

EXECUTIONS AND DEMOCRACY:

A 20 IMAGE LINOCUT SERIES BY SAM KERSON, PRINTED BY KATAH

We have been working on this project since 2006, when we first started *googling*, “*executions innocents*”.

We read George Jackson's book, *Soledad Brothers*, and David Von Drehles' book, *Among the Lowest of the Dead*.

There were plenty of cases; we looked for ones where the executions seemed especially unjust or in error, cases that were in doubt.

Our idea was that if we showed that twenty cases were flawed, possibly cases of mistaken executions, or political executions like Joe Hill, then our series would bring the entire system into question. We looked for cases that were complicated by racism, sexism, nationalism, cases of children and cases of people who were later proved to be innocent like Lena Baker.

We read through the big lists and we went name by name and read the histories of many cases.

To give you some idea of the scale of our national, history of executions, the Espy file lists 15,269 executions in the US and the colonies between 1608, and 2002.

Since 1976 when the death penalty was re-instated there have been 1,099 executions in the US.

Mankato, Minnesota, December 1862. We include this image, a mass hanging of Santee Sioux, to remember the historical precedents. Abe Lincoln condemned these 37 men. The locals intended to hang more than 300 Santee Sioux but President Lincoln asked to look at the court records and determined, that only 37 of the cases warranted execution. Some historical observers suggest that the fate of these 37 men was easier and more dignified than that of those who had their sentences commuted, the Santee Sioux were reduced to landless fugitives, fleeing the wrath of the invaders.

Joe Hill was a Swedish immigrant and member of Workers of the World who were organizing the lumber and mining industries, in the Northwest. A well-known figure, Joe was a singer and songwriter; this is one of his songs:

*You will eat bye and bye,
In the glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.*

Joe was arrested and accused of a robbery/murder in Salt Lake City. In an amazingly short time, in spite of protest from the U.S. and Europe, he was accused, convicted, condemned, and executed by firing squad.

Lena Baker was trapped and confined by a hometown racist and drunk; he kept her locked up in his mill, where he abused her as he saw fit. One day she was able to get his gun from him and in her escape she shot and killed her tormentor. Her trial was; black woman kills white man, and though she said, "I had no choice but to kill him and I killed him in self-defense", she was electrocuted.

Lena's family persisted in seeking a fair trial for her and 60 years after her execution the State of Georgia pardoned her. We wonder if Lena pardoned the State of Georgia?

The Rosenbergs' story is well known, it seems there was no doubt that Ethel was innocent but prosecutors hoped the threat of executing her would bring a confession out of Julius. The ploy failed, both were electrocuted, Julius first. Both maintained their innocence.

The ordeal of Barbara Graham was so colored with police chicanery and deceit that this case is sited as the background for the Miranda rules under which the police must announce to a person who is being taken into their custody, just what his rights are. After her execution, in the gas chamber, the coroner who did the autopsy said that Barbara was left handed and a right-handed person had committed the murder she was accused of.

The Wilbert Coffin case is up for reconsideration this year, 2008. Wilbert was the last person executed in Canada. It always seemed like he was framed, and some writers suggest that Duplessis, premier of Quebec at the time, was under pressure from John Foster Dulles to make the culprit pay with his life. The fact that no one knew who the killer was became a simple inconvenience. Wilbert was the scapegoat. We include this case to suggest that the death penalty in the US has deadly consequences in other countries.

It seems the US Army is maneuvering to reestablish their right to carry out executions, with the Guantanamo prisoners in mind. In this image; the execution of, pvt. John Arthur Bennett, we take a look at the US, military's record, and find it extremely racist. Bennett, hanged in 1961, was the last man executed by the military, he was guilty of raping a ten year-old girl in Austria. The child and her parents wrote appeals to John F. Kennedy asking that Bennett's life be spared.

George Jackson was imprisoned when he was seventeen for a 75-dollar gas station robbery. Twelve years later he was still in jail! George grew up in the California prison system and he was radicalized by the experience. George was the author of, *Soledad Brothers*. He used his pen to tell his own story. George Jackson's conflict with the California prison system became violent and deadly, his own death at the hands of prison guards brought the drama to a close.

Sam Melville, was a political prisoner accused and found guilty of a series of bombings in New York City. His Lawyer, William Kunstler says, Sam was executed, on Sept 13, 1971, by the State troopers, under the cloud of the Attica prison riots. Incidentally, he was not convicted of a capital crime and like George Jackson he died in prison at a time when the death penalty was suspended. Between 1972 and 1976 there were no court ordered executions in the US.

John Arthur Spenklink, was the first execution, in Florida, after the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, he resisted his execution and fought it to the end. His last words were, "Capital punishment; them without the capital get the punishment". There is a very good, in depth, book describing Florida's politics and Spenklink's execution; the *Lowest of the Dead*, by David Von Drehle.

