

## HAYS COUNTY COURTS

# Jury sentences killer to death

## Police now also link Willie Roy Jenkins to murders of three women in Texas, N.C.

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Jenkins

SAN MARCOS — As jurors sentenced convicted killer Willie Roy Jenkins to death Thursday, the first death sentence in Hays County in more than 20 years, police named Jenkins as a suspect in three unsolved murders dating back to the mid-1970s.

Jenkins, 59, was sentenced to death in the 1975 murder of Sheryl Ann Norris after jurors deliberated for four hours.



Norris

Following the sentencing, Cmdr. Penny Dunn of the San Marcos Police Department said that Jenkins is being investigated in two murders that occurred in San Antonio, one in December 1976, the other in May 1977. The victims were Nancy Freese and Linda Hopwood.

Serial killer Henry Lee Lucas confessed to those murders, but he took credit for hundreds of murders and later recanted. Detectives were always skeptical of Lucas' confessions in the San Antonio killings and considered Jenkins a suspect at the time of the crimes, Dunn said.

The other murder is believed to have occurred in May 1975, when 19-year-old Marine Jane Ellen Kidder disappeared from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, Dunn said. Jenkins was serving in the Marine Corps at that time and was assigned to Camp Lejeune, she said.

Jenkins has not been charged in the three killings. Dunn did not indicate when, or if, charges will be filed against him in those cases, which she said have recently been reopened.

The revelation that Jenkins — who was linked by DNA evidence to the 1975 Norris murder 35 years after the crime — is suspected in three additional killings

came at

the end of a day in which prosecutors portrayed him as a brutal serial rapist.

While in prison and jail, Jenkins beat fellow inmates bloody and intimidated accused killers who were assigned to share cells with him, they said.

“This defendant has spent the last 35 years earning his trip to death row,” District Attorney Sherri Tibbe told the jury of six men and six women.

The defense presented Jenkins as a man who had no chance. He had a difficult childhood and was sexually preyed upon in his teens, attorney Norman Lansford said. He argued that those circumstances mitigated the crime and asked the jury to spare Jenkins’ life.

### **‘Her day in court’**

Jenkins was convicted May 31 of murdering Norris on Nov. 24, 1975, in her San Marcos apartment. She had been attacked when she went home on her lunch break from work, prosecutors said.

She was raped, strangled and drowned in a bathtub. Much of the prosecution’s case rested on DNA evidence that was found on her body.

Jenkins was not identified as a suspect until 2010 when DNA technology had advanced enough to reveal a full DNA profile that could be compared on national databases. Those databases returned a match for Jenkins, who had been forcibly committed to Coalinga State Hospital in California for a pattern of violent sexual behavior following his release from prison on rape charges.

The victim’s sisters were in the courtroom throughout the trial and

burst into tears when the sentence was read. They later thanked jurors, law enforcement officials and prosecutors in a statement: “Sheryl has finally received her justice — her day in court.”

During the punishment phase of the trial, prosecutors outlined Jenkins’ previous rape convictions. He had pleaded guilty to one of the rapes in California four days before Norris was murdered. Jenkins was out on bail in that case.

Three months after the Norris murder, he was sentenced to six months in jail in California and three years of probation.

Jenkins was convicted of the 1977 rape of a San Antonio woman. After he was released from prison in Texas in 1981, he was extradited to California for violating his probation.

In California, he was again convicted of rape in 1983 and again in 1991. After serving 10 years for the 1991 rape, he was committed to the state hospital in 2001.

“This is the boogeyman,” said prosecutor Lisa Tanner of the Texas Attorney General’s Office. “This man is the personification of everything every woman on earth has learned to fear.”

The prosecution also presented testimony from inmates and staff at Coalinga State Hospital who had been assaulted by Jenkins. Nearly all of the assault victims had to be hospitalized for several days after the attacks.

During his time in Hays County Jail, Jenkins’ fellow inmates Paul Tovar, an accused killer with ties to the Mexican mafia, and Willie Griffin, charged in the 2011 death of an Austin woman and the rape and attempted murder of a 17-year-old girl, both asked to be moved to a different area of the jail away from Jenkins “before somebody gets hurt,” according to jail records.

## **‘A throwaway’**

Lansford said Jenkins was a product of his upbringing in a poor area of Houston, where he was abused and abandoned by his parents and family members.

“This kid never had a chance,” Lansford said. “He was a throwaway from the minute he was born.”

The defense also argued that Jenkins was the victim of sexual predation by his ex-wife, Merle Jenkins. She was 15 years his senior when they met while Willie Jenkins was a high school student in Marion.

Jenkins received a football scholarship to Southwest Texas State University, now Texas State, to play football, but dropped out after the first semester. Jenkins was on leave from the Marine Corps to visit his wife in the hospital in San Antonio on the day Norris was killed.

”We hope this case

— the oldest cold case in Texas to be solved — will bring other victims a sense of peace, closure and allow them to move on with their lives,” the Norris family said.

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