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The Justice Story: 'The Six Italians' executed for one murder

It all ended with a group of immigrants at the electric chair

BY DAVID J. KRAJICEK / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Sunday, November 6, 2011, 1:04 AM

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DAILY NEWS PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

The crime that provoked the most zealous use of capital punishment in New York history began with bunkhouse bunkum.

And it ended with a queue of six men - all Italian immigrants at the oaken foot of the Sing Sing electric chair.

The events played out 100 years ago this week in the midst of aqueduct construction at Croton Lake in Westchester County.

Thousands of poor laborers were working at Croton for two bucks a day as the reservoir was expanded and new water tunnels to New York were dug. They lived at close quarters. stacked like salted sardines in bunk towns like Bradley's Camp, west of Yorktown Heights.

After hours, they drank and grumbled about the money they were not earning.

In the summer of 1911, bunkhouse chins wagged about the death of a local farmer, William Griffin.

He was not particularly wealthy. His daughter, Anna, and a hired

man ran a modest dairy farm near Turkey Mountain, not far from where the Taconic State Parkway now traverses the reservoir.

They rented rooms to boarders from the Croton project. John Rae, an engineer, lived on the ground floor with his wife, Gertrude, and their two toddlers. Henry Hall, a pipe fitter, lived upstairs with wife Mary.

Farmer Griffin was said to have left a \$3,000 inheritance to his daughter, and the bunkhouse boys reckoned this fortune was lying around the farmhouse.

The rumor inspired sandhog Lorenzo Cali, 27, a fresh immigrant from Italy. He took the information home to East Flatbush, Brooklyn, where he found five recruits for his Croton job.

On the night of Nov. 8, 1911, Cali and his crew set out from a Brooklyn saloon and rode the midnight train 35 miles north to the old Croton station.



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An 80-year-old woman was struck and killed by a driver as she crossed a Queens street Tuesday afternoon.



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They hid in the woods until the men of the Griffin house left for work, then knocked at a Dutch door where Anna Griffin sold milk and eggs.

They bought a quart of milk. As Griffin was making change, ringleader Cali announced a stickup.

Griffin gave them \$4 in milk money and \$13 from her purse. With a gun barrel at her back, she opened her safe and turned over its contents: \$55. There was no fortune.

Gertrude Rae, who overheard the robbery, fled outdoors, carrying her two children. She was chased down by Filippo DeMarco, a dwarf-sized man who menaced her with a pistol but did no harm.

Two other men. Santo Zanza and Angelo Giusto, visited the room of Mary Hall. A few minutes later, they joined the others in a sprint over the hill.

Rae returned to the farmhouse and found Mrs. Hall murdered — gagged with her apron and stabbed. She was killed for \$20 worth of jewelry: a watch, a chain and a bracelet

THE WOMEN notified aqueduct police, who spread the news via a telephone chain and sent an automobile to prowl the lake road. Twenty minutes after the robbery, the mobile cop arrested DeMarco and another of the six, Vince Cona.

A local grocer, George Purdy, apprehended Zanza and Giusta, the two men who had gone to Hall's room. Her jewelry was later fished from the outhouse at Purdy's store, which both men had used after their arrests.

They fingered one another as the killer, but that point would prove moot.

The two others, Sal DeMarco and ringleader Cali, slipped the Croton dragnet but were arrested in Brooklyn.

The nationality of the killing crew prompted outrage in New York.

Italian immigrants and their Black Hand crime fraternity were the subject of alarm a century ago. Many Americans demanded deportation of Italian convicts and a crackdown on the lax immigration laws that allowed them to come here.

There were said to be 500,000 Italians in New York — including a "great aggregation of assassins, blackmailers and thieves," one newspaper clucked.

In the headlines, Cali and his minions became "the six Italians."

Westchester prosecutor Francis Winslow extracted confessions and fast-tracked the cases to court.

Cona went on trial Nov. 27, just 18 days after the murder. Italians were barred from court based upon fears of Black Hand terrorism.

Cona was convicted and condemned to die after a few hours of testimony and 10 minutes of jury deliberation. Cali and Filippo DeMarco met the same fate a day later, followed by Sal DeMarco, Zanza and Giusta — all marked for death.

A paper praised DA Winslow for establishing "a new record in this state for quick action in homicide cases." Meanwhile, the Italian embassy pleaded on behalf of the four who had no hand in the murder. But appeals failed based upon the law of equal culpability.

And so the executions began. First to go was Santo Zanza, on July 12, 1912. The others got their fatal jolts on Aug. 12. Seven were killed in all that day, an

A cop-killer and a wife-killer from New York were followed by Filippo DeMarco. When his body was cleared away, Cona — who had fainted — was carried to the chair, wired for electrocution and executed as he sat limp. The state then put to death Giusta, Cali and Sal DeMarco.

It was another record for New York, unequaled since: six men executed for a single murder.



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4 teens charged with attacking 2 off-duty cops in Brooklyn

A group of Brooklyn teens are accused of ganging up 'Airtight case' against Happy Land arsonist in 1990 Julio Gonzalez, held without bail on suicide watch, was charged with 87 counts of murder for the Happy Land

Driver charged under city's new right-of-

way law in BK crash Alexander Smotritsky, 39, struck Xiali Yue, 61, Monday morning at 21st Ave. and Cropsey Ave.,

killing 87 people in the



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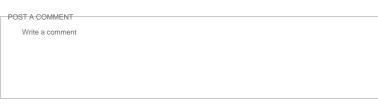






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MAMUWALDE72

The post I made earlier apparently got lost. But, in the eighties I $\,$ visited Sing Sing with a group of others. We were escorted through the prison, then taken down the hill to the old death house. Although 'Old Smokey' (the electric chair) was taken out of the prison, we actually could still smell the horrible stench of urine, excrement and burnt flesh in the same room executions were performed. Although I'm neither proponent nor opponent of capital punishment, here's something those



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hollering for blood need to know: there have been at least twelve or more people in this state (though New York State wouldn't readily volunteer such information to the public) who have been put to death and later discovered to be totally innocent. Yes, innocent! This just makes me wonder how those screaming for someone's head would feel if they discovered that a good friend or relative who's been executed was actually innocent. Through the years, many states have been either careless or racist, ignoring facts which could exonerated the condemned whenever it came to imposing the death penalty. This I do have a problem with. So, if we're going to cry for blood, be decent enough to make sure it's the right person before doing so.

VANILLAGORILLA

1224 days ago

Everyone loves to dump on the Italians. Here we have a hundred year old story DREDGED up for who knows what reason, that paints "the 6 Italians" as criminals. What happened? You couldn't find any current Italian criminals and need to hit the archives? Italians built this nation when they arrived, they fought for this nation, and they have succeeded where other immigrant groups have struggled. God Bless the Italian-Americans who are the backbone of this wonderful nation!!

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