

20-year-old murder case recalled during visit to parole hearings

By JAMES A. ROEMER

In 1970, Neal Ruetz came to South Bend with one purpose in mind. He intended to murder Tom Schultz, the owner of Monarch Laundry and Dry Cleaning Co.

Ruetz had been born in Niles, so he knew the community. In the stealth of night, he broke into the Schultz home at the edge of the Morris Park Country Club golf course and fired shots into Tom Schultz's head as he slept.

A painstaking investigation followed the killing. Ruetz was living in Denver. Leads were uncovered that showed both men had connections to a mystery woman. Witnesses placed him in South Bend on the day of the crime.

I was the criminal prosecutor responsible for trials in Circuit Court in St. Joseph County that year. However, the case was not assigned to me because it was moved to LaGrange County on a change of venue at Ruetz's request because of publicity.

The case was built on circumstantial evidence. The gun was found in Denver but a new barrel had been installed, which clouded the ballistics issue. The case was ably tried and a verdict was returned, sentencing the killer to life in the maximum security prison at Michigan City.

In June of this year, Ruetz had served 20 years and was eligible for parole. In Indiana, there is a five-person parole board which conducts public parole hearings. Ruetz pleaded his case before that board.

The Schultz family strongly recommended against his release. One of the five parole board members was absent during that first hearing and the board

MICHIANA POINT OF VIEW

split, 2-2. A factor working against Ruetz was his refusal to admit the crime. He argued that the case against him was circumstantial, implying that he was not guilty.

The board members advised Ruetz of the split decision and told him that he could appear at their hearing at the Michigan City prison on Sept. 7, when they would insist that he reveal what he knew about the murder.

Ruetz deliberated for months about whether he would admit the killing. If he refused, would the parole board deny his request?

Dick Doyle (a South Bend attorney and parole board member) had invited me to attend parole hearings in the prison that morning. He made no mention of the cases that were involved.

I brought Notre Dame basketball coach Digger Phelps and we sat behind the parole board so that we could observe the faces of the prisoners. We were impressed with the professionalism of the five board members. They are mixed by race, sex, political backgrounds and hometowns. Only Doyle is from the local area.

Some prisoners were asking for clemency from the governor. Others were parole violators who were asking for another chance. These were prisoners who had been sentenced under the new (1977) code which carried determinate sentences. Others were sentenced under the old code which carried indetermi-

nate sentences. They had served a sufficient amount of "good time" so as to be eligible for release — Ruetz was in this category.

At 11:45 a.m., Ruetz appeared. I was shocked because it suddenly dawned on me that this was a South Bend case.

Ruetz took his seat and I straightened in my chair as I realized who he was. His appearance was spell-binding. He was completely bald. His white handlebar mustache was waxed to perfection so that each end stuck out aggressively. If smoke had come out his nose, I could not have been more startled.

The board got right to the point. Patricia Ravinet insisted that he deal with the crime itself. He was smart, articulate and evasive. She repeatedly brought him back to this issue as he twisted away from a direct response.

One of the other board members joined the demand that he face up to that crucial issue. So, finally, after 20 years, Neal Ruetz confessed to the crime.

He said he and Schultz had been involved with the same woman. He also indicated Schultz had tried to ruin his carpet installation business in Denver and so he felt he had to kill him.

We had lunch with the parole board after the hearing. We had not been privy to any of the confidential files which the board had painstakingly reviewed before they heard each case.

Most of the requests for parole were denied. In the

Ruetz case, the South Bend member was a dissenter. Decisions are by majority vote. The majority of the board approved his parole.

In the opinion of this board, which had heard the evidence on several occasions, this man has served the time which was required. He has been a model prisoner. He worked in the prison greenhouse where he grew all the flowers and plants which are planted on the grounds.

Many people from this community would have voted with Doyle, especially if they were touched in some way by this vicious crime.

Warden Dick Clark took us for a quick tour of Death Row and the C cellhouse. Convicted murderer Alan Matheny was one of 46 people awaiting execution on Death Row. Almost all of the prisoners in the yard recognized Digger. Both of us heaved sighs of relief as the gates clanged closed behind us.

We were impressed by the competence of the warden. The five members of the parole board are outstanding people. They are not political hacks. They are professionals who devote a painstaking amount of care to a thankless task. I agreed with their judgment in almost every case. However, I still am troubled by some loose ends with regard to the motives of this murder.

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