

Juror has connection to dragging defendant

1 JASPER, Texas — A prospective juror in the trial of a white man accused of dragging a black man to death was excused Tuesday after revealing a relative received letters from the defendant laced with racist remarks.

Donald Halmon, a middle-aged construction worker, was one of several people released from jury service in the murder trial of John William King, the first of three white men to be tried in the June 7 slaying of James Byrd Jr.

King, Shawn Allen Berry and Lawrence Russell Brewer are accused of killing Byrd, 49, because he was black. The men allegedly beat him, chained him to a pickup truck and dragged him for 2 1/2 miles, tearing his right arm and head from his body.

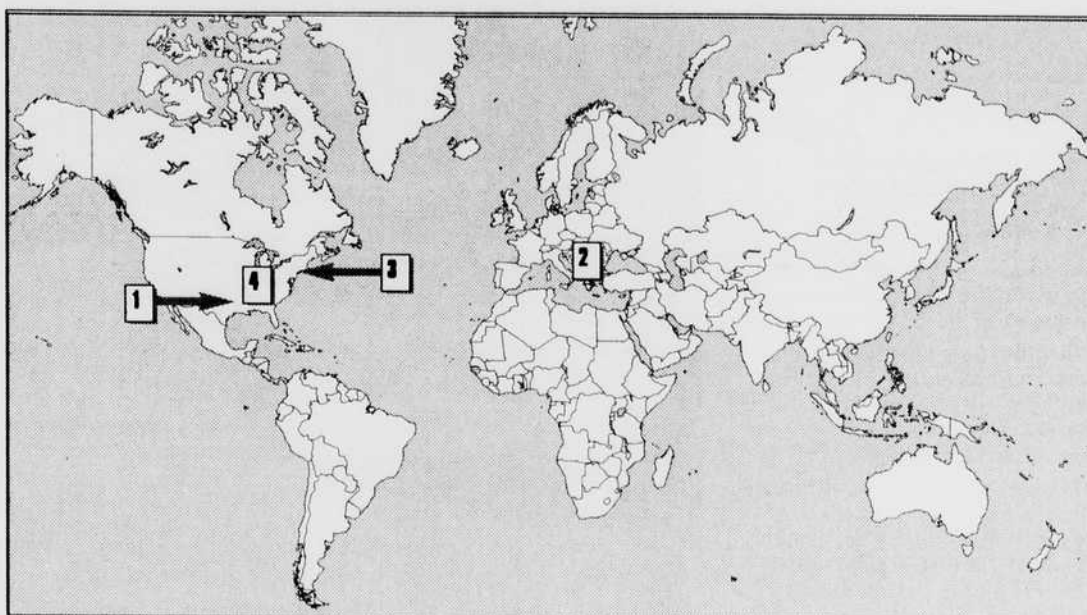
Halmon told attorneys his step-granddaughter, Michelle Chapman, received letters from King that espoused anti-black views. Chapman is one of 48 people subpoenaed as potential witnesses in the trial.

Chapman is one of several girls King contacted by letter while he was imprisoned from 1995 to 1997 for violating probation in a 1992 burglary, authorities said.

The contents of the letters have not been disclosed, but authorities characterized them as being romantic in nature, a series of come-ons to girls King was acquainted with in Jasper before he was sent to prison.

They contain details of his pro-Aryan, anti-black beliefs, authorities said.

A week after Byrd's mangled body was found, several of the girls' parents turned over the letters to investigators, District Attorney Guy James Gray said. The letters may be introduced as evidence in King's trial.



Evidence-tampering possible in massacre

2 PRISTINA, Yugoslavia — Finnish forensic experts investigating how 45 ethnic Albanian villagers were killed may be unable to determine whether they were massacred or shot in battle because of the possibility of evidence-tampering, the lead pathologist said Tuesday.

The remarks by Helena Ranta suggest the world may never learn for sure the truth of the Racak village killings, which sparked international outrage and renewed calls for NATO action against the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

The chief of the international peace monitors, William Walker, an American, called the slayings a massacre and has accused Serb police of killing the civilians. Yugoslav authorities claim the dead were rebels killed in battle. They ordered Walker expelled for his comments but froze the order after strong international pressure.

Ranta stressed Tuesday that she

was not accusing anyone of tampering with the bodies, but said the possibility could not be ruled out.

The bodies, including a boy and three women, were moved without supervision — first by ethnic Albanians to a mosque in Racak and later by Serb police to the Pristina morgue. In addition, Ranta said Yugoslav authorities had already conducted autopsies on about a third of the bodies before her team arrived.

"The problem as we see it, it is difficult to reconstruct the 'chain of custody' over the bodies," she said. "There is a possibility of contamination and a possibility of fabrication of evidence."

Sawyer, Gibson help ABC morning ratings

3 NEW YORK — The rescue bid of Diane Sawyer and Charles Gibson at ABC's struggling "Good Morning America" has gotten off to a solid start.

Nielsen Media Research ratings for the duo's first week were 25 percent higher than the show's

average numbers during the last three months of 1998.

Sawyer and Gibson replaced Lisa McRee and Kevin Newman on Jan. 18.

"I was very pleased and happy with the numbers," said Phyllis McGrady, the ABC executive in charge of the show. "It sounds like people were tuning in to see them. But what made us feel good is that they decided to stick around for the week."

NBC's "Today" show had an average 6.1 million viewers last week and "Good Morning America" had 4.1 million. CBS's "This Morning" had an average of 3 million viewers, Nielsen said Tuesday.

Gibson and Sawyer had 4.2 million viewers on their first day, and the audience declined only slightly the rest of the week.

The audience for "Good Morning America" has been declining for years and reached what ABC hoped was its nadir during the last week of 1998. That week, CBS dropped ABC to third place in the morning standings for the first time in more than two decades.

Only days later, ABC announced its overhaul. Gibson returned after stepping down as host last year and Sawyer joined him. Their reign was announced as temporary but indefinite.

Patient moves finger on transplanted hand

4 LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The man who received the first hand transplant in the United States moved a finger on Tuesday, and doctors said there are no signs of rejection or infection.

"His hand looks good," said Dr. Warren Breidenbach, lead surgeon for the team that transplanted a hand to Matthew Scott's left wrist on Monday.

"We are very cautious and not encouraging movement at this point. Controlled motion of the fingers will begin sometime in the next few days to one week."

This week Scott traded a metal-and-plastic prosthesis for a human hand — the first transplant of its kind performed in the United States. The price: a lifetime on anti-rejection drugs that will suppress his immune system, leaving him vulnerable to infection, disease, even death.

Scott, 37, lost his dominant hand in the explosion of an M-80, a powerful and illegal firecracker, on Dec. 23, 1985. He was given a donor hand in 14 1/2 hours of surgery Sunday and Monday at Jewish Hospital in Louisville.

Breidenbach said any number of complications could arise, some later than others, and that there was as much as a 50 percent chance Scott's body would reject the hand within a year.

"A lot of able-bodied people say, 'Why put yourself at risk? You're doing so well,'" Scott told The Courier-Journal earlier this month in an interview. "But this is a chance for me ... to get something back that is alive, that hopefully will be able to feel."

— The Associated Press

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