury. The Thomas family was well respected in the community.

As Andrew turned onto the picturesque main street of St. Martinville, he passed the drug store he had opened on his return a few years before from New Orleans, where he had worked for the K&B chain.

In as small towns of the '40s, the drug store was a favorite gathering place. People liked Thomas and liked to stop by for coffee and conversation.

There was a soda fountain, of course. Lafayette businessman Ed Liked Mr. Thomas.

Bulliard, a St. Martinville high school student in the Forties, recalls that "we all hung out there... the teenagers liked his music and his jokes.

...the song is about Willie Francis' failed execution.

See Chair, Page D-3
When the Willis Frances story picked up by the national media, he was portrayed by reporters much the way his mother de-
scribed him. However, former state trooper Otis Hebert of St. Mariville remembers him differently, as cocky and insolent. According to Hebert, one employer fired him because of his insolence, and during a heated confronta-
tion, threw him bodily out of his place of business.

"When he was leaving," He-
bert says, "Willie turned around and said 'I'm going to get you.'"

The employer, according to He-
bert, was Andrew Thomas.

The search for clues in the case some fruit when officers found a pistol—stolen from a dep-
uty's car—in a wooded area near Thomas's home. Sometime during the investigation, Francis disappeared from St. Mariville, al-
though there is no indication that he was a suspect in the crime.

He surfaced again in Port Ar-
thur. Police there, after pre-
paring a suspect in a similar case, were checking the area for clues. Francis was found hiding behind a tree, and after inter-
viewing and for investigation of any possible link with the drug case. When he was searched, Andrew Thomas's wallet was found in his pocket.

Port Arthur police reports con-
trict the story, gentle image the national media gave to Willie Francis. They show that he imme-
diately confessed to the brutal beating and robbery of an elderly Port Arthur man, then admitted he had murdered Andrew Thomas. Francis, Hebert said, at the crowd that had gathered around the jail to see the killer.

Francis repeated his confes-
sion to Sheriff Rosweber, and directed officers to the place where he said he had dug the gun out after shoot-
ing Thomas. It was the place where deputies had found the sto-
len gun earlier.

Next, Francis led officers to a jewelry store where he said he had sold Andrew Thomas's pocket watch. The jeweler produced a purchase receipt with the initials "A.T."

Finally, Francis pointed out a spot where he said he had thrown the holster that the murder weap-
on was in when he stole it from the sheriff's vehicle. Deputies digging with hoes and shovels found the leather holster.

Taking no chances on mob rule, Sheriff Rosweber had Francis transferred to the Iberia parish jail of Sheriff Gilbert Ozone to await trial. The court proceedings were short and uneventful.

District Attorney L. O. Pecot of Franklin prosecuted, assisted by Lawrence Simon of New Iberia. Francis, defended by court-appointed attorneys James R. Par-
ker of Franklin and Otto J. Testayre of New Iberia, did not testify. The Iberian Weekly newspaper report that he "appeared indifferent.

A guilty verdict was returned on Thursday, Sept. 14, 1945 and the next day, District Judges J. mes D. Simon sentenced Francis to die in the electric chair.

Gov. Jimmy Davis signed a mandatory death warrant, or-
dering Francis to be executed on May 3, 1946. In those days, execu-
tions took place in the parish where the crime was committed, using a portable, hardwood elec-
tric chair. It was switched around the state from its home base at Angola State Prison.

On the appointed day, Capt. E. Foster of the prison staff arrived in St. Mariville with the chair and large panel of switches and wires necessary for its operation. An Ang-
oua inmate, Vincent Vezina, acted as operator.

The chair was set up in a room of the courthouse, and Vezina, after connecting the wires, then ran them outside and across the lawn to the penitentiary truck which contained its own generator. He set the generator at 200 volts and ran the
ecessary tests.

Although there was no report of the incident at the time, it is known that the men from Angola "so drank it was impossible for them to have known what they were doing."