

Spedding convicted of murder

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A jury found Robert Spedding guilty of first-degree murder Friday in the death of Ernie King.

Spedding showed no emotion as the verdict was read to a crowded courtroom. The jury found that Spedding had forced King out of the back of a moving pickup during a robbery attempt in June 1988.

"This has been a two-year ordeal," his widow, Nancy King, said Friday. "Nothing will bring back my husband but we do have peace in knowing that no one else might be the victim of this man. ... We can get on with our lives now. I hope Mr. Spedding comes to grips with who he is."

"This jury brought justice to Santa Cruz," said Assistant District Attorney Christine McGuire. "Finally Robert Spedding will pay for forcing Ernie King to his untimely death." Spedding, 30, had been tried on the charges last year, but a mistrial was declared when the jury deadlocked 11-1 for conviction.

That jury found him guilty of attempted robbery, however.

To avoid a change of venue for the trial after publicity about the case, a jury was chosen in San Jose and bused into Santa Cruz for the trial. The jury deliberated only 1½ days before finding Spedding guilty, but jury members said that it was not an easy decision and that their first vote was not unanimous.

Spedding faces 25 years to life in prison. His attorney, Mitchell Page, said the decision will be appealed.

"I feel terrible," Page said. "I think (the jury's decision) is incorrect."

Some of the most damning evidence in the case came from witnesses who testified that Spedding raised his fist in a victory gesture, and yelled "Ya Ha" immediately after King fell from the pickup.

In an videotaped interview with detectives, Spedding admitted "Yeah, I guess I was going to rob him."

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The robbery was important. The felony-murder rule states that if a death occurs during a robbery or an attempted robbery, the killing is first-degree murder.

King, who was 38 when he died, was an exceptionally well-liked man and the father of two boys, now aged 4 and 6. He was a gifted high school athlete and an award-winning scholar who became a Christian school teacher. He overcame a degenerative disease that impaired his hearing and eyesight, leaving him with tunnel vision.

King maintained an active life and was attending graduate school at San Jose State University at the time of his murder.

Because of his eyesight he could not drive, and rode to school with a classmate who lived near the Summit. On June 24, 1988, the classmate let him out at a Summit parking area near a group of men gathered around a pickup truck. Rather than calling his wife to pick him up, King decided to ask for a ride into town.

He approached Spedding and a group of Spedding's fellow construction workers, who had consumed more than 20 pitchers of beer at a pizza parlor.

Spedding testified that he thought King was a "queer" and knocked him to the ground because of the way King looked at him. Gregory Kern, a friend of Spedding then jumped in, beating and kicking King.

