

Watson murder retrial set to begin March 19

Court: Watson's first attorneys had conflict of interest

By Rick Smith

Gazette staff writer

ANAMOSA — Nathan Watson, the son accused of shooting his father in 1998 inside a yellow school bus they called home, was in court here Friday to begin his second prosecution for the murder.

Watson's new trial, on a charge of first-degree murder, was set for March 19.

In November, the Iowa Supreme Court overturned Watson's December 1998 conviction, saying his defense attorneys had a conflict of interest during the trial.

In particular, the Supreme Court said Watson's public defenders had represented one of the prosecution witnesses in an unrelated criminal matter for a



Nathan Watson

Accused of killing father in 1998

Cedar Rapids Peterson to defend Watson at state expense.

Watson, now 21, had been serving a life sentence in prison, and will remain in custody under \$500,000 bond, Conmey ordered.

For now, Watson is being housed in the Iowa Men's Penitentiary at Anamosa, but he has made a request to be held in the Jones County Jail pending the outcome of his new trial.

Conmey said he will visit

brief time during Watson's prosecution.

The Supreme Court ordered the new trial and a new attorney.

District Judge Larry Conmey on Friday named attorney Scott

Peterson to defend Watson at

with Watson's new attorney about the matter.

Jones County Attorney Connie Ricklefs and Assistant Attorney General James Kivi convinced a jury to convict Watson in 1998 by arguing that Watson shot his father, Craig "Rocky" Chase, as Chase slept in the bus the two called home in Oxford Junction.

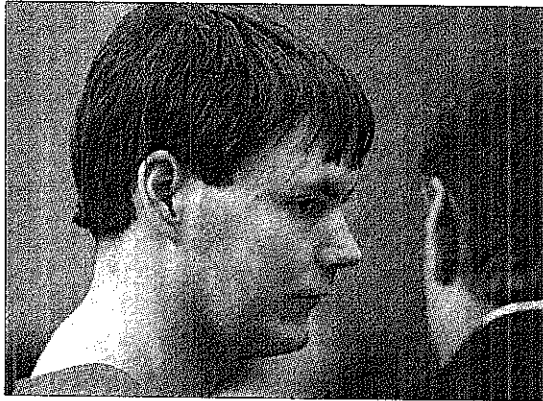
One relative said Watson had angry words with his father the afternoon of his death.

Watson has maintained his innocence.

At the first trial, his attorneys theorized that Chase had fallen asleep with a loaded shotgun and that the gun fell to the floor of the bus and accidentally discharged.

Construction worker Chase, 42, died the day before Watson turned 18. Watson, a school dropout who didn't work, was tried as an adult.

E. Iowa man avoids murder conviction



Gazette photo by Jim Slosiarek

Nathan Watson listens to attorney Scott Peterson during a hearing Friday at the Jones County Courthouse in Anamosa. Under a plea deal, Watson made Alford pleas to involuntary manslaughter, willful injury and assault causing serious injury during the commission of a felony in the death of his father.

Plea agreement leads to prison time in '98 shooting of his father

By Rick Smith

The Gazette

ANAMOSA — An Oxford Junction man pleaded guilty here Friday to the 1998 shooting death of his dad, a memorable death that came in the middle of the winter in a converted yellow school bus the two called home.

Nathan Watson, who was a day shy of his 18th birthday when his father was shot in the early morning of Jan. 16, 1998, entered the plea in Jones County District Court as part of a plea agreement.

Watson, now 22 and being treated for paranoid schizophrenia, was slated to go on trial a second time on Monday in

the death of his dad, Craig "Rocky" Chase.

Watson's plea Friday did not involve any of the three most serious charges facing him — first-degree murder, second-degree murder or voluntary manslaughter. Instead, he pleaded guilty to willful injury, assault causing serious injury while participating in a felony and involuntary manslaughter.

The plea marked a startling turnaround for Watson, who was sent to prison for life in February 1999 after a jury convicted him of first-degree murder in his father's death.

The Iowa Supreme Court, though, overturned the conviction in November 2000.

Prosecutors designed Friday's plea agreement to give Watson a prison sentence of 20 years when he is

■ Turn to 6A: **Watson**

Watson: Plea doesn't admit guilt

■ From page 1A

a- sentenced July 19.

ti- He should serve, at most,
y- about half that time behind
it bars once state "good time" is
d figured in.

r- He will be credited for time
t- already served. He has been in
e custody for 4½ years, since the
week after his dad's death.

Jones County Attorney Connie Ricklefs said she will resist any effort to win Watson an early parole.

Watson's plea on Friday was an Alford plea, an option that allows the court to accept a guilty plea even though the defendant does not admit guilt. The defendant admits only that he or she is apt to be convicted with the evidence at hand.

Watson agreed Friday when District Judge Larry Conmey asked him if he had little to gain and much to lose by going to trial.

One of Watson's attorneys, Jon Hammond of Cedar Rapids, reminded the judge that Watson knew well what could happen to him at trial.

At a first trial, Watson's attorneys argued that Rocky Chase had slept with his loaded

shotgun and that the gun had dropped out of bed and accidentally discharged. A Jones County jury disagreed.

The Iowa Supreme Court, in subsequently overturning the conviction, found that Watson's first team of defense attorneys had overlooked a conflict of interest. They had previously defended a witness who testified against Watson, which meant they might not have confronted the witness as aggressively as possible.

Watson's new defense team, Hammond and Scott Peterson of Cedar Rapids, had intended to take a new tack at the second trial. They were ready to argue that Watson had a diminished capacity at the time of his dad's shooting because he suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

Hammond said Friday that Watson currently takes medication and is under the care of a psychiatrist for the disease. It is chronic and progressive, Hammond said.

In the end, both sides seemed to have some motivation for a plea agreement.

Hammond and Peterson said it is not easy to win a case with a defense of mental illness.

The prosecutors, Ricklefs and Assistant Iowa Attorney General James Kivi, said mental illness was a wrinkle not there in the first trial.

"I'm not conceding that the jury would necessarily accept that testimony, but it was a factor that we had to take into account," Kivi said.

Both prosecutors said Iowa lawmakers give prosecutors too few options to negotiate with defendants in complicated murder cases.

Kivi said he knew of no defendant who was willing to plead guilty to second-degree murder because it brings a mandatory prison sentence of 42½ years before parole. That is little different from serving a life sentence that comes with first-degree murder, he said.

The next option in a plea discussion is a 10-year sentence, Ricklefs noted.

Instead, she and Kivi came up with an arrangement of combining charges that is in-

tended to give Watson a 20-year sentence.

After Friday's court hearing, Rocky Chase's brother, Everett Chase of Oxford Junction, called the plea agreement "a miscarriage of justice."

"The crummy little coward walked right in and shot him while he was sleeping," Chase said. "It's not right."

Prosecutor Ricklefs said she understood Chase's anger: "It's his brother," she said.

Ricklefs acknowledged that the circumstances of the death — a 17-year-old living in an old school bus in the middle of the winter — played on her mind in the case.

"We have truly spent a lot of time trying to do what we thought best, showing compassion for the survivors, for family members, for those who loved Rocky Chase, but keeping in mind that those family members are also the family members of the defendant," Ricklefs said.

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