

Former couple sentenced for murder

murder

1-10-04

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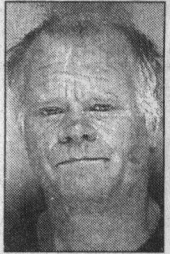
After watching a video of their victim's life, two transients from Texas were sentenced to prison Friday for the brutal slaying of a homeless man at a campsite along the San Lorenzo River nearly two years ago.

The pair showed little emotion throughout the short hearing as siblings of the man they beat to death spoke passionately of him and his death. Given a chance to address the court or the victim's family, the convicted pair — James Landrum Jones and Tia Hitt — declined.

Jones, 23, convicted of first-degree murder, was sentenced to 25 years to life by Judge Michael Barton. His attorney, Art Dudley, said he planned to file an appeal, contending that his client

was questioned by police without being properly advised of his rights.

Hitt, 21, Jones' former girlfriend, was sentenced to the expected 24 years, 4 months, in a deal made months ago with prosecutors. She pleaded guilty to manslaughter and other charges and testified against Jones. The pair appeared in court



BLANTON
Became homeless after breakdown

together for the first time since she made the deal.

Jones and Hitt killed Michael Blanton, 52, who became homeless after suffering a mental breakdown while a candidate for a doctorate in philosophy at UC Berkeley. Blanton, who was born without a hand, had come into a campsite where Jones and Hitt were sleeping.

Blanton's sister addressed the couple who beat her brother to death.

"I deeply resent having to be here today," said Barbara Jackson of Arizona. "Nothing in my life has prepared me for this."

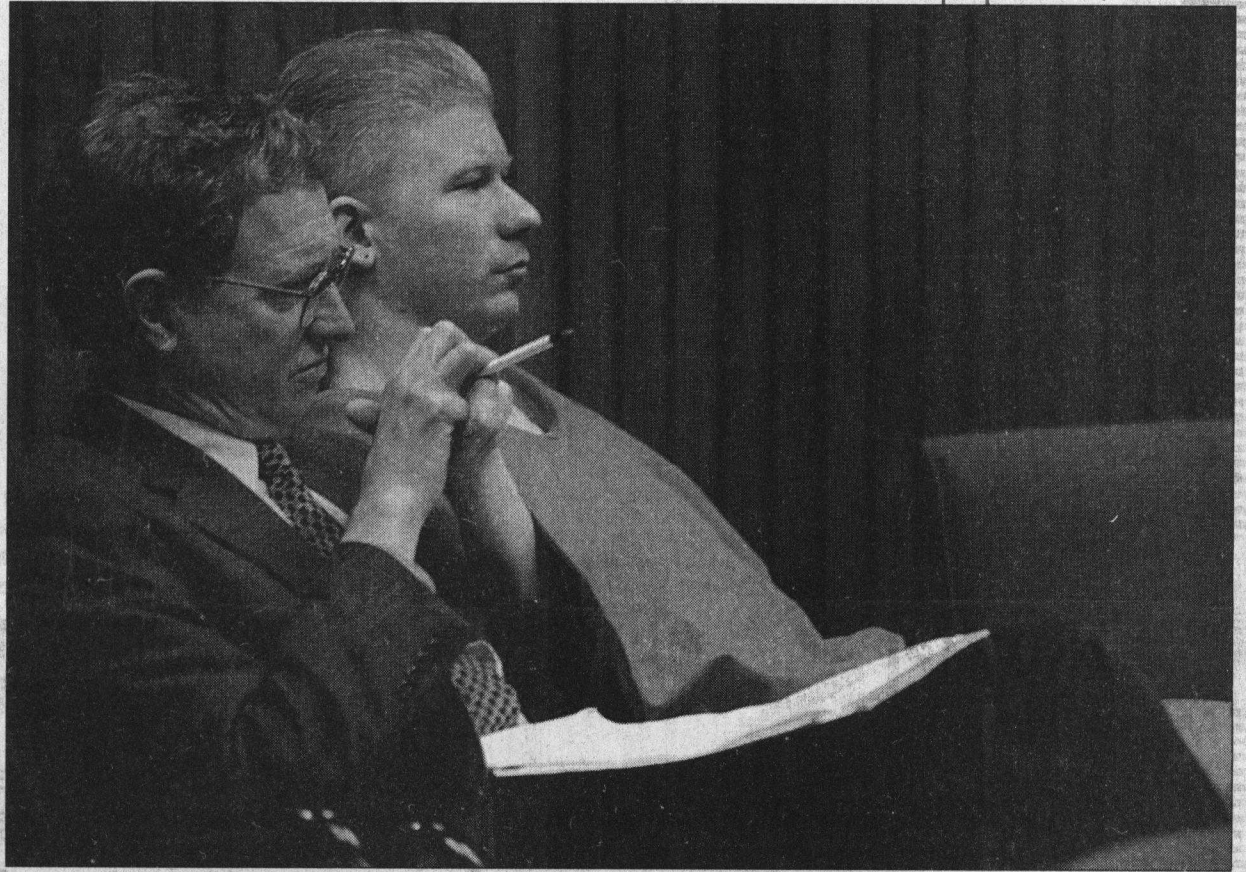
Jackson read a statement from her mother, who hadn't see her son in many years.

