

PRISONER GOT LIFE SENTENCE AFTER BITTER TRIAL JAN. 10

Sentiment Here was Not So Much in Favor
Of Frank Wetzel But Displeasure at The
State for Apparently Capitalizing Case.

WETZEL MAY BE TRIED AT SANFORD IN FEBRUARY

A Sensational Trial at
Rockingham Lasting Four
Days and Two Nights.

The Richmond county Court-house was built in 1923 and 1924, and was formally dedicated September 11, 1924. It seats 505 people, gallery and courtroom. It was given a severe test during the Frank Wetzel murder trial that began at Rockingham at 5:53 p. m. January 6, 1958, and ended with a guilty verdict at 5:58 p. m. January 10th. Sessions were held day and night and not only was every seat taken but not an inch of standing room was left unoccupied.

Wetzel was charged with the murder of Patrolman W. L. Reece on northern edge of Ellerbe about 7:53 p. m. November 5th. The evidence at the trial here last week was mostly circumstantial, and the jury simply would not bring itself to send the man to the gas chamber—when there might be doubt that he was the man who so brutally shot down a brave officer in the discharge of his duties. And so the jury of ten men and two women brought in a verdict of guilty of first degree but with recommendation for mercy—which automatically carried a life imprisonment sentence.

The defendant did not take the stand. Nor did his court-appointed attorney, John Thomas Page, offer any testimony. Throughout the trial the defense lawyer sought to break down the evidence of the State's star witness, a Negro named Robert Terry, who claimed he was riding with Wetzel when the Patrolman stopped the car in Ellerbe Nov. 5th on a routine speed check.

Also, there seemed to be discrepancies in the testimony of

certain officers, especially as to descriptions given the murderer by Terry the night of the murder!

In short, many felt that the State authorities had tried to make a show and a display of Wetzel in the way the man was kept in the pen and shuttled back and forth to Rockingham by seemingly armed might.

Right or wrong this seems to have set badly with the majority of our people.

Hard to Get Prisoner.

The prisoner had been brought from California by our Sheriff and two pen officers, and he could have easily been kept in the Richmond county jail. But the powers-that-be (in Raleigh?) wouldn't have this—he was kept in Raleigh. And even the day that the trial started—on Monday, January 6th, it seemed to take TWO

phone calls by Judge J. A. Rousseau to the penitentiary at Raleigh before the prisoner could be brought to Rockingham. The first call was at 2 p. m. The second call at 2:50—and the prisoner did not get to Rockingham until 5:51 p. m.

What goes now?

May be Tried at Sanford.

Reports from Solicitor Jack Hooks of the Lee county district are that Wetzel will be tried at Sanford perhaps at a special term in February, he to be charged with the murder of Patrolman James L. Brown some eight miles southwest of Sanford the night of November 5th about 50 minutes after Patrolman Reece had been killed at Ellerbe. The distance between the two points is 50 miles. The State will again put him on trial for his life, this time charged with killing officer Brown. It is believed the main evidence will be that the murderer is supposed to have been driving a 1957 Olds.

A Lee county lawyer will be appointed to defend Wetzel, and it is possible Atty. John Thomas Page may be named to assist.

The Rockingham Trial.

Judge J. A. Rousseau presided at the trial here in Rockingham, with Solicitor M. G. Boyette prosecuting. As stated, the Court appointed John Thomas Page to defend Wetzel. He was arraigned at 5:53 p. m. Monday, January 6th. The Judge then ordered 150 persons summoned for next