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Hostage Tells of Marin

By Stephen Cook
Examiner News Staff

SAN JOSE — The convict who took command during the armed takeover of a Marin County courtroom Aug. 7, 1970, was "very gentle" with his victims, according to one of the jurors not taken hostage.

The good words, offered by San Rafael housewife Norene Morris, were for the late James D. McClain, who was 37 when slain in the shootout which ended the abortive courtroom escape attempt.

Mrs. Morris, who displayed an impressive ability to recall details of the traumatic events which ended with the slaying of Superior Judge Harold J. Haley, McClain and two others, testified yesterday at the murder, kidnap and conspiracy trial of Angela Davis, accused as an accomplice in the Marin events.

Gun Taped

Mrs. Norris, whose testimony differed at several points from that of the state's first witness — hostage juror Maria Graham — said it all began when 17 year old Jonathan Jackson stood in the courtroom with a gun and said, "This is it!"

As the youth produced guns, McClain took a

sawed-off shotgun that "looked like a piece of wood with metal on the end of it" and taped it to Judge Haley's neck, Mrs. Norris recalled.

Young Jackson, pointing a carbine that looked like a machine gun, "told us to get on the floor. Mr. McClain told him to 'calm down. Leave the jury alone. We don't want to kill anybody,'" she said.

"Well, I want to kill somebody," she recalled Jackson answering.

At McClain's insistence, Judge Haley called the sheriff and initiated a low voiced conversation that began, "This is Judge Haley. We have an emergency here . . ." she recalled.

While the judge spoke, another escaping convict, William Christmas, walked up to juror Joyce Rodoni in the jury box and started wrapping a strand of wire around her neck.

"Cut that out!" McClain ordered from across the room, according to Mrs. Morris.

The witness recalled only one display of temper by McClain — when he became impatient with the progress of the judge's telephone conversation with Sheriff Louis Mountanos.

"Mr. McClain got on the telephone and started yelling that if he didn't get out he would kill Judge Haley," she said.

To the judge, McClain reportedly calmly said: "If I get killed, you get killed."

Again, McClain spotted Christmas trying to put wire around a juror's neck and Mrs. Morris reported that he said:

"Leave the jury alone. We don't want to hurt anyone. I'd think you would have had enough of that. We're not animals and we're not going to act like them."

McClain, personally, chose the reluctant hostages from the jury, telling the others "We don't want to hurt them. All we want to do is get away and we'll turn them loose," she testified.

One potential hostage, a white-haired lady, he sent back to the jury box, saying: "Are you scared? I don't want to scare anyone."

One woman stood before him shaking, her hand to her mouth and unable to respond when he asked if she were scared. He sent her back to her seat, Mrs. Morris said.

He went to Miss Rodoni, seated in the back row of the jury box and said softly, "Come on. Are you scared? Come on," Mrs. Morris remembered.

When Miss Rodoni said nothing, "he reached over and took hold of Joyce's arm and opened the gate and led her out. He seemed almost gentle. He asked if she wanted her purse and she said nothing. He picked up her purse and handed it to her."

As the abductors and hostages started to leave the courtroom, McClain stopped and told Prosecutor Gary Thomas to come along, too, said Mrs. Morris.

Jackson objected there would not be enough room in the getaway van, but McClain said, "He could come along. He could talk for them," she recalled.

Defense lawyers made much of the fact that neither Mrs. Morris nor Doris Wittmer, a hostage juror who followed her to the stand, testified of hearing anyone say "Free the Soledad Brothers."

Prosecutor Albert W. Harris Jr. contends the hostages were taken to hold as ransom for the release of Miss Davis's alleged lover by mail, George Jackson, and his two fellow Soledad Brothers, John Cluchette and Fleeta Drumgo.

His first witness, hostage juror Maria Elena Graham, testified to hearing demands for the freedom of the Soledad Brothers "repeatedly,"

in the courtroom, in the hallway outside and in the parking lot of the Marin Civic Center.

The trial, transferred here from Marin County on a change of venue, will go onto a new schedule Monday, starting daily at 9 a.m., a half hour earlier, Superior Judge Richard E. Arnason announced.

Shootout