Alisa Stingley
The (Shreveport) Times

Seven minutes after noon on Nov. 28, 1942, Toni Jo Henry was escorted to the electric chair in the Calcasieu Parish jail.

The 26-year-old Shreveport woman wore a black crepe dress she had sent to the cleaners a few days earlier. She clutched a tiny crucifix and a handkerchief over her shaved head. A large crowd waited outside, anxious for justice. Henry had been convicted of killing a woman and using the proceeds to fire a bullet into her head. By 12:12 p.m. no phone call from the governor had come.

Henry mumbled a few words to the executioner as he attached the electrodes and removed the scarf to place on her head. By 12:12 p.m. no phone call from the governor had come. The executioner pulled the switch. Three minutes later, Toni Jo Henry was dead.

She was buried in Graceland Cemetery, on the low-rent side of Lake Charles, which some might say was a fitting last home for a young woman whose life was bent on the dark side, almost from the beginning.

Sixty-three years have passed since the execution of Toni Jo Henry, the last woman in Louisiana to be put to death.

Her story fills volumes of court transcripts in the Calcasieu Parish Courthouse, painting a hard-scrabble life.

Annie Beatrice McQuiston was her legal name, but she preferred Toni Jo. Her father deserted the family and her mother died of tuberculosis when Toni Jo was only 6.

At 9, she wrapped and weighed macaroni in a Shreveport factory for 4 cents a case. She never finished grade school and at 12 left home. By 16, she was addicted to marijuana and cocaine. At 17, she worked in a brothel on Comman Street.

There were frequent run-ins with Shreveport police, although she was never prosecuted, and in 1939 in San Antonio, Toni Jo married Claude "Cowboy" Henry. Less than two years into the marriage, he went to prison for killing a police officer.

Toni Jo’s devotion to "Cowboy" was strong.

"No one ever cared about me before him," she once said.

Toni Jo convinced an acquaintance, Horace Finton Burks, to help her steal a car, rob a bank and use the money for Claude’s appeal.

On Valentine’s Day 1940, she and Burks hitchhiked on U.S. 90 out of Beaumont, armed with a gun. Toni Jo had already tested the weapon, proclaiming, "This one will shoot all right."

Joseph P. Calloway, 41, was on his way from Houston to Jennings to deliver a new Ford Deluxe coupe to a dealership. Just west of Vinton, he saw the couple and offered a ride. Just east of Lake Charles, Toni Jo pulled the gun and ordered Calloway off the main road.

Calloway was forced into the coupe’s trunk, Burks drove along a dirt road south of Lake Charles until Toni Jo told him to stop. She marched Calloway to a haystack. He pleaded for his life on behalf of his wife and 17-year-old daughter.

Toni Jo shot him in the head. She and Burks headed north, eventually splitting up. On Feb. 16, Toni Jo arrived at her Aunt Emma Holt’s home on Mooringsport Road, eight miles north of Shreveport.

"Aunt Emma," she blurted out, "I shot a man." Bolt contacted her brother, Capt. George McQuiston, the third-ranking officer in the Louisiana State Police, who lived in Shreveport. Toni Jo confessed, then accompanied McQuiston and other officers to Lake Charles. A few days later, Burks was arrested in Arkansas. He would later be convicted and executed.

Opening day of Toni Jo’s trial, March 27, 1940, was a spectacle at the Calcasieu Parish Courthouse. People stood on windows ledges, hovered around the judge’s bench and sat on chairs next to the witness stand. The sheriff rested his foot on the jury box; the jurors all were male.

Toni Jo’s defense was handled by a court-appointed attorney, while the prosecution was handled by the district attorney, who admitted they had little trial experience and that the state’s new portable electric chair was unconstitutional.

The case went to the jury at 5:39 p.m. March 28. Toni Jo’s sole defense, according to one of her attorneys, was her background and lack of advantages.

At 10:25 p.m. the jury returned a guilty verdict. Toni Jo stared straight ahead. A woman leaned over and said, “I feel sorry for you.”

Toni Jo’s appeals during the next two years tried to work any and every angle. Her attorney said she was insane because it was commonly thought that prostitutes were mentally ill. They cited court disorder, lack of criminal trial experience and that the state’s new portable electric chair was unconstitutional.

The conviction was thrown out twice on technicalities, but Toni Jo was convicted at each new trial and her appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied.

As she awaited execution, she became less the brush, outspoken woman and more the penitent, meditative inmate. She read her Bible. A priest said she had returned to her Catholic faith.

Outside, workers tested the generator that would produce 2,000 volts of electricity.

On her last day, Toni Jo wrote to "Cowboy" but put a $10 birthday bill in an envelope for a 6-year-old niece in Shreveport and telephoned to her jailer with the news, admitting she was "scared inside." The next morning, when they came to shave her head of its long, black hair, she cried.

As she was strapped into the electric chair, the sheriff asked if she had any last words. She did not.

No one ever came forward to claim Toni Jo’s body. The priest who had counseled her in jail conducted a Catholic service at a Lake Charles funeral home.

Curiosity-seekers were turned away.

The (Shreveport) Times

The Daily Advertiser

The United States, including 11 of 12 states, have executed women and the death penalty.

Since 1973, 155 death sentences have been given to convicted female offenders. North Carolina, Florida, California, Ohio and Texas account for almost half.

Current age range from 26 to 72.

The average length of time a woman serves a death sentence is 7 years and 11 months, 27 months less than a man on death row.

In Louisiana, three women have been put to death in the past 100 years: Ada LeBoeuf in 1923, Julia Moore (aka Powers, Williams) in 1936, and Toni Jo Henry in 1942.