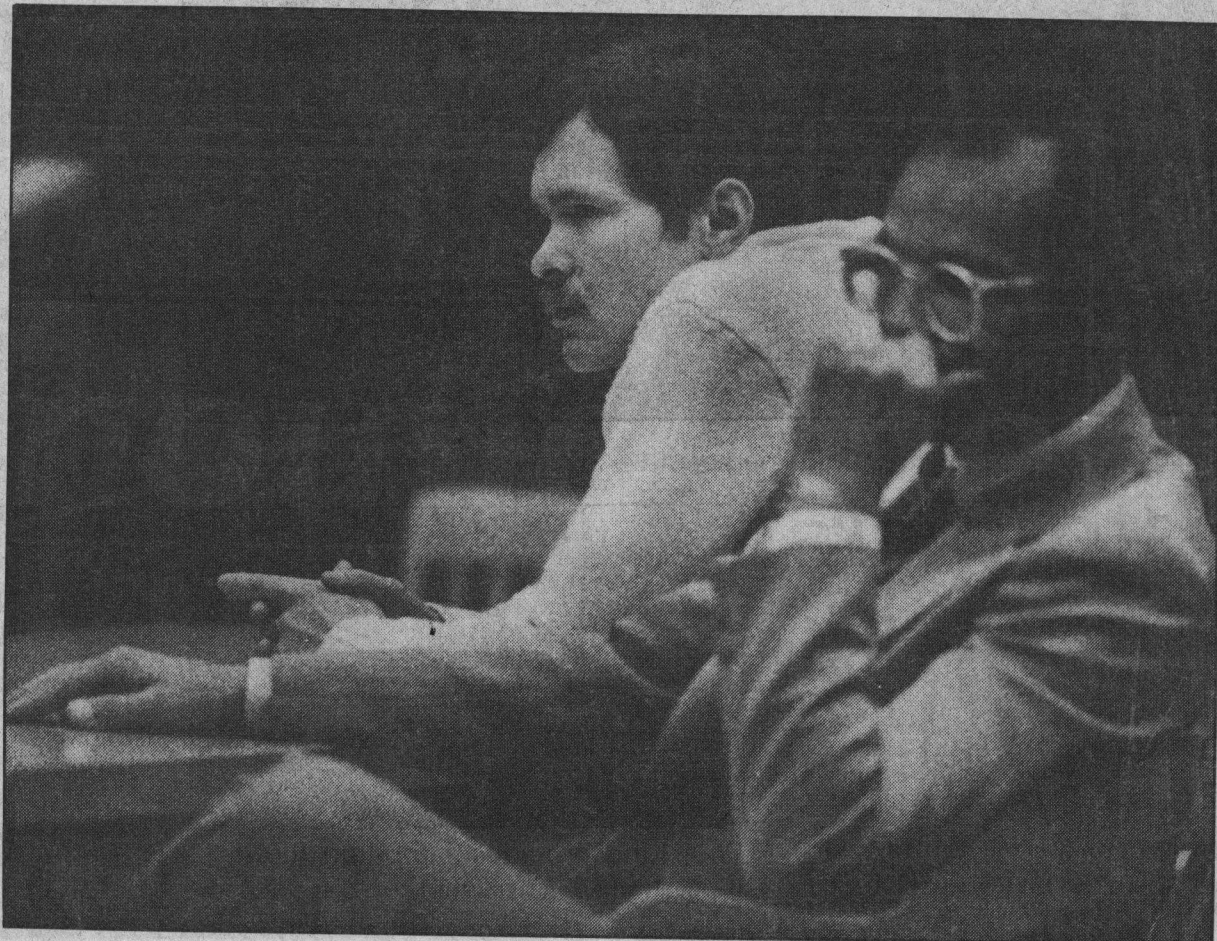
King then was ordered into the back of a pickup truck with Spedding and the truck took off up Summit Road. As they drove, witnesses said that King held out an empty wallet and that Spedding then pointed out of the truck and ordered him out. King went over the side as the truck was driving at more than 50 miles per hour, falling to his death.

The death outraged many who recalled King as a great friend and good Christian.

Members of King's family attended the trial daily, and said they felt the verdict was justified. They praised McGuire and the District Attorney's Office.

"It's a sorry business," King's mother Carol Youngmark said. "There are no winners. But still we're grateful to the jury and for their perseverance. We feel justice has been served."

Spedding is set to be sentenced Aug. 6.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Above, Robert Spedding and his attorney, Mitchell Page, right, listen as the jury returns a guilty verdict. Left, Prosecutor Christine McGuire speaks with Ernie King's mother, Carol Youngmark.

Spedding greeting card could be a bust

SANTA CRUZ — The day before Robert Spedding was convicted of first-degree murder in the death of Ernie King, a greeting card was sent to him in County Jail with what was believed to be marijuana inserted between the glued pages.

The card was confiscated by sheriff's deputies at the jail around 7 p.m. Thursday, before it reached Spedding, according to reports.

The return address on the envelope of the card contained the

name and address of a Santa Clara man. The Sheriff's Office will be sending a copy of their report to the Postmaster General, since it is illegal to send a controlled substance in the mail.