

MURDER VERDICTS DIVIDED MAN GUILTY IN TROY HIT-AND-RUN; FRIEND ACQUITTED

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An Oakland County jury on Monday convicted one man in the 1997 death of a Bloomfield Hills woman run down in a Troy grocery store parking lot during a purse snatching. But another jury exonerated his codefendant, bringing the monthlong trial to a dramatic close.

Jurors, in making their decision Monday to acquit John Wilson, apparently believed the testimony of codefendant Thomas Enfield, who said last week that Wilson was not present when he accidentally ran over Priscilla Ricketts after stealing her purse.

Enfield was found guilty of first-degree murder earlier Monday by a separate jury.

Police contend Wilson ran over Ricketts while driving a red truck. They said he was there with Enfield, who stole the purse and then jumped in the truck.

Both men were charged with first-degree felony murder. They were tried together but had separate juries.

Ricketts' daughter, Karen Struck, who attended the trial every day, was stunned by the jurors' decision.

Struck moved back to Michigan shortly after her mother's death to monitor the investigation. Her father, Thomas

Ricketts, died of abdominal cancer a month after her mother was killed.

"It is incredibly disappointing," she said, quietly.

Her husband, Burt, said, "It's too bad they chose to believe a lie."

That sentiment angered Wilson and his lawyer, David Steingold, who gathered Monday with a dozen relatives at Wilson's grandmother's home in Hazel Park. Steingold said he and Wilson will discuss possible wrongful-prosecution lawsuits in the next few days.

Wilson savored his freedom Monday night.

"The scariest day of my life was today," he said, his outfit still beltless and his shoes laceless because, until just before 7 p.m. Monday, he was a prisoner at the Oakland County Jail.

Jurors for both defendants declined to speak to reporters and left through a back doorway. Judge Richard Kuhn said that in addition to Enfield's testimony, jurors told him they felt there wasn't enough evidence to convict Wilson.

Prosecutor Paul Walton, who earlier in the day rejoiced after Enfield's conviction, struggled for answers Monday afternoon.

"All I can say is that I would not try the case any differently," he said. "I'm not sure what the jurors believed."

Wilson's verdict came after two days of deliberations, beginning Friday.

While Wilson trembled Monday as his jury was led into the courtroom, Enfield sat stone-faced earlier in the day when his verdict was imminent.

Wilson began to cry when he learned he would soon be free.

His sister, Mary, sobbed as she left the courtroom with other family members.

"We knew from day one he was innocent. We just hoped the jury would see that," she said.

Prosecutors and police contend that Wilson and Enfield were looking for drug money the afternoon of March 24, 1997, when they spotted Ricketts, the wife of Standard Federal Bank CEO Thomas Ricketts, loading groceries into her Cadillac at the Kroger grocery store at Long Lake and Livernois in Troy.

After Enfield snatched her purse, they say, he hopped into a waiting truck with Wilson behind the wheel. The two, police contend, intentionally hit Ricketts before driving away. She died two days later.

Dane Slater, the Troy police captain who handled the case, was saddened by Wilson's verdict.

"I am disappointed for the Ricketts family. I guess what would really bother me is if jurors made their decision based upon Enfield's testimony," he said. "That would be too bad."

Enfield, who had denied any involvement for more than two years, stunned the courtroom last week when he changed his story. Enfield said he was alone when he grabbed Ricketts' purse and accidentally backed into her as he was making his getaway. He said Wilson was not involved.

The new story sent prosecutors to adjust strategy. They argued that Enfield was hoping for a manslaughter conviction, which carries a sentence of up to 15 years. Now, convicted of first-degree murder, he faces mandatory life in prison.

Enfield, 23, of Warren was found guilty shortly before noon, three days after his jury began deliberating on Thursday. His

jurors either didn't believe his confession or decided the purse-grabbing put Ricketts at great risk of death or injury, grounds for a murder conviction.

"Even with his story, the jury could have reached a first-degree felony conviction," Walton said.

Enfield's attorney, Michael McCarthy, pledged to appeal. "There was good reason to believe this was an accident," he said.

Enfield is to be sentenced Dec. 7 to life in prison without parole.

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Caption: GUILTY: Thomas Enfield

NOT GUILTY: John Wilson

HOMICIDE; VERDICT; PRISCILLA RICKETTS;
THOMAS ENFIELD; JOHN WILSON
