

Terry: 'I was just a puppet'

7

BY ADRIENNE IVEY

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Did Justice's blindfold slip during the murder trial of Frank Wetzel in 1958? Could he be convicted today on the evidence presented then? Would law enforcement and prosecution be allowed to follow the same procedures, be permitted the same latitudes?

On March 4 — 28 years after Wetzel's conviction for the 1957 murder of N. C. State Highway Patrolman Wister Lee Reece — this reporter talked with the state's chief witness at the trial. Also present were Bianca Brown Wetzel of Airlie, wife of the convicted man, and Frank Drew of Martinsville, Va., who arranged the interview. Drew had been retained by Mrs. Wetzel to assist in uncovering evidence to be used in her efforts to win the release of her husband.

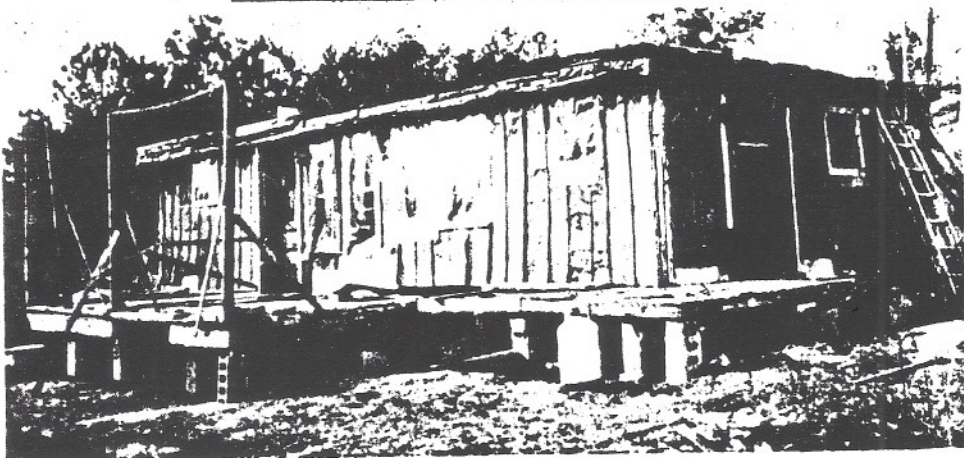
Robert Terry Jr. will be 59 years old next Tuesday but he was a 30-year-old hitch-hiker on Nov. 5, 1957. We found Terry just outside of Norman, a small town in the central Sandhills area of the state. On the night of the murder, Terry was making his way from New York to his home in Hamlet.

We followed Drew down a dirt road thinly covered with gravel, passing several deteriorating houses and mobile homes, until we reached a flat-roofed shack with a quivering, half-built wooden porch. Scrap lumber and "found" building materials had obviously been used in the construction. The shack was situated in a junk-yard, surrounded by disabled appliances, discarded tires and a wild assortment of other household and automotive flotsam and jetsam.

The interior of the structure was as depressing as the outside. There was no running water but the reporter surmised there was electrical service because there were lamps and a television set in the room. Several kerosene heaters sent temperatures in the living room soaring, a discomfort we endured for the better part of five hours as the talk continued.

Inside the house, Terry introduced us to his brother, Pete, who he said lives in High Point. Robert Terry, thin and aging, wore striped pants, a brown floral-print shirt and a beige cap with a narrow bill. He smoked constantly during the interview. His

A Herald exclusive



Residence of Robert Terry in Norman

brother simply observed the proceedings, nodding to indicate agreement or disagreement.

Terry's first words were "no tapes" as Drew placed a tape recorder on the coffee table. Once assured he was not being recorded, he began to talk.

It seemed that his chief concern was that "they" — meaning the state — had not paid him for his part in the Wetzel trial as he had been promised. He said he had given a deposition to a Judge Johnson in Lillington (Harnett County) a few days after the killing and before Wetzel was arrested. At that time, he said, the judge had promised he would be paid for all his time. "They would take care of me."

However, he said indignantly, up to now he has received only the approximately \$3 per day witness fee. He said he has contacted the Clerk of Court in Harnett, Lee and Richmond counties but no one has any record of the deposition. The judge is dead and the only other witness was the stenographer he knows only as "a white woman."

Throughout the interview, Terry repeatedly declared, "They just used me. . . I was just a puppet." The reporter asked Terry point-blank: Was the man with you in that car Wetzel? He responded, "Now that's another area." (To certain questions he was extremely cautious, evasive or gave ambiguous and nebulous an-

swers.)

What does that mean, I asked.

"The man who did it knows — and I know," Terry said. A pause. "I am in torment and he (Wetzel) is in prison." All during the years, he explained, he has been tormented by doubts that he identified the wrong man. He said he never really saw the man he was riding with in the car.

But hadn't he picked Wetzel from a police line-up? "The line-up," he said. "That was another thing. . . I wasn't sure in my heart it was Frank (Wetzel)." He said the line-up had initially been made up of seven or eight men but was narrowed down to two.

"Frank, he appeared tired." The record shows Wetzel was shackled for the line-up. "The other man was lively." During all of his interrogations, he was subjected to tremendous pressure, he said. Terry maintains that all his statements given at the time were distorted by law enforcement people, in court and in the extensive press coverage.

The witness admitted his animosity toward the press but acknowledged that "things are different now. . . If the people and the public knew, if it was written in the newspaper. . . I was used as a puppet. I was a dog."

Back then, he said, he was picked up at the whim of police and "hauled everywhere," including Rocking-

ham, Chattanooga, Kentucky. "I'm afraid to refuse," he said, "but I didn't know my rights. . . Little by little it unfolded to me what they were doing — but I wasn't aware of it then."

At that time, he remembered, he was under the impression there were five or six witnesses but "Recently, I found out I was the ONLIEST witness." He seemed to sense our questions cast doubt on his veracity. "All of my statements are true," he said, ". . . cannot be contradicted. . . I want them (law enforcement) to show and point out to me. . . that they can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Frank is guilty. I was a puppet, that's all."

Terry was taken into custody at the scene of the murder and although he was never charged with the crime, he says he was treated like a prisoner. He said he was confused and frightened. He didn't know whether to identify Wetzel or not. If he said Wetzel was not the man and Wetzel pleaded guilty, he would be in trouble.

After Mrs. Wetzel and the reporter left the house, Terry repeated the salient points to Drew and allowed his words to be recorded.

Norman is a good three-hour drive from Roanoke Rapids, about 50 miles southwest of Sanford. Elerbe, the scene of the patrolman's murder, is about six miles south of Norman.