

Split verdict in '89 killing

Jury acquits on murder, convicts on conspiracy & weapons

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In a bizarre split verdict, a jury of four black and eight white jurors yesterday acquitted skinhead Thomas Gibson of fatally shooting a black man to earn a spiderweb tattoo in his racist subculture.

The verdict in the 1989 killing of Aaron Wood stunned about 40 court watchers and left both sides scratching their heads.

They asked why the jury acquitted Gibson, 36, of Newark, Del., of first-degree murder and ethnic intimidation, yet convicted him of conspiracy to murder and weapons violations.

As jurors were polled, a tense Gibson appeared angry, his hands tightly clenched on the desk, while three rows behind him, his mother and uncle stared straight ahead, and a blond-haired girlfriend wiped tears.

All three declined to comment. His attorney, Michael Farrell, acknowledged the partial win by playfully poking Gibson in the bicep — above the Hitler and swastika tattoo hidden by his white long-sleeve shirt. His infamous spiderweb tattoo was also covered.

Asked for his client's reaction, Farrell said Gibson was "terribly disappointed," just as Farrell was.

"I'm shocked," said Assistant District Attorney Roger King of the last verdict of his nearly 40-year career as a prosecutor. "There was more

than enough evidence there."

Common Pleas Judge M. Teresa Sarmina set Gibson's sentencing for July 25.

Gibson's troubles may not be over. Federal authorities are looking into filing civil-rights violations or other charges against him.

Meantime, Farrell said he would seek bail for his client and ask the judge in post-verdict motions to overturn the charge of conspiracy to murder because it was inconsistent with the rest of the verdict.

The prosecution saw the bail issue differently.

"Bail? No way! This man is dangerous," said King. "He threatened a federal agent."

Jurors asked 11 questions during 11 hours of deliberations over three days during the 12-day trial. A key question was how a detective researched 37 unsolved murders and determined that Gibson killed Wood.

Four jurors who were contacted after the verdict declined to comment.

Immediately after the verdict, prosecutor King called the victim's youngest brother, Tyrone Wood, and uncle, Arnold Wynn, into a side room, telling them: "Don't try to make any sense out of it."

The verdict meant Gibson and an accomplice "talked about it, left to do it [by driving to Philadelphia]. They didn't do it, but [Gibson] had a gun," King added.

"It's a compromise," he added. "I think someone didn't want to sentence him to life."

Shaking his head and throwing up his hands, Wood said, "I don't see it. How can you be convicted of conspiracy to murder, but not murder? I don't understand."

Wood called the verdict "a travesty."

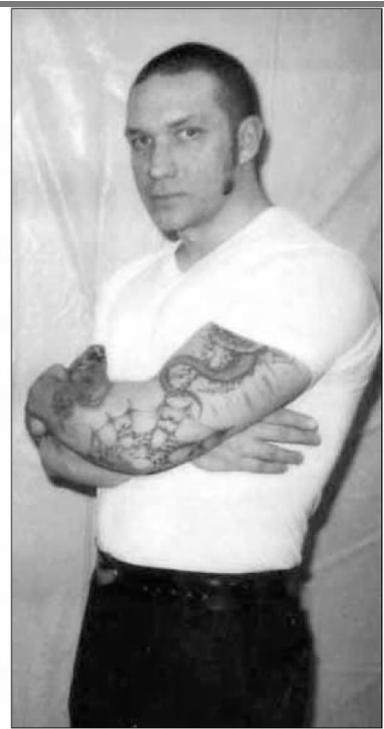
Wynn worried about what to tell the victim's mother, Dorothy Wood, 72, who has suffered heart disease and stroke, which he believes was caused by the stress of wondering for 19 years who killed her son.

"She'll never be able to reconcile this," he added. "That [court] document will always say 'not guilty.'"

Farrell had argued that Wood was killed by guns and drugs, and characterized the victim as a drug dealer. But King, in his closing, did not address the issues raised by the defense.

Nevertheless, King assured the family that, "bottom line," Wood might have been a drug user but, with only "\$29.25 in his sock" he wasn't selling drugs. "A dealer? No way!"

Farrell said that jurors had "enough courage" — and reasonable doubt — to find Gibson not guilty of murder and ethnic intimidation, but "not enough courage to let him go scott free."



Thomas Gibson's spiderweb tattoo was covered by his long-sleeve shirt at murder trial that ended yesterday.

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Fri, Jul 26, 2019