

T A T E S - I T E M

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—AP WIREPHOTO.
MRS. VERNON DAHMER
Tells of attack.

WIDOW TELLS OF FATAL FIREBOMB ATTACK Defense to Quiz Mrs. Dahmer

By JOHN S. LANG

HATTIESBURG, Miss. (AP)—Lawyers for a reputed Ku Klux Klansman today cross-examine the widow of Negro leader Vernon Dahmer, who testified in a wavering voice how her husband died in a firebomb sneak attack.

"Vernon was shooting back all the time, yelling at me to get the children out," Ellie Jewell Dahmer recalled.

Cecil Victor Sessum, the balding defendant charged with murdering Dahmer, stared intently at the victim's wife whose testimony yesterday followed the selection of a jury of 12 white men.

A HONKING horn woke Mrs. Dahmer about 2 a.m. on January 10, 1966 — in time to see flames eating away the eaves of her brick veneer home in the Kelly settlement north of here.

"I looked out and could see the eaves burning and heard shots coming in," she said. "I heard the picture window crash when it broke and something came through and fell on the floor. All the time, gunshots were coming in.

"My daughter Betty, who is 10, was screaming and crying we could never get out alive. Vernon was handing Betty out the window to me. He was shooting back all the time . . ."

Mrs. Dahmer said her two sons climbed out the window, then the whole family fled in their pajamas to a barn, where they found safety out of the light of the flames.

She said she did not see anyone outside her burning home.

"Who was burned the worst?" asked Dist. Atty. James Finch.

"VERNON," replied the widow. Her voice broke. "He died of it.

"He got burned the worst because he stayed in the house shooting at them all the time so we could escape."

Dahmer, 58, one-time president of the Forrest County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, appeared to be burned only on his arms, his widow said.

"He was resting well, and I thought he was all right. Then all of a sudden he raised up and called me. And he fell back. And he began breathing hard. And he said it was turning dark. And he died."

Finch stared across the room at the defense table.

"Your witness," he said.

"It's a quarter of six and we're going to stop right here," said circuit judge Stanton Hall. "We're going to send the jury to dinner and lock them up for the night. Recess until 9 a. m. tomorrow."

The jury of 62 and a white alternate was chosen after 15

hours of questioning which eliminated every other man on the venire list of more than 100.

During a brief recess after the jury was picked and before testimony began, Sessum sat holding hands with his wife.

The defendant, a 10th grade dropout identified by the FBI as a Ku Klux Klansman, smiled and nodded while his wife whispered in his ear and twice kissed him on the cheek.

MRS. SESSUM, a plump and pretty woman whose shiny black hair was piled high on her head, gazed down at the floor when Mrs. Dahmer testified.

When the jury was seated, Judge Hall released word that Mrs. Sessum tried to bring a long-barreled pistol into the courtroom Monday at the start of jury selection.

A search of spectators entering the courtroom turned up a

.38-caliber revolver in Mrs. Sessum's purse according to Sheriff Gene Walters.

He said charges would not be filed until after the trial because he did not want to influence the jury.