

'Budweiser Bandit' gets long prison term

By NANCY BARR
STAFF WRITER

Murl Craig, the so-called "Budweiser Bandit," was sentenced yesterday to 17 years in prison for robbing the Santa Cruz Alpha Beta store.

He gained the "Budweiser" appellation by allegedly robbing several grocery stores after first taking a six-pack of Budweiser to the check-out stand and having it rung up. He would then allegedly pull out a gun and demand cash.

The 17-year sentence was the result of Craig's several prior robbery convictions. The sentence might have been higher if not for a quirk in the law that governs how prior offenses are considered in sentencing.

Although he defended himself during his five-week jury trial, Craig had an attorney by his side when he appeared in court yesterday. John Gallagher, whom Craig had fired for not, in his opinion, doing a good job of representing him, was again appointed by the court as his attorney.

Craig's sentencing had been scheduled for just before Thanksgiving, but he escaped from jail at the beginning of November and was not recaptured until the end of the month. His escape charge is being pursued separately; he can receive no more than eight extra months of jail time if convicted of escape.

Also in court yesterday for Craig's sentencing were many of the jurors who sat through the often-tedious trial, then deliberated a day and a half before convicting him. Several jurors said they wanted to see the final outcome of the case that took so much of their time.

Juror Jim Thorne said he was anxious to see how Craig's case turned out, "particularly with the anti-climax when he got out of jail."

Jurors, like Judge William Kelsay, commented that it was evident that Craig is a bright man.

"He is so intelligent in so many ways, and so dumb in others," said juror Laura Yergin. It wasn't very smart of him, both Yergin and Thorne said, to use the same *modus operandi* in most of his robberies, and to have returned to the East Bay, where he was from, after his escape. (He was arrested in Walnut Creek.)

Craig has maintained his innocence in the Alpha Beta robbery, even in a letter to the judge following his rearrest after his escape.

Craig wrote to Kelsay that he had not planned the escape, but when he saw two other jail inmates leave through a window and not get caught, the temptation was too great for him to pass up. He left too, he said, because he knew he was facing a lengthy prison term for a crime he said he did not commit.

Gallagher, Craig's attorney, filed motions for a continuance of sentencing and for a new trial, based on several allegations of improper behavior on Kelsay's part. Kelsay denied all the motions, then proceeded with the sentencing.

Craig was given five years for the Santa Cruz robbery itself, with an additional two years for using a gun in the commission of the crime. He then received an additional 10 years because he had four prior robbery convictions. Under a quirk in the law, the four convictions counted as two, because cases that are tried together can only be counted as one conviction in considering prior offenses. Three of Craig's earlier robberies had been tried at the same time.

Craig is likely to face a far longer prison term when all his cases are processed. He is still to be tried for at least one bank robbery he allegedly committed while on the loose last month, and he still faces other robbery charges from before his arrest by Santa Cruz County officials last year.