

Rainbow Family killer sentenced to 63 years

Accomplices get light terms in death of alleged drug informant

Spokesman Review, By John Craig

April, 21 2001

Colville, Wash.—A man convicted of the drug related murders of two fellow members of the Rainbow Family was sentenced Friday to the maximum of 63 ½ years in prison.

Now, 26, convicted trigger man John D. “Chooey” Grange likely will spend the rest of his life in prison.

Also Friday, two accomplices who testified against Grange received maximum one-year jail terms for rendering criminal assistance by helping cover up the murders last July.

Jeff Cunningham, 25, and Dane M. Williams, 27, helped Grange put the bodies into a vehicle and set afire near the primitive cabin where the two 21-year-old victims were shot death.

A hunter found the victims’ bones about three months later on a logging road about 15 miles north of Colville.

Nick Kaiser of Waynesboro, Pa., was identified from dental records. The body of San Diego resident Josh Schaefer was burned so badly it could be identified through the testimony of Cunningham and Williams.

Kaiser’s mother, Judy Kaiser, said the hardest day of her life was when sheriff’s officers called to say they’d found her son’s vehicle, “and could we please send his dental records.”

Friday was another bad day.

Judy Kaiser was emotionally drained at the end of the testimony in three separate sentencing hearings. She finally broke down—unable to finish telling Williams, and admitted Northport marijuana farmer, what she thought of him.

But her husband, Wayne Kaiser, completed the job. Williams, he said, waited with Grange to ambush Kaiser’s son and Schaefer when Cunningham brought them to Grange’s cabin. The evil he saw in Williams’ eyes during Grange’s trial is still there Friday, Wayne Kaiser said.

Turning to Superior Court Judge Rebecca Baker, he said “Your honor, I’m starting to feel deep down inside that this man here murdered my son.”

The Rainbow Family is a loose-knit group of 60,000 hippies and others who are a part of America’s counterculture. They are known for massive annual gatherings, like on planned this year somewhere along the Washington-Idaho border.

Stevens County Prosecutor Jerry Wetle maintained during Grange’s trial that the drug rings operate within the Rainbow Family. They reap huge profits and sometimes resort to violence to protect their interests, Wetle said.

Testimony during the trial suggested Grange was directed by a superior in the Portland branch of the Rainbow Family to silence Kaiser for “snitching” on family members when federal drug officers arrested him. Schaefer apparently was killed simply because he was friends with Kaiser at the Northport Barter Faire when Grange, Cunningham, and Williams spotted them. Grange and the others apparently weren’t aware that Schaefer also had become an informer for the Drug Enforcement Administration, authorities said.

Wetle said lack of physical evidence and other witnesses forced him to cut a deal with Cunningham and Williams. In exchange for their testimony, Wetle allowed them to plead guilty to rendering criminal assistance—which carries a maximum one-year penalty.

Baker agreed with Wetle and the victims’ parents that the penalty was “woefully inadequate.”

All the assailants wept under withering statements from their victim’s parents—none more than Grange, and none more convincingly than Cunningham.

“If the tables had been turned, do you believe Nick would have done this to you?” Wayned Kaser asked Cunningham.

“I probably deserve a lot more,” Cunningham said. Turning to the Kaiser family, he added “I’m so sorry. Nick wouldn’t have don’t this to me...I’m guilty.”

Grange continued to proclaim his innocence, and testily chided Wetle for portraying the Rainbow Family as a network of drug traffickers.

“Yeah, there may be people who do deal drugs in the Rainbow Family, but I’m not one of them,” Grange said.

Under questioning by Grange’s attorney, Robert Simeone, Cunningham acknowledged that he hadn’t previously know Grange to be violent. As further evident that Grange should get the minimum 50-year sentence, Simeone got a jailer to say Grange has been polite in jail and keeps his cell neat.

Baker clearly was more impressed by testimony from Schaefer’s father, Tom Schaefer, about the devastation Grange caused—to the victims’ parents and siblings, to Josh Schaefer’s common-law wife and their 20-month-old son, even to Grange’s father Doug who pleaded for a new trial

Pat Schaefer recalled telling her son that the monsters he feared as a small child weren’t real.

“I was wrong,” the distraught mother told Grange, “You came out of the darkness and took my son, and you are a monster.”