

Home, Sweet Home

Brunswick County Extension Homemakers Clubs honor their own in annual tradition. Page 11-B.

Homecoming Time

West Brunswick's Trojans face the power-running West Columbus Vikings. Page 3-D.

Changes At UCB

Whiteville bank's streamlining said not likely to have much effect on its Brunswick County operations. Page 8-A.

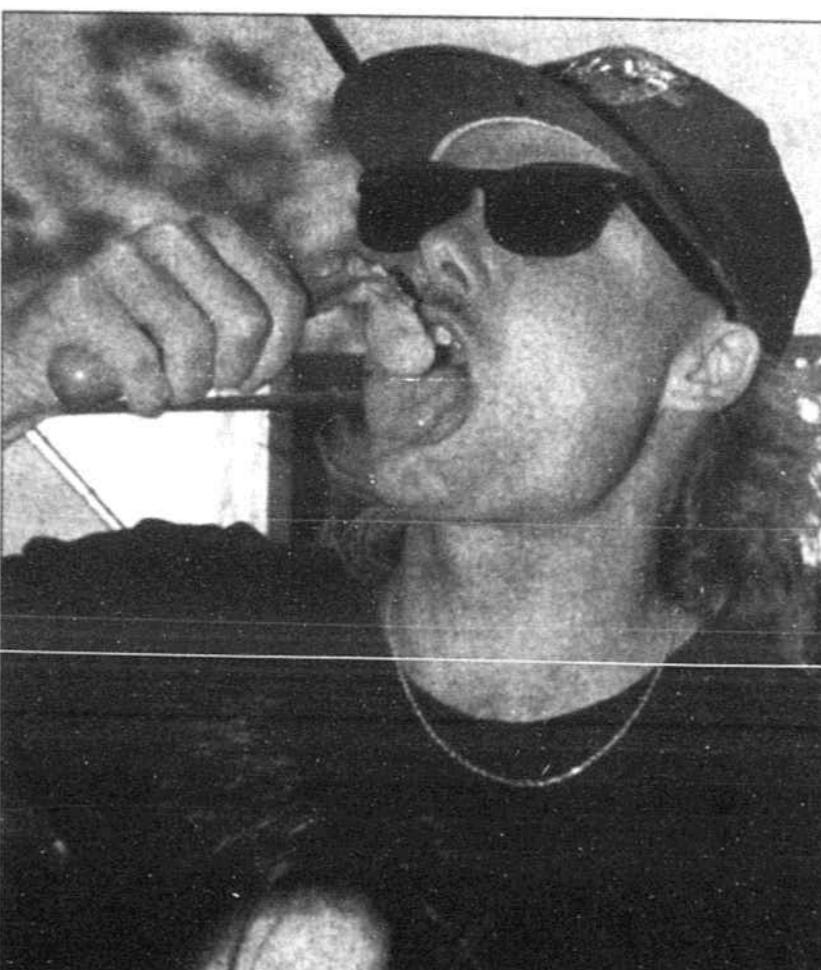
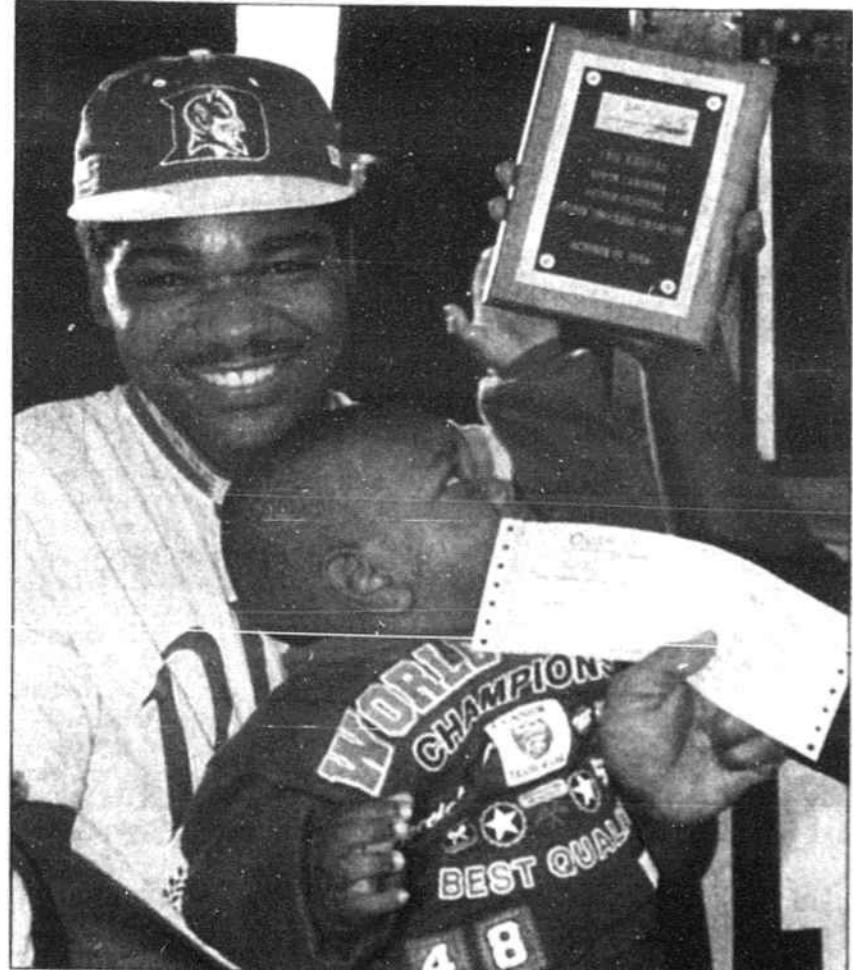
THE DDI IN JACK VICK BEACON

