

Trial opens in racist dragging death in Jasper, Texas

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The trial of John King for the brutal killing of James Byrd Jr. opened on Tuesday in Jasper, Texas. King, 24, is the first of three expected to stand trial for the murder of Byrd, 49, killed in the early morning hours of June 7, 1998. King, along with Shawn Berry, 23, and Lawrence Brewer, 31, are alleged to have severely beaten Byrd, before chaining him to a pickup truck and dragging him to his dismemberment and death.

King, Berry and Brewer, all white, established ties to racist organizations during previous prison terms. Byrd was black.

The prosecutor, District Attorney Guy James Gray, made his opening statement Tuesday, arguing that physical evidence and King's racist writings would demonstrate his responsibility for the murder. King pled not guilty to the charges while his attorney, Haden "Sonny" Cribbs, declined to make an opening statement.

In the weeks leading up to the trial, King has written to Texas newspapers claiming that Berry acted alone in killing Byrd and that neither he nor Brewer were present. In his confession to the police last June, Berry maintained that all three were present, but that Brewer and King attacked Byrd and chained him to Berry's pickup truck.

On Tuesday prosecutors entered into evidence a lighter found at the woodlands clearing where Byrd was chained to the truck. It was engraved with "KKK" and King's prison nickname. Prosecutors also submitted 22 pages of documents, handwritten by King, intended to serve as bylaws for a racist group he had hoped to start, the "Confederate Knights of America Texas Rebel Soldiers." (The Confederate Knights of America is a North Carolina affiliate of the Ku Klux Klan.)

Byrd's family left the courtroom in tears as photographs of his remains and fragments of his

tattered clothes were shown to jurors. Equally horrifying was the fact that Byrd was initially conscious while being dragged and tried to prop his head up from the pavement by leaning on his elbows. His head was severed after one mile while his torso was dragged for an additional two miles before being dumped in front of a black cemetery.

The prosecution stated that it would submit DNA evidence further linking King to the crime scene. Saliva tests done on cigarettes found in the clearing reportedly point to all three charged in the murder. Byrd's blood was also allegedly found on King's shoes.

The jury includes eleven whites and one black. Although the town of Jasper is half black, the surrounding county from which the jury pool was drawn is only 18 percent black.

King's adoptive father Ronald, who wrote an apology to Byrd's family after the murder, expressed his dismay and grief over the crime in a November interview with the *Dallas Morning News*. He told the paper that his son was not raised to be a racist, and that he had grown up around children who were black, including two of Ronald's goddaughters.

John King, the defendant, dropped out of high school in 1992 and was arrested twice for burglary. The second incident led to an eight-year prison sentence that began in July 1995. In prison he shared a cell with Brewer, eight years older and jailed for burglary, cocaine possession and parole violations. Brewer and Berry would later move in with King in the spring of 1998, following King's parole in July 1997 and Brewer's in September of the same year.

In prison King took up with inmates involved in the "Confederate Knights." There he acquired a number of his tattoos, which reportedly include Nazi symbols and a picture of a black man being hung. According to a

report published in the *Morning News*, while in jail he also discussed a plan to drag someone to death.



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