

The Execution of Ruth Snyder

Background:

On Jan. 12, 1928, Ruth Snyder, a 32-year-old New Yorker convicted of murdering her husband, was electrocuted at Sing Sing Prison.

The prison barred photographers. Tom Howard, then a photographer for the *Chicago Tribune*, was “imported” by the *New York Daily News* so he could sit, unrecognized, with newspaper reporters at the execution.

Howard had a miniature camera strapped to his ankle, and a wire with a trigger release up his pant leg. He photographed the electrocution, pulling off one of the most famous sneak shots in journalism. The *Daily News* splashed the black-and-white picture across the front page with the screaming headline, “DEAD!” The paper sold a half million extra copies. Howard reportedly received a \$100 bonus for the image.

This sensational coverage was widely condemned, but not among *Daily News* readers; only a handful wrote to complain.

This incident prompted prison officials to tighten surveillance of all who witness executions. No states currently allow the use of photographic or recording equipment at executions, according to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. But that hasn't kept some photojournalists from seeking permission. They argue that the public has a right to witness the death penalty in operation.