

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Harold Van Venison, Rapist, Sings As He Meets His Death

Excerpted from

History of
A Famous Scaffold
Used in the Last Legal Hanging in Kentucky

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HAROLD VAN VENISON, RAPIST, SINGS AS HE MEETS DEATH

On June 3, 1938, Harold Van Venison walked to the gallows with a firm step in Covington, Kentucky, to pay Kentucky's age-old penalty of death which is by the hangman's noose.

Deputy Sheriff Howard Adrian placed the black hood over Venison's head and adjusted the noose. Sheriff Berndt turned to four deputies standing at a window sill directly behind the scaffold and said "ready." With their left hands the men grasped four electric switches. The sheriff spoke again, "push." The deputys' hands moved. The death trap swung open. Venison dropped six feet like a shot; his body swayed lightly. That was at 5:38 A. M. A half-minute later Coroner James P. Riffe stepped forward. He applied the stethoscope to Venison's chest, felt his pulse. Stepping back, he handed the stethoscope to his son, Dr. James C. Riffe. He repeated the same procedure with the instrument and moved aside to make room for Dr. Robert E. Reichert. He applied a second stethoscope. In the same rotation the three physicians repeated their actions until Coroner Riffe turned to Sheriff Berndt and said: "This man is dead." The time was 5:54 A. M. Venison had died of strangulation, the coroner said. Deputy Sheriffs Harry Klain, John Shroder, Thomas McGraw and Dewey Wynn lifted the limp body of Venison a short distance. Sheriff Berndt cut the rope.

Venison's body was placed in an undertaker's basket which had been under the scaffold since shortly after midnight. The deputies carried it from the city building enclosure, then through the basement and into an outside hallway. There, Acting Chief Al Schild, of the Covington police department, made finger prints so the federal officials might close their records.

The doomed man's plunge to death through the trap came only eight minutes after he began his last walk at 5.30 A. M. The trail of Venison's last walk started on the third floor of the Covington jail.

Before Venison stepped from his cell, he took part in a religious ceremony held by Maj. Ernest Newton, Middletown, Ohio, and Captain Edward Brewer, Covington, both of the Salvation Army, and Rev. George Vanden, Negro pastor of the Holy Church of God, Cincinnati, Ohio. Standing in front of his cell door, Captain Brewer's hands moved rhythmically, squeezing tunes from a large accordion. Captain Brewer, Major Newton and Rev. Vanden sang "On a Hill Faraway Stood an Old Rugged Cross—an Emblem of Suffering and Shame." Throwing back his head, Venison, clad in white shirt and

trousers and brown bedroom slippers, joined in the hymn with his baritone voice.

The song completed, leaning against the cell bars in front of him, the condemned man requested "God Will Take Care of You," and then added "that's all right." After the music stopped, Venison requested the reading of scripture. Captain Brewer turned to the 14th chapter of the Book of St. John, the convicted man's favorite passage. "I am the way, the truth, and the light; no man cometh unto the Father but by me," came the holy words. "Amen," fell from the lips of Venison. One more time the Salvation Army accordion began the tune of "I Come to the Garden Alone." Then again, Venison's voice, clear and resonant, sang in baritone notes. Venison, the man who had less than one hour to live, was asked if he wished to pray, to which he replied "Yes sir, yes sir, there's always time to pray."

Sheriff Berndt and his deputies entered the cell. About the condemned man's arms they placed the straps—the first of the death equipment he was to feel. With deputies on each side of him, Venison took the first steps of his last walk. Outside, in the hallway of the jail, a cordon of officials started down the stairway. Venison's baritone voice softly singing "Steal Away, Steal Away, Steal Away to Jesus, Steal Away."

Down the cold black iron stairway the procession of death moved. Behind the condemned man walked Rev. Vanden and Sheriff Berndt, and slowly behind them came Capt. Brewer and Major Newton. The hymnal notes and spiritual songs were carried on. From below the stairway they became louder and louder. Soon the marchers neared the first floor. Venison sang louder, more clearly. A corps of newspaper men stood at the first floor of the jail stairway. Rounding the stairway turn, without ceasing to sing, Venison nodded a farewell to them and smiled. Just a short walk around the corner to the jail basement, then through a small tunnel the group moved on. Down three steps they walked; Venison had entered the city building; death now was practically lurking around the corner. The strains of "Steal Away, Steal Away, Steal Away to Jesus" could still be heard. Through a boiler room Venison walked, his step unwavering. Now he was in the building's enclosed yard. Before him stood a weather-beaten wooden scaffold from which he was to fall into space and sudden death. From its top dangled the gray rope of doom.

Only six more steps and the last life to pay by hanging in Kentucky. He stood at the bottom of the scaffold of death. Strongly leading the way, he mounted nine wooden steps, then one more and he was on the scaffold floor. For the first time in his march

the doomed man ceased to sing. Only four more steps across the scaffold floor to the trap door that would send him to death.

Venison stepped onto the trap, Deputy McGraw was holding it so it would not swing open too soon. Capt. Brewer's accordion played another tune—"I Come to the Garden Alone." Venison hummed. The music ended. In but a few seconds Venison's life also was to end. He spoke his last words to the sheriff. Capt. Brewer walked from the building as did Maj. Newton. Rev. Vanden stepped from the scaffold to view his church member's end from the ground below. A score or more of peace officers stood quietly by. The trap was sprung. Coroner Riffe pronounced Venison dead.

Meanwhile there waited outside a large black funeral hearse. Two Negro attendants sat inside, their expressions solemn, unchanging. The long yellow reed basket, once inside the vehicle, the motor roared. Then the large van moved quietly away.

As the 17th and last victim died on the famous scaffold, it was probably brought to the minds of people these words, "All the world's a stage and all the people in it merely players," for on his way to the gallows, knowing he would never sing again, and amid a great applause because of his talented voice, the entertainer, Harold Van Venison, on June 3, 1938, went singing. As on the stage, yet in a different setting, on the night before his death, this rapist calmly admitted his atrocious crime. And on the eve of his death, which seemingly meant nothing to him, he wise-cracked as he was about to eat his last supper. Putting on an act when religious songs were sung in the last hours of his life, and taking part in the last services for him, and in a non-chalant and loquacious manner, Venison spoke much of his assurance of heaven.

As the morning sun came slowly from its hiding, the condemned attacker of the 25-year-old Covington stenographer stood on the scaffold trap to speak distinctly his last words. Less than a minute later, while he hummed a tune, he plunged six feet through the scaffold to his death.