

## CAPROCK CHRONICLES

# Few of many convicted Lubbock County murderers executed

CHUCK LANEHART



*EDITOR'S NOTE: Caprock Chronicles is edited each week by Paul Carlson, emeritus professor of history at Texas Tech University, This week's essay, by Chuck Lanehart, a Lubbock historian and attorney, looks at executions of Lubbock County murderers.*

Hundreds of murder cases have been staged in Lubbock County. Some resulted in acquittals or mistrials, many resulted in convictions, but only a few of those convicted of murder were executed for their crimes.

Lubbock's first murder trial, in 1913, was State vs. William Taylor, for the murder of Tom Collins. Taylor, a deputy city marshal, shot and killed Collins and J.J. Reynolds at the Blue Front Restaurant. His self-defense claim was successful, and he was acquitted. The second case against Taylor, for killing Reynolds, was dismissed.



Hernandez



Hill



**Joiner**



**Clark**



**McBride**



**Rosales**

Twenty years later, the first death sentence was handed down by a Lubbock County jury. Paul Mitchell was convicted of killing Robert Tharp during the 1932 armed robbery of a grocery store. In 1934, his death warrant was commuted to a life sentence, and in 1950 he was granted a full pardon.

In 1934, a Dickens County case was transferred to Lubbock for the trial of Virgil Stalcup. Stalcup was convicted of murdering Dickens County Sheriff W.B. Arthur during a jailbreak. He was electrocuted at Huntsville in 1936, becoming the first defendant tried in Lubbock County and executed.

The first Lubbock County crime resulting in an execution was State vs. Walter Whitaker. The 20-year-old Reese AFB airman was tried for the January 1953 strangulation of his 18-year-old girlfriend, Joyce Fern White. His fate was decided six months later by a Wilbarger County jury on a change of venue. Whitaker was electrocuted on Sept. 1, 1954.

No other Lubbock County defendant died in “Old Sparky,” Huntsville’s electric chair, Texas’ official execution method from 1924 to 1964. Before 1924, Texas executions were conducted locally in the county of conviction — usually by hanging — and there is no record of a Lubbock County hanging or other form of execution prior to Whitaker’s 1954 electrocution.

Between 1967 and 1977, the US death penalty was suspended. Since reinstatement of the death penalty, ten Lubbock County defendants have been executed by lethal injection.

Michael McBride was convicted of the 1985 shooting deaths of his ex-girlfriend, Christian Fisher, and her companion, James Alan Holzer, outside McBride’s home. Fisher went to the house to collect some personal items, and McBride confronted her with a rifle. He shot Fisher, walked to the car and shot Holzer, then shot himself in the head, but survived. McBride was executed May 11, 2000.

Orien Joyner was convicted in the 1986 stabbing deaths of two waitresses, Carol Lynette Huckabee and Eva Marie DeForest. Both were bound with duct tape and stabbed repeatedly. Joiner lived next door. Blood stains found on Joiner’s shirt tested positive for both women’s blood type. His execution was July 12, 2000.

Mack Hill was convicted in the 1987 robbery-murder of his sometime business partner Donald Franklin Johnson. Johnson’s body was found five months after his disappearance in a 55-gallon drum that had been filled with concrete and dumped into a lake. Hill was lethally injected Aug. 8, 2001.

Adolph Hernandez was convicted of the 1988 robbery and murder of 69-year-old Elizabeth Alvarado in Slaton. Hernandez beat her to death with a baseball bat in her home. Hernandez was executed Feb. 8, 2001.

In October of 1989, Jack Clark murdered 23-year-old Melisa Ann Garcia of Slaton. She suffered two fatal stab wounds to the chest after she was abducted, forced into Clark’s car, taken to a remote area and sexually assaulted. He died by lethal injection Jan. 9, 2001.

Robert Salazar Jr. fatally injured a 2-year-old girl, Adriana Gomez, in 1997. While babysitting the girl, Salazar inflicted wounds consisting of a fractured

skull, bruised heart, fractured ribs and ruptured intestines. After injuring the girl, Salazar placed her in her crib and left the residence. The girl's mother arrived from work, finding Adriana in her crib and Salazar absent. Adriana was pronounced dead at a hospital. Salazar's execution took place March 22, 2006.

In 1997, Michael Rosales burglarized the home of 68-year-old Mary Felder, who surprised him during the burglary. He stabbed her 137 times with a kitchen knife and struck her on the head with a hard object. Rosales was executed April 15, 2009.

In 1998, Michael Yowell shot his father, Johnny Yowell, strangled his mother, Carol Yowell, and set fire to their house. His grandmother, Viola Davis, was unable to escape the burning house and died several days later. He was executed Oct. 9, 2013.

In 2001, Vaughn Ross killed Douglas Birdsall, a Texas Tech administrator and an 18-year-old woman, Viola Ross. His execution took place July 18, 2013.

In 2008, the "Suitcase Killer," Rosendo Rodriguez, was convicted of the 2005 murder of Summer Baldwin, who was 10 weeks pregnant. Her body was found in a suitcase at the city landfill. His execution was March 27, 2018.

Two convicted Lubbock County murderers remain on Death Row: Brian Suniga and Joe Franco Garza.