

LOCAL

City Editor Michael Howie 217-351-5211 mhowie@news-gazette.com
 News Editor George Dobrik 217-351-5381 gdobrik@news-gazette.com
 Regional Editor Rebecca Mabry 217-351-5638 rmabry@news-gazette.com

LA BAMBA CO-OWNER

Mattoon man admits role in kidnapping

Judge in federal case sets sentencing for March 30

By STEVE BAUER
 sbauer@news-gazette.com

— URBANA — Antonio Aguas and his brother, Ramiro, sat next to two FBI agents in the federal courthouse in Urbana on Monday as a Mattoon man admitted a brutal, terrifying kidnapping.

— Francisco Antonio Villalobos, also known as Adrian Lopez, pleaded guilty Monday to kidnapping and using a gun in a crime of violence in connection with the abduction of 32-year-old Antonio Aguas.

— Michael McCuskey, chief judge of the U.S. Central District of Illinois, set sentencing for Villalobos for March 30.

The judge advised him of a possible sentence of 10 years to life in prison. McCuskey said Villalobos could be deported to El Salvador after serving the prison sentence, if it is proven that he was in the U.S. illegally.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Rick Cox, who is prosecuting the case and gave the evidence that would have been presented at a trial for Villalobos, said after the hearing that Antonio Aguas was upset by the account.

"It's hard to relive it all," Cox said.

Cox said Villalobos and a co-defendant, Terence Merritt,

kidnapped Antonio Aguas from behind the La Bamba restaurant in Champaign the evening of Sept. 10. Villalobos, 31, and Merritt, 18, are both of Mattoon. Villalobos and Merritt forced Antonio at gunpoint into Antonio's Mitsubishi behind the restaurant and office at 1905 Glenn Park Drive, according to court records. The Aguas brothers own the La Bamba chain, which has more than two dozen locations in five states.

The two men drove Antonio to a cornfield on the outskirts of Champaign, where Antonio tried to escape, Cox said in court.

"During that attempt, (Villalobos) struck Antonio in the head with a gun, drawing blood," Cox said. "At some point during the escape attempt, the gun fired and a bullet struck the windshield of the Mitsubishi."

Villalobos, in answer to questions directly from the judge, said, "It was an accident," but admitted holding the gun at the time it was fired.

Cox said the evidence also shows Ramiro got a call Sept. 11 in Mexico, informing him of Antonio's kidnapping and demanding \$250,000 for his return. Over the next three days, there were more calls between the kidnappers and Ramiro, with them telling Ramiro that \$250,000 was "only

the tip of the iceberg," Cox said.

At one point, the kidnappers demanded \$1 million, and when Ramiro said he didn't have that much, he was asked if his brother's

head was worth \$1 million, according to Cox.

Antonio later called Ramiro and told his brother that the kidnappers threatened to begin "cutting him into little pieces," and one of the kidnappers told Ramiro that he would blow off Antonio's head if Ramiro did not do as told. Antonio called



ANTONIO AGUAS

two hours later and told Ramiro that he was taken to a river and beaten and that the kidnappers threatened to throw him in the river, according to Cox.

The prosecutor said Ramiro was told on Sept. 15 to drop off the ransom money near a BP gas station in Fort Wayne, Ind. Law enforcement officials had the site under surveillance and saw Villalobos pick up the ransom money, Cox said. Villalobos was then arrested.

A short time later, police rescued Antonio Aguas from a motel where he was being held by Merritt, who was also arrested, Cox said.

Merritt is scheduled for a possible change of plea hearing Dec. 13.