

WEATHER

Periods of showers and thunderstorms, 100 percent chance, locally heavy; high in lower 70s. Tonight showers and thunderstorms likely, then mostly cloudy; low around 50. Saturday variable cloudiness; high in lower 70s. DETAILED Page 2.

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71ST YEAR—NO. 290

Star witness says ID 'prompted by pressure'

Pardon sought for Wetzel in 28-year-old slaying

BY ADRIENNE IVEY
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The star witness in the 28-year-old murder of an N. C. State Highway Patrolman has admitted his identification of the man convicted for the crime was prompted by pressure from law enforcement officers.

Robert Terry Jr. of Norman on Thursday appeared before a notary public in Hamlet and signed a statement saying he could not positively identify Frank Wetzel, now serving a life sentence for the killing of Patrolman Wister Lee Reece on Nov. 5, 1957, as the killer.

This morning, Wetzel's wife, Bianca Brown Wetzel of the Airle Community near Littleton, presented Terry's notarized statement to James Trotter, legal counsel to Gov. James Martin. Mrs. Wetzel is requesting that the governor issue a pardon of innocence for Wetzel based upon the statement. Wetzel is scheduled for parole review again next month.

Wetzel, who was transferred to Caledonia Prison Unit at Tillery in 1981, drew a second life term for the killing of another state patrolman, James Thomas Brown, near Sanford on the same night. Court testimony set the two killings as occurring within about 20 minutes of each other and the murder scenes were determined to be 47.43 miles apart.

The following is a portion of the deposition made by Terry:

"At the time of my arrest Nov. 5, 1957, a tremendous amount of pressure was exerted upon me by the police to identify the man who allegedly killed North Carolina State Trooper Wister Lee Reece.

"I am unsure that Frank Wetzel was the driver in whose car I was riding the night of Nov. 5, 1957.

"Before the trial I was shown many pictures for identification and was shown pictures of Frank Wetzel before the line-up in Raleigh. Even at the line-up I was under great pressure by the police and I was not sure Wetzel

was the right man; I was not able to identify him as Reece's killer.

"I never recognized the color of the car I was riding in and made no statement until I was taken into custody, and then gave a description of the car's interior only as being black and white or cream and white.

"The car I was riding in had a small green light over the ashtray and had no luggage and/or boxes in the window or backseat to obstruct my vision. The only time I saw any merchandise or boxes was during the trial, where there were many tables stacked high with materials.

"I was used by the state and police and Wetzel became their scapegoat.

"I could not definitely identify Frank Wetzel beyond the shadow of a reasonable doubt in 1957 and I cannot do so now."

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Terry, age 30 when he testified, will be 59 years old next Tuesday. He is unemployed.

In the Background

Wetzel, who was 36 years old at the time, was arrested in Bakersfield, Calif., on Nov. 19, two weeks following the dual murders. He was subsequently convicted of both crimes and has been in custody of the N. C. Department of Corrections since Dec. 9, 1957. He has consistently maintained his innocence of the killings.

A Virginia man, Frank Drew of Martinsville, was instrumental in interviewing Terry and ultimately obtaining the statement being presented today.

A Herald exclusive

Mrs. Wetzel was voluble in her praise of Drew who describes himself as "an insurance underwriter." Drew is also involved in public relations work for small companies.

"He has really worked hard to win Terry's confidence and to bring him (Terry) to the point where he was ready to tell what really happened," Mrs. Wetzel said. She said that Terry had been thoroughly intimidated in 1957 and is still afraid.

Wetzel and the former Mrs. Brown were married at Caledonia Prison on Sept. 2, 1982. It was his first marriage; her third. "It's been almost a five-year struggle through all the legal channels," she said before leaving for Raleigh this morning. Her efforts to free her husband began even before their marriage.

In addition to Terry's testimony at the trial, Mrs. Wetzel points to numerous contradictions in other evidence presented. These discrepancies, she believes, were not given proper weight at the time of the trials — which were conducted, she said, "in a carnival atmosphere."

At the time of the murders, Wetzel had escaped from a New York state mental hospital which he had entered on a voluntary commitment. He said he had committed himself in order to be in a better position to escape police custody since he was scheduled for confinement in Attica Prison for parole violation.

His destination, he said, was Mississippi where his younger brother, Billy, was on death row for the killing of a prison inmate. He never reached his brother. The automobile he stole on his flight from New York was abandoned in Chattanooga, Tenn. He took another car and proceeded to California where he was apprehended.

Five days after Frank Wetzel's conviction for the murder of Patrolman Reece, his brother was executed by the State of Mississippi.



FRANK WETZEL
in 1979 file photo