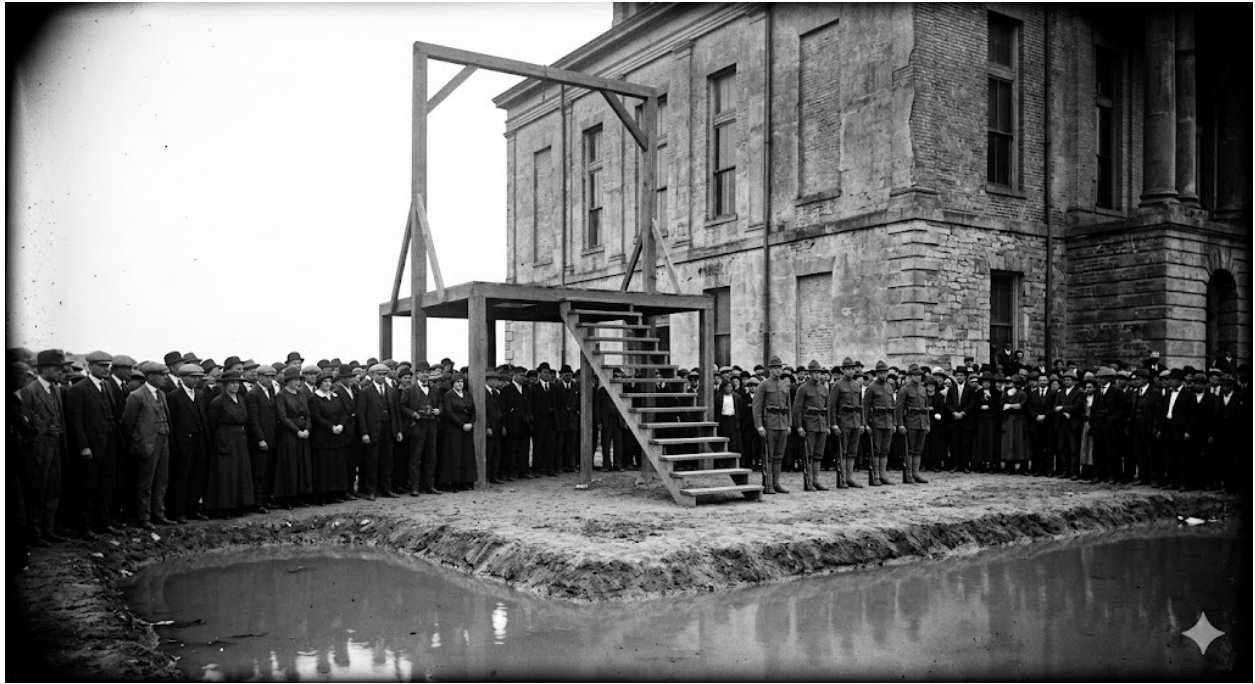




Thirteen Steps: *The Day Six Men Hanged*

Schools were closed. A moat ringed the courthouse. Machine guns were deployed. What happened at high noon was witnessed by hundreds — and haunted the survivors for the rest of their lives. This is how it ended. And why it never really did.

Amite, Louisiana · The Day of Execution, 1922



The Tangipahoa Parish School Board canceled classes. Many businesses locked their doors. The town of Amite woke that morning under something heavier than weather — a collective dread of what was about to be witnessed in the courthouse square, and what it would mean for everyone who watched it.

The preparations were extraordinary. A moat had been dug around the courthouse and filled with water by the fire department to keep the crowd at a controlled distance. Armed Louisiana National Guardsmen lined both sides of the street from the train depot to the courthouse. Additional units from Bogalusa

were deployed around the perimeter. Several Guardsmen manned machine guns on tripods at the courtyard entrance. And there, rising against the west wall of the courthouse, stood the newly built gallows: a massive wooden structure with thirteen steps leading to a platform equipped with two separate trap doors, designed to hang two men simultaneously.

That morning, before the executions began, the trap doors were tested multiple times with weighted sandbags to confirm they functioned correctly. At high noon, the proceedings commenced.

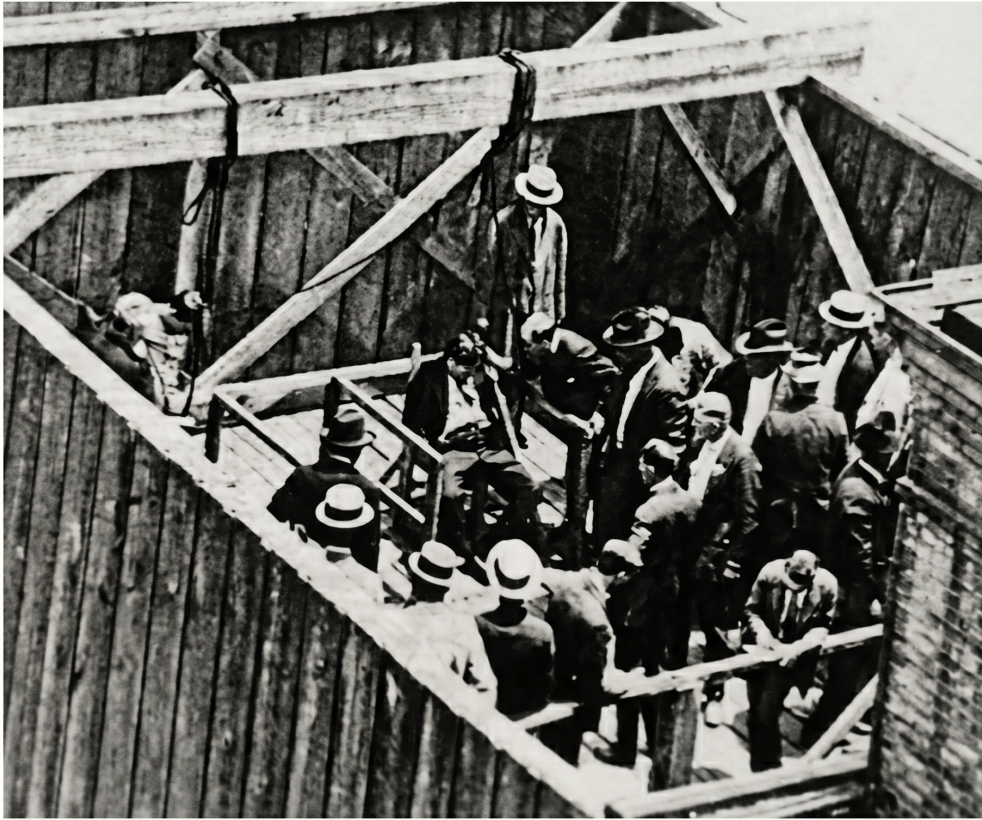
"Standing at the foot of the gallows and watching six men drop to their death in that manner is something I cannot explain and I will never forget."

