Terre Haute 'death house' only one of its kind in federal prison system

It was 4:36 p.m. a week ago last Friday. I was downing the end of a cup of coffee with friends at the Abbey Coffee on the Bypass.

One-hundred and fifty-two miles southwest, in a brick building that looks like a utilities outbuilding at an industrial site – distant, dangerous, windowless — Dustin Honken took his last, labored breath and the business of state killing ended for the week. He was declared dead at 4:36 on Friday afternoon.

And it had been a busy week. First there was Daniel Lewis Lee on Tuesday, then Wesley Purkey on Thursday, and finally Honken at 4 o'-clock on Friday.

Each of them died by lethal injection, strapped helplessly to a flat table in a tiny room – they call it the death chamber – inside that utility building at the edge of the 1,126 acre federal penitentiary ground just southwest of downtown Terre

No moralizing here today. This shall not be a rant against the evils of the death penalty, of the right of the state to take a life, but merely a look at the place along the Wabash River, how it got there, who and

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how many have been killed there and some thoughts about those waiting in line. There are 59 of them.

Because, you see, we Hoosiers have the distinction of being the only place that our federal government sends people to die. That single-story, flat-roofed building, surrounded by security fence is the only death house in the entire federal prison system. They call it a

"Special Confinement Unit," this place built in the late 1990s to house and kill those assigned to death. What makes it even more special is that the United States is the last nation in the Western world to permit execution, the killing of prisoners.

For a long time, because we couldn't make up our political minds, there was none of this. Only six people – all men – have been executed

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A MOMENT

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by the feds since 1963. The first and most famous: Timothy McVeigh, in the spring of '01. It was he, you recall, who killed 168 men, women and children, in the bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City 25 years ago. Then Juan Garza two weeks later and Louis Jones Jr. in March, 2003. Then 17 years passed and in the summer of COVID, Mr. Lee, Mr. Purkey and Mr. Honken.

And, I suppose, among the employed in Terre Haute are several people — I've no idea how many and they aren't going to tell me —who make their livings by preparing for and carrying out the killing of people that the state has determined must die for whatever heinous crimes they have committed. And make no mistake; the crimes are terrible, hideous: Murder, the killing of children, torture, the dismembering of bodies. The worst that humankind is capable of.

But these people who

work there, who live right there along U.S. 41 or right off of I-70, have lives and homes and families, kids who go to the Terre Haute schools or some other system in Vigo County. It's just that when they go to work . . well, in medieval England the executioner wore a black leather hood so as not to be identified by the family of those he dispatched. In the days of firing squads, one among them fired a blank so no one knew who fired the fatal shot. One was certain he did not. Now we use poison injected with needles and I don't know how we protect the minds of the executioners.

But we haven't given these people anything to do in 17 years until week before last then, boom, the Supreme Court said, in a 5-4 vote, that we could resume the state-sponsored killing of people, and just like that we had three in a couple of days.

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First Lee, then Purkey, then Honken. Three more are in the on-deck circle, to borrow a phrase from baseball. Then another 57 are in cells in this special section of this special prison. Among them, of course, is the little creep, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who, along with his dead brother, blew the legs off people who had come to watch the Boston Marathon seven years ago,. His turn is sure to come. As is the turn for Dylan Roof, who wantonly shot a roomful of people at prayer in

Charleston, S.C. The prison has been there since FDR put it there in 1938. There used to be a bad Hoosier joke about how the government put the federal prison in Terre Haute to save on transportation costs. And there is some truth in that. When it was selected as the federal death house back in the early '90s, among the reasons: Central location to reduce the time spent moving prisoners from other federal sites.

