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Expert execution witness shares his perspective



John Koch, the journalist who has witnessed the most executions in Florida – 76 as of Feb. 22.

Photo by John Koch - Provided

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SUWANNEE COUNTY – John Koch, 68, has seen 76 executions in Florida, including the first one he watched on Jan. 24, 1989 – Ted Bundy, through the one he watched on Feb. 22, 2018 – Eric Scott Branch.

Theodore Robert “Ted” Bundy was a serial killer, kidnapper, rapist, burglar, and necrophile who assaulted and murdered numerous young women and girls during the 1970s. One of those victims was from Columbia County, and her body was recovered from a shallow grave in Suwannee County, where then-Suwannee County Sheriff Robert Leonard brought out her corpse wrapped in a blue blanket after it was discovered buried near the Madison-Suwannee County Line, Koch said.

Bundy confessed to 30 homicides that he committed in seven states between 1974 and 1978.

As a witness to so many executions in Florida, Koch is the single-most expert who sets the bar. He is a journalist of the highest repute a well. He serves Independent News Service now as he has for decades.

He has been on the radio in the Live Oak area since the mid-1970s.

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On Friday (Feb. 23), Koch spoke with HardisonInk.com about what he has seen. This was within 24 hours of watching the most recent execution in Florida.

Koch has no qualms about the death penalty being exercised on convicted killers in Florida.

Of the 76 people he has seen executed either by electrocution or by lethal injection, Koch said there is only one that that he would have preferred to have seen commuted to a life sentence in prison.

“There are some pretty nasty people in this world,” Koch said. “I myself have been exposed to some really nasty people who I would have like to have seen disappear from my life. They are very violent, very powerful – just bad people.

“And we need a means to remove these people from the gene pool,” he continued, “and know they are going to be removed. Now it might take 10, or 15 or 20 years.”

In regard to the time between a death sentence imposition and it being finally carried out, Koch said he has no problem with that either.

“I might be the one on Death Row unjustly accused,” Koch said. “I would want every opportunity to prove my innocence if I know it is out there.”

Once the system has been completed, he said that is when he is certain the person has had an opportunity for justice to prevail.

Seventy-five out of 76 times he watched a person being executed, Koch believes the convicted person received the exact just punishment for the crime. As for the single other time, he sees a life sentence as being more appropriate then, but that is his opinion.

As for the man who was killed by the state of Florida on George Washington’s birthday (Feb, 22), Koch reported on the radio and in a written version of that event that the man screamed “murderers” as he was being put to death by the state.

The 47-year-old man died at the hands of the government.

With a dateline of Starke and “INS” for Independent News Service, Koch provided a written account on Facebook that is a revised version of his radio broadcast from what he witnessed.

Last minute challenges filed with the United States Supreme Court for a stay of execution for Eric Scott Branch failed, Koch noted.

Branch was lawfully put to death Thursday night at the Florida State Prison in Starke.

“In 1993, Branch ambushed a 21-year-old college student and stole her car but not before taking her to a wooded area, brutally raped and beat her to death,” Koch wrote. “When asked if he had a last statement, Branch asked the execution team to leave the chamber and not participate in his execution as well as saying Florida’s Governor and Attorney General were acting out of a political motivation to seek higher office, and are using his execution as a means to do so.”

Koch then shared what he saw during the 76th execution he witnessed.

“When the order was given to the executioner to begin the injection of the first of three chemicals that would eventually end his life,” Koch said, “Branch began to scream loudly and in a hideous manner, ‘murderers’ and thrashed around on the gurney even though he was solidly secured. For just over one minute, Branch violently moved about and loudly screamed, ‘murderers’ at least three more times before the drug to render him unconscious with his last utterance of ‘murderers’ was eerily heard, and then he laid silent while the last two chemicals stopped his breathing and heart. It took 15 minutes to die before being declared dead by the physician and at 7:05 p.m. the Execution Team Warden announced that the sentence of the State of Florida upon Eric Scott Branch was carried out.”