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STAFF PHOTOS BY ERIC CARLSON

Everyone Wins

Lofton James (left) of Shallotte shares the honor with his 17-month-old son Darius after winning the N.C. Oyster Shucking Championship Saturday. James won a plaque, a \$100 check and an all-expense-paid trip to compete in the national championship in Maryland next year. Lee Tarlton (right) of Maxton was a winner too, slurping down a bucket of steamed oysters along with the thousands of visitors who attended the N.C. Oyster Festival in Seaside last weekend.

Ninth Suspect Pleads Guilty, Gets Life Sentence In 'Gang-Style' Davis Killing

BY ERIC CARLSON

The second of three "major participants" to be tried in the gang-style murder of Charles Wayne "Butch" Davis pleaded guilty to second-degree murder Monday and was sentenced to life in prison.

Terrance LaQuinn Jones, 19, was charged with first-degree murder and numerous other felonies for his role in the killing of Davis, 37, who was fatally shot, beaten and slashed with a machete in the driveway of his Bolivia home last Nov. 28.

The other charges against Jones were dropped as part of a plea bargain.

Jones was one of 10 young people who piled into two cars and drove to Davis's trailer "to teach him a lesson" after an altercation between Davis and co-defendant Frank Lenail Ford earlier that day. Jones and another man, Byron Henry Knowles, were accused of helping Ford drag Davis out of his car moments before the murder.

Ford last month admitted shooting Davis in the back and pleaded guilty to second degree murder and conspiracy. He was sentenced to life plus 20 years in prison. Seven other young people described by prosecutors as "minor players" in the murder pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges and received suspended sentences.

Investigators say that while Davis lay dying from the gunshot wound, Jones kicked him several times, then grabbed the back of Davis's head and beat his face into the ground. The third murderer suspect, Byron Henry Knowles, is accused of hitting Davis in the face with a machete.

In a brief description of the events leading to Davis's death, Assistant District Attorney Lee Bollinger on Monday called it "a case of young people drinking and looking for somebody to hurt."

Bollinger said the group's initial intention was to "roll up" on another man, Joey Brown, who had allegedly threatened Ford. The plan was changed on the way to Brown's house, when they saw Davis driving on Midway Road in the opposite direction.

When the gang arrived at Davis's trailer on Albright Road, Ford told them, "I don't want Butch. I want the white dude," Bollinger said. "How their minds got changed, I'm not sure."

Referring to his client as "Quinn," defense attorney Steve Yount called Jones a "polite young man" and said the killing was "totally out of character" for him. He suggested that Jones was caught up in a "mob mentality" enhanced by a

"combination of alcohol and marijuana that led to his action."

Dressed in a brightly colored shirt and black pants, Jones stood to face Superior Court Judge Gregory Weeks for sentencing.

"We've got one young man who is dead and a number of others who are convicted felons," Weeks said. "Now you, at 19, are looking at a life sentence."

