

Rev. Albert Schaller, OSB

1926-1931

SLAYER MEETS DEATH SMILING

Leonard Belongia Walks to Gas Cell Smoking, Laughing

'Rarin' to Go,' He Replies to Final Call; Holds
Light While Colorado Prison Warden
Reads Execution Warrant

BY WALLIS M. REEF
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CANON CITY, Colo.—Leonard (Lee) Belongia, 25-year-old murderer of a sleeping man, smiled and prayed as he walked unaided into the lethal gas chamber of the state penitentiary here Friday night, true to his boast that he welcomed death and knew no fear. Blond, almost tow-headed, his thin

JOHNSON FIRES SHOT AT HOPKINS

Charges Shriver Was Appointed to Boost Stock of Costigan

Colorado's officialdom rocked with a new sensation Friday when Governor Johnson sent a biting note to Harry L. Hopkins in Washington protesting the appointment of Paul Shriver as works progress administrator of the state.

The governor charged that the chief purpose back of Shriver's selection is to build up political fences for Senator Costigan, who comes up for re-election next year.

Causes Speculation

hair brushed back in pompadour from his high forehead, Belongia (pronounced Belaya) was sealed in the airtight chamber at 7:47 p. m.

At 7:51 p. m., the automatic "arm," operated by a lever from without, dropped a cyanide "egg" into sulphuric acid.

Thin spirals of vapor arose. Belongia breathed naturally. He didn't try to hold his breath. His lips, still molded in a smile, moved with words of a



LEONARD
BELONGIA

prayer taught him by Rev. Father Albert Schaller, who had taken him into the Catholic faith and heard his confession.

At 7:52, the wispy vapor—deadly hydrocyanic gas—reached the youth's nostrils. His head jerked back and remained pressed to the back of the chair in which he was strapped.

Strangest Execution

At 7:59 p. m., Mr. R. E. Holmes, prison physician, pronounced Belongia dead. Blowers to clear the chamber of the gas were turned on a minute later, and at 8:12 p. m. Belongia's body was removed.

With this swift precision one of the strangest executions in Colorado's penal history was over, its dramatic tragedy softened by Belongia's laughter at death, his smiling, unwavering bravery.

Only once did he show any sign of breaking.

That was half an hour before the execution as he sat in his cell in the death house with Father Schaller, his last meal of pork chops, French fried potatoes, salad and strawberry shortcake, finished.

Bargains With Priest

Father Schaller had been with him all day.

Suddenly realization seemed to come over Belongia; he shuddered and whitened.

"Son," said the priest, "this is something we must go thru with. You have been brave and cheerful. Let's not let any sadness come into it now."

After thinking a moment, Belongia brightened and said:

"Well, Father, I'll make a bargain with you. You make your smile last and I'll make mine last, too."

Smokes and Laughs

Belongia's hands were cuffed together, but he was not manacled to a guard as the walk started from his death house cell to the gas chamber, set on top of a small, barren hill.

He walked calmly, with a firm, steady step. His lighted cigar made

Born in Neuhausen, Wuerttemberg 9 June, 1876

Ordained a priest 20 June 1901

Died 28 August, 1958

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a point of light in the fast-falling darkness.

He joked and laughed.

In the gas chamber building, which has two other cells facing the chamber itself, Belongia changed from his prison clothes into white duck trousers and a white shirt.

He kept up a steady flow of conversation.

Warden Roy Best took the death warrant from his pocket and began to read it.

The light was poor, and Belongia grasped the electric bulb that hung at the end of a swinging cord and held it closer to the document.

"Maybe that will be better, Warden," he said.

He was asked by the warden whether he had anything to say.

"Well, I'm all set; I'm rarin' to go," he replied.

There was an awkward pause. Witnesses shivered. Many of them were pale. Their lips compressed and features strained.

"Well, I guess we'd better be going," said Warden Best.

"Sure. Lead me to it," answered Belongia, still calm and cheerful.

"Anything more to say?"

"Well, I hate leaving this swell bunch here; I am not anxious to get rid of a swell gang like this. The warden has been particularly nice to me."

Belongia still smoked the cigar.

He looked at Father Schaller. The priest smiled at him.

"Well, Father," said Belongia, "you've still got your smile and I'm going to keep mine."

Priest Last to Leave

He walked erect into the death chamber, his face spotless and shining from soap and water, his hair newly-cut, his beard shaved.

"Okay, I'm all ready to walk that last mile," he had remarked a few minutes earlier.

Father Schaller was the last to leave the chamber after Belongia had been blindfolded and fastened to the chair with leather bands about his chest and arms.

He grasped Belongia's hand, pressing it firmly. The youth's face lighted up as he returned the pressure.

"Good luck; God bless you," said the priest.

"God bless you, Father," said Belongia.

He began praying. The door closed and was sealed. A few minutes later — minutes that seemed weeks to the witnesses—Belongia was dead.

was dead.

Wounds Victim's Wife

The youth, who had claimed he was glad to die because he realized that if he were to go free he would only commit some new crime, paid the penalty for the murder of Albert Oesterick, Weld County farmer, whom he shot in his sleep after the farmer, his employer, had refused to advance him money to marry a Fort Lupton girl. He also wounded Mrs. Oesterick and beat the couple's son.

During his last days, Belongia convinced himself that criminals could be cured by operations. He said something always "seemed to snap" before he committed a crime. He offered his body to Denver University for study, and Vice Chancellor Wilbur D. Engle turned the offer over to the University of Colorado medical school.

Inquires About Body

Dr. Maurice H. Rees accepted, but it appeared Friday night that Belongia's body would be buried in the prison graveyard on Woodpecker Hill because of lack of funds to bring it to Denver.

Shortly before he went into the chamber, Belongia turned to Warden Best and asked: "Have you heard whether they want my body?"

"I haven't heard yet," the warden replied.

- Could possibly speak Spanish (presided at Spanish speaking masses)
- Served many of the other area parishes
- Was a prison chaplain

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Biographical information provided by St. Vincent Arch Abbey, LaTrobe, PA