

Racist Guilty of Jasper Murder

Unanimous Jury Decision in 2 ½ Hours

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JASPER, Texas – A young white supremacist who dreamed of launching his own hate group was convicted of capital murder Tuesday for chaining a disabled black man to a pickup and dragging him to his death through the East Texas woods last summer.

The jury deliberated 2 ½ hours before returning a unanimous guilty verdict against John William “Bill” King, 24, an ex-con accused of masterminding James Byrd Jr.’s gruesome killing last June 7. Two other white men, friends of King’s, will stand trial later.

The jury foreman, the sole African-American in the group of seven men and five women, delivered the verdict to state District Judge Job Bob Golden. The judge read it before a packed courtroom, quickly silencing a brief outburst of applause.

King showed no emotion as the verdict was read. His father, Ronald, seated in a wheelchair in the front row of the courtroom, cried openly. He later released a typewritten statement through a friend, saying he loved his son as any father should, and was “deeply saddened” by the verdict. He asked for prayers for the Byrd family “as they have shouldered an even greater burden these last several months.”

Byrd’s relatives, who had sat through 4 ½ days of often horrific testimony, also wept as the verdict was read. The victim’s sister, Mary Verrett, said she was relieved by the decision, one that in her view was based on fact, not emotion. “And that’s what we wanted,” she said.

She added that her brother, a singer and piano player, had always told her that one day he would be famous and that “the world would know that James Byrd Jr. had walked on this earth.”

“But I don’t think he wanted to be remembered for this,” she said.

Jurors took a short break Tuesday afternoon and then returned to hear additional testimony in the punishment phase of the trial. That testimony is expected to wrap up today. On Thursday, the lawyers will make closing arguments before the jury decides whether King will get a life sentence or death by injection.

If he goes to death row, King would become the first white person in Texas sentenced to lethal injection for killing a black person since the state resumed the death penalty more than 20 years ago.

As prosecutors began calling witnesses in the punishment phase, Byrd’s 28-year-old daughter, Renee Mullins, and his son, Ross, 20, stood outside the courthouse with their arms around each other. Mullins, who burst into tears when the verdict was read, said it was “a breath of fresh air” that would help bring an end to a nightmare she has lived since her father’s brutal death.

“That’s one down and two to go,” added Ross Byrd, who said he wants King to get the death penalty.

That sentiment was later echoed by his aunt, Clara Taylor of Houston. “If the death penalty is what the government provides for a crime of this sort, then by all means, that’s what we want,” she said.

Across the country, black leaders and anti-racist groups applauded the “swift and true justice” in Jasper. President Clinton said he was heartened by the public’s reaction of outrage to Byrd’s murder, which demonstrated “an act of evil like this is not what our country is all about.”

In his statement to the media, Ronald King, the father of the defendant, said he “prays that no family should ever experience prejudice of any sort ever again.”

The elder King, who may be called to testify during the punishment phase of his son’s trial, also asked a friend, a priest who had accompanied him every day of the trial, to express his sorrow to the Byrd family. The priest approached each member of the family to deliver the message.

“We don’t blame him,” Byrd’s sister, Mylinda Washington, said of the killer’s father. “It was hard for him as a parent to go through that. We’re all losers here.”

King’s attorneys later said that Ronald King, who is ailing from emphysema and stress, was taken to the doctor Tuesday afternoon for a checkup.

In closing arguments earlier in the day, prosecutor Pat Hardy compared King to Adolf Hitler and urged the jury to ignore the defense’s contention that King’s numerous tattoos could be something other than racist or satanic.

“Aryan Pride,” he said, referring to a large tattoo on King’s side. “Ladies and gentlemen, that’s Adolf Hitler. “These symbols have always had a meaning.”

Hardy ended his 20-minute argument by showing the jury a drawing found in King’s apartment of the satanic baphomet symbol with three hooded figures riding horses.

“I hope you all can see this,” Hardy said, “because it shows exactly what was in the mind of John King and his cohorts that night. This amounts to three robed riders coming straight out of hell, and that’s exactly what there was that night.