Jones will be eligible for parole in about 12 years. Bollinger called the negotiated sentence a "good plea, based on the fact that the other defendant got life plus 20 years. It reflects that he was a major participant, even though he wasn't armed."

Charges dismissed in the plea bargain included conspiracy to commit murder, assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill inflicting serious injury, conspiracy to commit assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill inflicting serious injury, first-degree kidnapping, conspiracy to commit kidnapping and robbery with a dangerous weapon. Jones was also accused of taking Davis's wallet after the murder.

Knowles, the final suspect in the case, remains in the Bahamas. So far, he has refused to return to the U.S. voluntarily. Extradition proceedings are likely to begin soon.

Keeler Takes Plea Arrangement, Gets 15 Years In Wife's Death

BY ERIC CARLSON

Timothy James Keeler may spend less time in prison than he did hiding from police after shooting his wife in the head, burying her body, digging it up and burying it again.

Standing silently in his orange jail house jump suit Monday, Keeler, 34, showed no emotion and offered no apologies as Superior Court Judge Gregory Weeks read the plea bargain agreement reached by defense and prosecution attorneys.

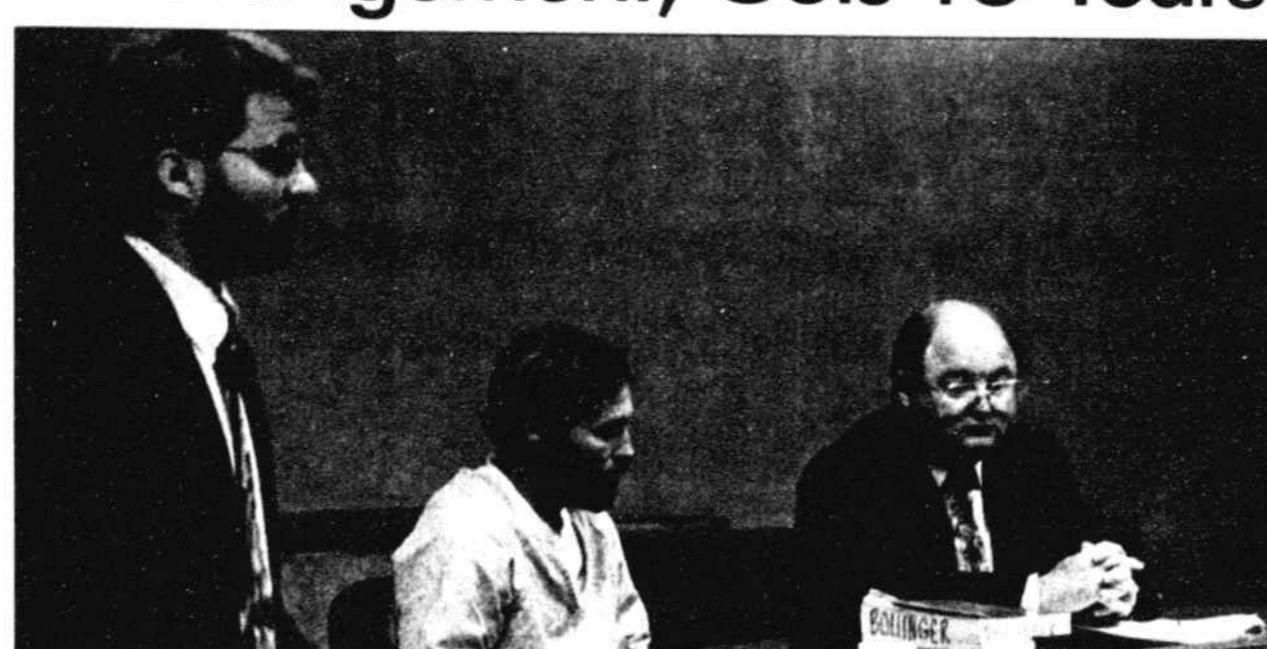
The arrangement called for Keeler to plead guilty to voluntary manslaughter. In exchange, he received a 15-year sentence for killing 29-year-old Rhonda Diane Keeler at their home in Ash three years ago.

Under current N.C. Department of Corrections release policies, Keeler will be eligible for parole in 18 months.

