

Ex-Marine Pleads Guilty to Avoid 2nd Trial in '79 Slaying

By Kevin O'Leary

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A former Marine whose murder conviction was overturned by an appeals court last August reversed himself Monday and pleaded guilty in the beating and strangling death of a 22-year-old Irvine woman in 1979.

Robert Lloyd Sellers' guilty plea-entered 10 years to the day after Savannah Leigh Anderson's naked, bruised and sexually molested body was discovered in her Woodbridge apartment-was only the latest twist in the bizarre murder case.

Defense attorney Jack Earley said Sellers decided to plead guilty to first-degree murder after prosecutors agreed to seek a sentence of 25 years to life, but with the possibility of parole. At trial, prosecutors had sought the death penalty and Sellers received a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Earley said Sellers wanted to avoid "the risk involved in a new trial. This is an emotional case, and there is no telling what a jury could do. . . . The certainty of having the case over was peaceful to Mr. Sellers."

Sellers was a 22-year-old Marine and part-time security guard at Anderson's apartment complex. He subsequently admitted to police that he was obsessed with the woman and had broken into her apartment to confront her shortly after midnight on May 14, 1979. When Anderson rejected Sellers' advances, he went into a rage, beating her with his night stick and then strangling her with his belt. He returned to the apartment several hours later, dragged the woman's body to the bathtub, washed it and put it into bed, where he sexually molested the body.

For 5 years the case was an unsolved murder. Then in 1984 Irvine police officers Larry Montgomery and Scott Cade decided to recheck the bloody palm print left in the victim's bathroom and discovered it matched Sellers'. When the FBI verified the finding, Sellers was brought in for questioning and confessed to the crime.

The prosecution had argued that Anderson was raped twice-during her struggle with her killer and again after she was dead.

In August, 1988, the state's 4th District Court of Appeal found that there was evidence only that she was raped after her death. Ruling that rape can occur only while a victim is alive, the court overturned the life-without-parole sentence because the murder conviction lacked a legally required "special circumstance," such as rape. The court ordered a new trial, saying that while the bludgeoning and strangulation of Anderson was "a most heinous crime," jurors had been improperly instructed on the law regarding rape and that this had improperly influenced the verdict on the murder charge.

Sellers has been incarcerated at Folsom State Prison since his conviction. Deputy Dist. Atty. Richard M. King said that considering all the factors involved in the case-particularly the expense of a second trial-"it was in the interest of justice to accept the defendant's offer to plead guilty."

The victim's mother, Maxine Anderson of Salt Lake City, reacted to the plea agreement Tuesday by saying that "my emotions are mixed."

Maxine Anderson said that Sellers is a "cold-blooded killer" and she had worried that other young women might be harmed if he was released. But she said she was glad to have the case finally closed.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Robert Lloyd Sellers after the jury's guilty verdict in 1986. / GLENN KOENIG / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Savannah Leigh Anderson, 7 months before 1979 murder.