“Instead of a rope they used a chain. Instead of horses, they were using a pickup truck,” he said. “And after they dragged that poor man and tore his body to pieces, they dropped him right in front of a church and a cemetery.”

Hardy said that with that last act, King and Byrd’s other killers showed their “defiance of everything that most people in this county stand for.”

“And in this state, and in this country,” he added.

Hardy also quoted a jailhouse note, or “kite” that King sent to co-defendant Lawrence Russell Brewer Jr., 31, shortly after their arrests last summer. In the note, which jailers intercepted and photocopied, King bragged about the crime, saying that regardless of the outcome, they had “made history.” He signed the note, “Much Aryan Love, Respect and Honor ... Seig Heil.”

“Honor?” Hardy said. “These were strong men in their 20s and it took three of them to bring down a 49-year-old, half-intoxicated, disabled man. Where is the honor in that?”

During their deliberations, jurors sent out one note, asking to see the kite. They reached their verdict 15 minutes later.

In his closing, defense lawyer Brack Jones Jr. focused on the kidnapping charge, saying that chaining Byrd's ankles to the pickup was the method of death rather than the second crime of kidnapping, which was needed for the capital murder conviction.

"It was a terrible, terrible, brutal, horrendous and painful death," Jones acknowledged. "The question is, was Mr. Byrd kidnapped?"

Defense lawyer C. Haden "Sonny" Cribbs Jr. also reminded the jury that King's white supremacist beliefs did not prove his guilt. "You have a right to be a racist," he said. "You have a right to be a Satanist. Right or wrong, that is his right."

He urged jurors to look again at the physical evidence in the case, a cigarette with King's DNA and a lighter found at the crime scene, and less than a drop of Byrd's blood on King's sandal strap. None of those things placed his client definitely at the scene, he said.

He dismissed the prosecution's theory that the cigarette butt was King's and that another person's DNA on it could have been Byrd's.

"If the man is such a severe racist, he's not going to share a cigarette with a black man," he said.

More likely, he said, was a scenario in which King smoked the cigarette earlier in the day and put it in the ashtray of co-defendant Shawn Berry's truck, where Byrd later found it.

Byrd, 49, a well-known local figure who walked everywhere he went, was headed down Martin Luther King Boulevard on his way home from a party early on June 7 when he accepted a ride with three white men in a pickup.

Evidence in the case indicated that King, a member of the Confederate Knight of America prison gang, and his buddies Berry and Brewer, took Byrd to a clearing in the woods east of Jasper, beat him, pulled his jeans to his ankles and changed him to the pickup.

Byrd was then dragged more than two miles. Along the way, he fought to keep his head off the pavement, grinding his elbows, knees, heels and buttocks to the bone before his head slammed into a concrete culvert, killing him.

The next morning, Byrd's battered, beheaded body was found in the middle of Huff Creek Road. His head, shoulder and right arm lay in a ditch a mile away.

After the verdict, Cribbs described defending King as "climbing Mount Everest," saying it was nearly impossible to overcome the damning evidence in King's own writings.

Nearly every day of the trial, prosecutors produced incriminating letters and other documents, many handwritten and signed with King's distinctive signature, "Possum," with Nazi lightning bolts for the SS, and a triangular symbol with three interlocking K's.

King even scratched the words "White Pride" into his cell door, and wrote "Shawn Berry is a snitch-ass traitor" in his cell.

Berry, who also is charged in the case, pointed the finger at King and Brewer following his arrest, and led police to a 24-½ foot logging chain used to drag Byrd. He and Brewer will be tried separately later.

When court recessed for the day, Byrd's father, James Byrd Sr., thanked prosecutors for "a fine job" on the case and thanked the community for its support of his family.

The victim's mother, Stella Byrd, has been absent from the courtroom during the trial, but her daughters said she was relieved by the verdict.

I saw her smile for the first time in a long time," Taylor said.

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