

Waco DA gets his say on Channel 8



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Never mind those nasty words that Waco District Attorney Vic Fezell had for Channel 8 the other night. It was *how* he said them that counted. Those who caught his "Hi, I'm Vic Fezell" editorial reply Tuesday on

Channel 8 probably would agree that the guy was "good television." Smooth, vigorous delivery, steady eye contact, relaxed appearance — Fezell had it all Tuesday night, when his unedited reply took strong exception to a July 25 "Perspective" from Channel 8 anchor Tracy Rowlett, whose commentaries immediately follow some of the station's 10 p.m. newscasts.

Rowlett had commended a series of 10 stories by Channel 8's Charles Duncan, who reported that Fezell's office allegedly had gone easy on a number of drunken drivers and drug peddlers. Fezell refused to be interviewed on camera about the charges, Duncan reported. But when Rowlett offered his commentary, Fezell became eligible to make an unedited reply. He took full advantage of that with a sit-up-and-take-notice performance that had viewers talking Wednesday morning.

Fezell, in a reply taped at Channel 8 studios, said the station had neglected to report that his McLennan County office has a higher drunken-driving conviction rate than Dallas or Tarrant counties. He said his office had solved the "Lake Waco triple murder case" after the police had "given up on it." And furthermore, Fezell said, his felony conviction rate was the highest in the state.

Then it got really interesting.

"Why didn't Channel 8 tell you the rest of the story?" Fezell asked. "I don't know. I do know that when we exposed the fact that Henry Lee Lucas couldn't possibly have killed 600 people, a lot of powerful people got embarrassed. Then they got mad. We figure that this Channel 8 Duncan thing was just another chapter in what

■ Speaking of Soaps will run Monday.

Vacoans now call 'Lucasgate.'

Building up to a big finish, Fezell said that Rowlett "questioned three things" during his "Perspective." Rowlett had said:

■ Fezell owed the people of Waco an explanation.

■ Fezell wouldn't talk to Duncan on camera, but had called the reporter a "sissy" in print.

■ "Honk If You Hate Channel Eight" bumper stickers were being distributed in the Waco area.

"Well, folks," Fezell said, "the people of Waco have seen my record day after day, and 10 random shots of insinuation don't add up to any big questions.

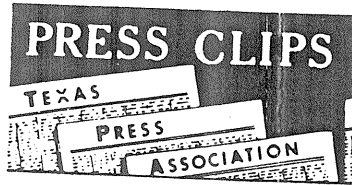
"Number two, Mr. Rowlett seemed upset that I called Charles Duncan a sissy. Well.

"Number three, since Duncan's report, a bumper sticker, 'Honk If You Hate Channel Eight,' has circulated in Waco. That's true. And you know, there's only one problem with that bumper sticker. If you have it on your car, you're gonna get honked at — a lot. I'm Vic Fezell."

The district attorney's rebuttal was both unique and persuasive, at least on the face of it. Many who saw it might not have seen — or remembered — either Duncan's reports, which ran from mid-June through early July, or Rowlett's "Perspective," delivered a month earlier. Is it possible that an electronically attuned politician made a bigger, better impression with his one-night stand?

"I gave it no thought then, and I've given it no thought since then," said Duncan, who was watching at home when Fezell's slam-bang theater came on. "The only thought that I had was that he again has failed to address the real issues."

Commenting on Fezell's use of the word "sissy," Duncan said, "That's pretty mild compared to what I've been called. Please see WACO on Page 2F.



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during eight years of doing this. (Being called) a sissy isn't going to disturb me."

Channel 8 News Director Marty Haag said it was the station's policy to "bend over backwards" to accommodate anybody who is the subject of one of Rowlett's "Perspectives."

"The walls of Channel 8 aren't going to fall down if someone has a strong and articulate disagreement with us," Haag said.

He acknowledged, however, that Channel 8 may have to rethink that position when a subject of news stories opts for "a straight shot without having to answer any tough questions."

This week, while Feazell fired back, Channel 8 reporter Brad Watson began a series of reports that charged another out-of-town law enforcement official — Rockwall County Sheriff John McWhorter — with wrongdoing in office. McWhorter, like Feazell, has refused to be interviewed on-camera, Watson said. The series was put on hold Wednesday after it appeared possible that one of McWhorter's assistants would consent to an on-camera interview, Watson said.

In Monday's report, Watson talked to a man who alleged he was beaten by the sheriff. He also interviewed, on camera, two former deputies who claimed to have witnessed the alleged beating. The allegations were illustrated by an artist's drawings that showed McWhorter in the act of beating

up the complainant and shooting several of his dogs. What viewers saw, in essence, was McWhorter committing violent acts that only have been alleged, not proven.

Haag defended the use of the drawings, by artist Gary Myrick.

"I think that you have to consider that television is, after all, a marriage of the visual and audio," Haag said. "I can see that maybe some viewers will see this as a literal translation, but it should be taken in the context of a depiction of what is being said at the time."

The illustrations might not have been used had McWhorter agreed to tell his side of the story on camera, Haag said.

"If McWhorter says something completely different, then you have to evaluate whether the illustrations are valid," he said.

Channel 8 began both the McWhorter and Feazell investigations after being tipped by sources who called the station, Haag said.

"Sure, they're disgruntled," Watson said of the two former deputies he interviewed on camera. "But I have yet to have a source who's a real white knight come forward."

"I don't think you ever back away from investigative pieces," Haag said. "All of the checking you have to do, all of the second-guessing — every time you do an investigative story, you have the friends and associates and backers of the subject saying, 'How can you do something like that?' But if you back away from those stories, people will stop calling you with tips. And you might miss some tremendously important stories."

Plus The Vic Feazell Show.