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Elaborate kidnapping scheme falls apart despite 'mastermind'



ANTIOCH, Calif. (AP) — It began when gunmen forced their way into the home of a suburban jeweler, seizing his wife and demanding \$2 million ransom.

Three days later — on Christmas Eve — the tough-talking kidnappers had a seeming change of heart and released their victim 30 miles from home.

That case, strange enough on its own, may have been the latest in a string of recent painstakingly crafted crimes, including robberies of a bank and a scuba diving shop, authorities said.

So far, 10 suspects have been named in the abduction embellished with such theatrical flourishes as a reported scheme to fish the ransom money from the murky waters of San Francisco Bay and another to hide the victim in a hole in the ground.

Still, authorities note, the elaborate plans failed. "You can have a sophisticated plan without necessarily being sophisticated," said FBI spokesman Rick Smith.

For instance, an Oct. 15 bank robbery featured a masked gunman bursting through a hole in the ceiling and sliding down a rope, startling employees.

But police were summoned quickly and the robbery ended in a running gun battle, the robber shedding cash as he fled while getting away with \$35,000.

Charged and arrested in that heist was Eural Wills II, 23, of Antioch. Wills, indicted Wednesday by a federal grand jury, has pleaded innocent.

Wills has not been charged in the kidnapping of the jeweler's wife, but other suspects describe him as the mastermind, said Paul Sequeira, a Contra Costa County deputy district attorney.

Wills has denied any involvement in the kidnapping.

In the Dec. 21 kidnapping, two gunmen muscled their way into the home of jeweler Gene Mayer and his wife, Ruth, tied them up, stole a safe containing \$400,000 worth of jewelry and then asked, "Which one of you wants to go," according to the

police report.

It was decided that Ruth Mayer, 61, would go because her husband has a bad heart.

The kidnappers, who told the Mayers, "This is purely a dollar-and-cents thing," left a note demanding \$2 million ransom.

Published reports said the kidnappers planned to have the money tossed off Berkeley's municipal pier, to be retrieved by scuba divers. Sequeira declined comment on those reports.

However, authorities said, Wills is a suspect in the December robbery of an Oakland scuba diving shop, and he's had diving lessons. No charges have been filed.

Another odd touch in the kidnapping case was the discovery of a hole in the ground where the kidnappers may have planned to keep their victim, Sequeira said.

It all fell apart after Wills' arrest on the robbery charges Dec. 22. Some of the Mayers' jewelry was found in Wills' van, authorities said. Wills said the jewelry was planted.

Two days after the kidnapping, Ruth Mayer was freed unharmed. No ransom was paid.

On Thursday, three men were in jail in the kidnapping — Mark Anthony Rantissi, 21, and Brian James Tomasello, 21, both of Walnut Creek, and Francisco Cruz Sarinana, 22, of Richmond.

Tomasello and Sarinana pleaded innocent to several charges including kidnapping. Rantissi was being held on suspicion of the same charges. Two other men were arrested in the case, but later released when a charging deadline expired. Four remained at large Thursday.

Oakland Police Sgt. Dave Kozicki recalls investigating Wills in a robbery case that fell apart after a witness failed to identify him with certainty.

Kozicki said Wills "seemed to have a fascination" with criminal figures, and used to call him, apparently attempting a duel of wits along the lines of TV detective dramas.

It was "a weak attempt," the sergeant said. "I've dealt with criminal masterminds and he's not one."

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