

Grange murder trial underway

Accused in the murders of Joshua Schaefer and Nicholas Kaiser, bulk of testimony still to come

Statesman Examiner, By Jodi Miller

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The trial of accused double-murderer John Douglas Grange, 26, began late Friday following a long and painstaking evidence hearing and jury selection.

Grange is charged with two counts of first degree murder for the shooting of Joshua Schaefer, 21, and Nicholas Kaiser, also 21, on June 11 outside of the cabin on Crown Creek, southwest of Northport. The remains of the bodies, allegedly burned in Kaiser's truck, were discovered by a hunter on Sept. 24.

Dane Williams, 28, and Jeff Cunningham, 25, have both pled guilty—in return for lenient sentencing—to assisting Grange in transporting, then burning, both of the bodies in the back of Kaiser's Ford Bronco. Williams and Cunningham are expected to testify against Grange this week.

The story is “convoluted,” admitted Stevens County Prosecutor Jerry Wetle. He laid out the prosecution's version of the story in opening statements Friday.

It all began on April 25, 2000, he said, with Kaiser and his girlfriend being busted in Oak Harbor in the midst of preparing LSD for sale. Kaiser had a profitable LSD business, Wetle said.

Kaiser was able to escape serious charges by turning in the names of some of his associates.

Schaefer, Wetle said, had a similar problem. He and girlfriend Kim Kerpan were held in Oakland, CA after the house they were living in was busted for LSD. Schaefer apparently also “rolled over”—betrayed associates to authorities. He said that Schaefer and Kaiser were lured by Williams and Cunningham to the Crown Creek cabin in hopes of buying hallucinogenic mushrooms, but both were shot in the back of the head.

‘Grange was not there.’

Defense attorney Robert Simeone said Grange wasn't at the cabin when the men were shot. He claimed that Kaiser, Schaefer and Cunningham left the Barter Fair with \$1700 worth of marijuana that Williams had fronted Cunningham.

Williams then borrowed Grange's truck to catch up with the others, Simeone said, and returned later—very agitated. Grange was upset that Williams was gone so long, Simeone said, so Williams took him out to eat at the Whitebird Tavern in Northport as a sort of apology.

Simeone claims that the testimony of Williams is “a fabrication,” and that “Mr. Grange was not there” when the victims were murdered.

Maija Soucie is expected to testify Tuesday, Cunningham revealed the story to her, Wetle said, on the night of June 11, and will corroborate the stories.

Stevens County Detective Loren Erdman took photographs of the crime scene. One showed a paper torch stuffed into the Bronco’s gas tank—apparently used in a first and unsuccessful attempt to start the vehicle on fire. The gas cap was found in the back of the vehicle. A green garden hose was found on the ground near the vehicle. A piece of skull with a bullet hole in it was found, as was a large acetylene tank, and a portion of dread-locked hair with a glass bead on it.

22 caliber casings recovered

Erdman showed a picture of bullet impact on top of the fire-pit screen outside the cabin, the place the two men were allegedly shot. Another photo showed a piece of wood in the fire pit that appeared to have a bullet hole in it. Erdman recovered a piece of metal he believed to be a bullet fragment.

The detective also photographed the alleged grave sites that Williams and Cunningham testified were at the scene. They claim that Grange told them to bury the two bodies, and they attempted to, but the digging was too hard and the attempt was aborted.

Authorities found the graves about 30 feet apart from one another. The upper grave, Erdman testified, was about four feet long, and “we were able to see shovel marks on the sides of the upper grave.”

The lower grave was also about four feet long, he said, and about 17 inches deep. Marks along the grave’s edge “appeared to be consistent with a pick-axe,” he said.

Lance Hart, a certified fire investigator with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, testified that the fire was “an incendiary fire...intentionally set by a human being.”

The attempted torch in the gas tank wouldn’t cause the vehicle to burn, he said, because “there is not sufficient oxygen” inside the tank. There was, he said, “_intentional fire set on the inside, or cab area of the vehicle.”

Simeone admitted Hart’s report from the scene evidence. He argued that, in the report’s conclusion, he didn’t say that the fire was started by a second source, he only mentioned the paper torch. Simeone hopes to call into question Hart as a witness.

Hart responded that the second source of fire could not be determined because of the extent of damage to the vehicle, but that the second source was discussed in the body of the report.

Simeone stressed the lack of physical evidence against his client. No fingerprints, hair, blood or clothing samples have linked Grange to the crime, he argued, and no murder weapon has been recovered. Further, he said, there’s no physical evidence “that really proves (the cabin) is where these boys were killed.”

Simeone asked Schaefer’s father, Tom Schaefer, if it was possible that Kaiser simply had some of Schaefer’s belongings, since the two were known to have been traveling together.

“His nose ring he never took out.” Schaefer told Simeone. “His crystal he took with him everywhere he went. He had it with him everywhere.”

A clearly emotional Schaefer also testified that the piece of dread-lock with the glass bead

belonged to his son.

Someone then wondered if it was possible that Schaefer, who was able to be identified only through personal items, may have been killed in a separate incident, then had the items placed in Kaiser's truck.

Schaefer appeared baffled, but affirmed that it was possible.

The trial is expected to continue through the week. The witnesses for the defense have yet been called.