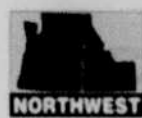


Murder trail opens for two former Rajneeshees



PORTLAND (AP) — A guru hooked on Rolls-Royces and expensive watches and sometimes high on nitrous oxide.

His power-crazed, paranoid personal secretary handing out bizarre orders and concocting enemies lists from her opulent bedroom crowded with favor seekers.

Thousands of red-garbed followers building their vision of utopia in the high Oregon desert.

The strange days of Rajneeshpuram were revisited Wednesday in opening arguments in the trial of two of the commune's former leaders on charges they conspired to kill the U.S. attorney for Oregon.

"It's a classic case of human frailty and corruption, the arrogance of power and the manipulation of the devoted," prosecutor T.J. Reardon III said.

However, attorneys for the defendants say the government's case is based entirely on the dubious testimony of five ex-followers of the guru whose stories have changed through the years. The five are

testifying as part of deals they cut with the government.

"The evidence will show that these are people who lie to get what they want," attorney Leslie Weatherhead said.

Defendants Sally-Anne Croft and Susan Hagan were known as Ma Prem Savita and Ma Anand Su in their days at the north central Oregon commune in the early 1980s. Croft was in charge of the commune's money. Hagan headed the heavy equipment department.

Reardon depicted Croft as the No. 3 person at the commune, but her attorney disputed that, saying there was no hierarchy beyond the guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and his sharp-tongued personal secretary, Ma Anand Sheela.

Croft was asked by Rajneesh to succeed Sheela as secretary when she fled the commune, but she turned him down after he told her he didn't care about his followers and was only concerned with his Rolls-Royces and watches, Weatherhead said.

In 1981, Rajneesh moved his followers from India to the former Big Muddy Ranch in a remote section of Wasco

County. The defendants were major players in the development of a lavish commune that included an airport, shopping malls, hotel and a large meditation hall.

Four thousand followers worked seven-day weeks in a tightly controlled, authoritarian environment.

Witnesses will testify that Croft and Hagan were present at meetings where plans were made to kill then-U.S. attorney Charles Turner, Reardon said. Turner was heading an investigation into allegations that Rajneeshees were conducting sham marriages to circumvent U.S. immigration laws.

The prosecution contends Croft and Hagan attended "a series of killing conferences" in Sheela's bedroom where the conspiracy to kill Turner was developed. Croft is alleged to have supplied the money to purchase five guns that could not be traced to the commune. Hagan was a fervent follower who gave a pep talk in support of the plot, the prosecution alleges.

Followers of the guru went to Portland to find out Turner's work habits and took photographs of his home, Reardon said. Two women were sent to Texas and New

Mexico to buy the guns. The weapons were retrieved from a drained lake last year and will be presented as evidence, Reardon said.

But the defense attorneys said there is no evidence that the two women attended the meetings, and those who say otherwise have changed their stories over the years. Four of the five named in opening arguments have reached plea bargain deals with the government. The fifth was granted immunity from all prosecution.

Weatherhead wants the results of a lie-detector examination that Croft took to be admitted as evidence. Hagan's attorney Colleen Scissors said her client has offered to take a lie-detector test, too.

The women fought extradition from England, where Croft worked as an accountant and Hagan was an aromatherapist. Several family members and supporters, including Hagan's 19-year-old daughter, were in the courtroom Wednesday.

It was the same courthouse where Rajneesh pleaded guilty to immigration fraud before leaving the country in 1985. He died in India in 1990.

Packwood declines public hearing

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Bob Packwood notified the Ethics Committee on Wednesday that he will not request a hearing on charges including sexual misconduct and attempting to obstruct the probe by altering his diaries.

However, the committee could order a hearing anyway — and has done so in every case that has reached the final investigative stage. The Oregon Republican's case has reached that point, and he had until Wednesday to request a hearing.

If the ethics panel's three Republicans and three Democrats decide to order hearings, they also would determine whether — as in the past — the proceedings would be public. The alternative would be to reach conclusions without a hearing, basing a committee report on evidence gathered and on private interviews with witnesses.

Packwood's lawyers sent the

committee a brief letter stating, "This is to notify you that Sen. Packwood does not request a hearing."

The senator, who chairs the Senate Finance Committee, could have used the proceeding to make statements in his defense, and his lawyers could have cross-examined witnesses.

It was not immediately clear what the Ethics Committee would decide. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., a committee member, has called for public hearings. Ranking committee Democrat Richard Bryan, of Nevada, strongly hinted that he favored hearings by pointing to the panel's past history.

Packwood met with the panel privately for three days last week to defend himself and answer questions.

His chief of staff, Elaine Franklin, said, "For two and one-half years, Sen. Packwood has said he wants an opportunity to

present his side to the Ethics Committee. For three days last week he had that opportunity.

"Now he looks forward to: One, a resolution to these matters; two, leading the Senate on the spending restraints necessary to balance the budget."

The Finance Committee is preparing to revamp Medicare and Medicaid and to write tax-cut legislation.

In the sexual misconduct allegations, Packwood was accused of making unwanted advances to women from 1969 through 1990, including grabbing and kissing them against their will. Several of the women said they wanted to tell their stories at a public hearing.

He is also accused of altering his personal diaries when he learned they might be subpoenaed, and soliciting job offers for his soon-to-be ex-wife from individuals with legislative interests.

Blind couple's concessions sight for visitors' sore eyes

ROGUE RIVER, Ore. (AP) — People who buy a latte or a snow cone at Valley of the Rogue State Park have a hard time believing Roy and Becky Pickett are both legally blind.

"They didn't act like blind people," said Jerry Agnew, who stopped on his way home to Visalia, Calif.

"I had not a clue," said Rob Massey of Tigard. "She just took my money and made change."

With so many visitors saying they want a chance to buy snacks and drinks, Oregon state parks this year are making their first foray into the world of concession stands, said Jim Hutton, who manages the park neighboring a rest stop on Interstate 5 between Medford and Grants Pass.

Under Oregon law, the disabled get preference for offering concessions at state-owned facilities. The Picketts pay 15 percent of their gross receipts to the state.

Though people have little notion the Picketts are disabled, they both suffer from severe limitations to their sight.

"I can't tell a man from a woman until they open their mouth," Roy Pickett said.

They have learned their way around the 24-foot trailer that is their concession stand. Roy Pickett uses a magnifier to identify currency and knows a soft drink is full when the bubbles burst over the rim.

"I make espresso as fast as somebody with sight," Roy Pickett said.

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