

Ex-restaurateur guilty in 'Santa Claus' robbery

6-26-92

By LIZ HALLORAN
and SUZANNE SATALINE
Courant Staff Writers

Santa Claus is going to jail.

Jeffrey R. Stenner of New Britain admitted Thursday in U.S. District Court that he stole a total of \$1.8 million in two armored car robberies in West Hartford — including one in which he was dressed as Santa Claus.

Stenner, a former New Britain restaurateur, pleaded guilty with two accomplices — his wife, Jill M. St. John, 32, of New Britain, and a friend, Perfecto Valle, 30, of the Rockville section of Vernon. St. John and Valle are former restaurant employees.

The U.S. Department of Justice had planned to prosecute the three at a trial that was scheduled to begin in early July, U.S. Attorney Albert S. Dabrowski said.

"This particular case was an important one for us," Dabrowski said. "There was a lot of money involved."

Dabrowski said some of the money has been recovered, but "not a significant amount."

Stenner and his accomplices were indicted in February in connection with the crimes, which took place in 1987 and 1988, said Assistant U.S. Attorney James G. Genco, who prosecuted the case.

Stenner stood in court Thursday morning and described how he disguised himself as Santa Claus on Dec. 20, 1988, drove a leased Volkswagen Jetta to the United Bank and Trust Co. branch at Corbins Corner in West Hartford, and robbed a Dunbar armored car.

He got away with \$695,000.

Stenner and Valle also pleaded guilty to carrying out a bold daylight robbery of a Loomis armored car on March 4, 1987, at the Bank of Boston Connecticut branch in West Hartford. The masked pair, along with a Loomis employee, Robert Schmidt, made off with more than \$1.09 million — the state's second-largest robbery of the 1980s. The largest was the 1983 Wells Fargo armored car robbery in West Hartford, in which \$7 million was stolen.

Please see Man, Page D11

Continued from Connecticut Page

Two years later, Schmidt's body was found dumped by a Southington road. He had been strangled. Stenner is the prime suspect in the killing, police said.

St. John pleaded guilty to being an accessory to the Loomis robbery, and to laundering the stolen cash through local banks. Stenner also pleaded guilty to one count of money laundering.

Federal investigators said the couple bought cashier's and bank checks in amounts of \$2,500 to \$3,500 to avoid the attention of the Internal Revenue Service.

"He's a very smart man. But not

smart enough," said Det. Charles Coffey of the West Hartford Police Department.

It was the leased brown Jetta that led investigators to Stenner, Genco said. FBI agents did a computer check of every brown Jetta in the state, knowing that the license plate of the one involved in the Santa Claus robbery was stolen.

Stenner, who at the time was operating Banquers Restaurant on Main Street in New Britain, was still leasing the car when agents went to interview him, Genco said.

"The restaurant was in terrible shape," Genco said. "They were behind on their bills. Employees were not getting paid. Vendors were not getting paid." But after the second

robbery, he said, employees were being paid in wads of cash.

When agents began interviewing employees, one said he recognized Stenner's voice as the one he heard on a West Hartford police tape that investigators played on the radio. On the tape, the caller reports a phony burglary complaint to divert police attention from the Bank of Boston robbery.

Stenner faces as long as 35 years in prison and a fine of as much as \$1.8 million. He will be sentenced Sept. 1. Valle faces up to 20 years in prison and a \$2.2 million fine. His sentencing date is Aug. 24. St. John faces a maximum of 22½ years in prison, and will be sentenced Aug. 27.