

# Death Of the People, By the People, For the People

Jonathan Lam APRIL 15, 1965

Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, two young men convicted for the murder of four members of the Clutter family of Holcomb, Kansas, were put to death early yesterday morning, ending an uneasy five-year period of a localized terror and thousands of man-hours of investigation and trial.

According to Smith's confession, the crime began when Hickock heard a rumor from a cell-mate in prison about a safe with large sums of money in the Clutter family. Hickock formed plans to make a robbery and leave "no witnesses" when he left prison. Smith, also on parole, was informed of the plan, and they committed the tying up and shooting each of the four inhabitants of the Clutter house through the head at point-blank range, even though they harbored no money and had pleaded for their safety.

A difficult investigation ensued, headed by Kansas sheriff Alvin Dewey. Multiple false leads were discarded before the inmate who had first introduced the Clutters to Hickock stated that they were the likely suspects. A quick investigation and multiple retrials saw them guilty under the law, finally culminating in their deaths on Wednesday.

During the long months of the initial confusion, a winter descended upon Holcomb; a cold, hostile environment that keeps people inside and away from each other, worried about catching a deadly from suspicious neighbors-turned-strangers. Visitors even reported seeing "fully clothed people, even entire families, who had sat the whole night wide awake, watchful, listening." Fear ran high and trust ran low, and this volatile situation held the town in paralysis until the two murderers were condemned to death.

Despite the terrible fear inflicted upon Holcomb, doomsayers and capital-punishment adversaries alike speculate that their deaths may not be the end of the trial.

Perhaps death can do nothing to heal a society; the murders of four Walker family members followed three months later, an unsolved mystery eerily similar in procedure to that of the Clutters. Years cannot clean the blood of the innocent. People can fade, but remnants of a frightful anomaly cannot.

Some have suggested improving access to education. This seems reasonable: Smith was ripped off his education after the third grade, and Hickock was denied a college education for lack of money.

The problem with education is that although humanity might be learned via social interaction, but ethics are not taught; they're implied and learned through experience. Lowell Lee Andrews, a man previously on the death row, was "an honor student majoring in biology" at the University in Kansas. He was well-educated and wealthy — an indication that schooling does not equate to moral rectitude. In cases such as these, even the most sweeping policy changes — governmental amendments which also have a complexity and sluggishness beyond the scope of this article — cannot help the ill-minded.

Hickock stated prior to his execution that "Revenge is all [capital punishment] is, but what's wrong with revenge? Well, I can see ... they're mad 'cause they're not getting what they want—revenge." Although it cannot affect the crime, one criminal is eliminated. Out of the picture. As with a squashed bug, there is a certainty that there will be no harm done— a fact, a peace of mind, a comfort.

The death penalty is yet another example of the "mob mentality" of society versus man, such as the case with Socrates. It is also arguable, then, that this display of popular opinion makes us ever more democratic — a nomocracy based solely on majority opinion— and therefore more American.

The death penalty is a sociopolitical compromise, a sacrifice for the greater good. They violate the natural right to life. And, as Andrews had pointed out, there were "fourteen [murder victims] and five of [the murderers]" — punishing the perpetrators of atrocious crimes like these do not even satisfy the age-old dictum of justice: "an eye for an eye."

The above statistic also hones in on the reasoning behind the death penalty: it was created as a horrifying punishment for terrible crimes. These people command fear in their cruelty; the government commands fear in them with its iron fist. It is a fair system in light of our current political ideals, reassuring society and allowing it to move on. And this is what Holcomb needs the most: to wipe its tears, get back up again, recover, heal, reform, progress, learn to laugh again.