"Not one day passed when I didn't hope or pray that would be the day I would see my son again," Jackson read from the letter. "Now I know that will never happen. You have robbed me of hope. This man you so mercilessly slaughtered was my son."

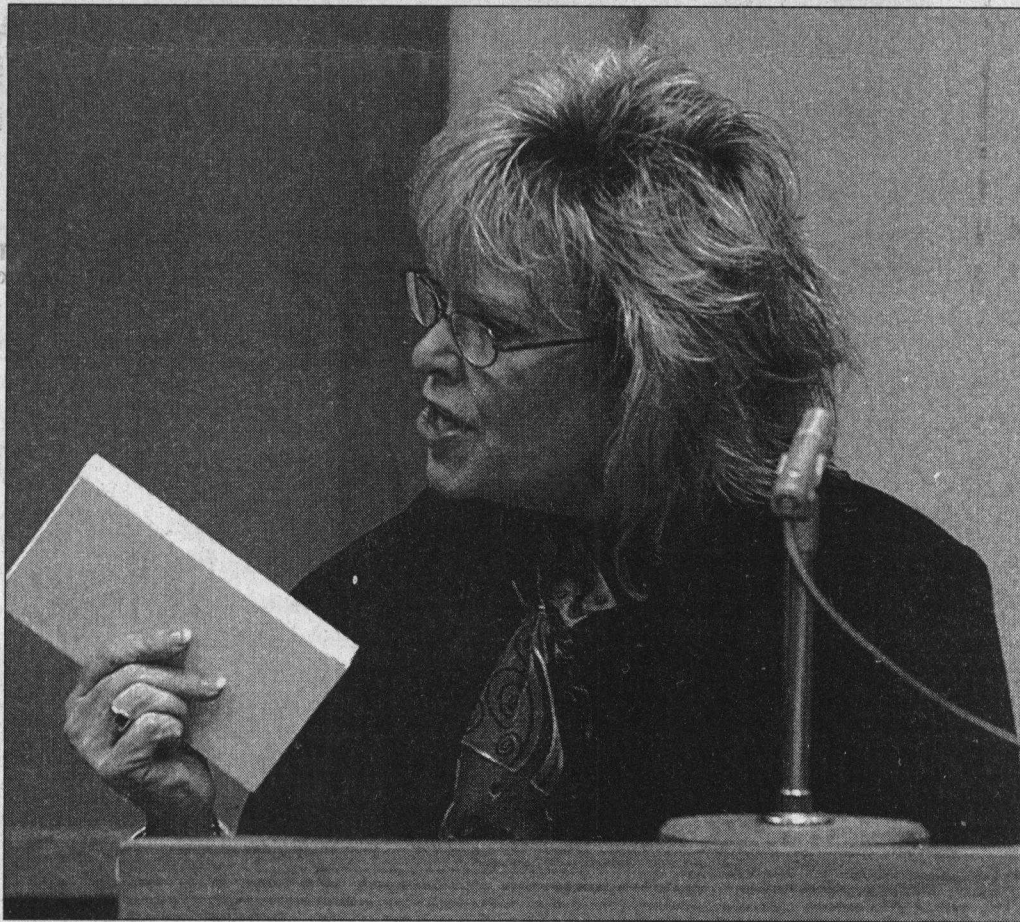
"I am unable and unwilling to ask God for your mercy. You deserve death for the diabolic things you did."

Jones stared blankly at Jackson as she read.

Police said Jones killed Blanton in February 2002 after telling him to leave the campsite, then blocking Blanton's path as he walked away. The pair hit him with sticks, and Jones killed him by strangling him with a bike chain, then slamming a large rock on his head.



ABOVE: James Jones, right, and his attorney listen to Jones' sentence, handed down by Judge Michael Barton. Jones was sentenced to 25 years to life.



LEFT: Barbara Jackson, victim Michael Blanton's sister, addresses Jones in the courtroom. Jackso also read a statement written by her mother.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel photos

Hitt provided the bike chain.

Prosecutor Ariadne Symons said Jones and Hitt had discussed him killing someone, declaring he would kill to prove his love, Symons said.

Police say the pair commented that Blanton's skull was too crushed to use as a candleholder, as they had

wanted to do. They buried his body and went on a spending spree downtown with money they found on him. Police caught them after a 14-year-old boy, who had sex with Hitt, told them the couple said they had killed someone. They will be eligible for parole in

about 20 years. Symons said she didn't believe Jones would ever be released, because of the brutality of the crime and of his penchant for misbehaving in jail.

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