

California jury: Career criminal guilty of killing two teens

■ Oregon jury had previously sentenced Rodney Halbower to 15 years in prison for rape and attempted murder

By Paul Elias
The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A Northern California jury on Tuesday found guilty a career criminal thought to be the “Gypsy Hill Killer”



of raping and murdering two teenage girls more than 42 years ago. The San Mateo County jury deliberated for a little more than an hour before finding Rodney Halbower guilty.

Authorities believe the 69-year-old is responsible for other rapes and murders of young women in Northern California and Reno, Nevada, over a five-month span in 1976. In 2004, advances in DNA technology connected Halbower to the murders. He was in an Oregon prison at the time.

Halbower is scheduled to be sentenced Oct. 10 in Redwood City, about 25 miles south of San Francisco. The judge is required to sentence Halbower under the sentencing laws of 1976, the year the crimes occurred.

District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said the stiffest sentence available then was life with the possibility of parole. Wagstaffe said the judge can impose consecutive sentences, meaning if Halbower was given parole for one murder, he would start serving the life sentence for the second.

“Our expectation is that this monster of a killer will never, ever, be allowed to be free on our streets again,” Wagstaffe said.

The six murders remained a mystery for four decades until a cold-case detective re-opened the investigation. He scraped DNA samples from cigarette butts found at the scene and in 2014 they were discovered to match Halbower’s genetic makeup. DNA taken from the victims also matched Halbower’s DNA, prosecutors told jurors.

It took four years to start Halbower’s after he was charged with two of the murders. He routinely fired his attorneys and demanded to represent himself. A

judge also ordered a trial to determine if he was sane enough to stand trial. A jury in 2017 found him sane.

The start of the murder trial almost ended as soon as it started on Sept. 7 with Halbower disrupting the proceedings.

“I am not guilty!” he yelled at the jury. “I have never raped or murdered in my life!”

The judge declined public defender John Halley’s calls for a mistrial and Halbower ceased his outbursts.

“He doesn’t get to set up his own mistrial,” Judge Mark Forcum said.

He stopped the outbursts after that and Wagstaffe said Halbower calmly congratulated prosecutor Sean Gallagher after the verdicts were read.

Prosecutors said they charged him with the two murders with the strongest evidence and expected he would be locked up for life if convicted.

Gallagher told the jury about the two teen girls who were abducted, raped and killed in a once-quiet suburb, and that DNA from semen found in both women and preserved for decades matched Halbower’s DNA. One of the vic-

tims was stabbed to death and the other was beaten in the head with concrete and stabbed in her heart.

Authorities in the 1970s said the killings were linked and dubbed the attacker the Gypsy Hill Killer for the location where one of the first victims was found. Halbower is also suspected of rap-

ing and killing a nursing student in Reno during the same period as the five California killings.

It’s possible that Halbower would never have been linked to the attacks had he not escaped from a Nevada prison in December 1986. He made his way to Oregon, where he was arrested on suspicion of rape

and attempted murder within days of his escape.

An Oregon jury convicted Halbower and sentenced him to 15 years in prison in that state. First, he was returned to Nevada to finish that state’s prison term.

When Nevada paroled him in 2013, he was sent back to Oregon, where

prison officials took a DNA sample and submitted it to the national database investigators use to revive stalled investigations. Authorities say the results linked him to the Gypsy Hill case.

Court records show Halbower has spent the past 53 years in prison or on the lam.

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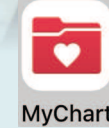
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BRIEFLY

From wire reports

Oregon's unemployment rate at lowest in history

SALEM — Oregon's unemployment rate for August was 3.8 percent, the lowest unemployment rate since comparable records began 42 years ago.

The Oregon Employment Department said Tuesday that the state's unemployment rate is just below the national unemployment rate of 3.9 percent.

The number of unemployed people in August dropped to 80,500, down from 88,000 a year ago.

Many people entering the labor force are getting snapped up by employers in a very tight job market.

Oregon's nonfarm payroll employment grew by 900 jobs in August, following a revised gain of 3,400 jobs in July.

Those jobs were in construction, which added 800 jobs, and trade, which added 800 jobs in wholesale trade and 700 jobs in retail trade.

The leisure and hospitality industries lost 1,100 jobs and government lost 600 jobs.

