

**Volume 10**

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**Electric Chair**

**Lead: Caught up in the frenzy of competition in the early days of electric power, Thomas Edison gave impetus to development of the twentieth century's most fearsome form of judicial execution, the electric chair.**

**Intro. : *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: In the 1880s, inventor Thomas Edison and industrialist George Westinghouse were locked in a fierce competition over the future of electric power. The issue was transmission. Edison championed**

**direct current, Westinghouse, in alliance with the brilliant and erratic Nikola Tesla, was an advocate of alternating current. Westinghouse eventually prevailed because AC, with its more efficient distribution over longer distances, was clearly the superior choice.**

**Heavily invested in his own approach and with the lucrative New York City market in contention, Edison refused to give up. He attacked alternating current as dangerous and life threatening. On occasion, invited the press out to his West Orange, New Jersey facility where he committed “electricide” on various pitiful animals, including a horse, by shocking them with 1000-**

**volts of AC.**

**In the meantime, though the number of crimes for which a perpetrator could be executed had steadily been shrinking since the Middle Ages, the means by which the guilty could be sent on their way had changed but little. The most prevalent form of execution was hanging, a method increasingly held in disdain by society. In 1886 a commission in New York began looking for another way and they recommended electrocution by alternating current. Edison was ecstatic, but it did him little good. In the end, Westinghouse and AC prevailed. The electric chair as a means of execution had some growing pains. The first man**

**was electrocuted in August, 1890 and though he passed out immediately, his body refused to die and more power was required. Essayist John Steele Gordon, writes, “The autopsy had to be postponed for hours while the body cooled down.”**

**At the University of Richmond,  
this is Dan Roberts.**

### Resources

**Brandon, Craig. *The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland Press, 1999.**

**Essig, Mark Regan. *Edison and the Electric Chair: A Story of Light and Death*. New York, NY: Walker and Company, 2003.**

**Gordon, John Steele. “Thomas Edison’s Deadly Game,” *American Heritage* (October, 2000): 15-17.**

<http://www.ccadp.org/electricchair.htm>

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