

Wetzel Pleads "Not Guilty"; Jury Selection Begins Today

By CHUCK HAUSER

Observer Staff Writer

ROCKINGHAM — Almost in a whisper, Frank Edward Wetzel answered "not guilty" Monday evening to a bill of indictment charging him with the first degree murder of Highway Patrolman Wister Lee Reece.

The selection of a jury to try Wetzel on the capital charge will begin at 9:30 a.m. today in the spacious Richmond County Superior Courtroom here.

A new grand jury, selected Monday morning, returned a true bill of indictment at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

The 36-year-old defendant from Seneca Falls, N. Y., was brought to Rockingham by State Prisons

Department officials shortly before 6 p.m.

He was taken directly to the courtroom, where Judge J. A. Rousseau of North Wilkesboro was waiting to conduct the arraignment.

Solicitor M. G. Boyette of Carthage read the indictment which named Wetzel as the man who gunned down Patrolman Reece near Ellerbe, a few miles

north of here, on the night of Nov. 5, 1957.

Wetzel stood, eyes downcast, as he listened to the charge. At one point he nervously drummed the fingers of his left hand on the top of the table in front of him.

Boyette completed the reading and asked, "How do you plead?"

Wetzel raised his eyes and looked at the solicitor. "Not guilty," he said softly.

"How will you be tried?" Boyette asked, following the ancient ritual prescribed for capital cases.

Prompted by his court-appointed attorney, John T. Page Jr. of Rockingham, Wetzel made his

reply in the same low voice: "By God and my country."

"May God give you a due deliverance," Boyette responded.

The solicitor then turned to the bench and asked that a 150-man venire be called to report to court this morning for the process of selecting the jury to try the case.

Defense Attorney Page, ending weeks of speculation that he might ask for a postponement of the trial, asked that the venire be drawn from the regular jury box.

Judge Rousseau agreed, and the mechanics of drawing the 150 names from the venire box began. A tiny three-year-old blond girl, Kathy Currie of Rockingham, drew the names of the people who will hold Frank Wetzel's life in their hands.

After the drawing, Wetzel was taken to the Richmond County jail, instead of being returned to Raleigh where he has been confined in Central Prison awaiting trial.

Earlier in the day four-year-old Janice Kay Gibson of Rockingham was given the assignment of selecting the names of the grand jurors who were to decide whether Wetzel would go on trial.

Symbolically, the child pulled the pieces of paper on which the names were written from the hat of a highway patrolman standing in the courtroom.

Wetzel, neat, handsome defendant, is accused of killing another patrolman, J. T. Brown of Sanford, on the same night that Reece was slain. However, he is being tried at this time only for the slaying of Reece.

The state is expected to claim that Wetzel killed the two officers to prevent them from interrupting his plans to go to Mississippi to free his brother, scheduled to be executed Jan. 17 for the murder of a fellow prisoner inmate.

The grand jury, composed of 16 white men, one Negro, and one white woman, spent an hour and 15 minutes deliberating on the indictment against Wetzel.

The jury heard testimony from three witnesses — Robert Terry Jr., Negro lay preacher from Norman, who hitch-hiked a ride with Wetzel the night of the slayings; Dr. C. L. Ingalls of Rockingham, who pronounced Reece dead at Richmond County Hospital, and Highway Patrol Sgt. E. C. Guy, Reece's immediate superior.

Terry alone took up 40 minutes of the jurors' time. Newsmen watched through a glass-pannelled door as he testified, half perched on his knee, looking directly at the jury and speaking rapidly and earnestly.

RICHMOND COUNTY COURTHOUSE