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Lucas: shameful saga ending

Out in El Paso, the once-sensational legal saga of Henry Lee Lucas is coming to a close. That is a blessing, because his bizarre story has been a major embarrassment for Texas.

After listening to two months of testimony in a pretrial hearing detailing how Mr. Lucas was induced by offerings of pizza, hamburgers, strawberry milkshakes and cigarettes to admit to dozens of murders he did not commit, a state district judge dismissed charges against him.

Investigators contended that the El Paso case, involving the ax-slaying of a 72-year-old woman, was one of the stronger against Mr. Lucas. But in the end, the judge decided his confession was as phony as a three-dollar bill — just as phony as the other confessions he gave over a two-year-period claiming responsibility for 200 slayings in 26 states.

It has become increasingly clear that the reason the drifter admitted the crimes was that he was having a ball stringing in-

vestigators along, that he was getting a free tour of the U.S. and that by keeping the game going he could postpone a date with death row.

Lucas won't go free. He has been convicted of killing a hitchhiker near San Angelo, although he claims his confession in that case was false, too. According to one of his court-appointed attorneys, Lucas probably is guilty of only two murders — the killing of his 15-year-old girl friend and an elderly woman in Montague County.

Texas Rangers and investigators in other states used Lucas' confessions to clear their books of many unsolved murders. After it was shown he couldn't have been two places at once, Lucas came clean and said he was perpetrating the biggest set of bald-face lies since the heyday of Joseph P. Goebbels.

We hope the officials who swallowed his nonsense, or abetted it by plying him with strawberry milkshakes and pizza, have learned a lesson. The criminal justice system doesn't deserve that kind of black eye.