Koch said as he drove back to Suwannee County along the dark and empty roads between Starke and his home, that death penalty conclusion upset him.

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“That would be the second most-remembered execution that I attended,” Koch said. “You always remember your first – of anything.”

The death of Ted Bundy was his first, almost 30 years ago.

Another memorable execution for Koch, however, was the last use of the electric chair,

That was when Allen Lee Davis (July 20, 1944 - July 8, 1999) was put to death for the May 11, 1982 Jacksonville murder of Nancy Weiler.

That was the last time “Old Sparky” was used in Florida.

This most recent execution on Thursday night of Branch, Koch said, showed a man thrashing around and making a scene.

“I was thinking last night (Feb. 22) as I was on my way home,” Koch said, “and I was ‘detoxing’ or ‘depressing’ or whatever, is that the S.O.B. should have taken it like a man. He should have laid there and taken it like a man.

“He knew what he did,” Koch said. “He was a very violent, and twice violent. He didn’t kill his first victim. He sexually abused and sexually assaulted somebody up in Indiana. That’s what he was in prison for (to be punished for murdering the second victim).”

Koch said he considers sexual assault equal to murder in some cases, because the victim – male or female – is never the same again.

When he was asked about what he sees as a difference between death by electrocution or death by lethal injection, Koch said he sees injections as being more modern.

“Death by the electric chair is medieval,” Koch said. “It was medieval. I disliked (witnessing) it.

“Does the person feel anything?” he asked. “I’m sure you feel the initial juice, but your brain is fried. You don’t feel anything more. The body is reacting (to the continued current).”

As far as death by electrocution being cruel and painful, Koch said it is his opinion that it may be for the initial jolt.

“The Constitution doesn’t say you will have a painless death,” Koch said. “It says you will have a ‘humane’ death. I didn’t think the (electric) chair was the way to go. The chair was barbaric. It was pure, out-and-out only for revenge.”

The physical and psychological effect of the chair, he said, was just for revenge.

Lethal injection as a means of execution, he added, is humane, legal and proper.

“What we have now,” Koch said, “... I should be so lucky to know the date and time, and the way I am going to die.”

Is Koch going to continue to witness executions and report on this to listeners and readers?

“As long as I am physically able to travel to Starke,” he said, “I think it is my duty and my obligation because I am good at it, Jeff. I don’t think you can read my stories and see which side of the fence I am laying on.”

Koch said he has a judge in the Third Judicial Circuit who reads his material as a third party to assure that the broadcaster has kept his personal opinion out of his work. Koch said the people need a journalist to report executions with neutrality and “straight down the line.”

Reporting an execution with a 30-second broadcast window forces him to be concise, accurate and free from editorial opinion.

Koch said he does not like the subject matter that he reports on when it comes to the crimes and subsequent punishment by execution, but he is driven to report this news.

He gets goosebumps when he hears his stories.

He feels that he has accomplished a mission when a person tells him that they listened to his report on the radio and they had to pull their car over to the side of the road because they were so affected.

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Every time one of his editors tells him that he did a really good job, Koch knows he has done what he is called to do.

And as some actual journalists know, there is that *je ne sais quoi* -- there is that certain indefinable, elusive quality, which is especially a pleasing sense that some good for humanity has been accomplished with a story -- even if it has to portray the most evil and vile acts of some very bad people, and in these cases and stories, their just end -- as has been determined by the state of Florida.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: John Koch and Jeff M. Hardison have been friends since October of 1982 when Hardison was a reporter at *The Jasper News*, *Suwannee Democrat*, *Madison Enterprise-Recorder*, and *Perry News-Herald* and on through Hardison's days as the editor of the *Live Oak Star* and *Live Oak Sun*, which ended in 1984 before Hardison moved to Naples to become the business writer and then managing editor of *The Naples Star*. Meanwhile, Koch continued as a radio broadcast journalist in North Florida -- where he remains connected with the Independent News Service (INS).