

AS WE SEE IT

Mullin's day in court

Mullin, Herbert

HEARING: 3-24-06

After 30 years have passed, the pain remains for those whose loved ones were slain by a notorious serial killer.

It was not a surprise: Herbert Mullin, killer of 13 people back in the 1970s, was denied parole this week, his latest attempt to get out of prison.

Mullin was sentenced to life in prison back in 1973, and the question that is on most lips is: "If he was sentenced to life, why does he get a parole hearing?"

The law was different back then, and even the worst murderer could be considered for parole after seven years — even if he had received a life term.

That's why Charles Manson goes before the parole board. And that's why Mullin was there, at a parole hearing in Ione. He qualifies for a parole hearing every five years, and this year — like others — he asked for his release.

It's hard to imagine that anyone seriously considered letting him out. His bizarre words continue to confuse anyone who tries to figure out exactly why he killed 13 people back in the early 1970s.

In a way, the attention on Mullin is probably a good thing. It serves to remind us that unexplainable and brutal crime is possible, and it also serves to remind us just how crazy things really were in Santa Cruz back then.

The Santa Cruz community had to deal with not just Mullin, but three serial killers. The others, John Linley Frazier and Edmund Kemper, also have been sentenced to prison for life. They, too, are eligible for parole hearings, although they don't often accept the offer.

In the Mullin case, the big question before the jurors who convicted him was whether or not he was legally insane. His attorney, then-Public Defender Jim Jackson, insisted to the jury that his client was legally mad, and he presented a parade of expert witnesses who said just that.

The jury decided against insanity — and instead found Mullin guilty. They did so — and this is an opinion — because it came out during the course of the trial that his chances of getting out were less if he were convicted.

But the thought remains: If Mullin wasn't legally insane, who in the world ever would be?

That question is academic by now. And the law that ended up putting him in prison for life also allows him to appear at a hearing every five years.

This week's hearing was just the latest. In fact, there's nothing he could have said that would have resulted in his release. And that's something that the entire community should be happy about.

The one regret about the hearing is that reading about it must be difficult for those who lost loved ones to Mullin. Even though more than 30 years have passed, the pain of that loss never goes away.