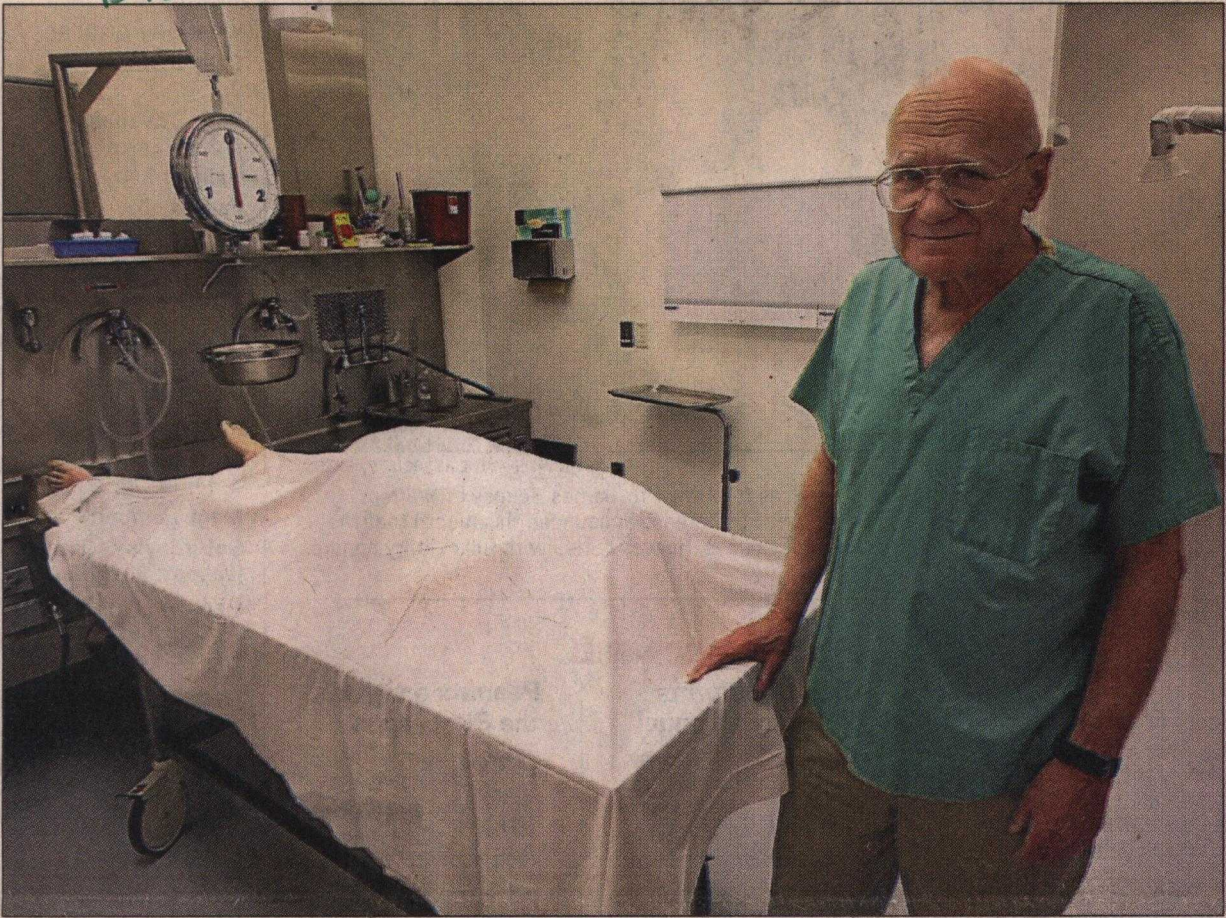


MASON'S MARK

Expert forensic pathologist Richard 'Doc' Mason retires after 34 years



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Dr. Richard Mason retires Friday after 34 years as the county coroner.

By **Stephen Baxter**

sbaxter@santacruzsentinel.com

@sbaxter_sc on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Finding a cause of death is just the start of an investigation for Richard "Doc" Mason, Santa Cruz County's forensic pathologist of 34 years.

Mason, who will retire Friday at age 78, doesn't just explain that a man was murdered with two stabs in the chest, for instance, he finds answers to dozens of questions that police want and prosecutors need to find and convict the killer.

"Were the wounds in a certain order? Were they defensive in nature? Was he moving when he was killed?" asked Jeff Rosell, a Santa Cruz County prosecutor who worked with Mason for 20 years. "This is where he is so gifted and

skilled. He paints a picture of what happened and why."

People who worked with Mason describe him as hardworking, self critical and intelligent. An Army veteran originally from New York, Mason usually worked at night at the county's old morgue on Emeline Avenue.

"There was no phone ringing and no one bothering you," he said. "I've always been a solitary person."

With 10,000 autopsies performed and a deep knowledge of guns, Mason's work is widely respected.

"Dr. Mason is one of the finest forensic pathologists in the nation and Santa Cruz County has been lucky to have his services for all these years," Rosell said.

