

COMMENTARY

Public Enemy No.1

Twenty-four years later, the legend of Frank Wetzel lives

By JOHN DRESCHER

• First of two parts.

As the story goes, 24 years ago on a cold November night he drove into North Carolina and brutally shot his way into a spot in state history. He was the subject of one of the largest man-hunts in FBI history. Captured in California, he was tried in North Carolina where teenage girls screamed and squealed at his intense good looks. The rest of the public despised him as a crazed, savagely cold-blooded killer and called for his execution. He was convicted of murdering two state highway patrolmen and sentenced to life in prison.

He is Frank Wetzel, and for any native North Carolinian old enough to remember life in 1957, he is a living legend. For nearly 25 years he has been in and out of the news, an incredible timespan — especially considering that he's been in prisons for most of those years — that matches even the most famous of celebrities. A month ago Wetzel was allegedly caught while devising an escape plan from a prison in Caldeonia and was mysteriously found guilty by a prison committee that released only the verdict and no details about the case. It was the latest chapter in the often bizarre story of North Carolina's most famous convicted murderer.

It all started on the night of Nov. 5, 1957. Highway Patrolman Wister Lee Reece stopped a speeding 1957 Oldsmobile in Ellerbe and pulled the car to the side of the road. The patrolman was shot and killed. One hour and 50 miles away in Sanford, Patrolman J.T. Brown also stopped the speeding car and was also fatally shot.

A day after the slayings, a black 1957 Oldsmobile coupe stolen from Bradford, Pa., was found abandoned in Chattanooga, Tenn. A .44 magnum revolver was found in the car. Fingerprints in the car and on numerous other objects in the car were matched with those of Frank Wetzel, a 36-year-old escapee from a Willard, N.Y., mental hospital. The search was on.

And what a search it was. FBI officials called it one of the largest man-hunts in history and even compared it to the sensational search for one-time criminal king John Dillinger. The FBI placed all its resources into cooperation to find Wetzel for two reasons, the bureau said. One was because of the vicious nature of the slayings. The second reason was because the killer could be expected to kill without warning in the future.

The FBI distributed "wanted flyers" — a description of Wetzel, his photo, fingerprint classification and an ex-

planation of what to do if he was spotted — all over the United States. "From my knowledge, this was the first attempt at such blanket coverage," Charlotte FBI chief M.P. Chiles said in December of 1957.

Wetzel became Public Enemy No. 1 in North Carolina when he was listed at the top of the State Bureau of Investigation's Most Wanted List, replacing a black man named Eddie Dibbs, who was charged with killing his wife and two children. There could be little doubt that authorities wanted Wetzel ever-so-much that in the southern state of North Carolina in 1957, they listed the white Wetzel ahead of a black child-

In California, Wetzel refused to talk to police about the slayings in North Carolina. "I will say this though," he said. "I got the urge to kill when I was cooped up in prison in New York." With that he was extradited to Rockingham, N.C., to face trial for the killing of Patrolman Wister Lee Reece.

First Wetzel had to face a preliminary hearing on Dec. 9. It was then that the state's case against Wetzel began to take shape. On that day, a black man who claimed to have been picked up by

Wetzel, who did not have a lawyer at the hearing, cross-examined Terry himself. Wetzel recalled that after the killing, Terry told police the motorist was about 24 or 25 years old and apparently of Latin descent. "Wetzel was 36 years old and white.

"What nationality would you say I am now?" Terry asked.

"White," Terry replied.

When Wetzel asked why he described the driver as apparently of Latin descent, Terry said, "I tried to explain your complexion as it appeared to me." Even with the discrepancy of Terry's statements, there was little doubt that Wetzel would be convicted in the coming trial. The question was: death in the gas chamber or life in prison?

The state wanted the death penalty. Pointing at Wetzel during the trial, prosecutor M.G. Boyette said, "That man has less respect for law and order than any man who ever drew a breath of life."

Wetzel had little chance of acquittal. The state had witness Terry, plus various pieces of evidence in cars with Wetzel's fingerprints positively identified. In fact, the defense did not prepare a case, choosing to plea for mercy. It offered no witnesses and no evidence. Wetzel remained composed and straightfaced throughout the trial and never took the stand.

Even so, the courthouse in Rockingham was jammed every day. Wetzel, dark and violently good-looking, always neatly groomed and dressed in the latest style, had a mysterious charisma that attracted women who gazed intently and men who hated with equal intensity.

On Jan. 10 a jury of 10 men and two women found Wetzel guilty of first-degree murder and recommended life imprisonment. Teen-age girls, who had been rushing to the trial when school let out, squealed and clapped their hands when it was announced Wetzel would not die. In a statement to the court Wetzel said, "Everyone in the state has been real nice to me."

In March Wetzel was given another life sentence for the killing of the other highway patrolman. He was sent to maximum-security Central Prison in Raleigh, where many assumed he would spend the rest of his life. Years later, when he was attempting to be moved into a medium-security prison in order to be paroled, a Raleigh newspaper came out against the move. Said the 1978 headline: "The public can never forget." Perhaps no other statement is more indicative that after nearly 25 years, the legend lives.

Next week: "The most dangerous prisoner in North Carolina."

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killer as the most wanted man in the state.

Less than three weeks later, the man-hunt came to an end in Bakersville, Calif. There, two patrolmen arrested Wetzel when they caught him loitering in an alley next to a sporting goods store that sold guns. He gave his name as Paul Cameron and the next day was sentenced to 30 days in the county jail as a vagrant. Soon after, police found a car with Missouri license plates parked near the sporting goods store. Wetzel's fingerprints in the car were identified by the FBI as the man wanted in North Carolina for two counts of murder.

Wetzel while hitchhiking identified Wetzel in a line-up and said he saw Wetzel kill Reece. The hitchhiker, Robert Terry Jr., confronted Wetzel and "positively identified" Wetzel as the slayer. Superior Court Judge W.A. Leland McKeithan found probable cause and ordered Wetzel to be held without bond pending trial.

Terry said that when the highway patrolman pulled the car, Wetzel stopped, reached into the glove compartment and grabbed the gun that ended Reece's life. Terry said he jumped into a ditch as he heard the pistol fire.