

Louisiana inmate exonerated after 30 years on death row

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18 March 2014

Louisiana's longest-serving death row inmate walked free after a judge ordered his release last Tuesday on the grounds that he was innocent. Glenn Ford, 64, was held in the brutal Angola penitentiary for 30 years for a crime he did not commit. He was wrongfully convicted of murder in 1984 and was sentenced to death by electrocution.

Now a free man, he expressed joy over his release but lamented being robbed of so many years of his life. "I've been locked up almost 30 years for something I didn't do," Ford said. "I can't go back and do anything I should have been doing when I was 35, 38, 40." His son, an infant at the time of his incarceration, is now a grown man with children of his own.

Ford was convicted of the murder of Isadore Rozeman, 58, who operated a small jewelry and watch repair shop in Shreveport, Louisiana. Rozeman had been in his shop on the afternoon of November 5, 1983 when an intruder shot him through the head and robbed him.

Ford, who was Rozeman's yard worker, was originally arrested following the murder for possession of stolen items from Rozeman's store. He was charged with murder the next year, along with George Starks, and brothers Henry and Jake Robinson.

Ford and his attorneys have spent the past three decades attempting to appeal his case and overturn his conviction. Time and time again, the courts denied his appeals until last year, when Jake Robinson confessed to the same murder. Court documents also show that an unidentified informant questioned on an unrelated murder named Rozeman's killer as Jake Robinson, not Ford. The prosecutors now admit that Ford was neither present at the scene of the crime nor did he take part in it.

On March 10, 2014, the district attorney's office filed

a motion to vacate on Ford's behalf. They cited insufficient evidence against Ford, requesting his release and the overturn of the original verdict. "Indeed, if the information had been within the knowledge of the state, Glenn Ford might not even have been arrested or indicted for this offense," the motion reads.

A friend of Ford testified to the police that he had been at the nearby Stoner Vista Apartments the morning of the murder. She left him at a bus stop at 11 a.m., and testified that she overheard him say to her boyfriend that "some dude wants to sell him a gun." A 17-year-old neighbor testified that Ford and Rozeman had argued over money earlier that week. Numerous witnesses all testified that they had seen Ford in various places throughout the immediate area of the killing.

Marvella Brown, the girlfriend of Jake Robinson, testified against Ford in the original trial. Brown claimed that she had seen Ford leave with Jake and his brother Henry with a brown paper bag on the day of the killing. When they returned several hours later, Ford was carrying a smaller paper bag with "something" in it. In addition, she claimed Jake had a .22 caliber handgun and Ford had a gun in his waistband. Brown testified that Jake showed her pocket watches, wristwatches and rings wrapped in a towel later that evening.

Brown would later reverse her testimony. She claimed she had suffered memory loss due to being shot in the head, and that her previous testimony leading to Ford's conviction was "a lie." Despite this admission by Brown, the court still sentenced Ford to die in the electric chair. A district court denied his appeal in 2009, citing a failure to prove disclosure of evidence that would have led to a different outcome from his trial. In 2011, the Louisiana Supreme Court

also denied his appeal.

Ford's attorneys cited numerous problems with the original trial, including inexperienced court-appointed attorneys, incorrect assumptions by a forensic anthropologist and questionable fingerprint analysis. Ford alleges that the court actively suppressed evidence that would have proved his innocence. In addition, the trial included questionable acts by the prosecution, including peremptory strikes that kept black jurors from the box.

Cases such as that of Glenn Ford are not uncommon. There are countless prisoners at Angola who have been on death row for periods almost as long, some of whom were also wrongfully convicted. Gary Tyler, a black teenager who was the victim of a racially and politically motivated frame-up, has spent nearly his entire life in Angola.

The prison in which Glenn Ford spent 30 years of his life is notorious for its brutality. The Louisiana State Penitentiary, known colloquially as "Angola," is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Its horrific conditions have earned it the nickname "Alcatraz of the South." It is still operated as a working farm, where inmates are effectively forced into manual labor for meager wages.

The prison has been accused of holding inmates in solitary confinement for "unprecedented lengths," and are also regularly subjected to random strip searches without any probable cause. Last year, inmates sued the Louisiana Department of Corrections for not providing adequate ventilation for prisoners on death row. Inmates complained of conditions of "extreme heat," which exposed many of them to illness and even death.

Since 1976, the US has executed 1,369 prisoners. Use of the death penalty is disproportionately high in the southern states. Of the total number of executions, 1,113 were performed in the South. Of those in the region, 620 were performed in Texas and Virginia alone. Louisiana has used the death penalty 28 times over the same period.



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