— Lawrence Calmes, grandson of Rene, who attended as a young man

They went two at a time. Hands bound behind their backs, legs tied with rope drawn up and affixed to their bound wrists, a few words from a priest, a cloth sack over the head, and then the noose. The executioner cut the rope. The sandbags fell. The trap doors opened, and two men dropped. Then two more. Then two more.

But there were extraordinary scenes before the last men walked up those steps. Rosario Leona, the man who had confessed to spare the others, had acquired a switchblade knife in his cell at Parish Prison and stabbed himself repeatedly in the temple, neck, and chest, puncturing a lung. Doctors from Charity Hospital treated him on site and declared his wounds non-life-threatening. He arrived at the Amite courthouse bandaged and visibly ravaged, and walked to the gallows

anyway.



Joseph Bocchio (left trap) and Andre Lamantia (right trap)

And then there was Andrea Lamantia. While waiting in his cell for his turn, Lamantia got hold of a knife and stabbed himself repeatedly in the chest, screaming "I want to die! I want to die!" He was moved immediately to the front of the execution order and rushed to the gallows semi-conscious, bleeding profusely. He could not stand. They seated him in a chair. Moments later, he and the chair together crashed through the trap door.

In the case of Joseph Giglio, death was not instantaneous. The sound that followed — the gagging, the thrashing, the agonized contorting — was one that no one who heard it forgot. Then finally, silence. All six were gone.

Rene Calmes had served as the state's official witness. He climbed those thirteen steps and, just before the hoods were placed over the heads of the two men he knew had pulled the triggers, he walked up to each of them and spoke quietly, from just inches away. Then he watched them drop. Then he walked down, looked at their bodies, signed the required paperwork verifying the sentences had been carried out, and climbed back up the steps to wait for the next pair.

Years later, his son Lawrence was asked what Rene had whispered to those two men in those final seconds. Lawrence said his father had told him: *"None of your damn business."* And so that, too, remained a secret Rene carried to his grave.

"The hanging of the two SOB's that did the shooting was an act of justice being carried out. On the other hand, the indiscriminate hanging of the other four men was a prime example of political power out-weighting anything that even remotely resembles equal justice."

— Rene Calmes

Rene never spoke of any of it again. His son Lawrence — who had participated in the pursuit, attended both trials, and stood at the foot of the gallows — agreed, decades later and over two pots of coffee, to recount the whole story to his grandson Larry, the author of this account. When he finished, Lawrence said: *"It's the absolute worst experience of my entire life. I wish I had not attended the damn executions at all. So now you know as much as I do. Don't ever bring it up again."* And then he wept.

And still the questions lingered. How did men who didn't even know how to find Independence know exactly how much cash was in the vault? Why were the bank's interior lights — always kept on at night — found turned off after the murder, even though the would-be robbers never entered? Who was the bank employee rumored to be connected to a prominent Mafia figure in New Orleans, and who held one of only two keys to the bank's doors? Rene Calmes refused to say the name. His brother Ray gave it to Larry once — and Larry made a promise he has kept ever since: "I never have and I never will."

Seven men were dead. Three small children grew up without their father. The Sicilian community, which had fled the Mafia in Sicily only to find it following them to Louisiana, faced years of strained relations with their neighbors. And somewhere in Independence, a bank employee went home and presumably never slept well again.

Mayor Anzalone, perhaps, said it most plainly: *"Would this have been handled any differently had the six men not been Sicilian? You tell me."*

There were no winners here. Only the dead, the grieving, a community fractured by fear and bigotry, and a set of questions as unresolved as the night is dark. What we are left with — what Larry Calmes has given us in preserving these first-hand accounts — is not a tidy story of justice served. It is something more honest, and more American: a story about who we protect, who we punish, who we listen to, and who we disappear.

The strawberry season ended. The town moved on, slowly. The immigrants earned their place, generation by generation. And on certain still nights in Independence, Louisiana, one imagines that somewhere in the dark, you can still almost hear the creak of a wooden fence being pried apart.



End of Series

This blog series is based on the original account written by Larry Calmes, great great nephew of Dallas Calmes, drawing on first-hand testimony from Lawrence Calmes, Ray Calmes, Mayor Charles Anzalone, and Tom Candiotta. For a fully researched and documented account including court records and photographs, see Spirit of Vengeance by Dr. John V. Baiamonte, Jr.