Before accepting the arrangement, Judge Weeks questioned Assistant District Attorney Lee Bollinger about the plea bargain, noting that District Court Judge Jerry Jolly last month found sufficient evidence to try Keeler on a charge of second-degree murder.

That was before Keeler agreed to lead authorities to the shallow grave on Simmons Road where Mrs. Keeler's remains were buried. Prior to that time, Keeler insisted his wife ran off and left him sitting at a bar in Charlotte after the two had an argument in August 1991.

A short time later relatives first reported Mrs. Keeler missing. As investigators began to suspect her husband of foul play, Timothy Keeler left Brunswick County on the day before he was supposed to take a lie detector test. Warrants for his arrest on a murder charge were issued after a piece of Mrs. Keeler's finger and locks of her hair were found buried behind the couple's home on Milligan Road.



TIMOTHY KEELER, flanked by prosecutor Lee Bollinger (left) and Defense Attorney Roy Trest, awaits sentencing Monday after pleading guilty to voluntary manslaughter in the death of his wife three years ago.

Her body wasn't found at that time, despite a massive search of the Ash area by hundreds of law enforcement officers and volunteers. Keeler was finally apprehended last month at a routine traffic stop outside Charlotte.

Jailed on a charge of first-degree murder, Keeler asked his lawyer Roy Trest to negotiate a plea bargain in

exchange for information about the whereabouts of Mrs. Keeler. Finally, on Sept. 28, Brunswick County sheriff's detectives were led to the spot where Keeler told them his wife was buried. An autopsy revealed that Mrs. Keeler died of a gunshot wound to the head, probably from a .22-caliber weapon.

In a brief description of prosecution evidence Monday, Bollinger told Judge Weeks that without Keeler's cooperation, the state would have had little more than circumstantial evidence to present at trial. Investigators had no body, no murder weapon, no ballistics evidence, no eyewitnesses, no crime scene and no information regarding her cause of death.

There would have been testimony suggesting that the Keelers "had a history of domestic problems, many of which were related to the use of alcohol," Bollinger said.

Several of the Keelers' neighbors would have testified that they heard two gunshots at the home on the day that Mrs. Keeler was last seen alive, Bollinger said. Others were prepared to say that Keeler borrowed a shovel the next morning, saying he needed to bury a dead cat.

Hard evidence of murder included a piece of finger and some female hair found buried near the Keeler home. The fingernail was painted with polish matching a type found inside the residence. There were also "blood spatters" discovered in the house, Bollinger said.

Investigators believe Keeler murdered his wife inside the house and buried her in a nearby swamp. They feel the fingernail and hair were left behind when Keeler dug the corpse up, borrowed a pickup truck and moved the body to the woods beside a farm field on Simmons Road.

Keeler has not made a statement to police about his wife's killing. Trest said his client "actively sought the plea arrangement" in an effort to dispel "rumors about chopped up bodies" that had circulated since the first grave was found. Trest said Keeler felt he had been "portrayed as some sort of monster" in publicity surrounding the three-year-old case.

Attorney Charges 'Smear Campaign' In Sheriff's Race, Says Lawsuits Likely

BY ERIC CARLSON

A lawyer representing Democratic sheriff candidate Ronald Hewett said Tuesday that Republican sheriff candidate James Brown was among those circulating copies of an X-rated videotape and a libelous letter accusing Hewett of allowing students to watch pornography in a police training class.

Hewett has denied the allegations, calling them "totally false" and "obviously politically motivated." He said he was at home during a lunch break in his Basic Law Enforcement class at Brunswick Community College on Nov. 21, 1992 when the incident is alleged to have occurred.

Hewett's attorney Roy Trest of Shallotte, said defamation lawsuits will be filed against everyone participating in what he called a "smear campaign" against Hewett.

Trest said Leland Police Officer James Wallace McLean has sworn a deposition saying that Brown hand-delivered the letter "along with bumper stickers and other Brown materials," Trest said. The attorney said he was aware of only one case in which Brown also delivered a copy of the tape.

The letter claims the incident occurred on the last day of Basic Law Enforcement Training at the college. It says that when the class broke for lunch, there was a discussion of renting videotapes to view that afternoon.

"Suzanne Pearson, Anthony Key and Laura Crane walked toward Suzanne's car to leave," the letter reads. "Lt. Ronald E. Hewett approached the students and made a gesture in the shape of an 'X' using

(See LAWSUITS, Page 2-A)

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