

# Murder suspect downplays role in summit attack

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SANTA CRUZ — Murder suspect Robert Spedding told investigators that he intended to take Ernie King's money, but insisted he did not order King to jump to his death from the back of a fast-moving pickup truck when King produced an empty wallet, a jury learned Wednesday.

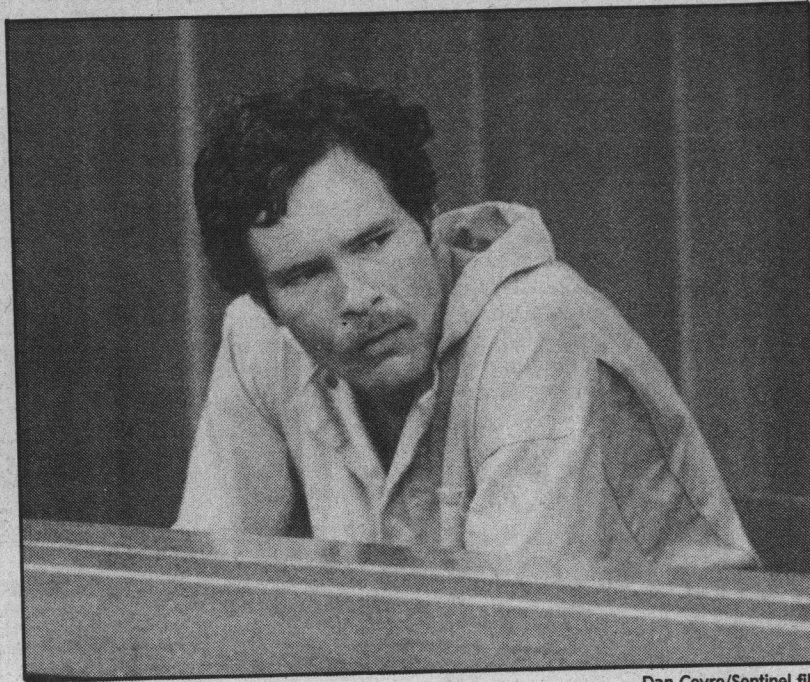
In a video-taped statement seen by the jury, Spedding, 30, admitted that he asked King if he had any money after King, 38, climbed into the back of the truck with him on June 24, 1988 at the park-and-ride lot on Summit Road.

And he said he would have taken money if King had had any.

The admission is important to Assistant District Attorney Christine McGuire's case because she could gain a first-degree murder conviction if she can convince the jury that King was killed during the commission or attempted commission of robbery.

But, Spedding claimed in his statement to Sheriff's Detective Clint Ainsworth and District Attorney's Inspector Dick Loesch that he didn't order King out of the truck when King came up with an empty wallet.

"I was going to take his money if he gave it to me, but I wasn't going to rob him. ... I wasn't going to push him out or anything," Spedding



Dan Covro/Sentinel file

Jury heard video-taped statement from Robert Spedding.

said.

Spedding said King did not jump from the back of the truck for a mile or so after he was asked for money. He told investigators he believed King jumped because he became fearful of the speed at which the truck was being driven.

Spedding said he was just sitting

across from King and that neither of them were speaking when King picked up his backpack full of textbooks and "rolled out the back." Spedding estimated the speed of the truck at 50 miles an hour.

Spedding said he was shocked and yelled at his two companions in the cab of the truck. "I said 'Did

you see that? Did you see that? I didn't touch him.'"

Spedding said he then "just turned around and sat back down."

His statement was in contrast to the testimony of an electronics engineer who testified earlier at the trial that he saw the truck go by right after King went out and that the man in the back was shouting "Yah-Hah!" with elation.

The truck kept on going, as did two friends in a car that was following the truck. The car swerved to keep from hitting King's body, Spedding said.

He said that he and his construction buddies continued on to Soquel where they sat around with their heads bowed and drank some beer.

McGuire contends the men drank in a party mood.

The case is fraught with contradictions.

For example, Spedding told investigators that he used an open hand to push King's face away after King approached him in the park-and-ride lot looking for a ride from the summit down into Soquel.

But Scott Collins, a teen-ager who was standing at a phone booth nearby, testified Tuesday that Spedding punched King "like a boxer would hit a punching bag."

And Spedding said he said nothing to the "pleasant" looking

woman who had just dropped King off at the lot.

But Collins testified that Spedding shouted sexual remarks at the woman, noting her breasts, in particular.

Spedding said he "pushed" King because he thought King was gay and because he was staring at his crotch. He said he didn't learn until later that King was legally blind.

But King's widow, Nancy, testified earlier that although her husband suffered from tunnel vision, his disability was not readily apparent.

It was because of that tunnel vision that King did not drive and needed to accept rides to and from graduate classes at San Jose State University.

Spedding said that even after he and buddy Greg Kern struck and kicked King that King still accepted a ride. "I said 'If you still want a ride, hop in,' and he got in on his own," Spedding said.

Another witness testified earlier in the trial that Spedding seemed to command King to get into the

'I thought, why me?'

—Robert Spedding

truck. And Collins said King appeared dazed from his beating.

Spedding told investigators when he surrendered four days after King's death that he wanted to make a statement. "I just want the truth to come out," he said.

"I'm guilty for hitting the guy, but nobody murdered him," Spedding said.

When asked what he thought about when King went out of the back of the truck, Spedding said he remembered that King had told him he was married.

And, he said, he remembered an accident a year earlier in which a motorcyclist was killed when he rammed into Spedding's construction tractor. "I hadn't finished working through that," he said.

"I thought, why me?" he told investigators.