Dane Lobb, a retired California Highway Patrol

MASON » PAGE 5



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

County forensic pathologist Dr. Richard Mason handles the murder weapon on the witness stand as he testifies in the murder trial of Terry Childs on Jan. 19, 1987.

"He's very clinical, he's very focused on what he's doing and he's got an amazing eye for picking up the smallest abnormality."

— Dane Lobb, retired California Highway Patrol lieutenant

Mason

FROM PAGE 1

lieutenant who worked with Mason, agreed.

"I've been to autopsies in seven different counties and I can tell you without any hesitation, he's the man. He's very clinical, he's very focused on what he's doing and he's got an amazing eye for picking up the smallest abnormality."

Mason grew up as the son of a machinist and the eldest of two brothers.

He found an interest in guns at 16, which he said was unusual for a city kid. He earned degrees from Manhattan College and St. John's University on his way to the Boston University School of Medicine.

Early training

Mason considered a career in microbiology, but the Army came calling. The military needed forensic pathologists to perform autopsies in Vietnam.

"First off, no one wanted to do it," Mason said Thursday, squinting behind the

same style metal-rimmed glasses he's worn for decades.

"It was probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Mason said.

He said he was sent to Vietnam during the Tet Offensive in 1968 and handled about 500 autopsies a week. Some of the men that ended up on his examining table were soldiers he knew from a stint at Fort Riley, Kansas.

Handling so many gunshot wounds at war helped Mason develop his knowledge of firearms and causes of death.

The cases that come in to Mason's Santa Cruz County office are not just homicides, but drug overdoses, car crashes, suspicious deaths, suicides and other deaths where the cause is not obvious.

In an autopsy for a gun homicide, for instance, Mason's coworkers said he often can pull out bullet parts and immediately tell its caliber and the type of gun from which it was fired. The diameter of the lead core and copper jacket of a bullet are clues, but there are also telltale "lands and grooves" that

different guns leave as they spin right or left out of the gun's barrel.

Bullet parts from bodies typically are sent to a lab to confirm Mason's hunches, but his speed in identifying them has saved detectives precious time in matching a gun to a bullet in murder cases. It has informed detectives on the type of gun they should be looking for.

"He looks at the right-hand twist with eight lands and grooves, and says, 'OK, you're looking for these manufacturers. It's not a Colt, not a Smith & Wesson, it is a Taurus, which is off brand,'" said Rosell, as an example.

"I think the driving force for Dr. Mason is that he's constantly on the search for the truth about how it happened."

Mason's style in dealing with investigators and prosecutors hasn't always been pleasant.

He doesn't "suffer fools," two of his coworkers said, and he has no patience for stupid or poorly worded questions.

Court testimony

Celia Rowland, a Santa

Cruz County prosecutor who worked with Mason on several murder cases, said Mason has a knack for explaining complicated things to the jury with plain speech.

Rowland said she remembers the case of 18-year-old Robbie Reynolds, who was stabbed to death by 17-year-old Jonathan Cardenas in 2008 over a small amount of money.

Cardenas attacked Reynolds once with a knife in a small Santa Cruz hotel room, and defense attorneys argued that Cardenas acted in self defense. Reynolds stumbled out of the room after he was stabbed.

During the trial, Mason described the wound to Reynolds' left ventricle of his heart.

"Based on that type of injury, he said he (Reynolds) would be panicked, it would be difficult to breathe, and disorienting. That gave us a sense of what happened in this room," Rowland said. "In a self-defense case, it's important what a victim is able to do afterward."

A big part of a coroner's job is to testify in court, and

Mason relishes it.

"Without the testimony aspect, I think the job would be much less interesting," he said.

"What other job is there where I can eviscerate people and torture lawyers?" Mason told the Sentinel in 2005.

In June, Mason will be succeeded by Stephany Fiore, the chief forensic pathologist at the Sacramento County Coroner's Office. Part of her work was in New York during the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Mason said he hasn't made solid plans for his retirement, although he plans to do to some work for an auto collision reconstruction firm in Sunnyvale.

He said he has few hobbies. He gave up hunting years ago because he said he didn't feel like killing anything anymore. Time away from work has meant hiking in Mendocino County.

He and his wife, Vivian, live in San Jose. She worked in the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office records department. They have no children.

Santa Cruz County sher-

RICHARD 'DOC' MASON

Born: New York City

Resides: San Jose

Age: 78

Years as Santa Cruz County forensic pathologist: 34

Years as Santa Clara County forensic pathologist: 8

Years as U.S. Army forensic pathologist: 2

Autopsies performed: About 10,000

Education: Bachelor's degree from Manhattan College; master's in microbiology from St. John's University; medical degree from Boston University School of Medicine; medical residency at UC San Francisco

iff's Sgt. Alan Burt worked with Mason for years.

"I don't think we'll ever be able to replace him," said Burt. "There's no BS in him at all."

Rosell, the prosecutor, said the same.

"In Doc Mason's business, there is absolutely no substitute for experience," Rosell said. "It's seeing it over and over again."