The brothers Herrera are a painful example of the failure of eyewitnesses. One of the two police officers murdered that night, David Rucker and Enrique Corrisalez, as he was dying, was shown a single photo and asked, by his fellow policemen, if the photo was of his killer. The dying officer said, yes. Based on that, "identification" Leonel Torres Herrera was accused, found guilty and sentenced to death. However, before the execution Leonel's brother Raul was killed in a drug related shoot out, Raul left a confession saying that he had murdered both policemen.

Ireneo Tristan Montoya, had a right to consular protection. He was a Mexican citizen and the Mexican consulate was not notified of his confinement till after he had been sentenced. Essentially he had no legal counsel, the facts being what they are in Texas. He was eighteen at the time of his arrest, and he spoke no English. Further, he claimed, the confession he signed was presented to him for his signature, as a deportation order.

Gary Graham, was 17 at the time of his accusation, that is, he was legally a child. He always said he did not kill Bobby Lambert, that he was innocent of murder. He lived on death row for nineteen years. During this time he changed his name to Shaka Sankofa. Shaka never accepted the idea that he should cooperate with the prison authorities in carrying out his execution, most people do submit finally and go to their death with out resistance.

Francis Newton, first we felt the case against Francis was very unlikely. The motive and the crime seemed inappropriate and unbelievable. But also, we included her in this series, to show the false medical procedure of the three injections; which has been in fashion through out the country in recent years. It appears to be a medical procedure, but no doctor will carry out the execution because it is against his or her oath to save lives. Therefore prison employees who are untrained and inept at the process give the three injections. Francis Newton's parents observed her execution.

Filiberto Ojeda Rios was a Puerto Rican Nationalist, and a self professed and widely recognized revolutionary. He was tried for his part in a Hartford Connecticut robbery in San Juan where the jury absolved him unanimously. He was 72 years old in 2005 and he was a fugitive, pursued by the FBI. You might say he had retired, to a cabin in the hills of Puerto Rico at a place called las Hormigueros. On the annual holiday when Puerto Rico celebrates, the Grito de Lares, declaring her independence from Spain in 1868, Filiberto always made a speech, which was taped and played for the celebrants, since he was in hiding. In 2005 while Puerto Ricans were celebrating their independence from Spain, Filiberto was executed in a para-military style, FBI, "anti-terrorism", operation.

Tookie Williams, we found curiously similar to Arnold Schwartzneggar. At least they were both body builders. Arnold had been the Terminator and Tookie was accused of murder. Arnold had become governor and Tookie had undergone a spiritual rebirth and transformation. Tookie had to ask Arnold to spare his life, and Arnold said, no. Tookie was executed by injection, Arnold's hometown, Gratz, took his name off the local stadium. Austria opposes the death penalty.

Dwayne Johnson was a suicide; he killed himself before the guards came to get him, on the day of his execution. He wrote with his own blood, I am innocent.

Hanging Saddam Hussein, had an especially Texan quality to it, Texas law as US foreign policy.

If we already know he is going to be hung, can there be a fair trial?

Wasn't there more to be learned from Saddam?

Is hanging a political solution?

Has the situation in Iraq improved?

It was very much like a public hanging, a show trial, followed by a show and tell hanging. Saddam certainly looked brave and dignified, on the videos, we can't say so much for his tormentors.

Donald Fell, is a Vermonter. Vermont does not have a death penalty.

Nonetheless after federal intervention, judge Sessions was forced to condemn Fell to death. Vermont has no facilities to execute him.

Mumia Abu Jamal, is still alive, and his "guilt" is certainly in question.

This series of images is a Dragon Dance Theatre production. Dragon Dance was founded in 1976 in Vermont. Since 2000 we have been on tour, performing in Mexico, France, and Finland, plus carrying out graphic and visual arts projects in Slovakia and in Quebec. These images are linocuts, 9x12 inches, printed on Stonehenge paper 13x19 inches. They were designed and cut by Sam Kerson and printed by Katah at Atelier Presse Papier in Trois-Rivières, Québec.

The Maverick Foundation, The Puffin Foundation, and Richard Rubin supported this project.

Sam Kerson

painter, engraver, muralist

Artist Statement,

There are so many life and death issues in our modern world.

We chose this one for its perversity, executing men after holding them in cages for extended periods of time, seems to us, cruel, cowardly, disgraceful, embittering, and poisonous, it is a practice that encourages violence and bizarre behavior. It is shameful for a democratic society to practice such totalitarian racist violence.

Because we are a democracy we must acknowledge that we all choose this death penalty, it is our elected method of dealing with certain people in our society, people who are poor and/or non white.

It is obviously an archaic practice passed down to our generation from the slave culture. Obvious because most of the victims continue to be black and poor. Obvious because most of the executions go on in the south. Obvious because the methods are hardly different from lynching. Obvious because of the gang violence practiced by these state agencies in bringing individual men and women to their deaths.

We have selected a series of cases that illustrate the inconsistencies, the injustices, the racism, the sexism and the blood mania that defines our system of injustice. These twenty images we hold up as our argument against the death penalty, and with these images we call for an end to the death penalty!

Sam and Katah, April 2008