

Two murders, burning of bodies described

Jury told killings meant to silence man suspected of betraying drug network

By John Craig
Staff writer

COLVILLE, Wash. — Jeffrey Stephen Cunningham presented a chilling picture Wednesday of two murders meant to silence a man believed to have betrayed the Rainbow Family drug network.

Cunningham, 25, told a Stevens County Superior Court jury that he helped burn the bodies of the suspected informer and a friend last June after John Douglas "Chooley" Grange shot them at a cabin in northern Stevens County.

Grange, 25, of Portland, is on trial for two counts of first-degree murder. The victims were Nick Kaiser and Josh Schaefer, both 21.

Cunningham testified that a blanket covering the bodies "crinkled up" in the fire and one head "kind of popped out from underneath it."

After the killings, Cunningham testified, he and Grange and another defendant discussed the possibility of collecting a \$100,000 reward that Rainbow Family members in San Francisco offered for Kaiser's murder.

The new plaid flannel shirt that Cunningham wore in court did little to soften the effect of a large tattoo on his right cheekbone and the broad blond streak in his layered brown hair.

An avid drug user, Cunningham described himself as a hapless marijuana farmer and an indifferent drug dealer.

He said he was unable to grow a crop at the rustic cabin 15 miles north of Colville, where he went last year to represent the drug interests of the Portland branch of the counterculture Rainbow Family. He said he was so inefficient at arranging drug deals that Grange eventually was sent last spring to replace him.

"John's more of an influential guy than I was, so he could represent Portland better up here than I could — because I didn't really care," Cunningham said.



Cunningham

Cunningham claims he and Dane Matthew Williams, 27, weren't in the immediate vicinity when Grange shot Kaiser and Schaefer.

Cunningham and Williams, who is scheduled to testify today, told detectives they thought Grange planned to rough up or intimidate Kaiser, not kill him.

Cunningham said he met Kaiser in Portland, where both were part of a network of Rainbow Family street kids. Later, he said, he learned that family members in San Francisco wanted Kaiser dead because he was thought to have informed against them.

The two met again last June at the counterculture Northport Bartre Faire, where Cunningham said he sold \$1,700 worth of marijuana, about a half-pound, in an hour. Cunningham said he followed the hissing sound of a nitrous oxide tank to the back of a Ford Bronco, where he was surprised to find Kaiser and Schaefer.

He said they all got high on the so-called laughing gas while he warned Kaiser of the San Francisco group's desire to have him killed.

Kaiser discounted the danger and said he wanted to meet with Portland "family" leader Rob Schultz to smooth things out. Cunningham testified.

Cunningham said he took Kaiser and Schaefer a day later to the cabin where he and Grange were living. He said they planned to buy hallucinogenic mushrooms after conferring with Grange.

But Cunningham said Williams joined them at the cabin, and intercepted him on his way back from gathering water at a nearby creek. Kaiser and Schaefer remained at the cabin, where Cunningham surmised Grange had been hiding.

"Dane walked up to me and said, 'This is going to happen right now,' and then I heard a whole

bunch of shots," Kaiser testified.

Williams and Cunningham pleaded guilty to rendering criminal assistance and agreed to testify against Grange. Prosecutor Jerry Wetle will recommend one-year jail terms for both Cunningham and Williams if they complete their part of the bargain.

While on the stand, Cunningham often looked down and never looked Grange in the eye — even when asked to identify the defendant. He was agitated when Wetle pressed him about the appearance of the victims when he and Williams saw their bodies in a fire pit.

"There was blood everywhere, man," Cunningham said irritably, fidgeting and fingering his thin beard with his heavily tattooed left hand. "They were bloody from the tops of their heads to the middle of their chests."

Kaiser's tearful father, Wayne Kaiser of Waynesboro, Pa., wailed and left the courtroom when Cunningham told how he drove Kaiser's truck away with the bodies inside.

"Nick's head fell on my lap, and I had to stop the truck for a while," Cunningham testified.

Cunningham said he and Williams drove up a logging road to bury the bodies after helping Grange put the victims in Kaiser's Ford Bronco. Grange remained behind to hide the murder weapon, a .22-caliber rifle Grange's father bought for him at the Colville Wal-Mart. Cunningham said.

Authorities were unable to locate the weapon, which Cunningham said Grange reportedly buried by digging a hole with the stock.

Cunningham said he and Williams were less successful even though they were equipped with a shovel and a pickax. Unable to dig graves or to ignite the vehicle's gasoline tank, they walked back to the cabin, where Cunningham said Grange helped them find some gasoline to burn Kaiser's truck.

A hunter found the burned-out vehicle and the victims' animal-scattered bones last September.