

# Hall jury not told of similar case

## Defendant did time in '73 strangulation

By DEBORA WILEY and LESLIE VAZEL

Davenport, Ia. — Someone strangled Susan Hajeck.

Someone wrapped hands around her throat between about 11 p.m. on March 19, 1992, and 1:38 a.m. on March 20, 1992, and squeezed the life out of the 31-year-old Cedar Rapids grocery store clerk and hair stylist. The kill-*No alibi* er left her body on the floor of her bedroom, with her daughter, then 8 months old, sleeping in a nearby nursery.

James Wendell Hall probably was one of the last people to see her alive. He was unquestionably one of two people who found her dead. After a 20-week investigation, a grand jury indicted him for the crime.

When the prosecution rested its case against Hall Friday in court in Davenport after eight days of testimony, the jury knew Hall was a familiar figure to police officers and reporters. They just did not know why.

### Conviction Overturned

Hall, 38, a former University of Iowa football player, was convicted in the 1973 strangulation of Sarah Ann Ottens, a University of Iowa nursing student. He served nearly seven years of a 50-year sentence before his conviction was overturned because the prosecution failed to correct false testimony and prosecutors made improper statements. A second grand jury decided not to reindict him.

That conviction is not allowed to be mentioned during this trial, but its specter haunts observers, who wonder alternately whether Hall's past blinded police to other suspects or whether the chickens finally came home to roost.

"Just the nature of him being back in the same predicament raises questions," said Tom Curtis of Iowa City, a retired U of I administrator who has been attending the trial and is thinking of writing a book about the two cases.

### Public Outcry

After Hall's earlier conviction, there was a massive public outcry in Iowa City, with signs of "Free James Hall" appearing around town and scores of people convinced of his innocence.

This time, public interest has not been nearly as great, although the trial was moved to Scott County to ensure fairness.

Although meting out justice isn't easy, this case is challenging. There is no physical evidence to link anyone to the crime, possibly because of poor police work or possibly because there simply was not much to find.

Defense testimony is expected to last until mid-week, when Hall's fate again will be in the hands of a jury.

"We're just saying he didn't do it," said Hall's court-appointed lawyer, Leon Spies of Iowa City. "And if the police had done a better



Hall

job, we might know who did. Now we might never know."

### Circumstantial

The state's case against Hall is circumstantial, appearing to rest on the fact Hall has no alibi and has never been able to explain why he roused his girlfriend, Debra Mayfield, from sleep.

Both said they stopped for cigarettes and drove around town for about an hour before driving to Hajeck's house, where they found her body. Hajeck's skin was still warm to the touch.

Hall and Mayfield gave ever-changing stories to the police after the killing as more evidence became available. Matt Hajeck, who had lived with his sister until a week before the killing, testified, "It was really strange that Debra and James were the ones to find her."

Mayfield and Hajeck had been friends but their relationship had cooled in December when Hajeck gave Mayfield a yellow sapphire ring with heavy sentimental value in exchange for crack cocaine. Drugs had become an increasingly big part of Hajeck's life in the weeks before her death, witnesses testified.

### Using Drugs

Hall also had a drug problem and became a federal drug informant in January 1992. He was still using drugs and had stopped by Hajeck's house twice before that night on drug-related visits.

Mayfield, the mother of Hall's 16-week-old son, testified that Hall woke her about midnight with the words, "If you don't come with me I'm a dead man."

But Mayfield has been a strong defense witness. Mayfield popped a surprise on prosecutor Jerry Vander Sanden when she quoted Phil Parker, a Chicago drug dealer who was at Hajeck's with Hall twice earlier that evening, as saying he "would go to jail on a dope case but they would never get him for murder."

Parker and Hall each told authorities they were together at Hajeck's about three hours before her body was found. Parker said Hall was smoking crack in Hajeck's living room. Hall said Parker was.

### Blood Tests

Hall's blood tests a few hours later showed evidence of cocaine in his system, but authorities didn't interview Parker until the next month.

Parker testified that Hall was angry because Hajeck wouldn't have sex with him and that Hall said he was going back to her house later.

Hall told police Hajeck had given Parker Hajeck's phone number and they were going to "hook up later." Parker has no alibi for the time of the slaying. One of his roommates, Dana Clayton, testified she couldn't remember when Parker arrived home that night.

Spies has worked hard at throwing names at the jury of other possible suspects.

Cedar Rapids Police Detective Mark Fischer said Hall suggested names of four suspects, but none of them was at Hajeck's home the night of the killing.

### Requests for Mistrial

Twice witnesses have made oblique reference to Hall's earlier conviction, but Spies' requests for a mistrial have been denied by Judge Kristin Hibbs.

Parker said Hall had told him, "Don't send me back to the penitentiary." Robert Enter, who shared an apartment with Hall and their girlfriends, said Hall told him, "I'm going through it again," a few hours after finding Susan Hajeck's body.

Nearly 13 months after they buried Susan Hajeck, members of her family have watched the trial with grim resolution, sometimes burying their heads in their hands when photos of her body are shown.

Vernon Hajeck, Susan's father, is confident the jury will convict Hall. "I feel the jury is going to be able to see who's lying and who isn't," said Hajeck. "It's obvious to me both (Mayfield and Hall) aren't telling the truth."

## onors

Richardson of Roosevelt High  
saying Williams of Roosevelt for original

Hayes of Roosevelt for painting.

Burrell of Hoover High School

14th year that the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has sponsored the effort to encourage African-American academic and cultural pursuits through the support of their

**He spent** seven years in prison in a similar case before that conviction was overturned.

**By DEBORA WILEY**

OF THE REGISTER'S CEDAR RAPIDS BUREAU

**Davenport, Ia.** — James Wendell Hall of Cedar Rapids, who served nearly seven years in prison on a previous murder conviction before it was overturned, was convicted of first-degree murder Friday in a second strangulation case.

The verdict, returned about 1:25 p.m. after nearly three weeks of testimony and 15 hours of jury deliberation, left relatives of strangulation victim Susan Hajek of Cedar



**Hall**  
*Spurned?*

Rapids gasping and crying with relief.

Hall, 38, showed little emotion beyond a tightening of his jaw as his lawyer, Leon Spies of Iowa City, placed his hand on the small of Hall's back in support.

Sentencing will be June 11 in Cedar Rapids. The conviction requires a sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole.

### Appeal Process

Hall and Spies were spirited out of the courtroom and did not talk with reporters. Deputies who transported Hall back to the Linn County Jail said his only remark was, "Now begins the long appeal process."

It's a process Hall is familiar with. Convicted of second-degree murder in 1974 in the death of Sarah Ottens, a 20-year-old University of Iowa student, Hall spent three years appealing until the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear his case.

In 1977, he began serving a 50-

**HALL** Please turn to Page 3A