

Jury begins deliberations in 1974 Iowa murder case

OTTUMWA, IA. — Despite a lack of direct evidence connecting Robert “Gene” Pilcher to the killing of a 17-year-old waitress at his cousin’s Iowa farmhouse, investigators immediately suspected him in the 1974 death, a prosecutor told jurors Thursday at his murder trial.

Three days before Mary Jayne Jones’ beaten, bullet-ridden body was found in the bedroom of the farmhouse near Ottumwa, another woman told police that the married exterminator had handcuffed her in the same room and forced her to perform oral sex, assistant state attorney general Denise Timmins said in closing arguments.

Pilcher was convicted of sodomy and perjury in that case. But he wasn’t charged in Jones’ death until two years ago, when cold case investigators matched his DNA to semen stains on the blanket beneath Jones’ body.

“What are the odds that that semen is not connected to that crime scene, to the horrendous acts that occurred to Mary Jayne Jones?” Timmins asked jurors, urging them to convict Pilcher.

But the semen “cuts both ways” because prosecutors know Pilcher had sex in the bed earlier and could not show when it was left, defense lawyer Allen Cook told jurors. The earlier sexual encounter gives “a legitimate, innocent reason for why Gene Pilcher’s DNA would be there,” he said.

Cook said that encounter involved a barmaid with whom Pilcher previously had consensual sex. He said that was a very different situation than the violent death of Jones, whom he only knew as a customer at her restaurant.

But Timmins said there were similarities between the attack on Jones and the attack on the barmaid that led to the sodomy case. She read the barmaid’s police statement to jurors in which she recounted an attack in which Pilcher stripped and handcuffed her.

Timmins said both attacks happened at the same time of day and that Pilcher neatly laid out the victims' clothes on a chair.

Cook urged jurors to acquit Pilcher, 67, saying the state's case was based upon speculation. Prosecutors did not show how Jones ended up at the farmhouse, he said.

The attorneys also sparred over whether Pilcher had the time to commit the slaying, and whether there were other viable suspects.

Pilcher faces life in prison if convicted of first-degree murder. Jurors deliberated for an hour Thursday afternoon before leaving for the day. Deliberations will resume Friday morning.

"I feel fine, I guess," Pilcher said as he waited for a verdict.

Jones' naked body was found on a bed in a farmhouse that was owned by Pilcher's cousin, Max Marlin, on April 9, 1974. Investigators said she had been beaten with a shotgun, sexually assaulted and shot with a rifle through the heart and the head.

Jones, who had moved to Iowa from North Carolina to live with her sister in 1973, was last seen hours earlier at an Ottumwa bank. Her body was discovered by Marlin's mother, who had stopped by the home while her son was out of town.

Timmins said that Pilcher was always the prime suspect. Pilcher knew that his cousin was out of town and had access to the farmhouse. Pilcher had made lewd comments about Jones when he ate at her restaurant and was rebuffed when he asked her out, Timmins said.

Timmins said that it remained unclear how Pilcher got Jones to the house, and that no eyewitnesses saw the crime. But she said jurors should piece together bits of circumstantial evidence like a puzzle, and "see the big picture" pointing to Pilcher's guilt.

But Cook said holes in the case created reasonable doubt. Investigators never identified

another source of male semen found on the blanket or the owner of the gun that was used to beat Jones, he said.

He suggested there were other suspects, including a Colorado inmate from Iowa who knew many details about Jones' death and a boyfriend of Jones who went looking for her around the time she disappeared. Many other people had access to the farmhouse, which was a bachelor pad, he said.

Pilcher didn't have the time to commit the slaying given that some witnesses told police they saw him around Ottumwa that afternoon, Cook argued.

Timmins rejected that testimony, suggesting Pilcher was unaccounted for during a brief window of time.

"Violent assaults can happen quickly," she said.