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VERNON MCMANUS

Sentenced to death after a former employee claimed he had hired two men to kill her parents

Vernon McManus, the football coach at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, was sentenced to death in 1977 for the purported murder-for-hire of a former employee's parents, Paul Harvey Cantrell and Mary Bright Cantrell, in their home in Baytown, Texas.

The key evidence against McManus was the testimony of the former employee, Paula Cantrell Derese, who received a life sentence after testifying against him. Derese claimed that, because she had "problems" with her parents, McManus suggested hiring someone to kill them.

After she agreed, she said, he told her he had paid \$20,000 to two men who would carry out the plot. Then, at 4 p.m. on July 24, 1976, McManus allegedly called her at her parent's home, where she lived, and told her "the people supposed to do the killings were in the area" and that she should leave because "three is a crowd."

She said she left home about 6 p.m. and returned in the early morning hours of July 25 to find the bodies of her parents. She also said she spoke with McManus later that day and he revealed that he had been forced to go with the other two men in the car he had rented and had been present when the killings took place and described the events to her. He warned her "not to crack."

A federal court granted McManus's petition for a writ of habeas corpus, and Derese refused to testify against him at a second trial. All charges were dropped in 1987.—*Researched by Rachel Rosati Warner*

SOURCES: Ex Parte Paula Derese, 540 S.W.2d 332 (1976); McManus v. State, 591 S.W.2d 505 (1979); Houston Chronicle, May 1, 2, 9, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, 1977, Jan. 25, 1987; Beaumont Enterprise, Jan. 15, 1987.

Part I

Paul and Mary Cantrell were well-known and well-liked couple. They were avid golfers and lived near the Goose Creek Country Club in a fashionable, upscale neighborhood. On July 24, 1976 they had gone out to dinner with friends and returned home near midnight. As Paul Cantrell wheeled onto his street he noticed an unfamiliar car parked in front of his home. "Looks like we have company," he remarked.

Two hours later, the couple's daughter, Paula Cantrell Derese, who had moved in with her parents after a divorce, came home from a concert to find part of the house in disarray and the bloodied and battered bodies of Paul and Mary lying dead on the floor of their home. The couple had been beaten, strangled and stabbed repeatedly. Gaping neck wounds indicated the couple's throats had been slashed. Paula ran screaming from the house to neighbors.

Baytown police quickly found that robbery was not a motive. The couple had more than \$300 in cash as well as credit cards and jewelry, none of which had been taken and nothing of value was missing from the home. Police also found little physical evidence of the killer or killers at the scene. They could not find even a single bloody fingerprint.

Word of the horrifying double homicide sent panic through the city. Uneasy Baytonians made a run on local hardware stores, cleaning out their stocks of deadbolts, chain door guards, locks and burglar bars. Merchants reported sales of security items had jumped 50 percent in the days after the killings.

Hoping to turn over some leads before the trail cooled, the Baytown Police put 12 officers on the case, working round the clock. They probed the Cantrells' personal lives, particularly Paul's business dealings. Paul Cantrell, an electrical contractor, they found, had no business difficulties and no union hassles. The couple was financially stable and police could find no one who might wish them harm.

However, police suspicions had already fallen on the Cantrell's daughter, Paula Derese. Paula, an attractive, petite, green-eyed blonde, was the Cantrell's only child. Most of her friends remembered her as an active and popular high school student. But at 26, she seemed haggard, jittery and already had two short-lived, unhappy marriages behind her. Paula and her 2-year-old son had been living in the Cantrell home for a little less than a year after separating from her second husband.

A few days after the funeral of Paul and Mary Cantrell, police arrested Paula Derese and Vernon McManus, charging them both with capital murder.

"I interviewed Paula that night," said one police detective. "All throughout she reacted poorly. Her emotional display seemed fake." After flunking a polygraph test, Derese cracked under more questioning and tearfully admitted that she and Vernon McManus, whom she had once worked for, had plotted to kill her parents for their money.

McManus, 33 and married to a local schoolteacher also had a 2-year-old daughter. He, too, was well-known in Baytown. McManus had been a local high school football star in the late 1950s and then went on to win small college all-American honors at Lamar University in 1965. After college McManus embarked on a promising coaching career but somewhere along the line the career faltered and he had returned to Baytown to go into business with an old high school chum named Vernon Olney. Derese and McManus first met at Lamar University in the early 1970s when she worked as a secretary in the football office while he was an assistant football coach. After she returned to town, she went to work for McManus and Olney.

McManus told police that on the night of the murders he was with his friend Olney and Olney's wife in the couple's apartment. When the Olneys turned in at about 10 p.m., he stayed on their couch, watching television until he fell asleep. Vernon Olney added, when he woke around 6 a.m. the next morning, McManus was still there.

About a month after arresting McManus and Derese, Olney was arrested and indicted on charges of criminal conspiracy to commit capital murder.

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Part II

Olney, 34, married and the father of a teenage daughter, not only shared first names with McManus, but also bore a strange physical likeness to his boyhood friend. Olney had also been a football and baseball star in high school. Police had scheduled three meetings with Olney to talk about the Cantrell murders. However, each time he allegedly backed out and refused to talk. Police doubted that McManus had been able to kill the Cantrell's alone and surmised that Olney might have helped him plan or even aided him in the deed. Unknown at the time, police had an informant who helped link Olney and McManus to the Cantrell killings named Ben Milton Tabor.

An ex-Golden Gloves boxer, Tabor made his living as an itinerant pool and golf hustler. When not on the links or at the billiard table, he was hustling as a confidence man. Though the affable Tabor had not held a straight job in five years, he was carrying \$3,000 when police picked him up for questioning in the case.

Tabor told detectives McManus and Olney approached him in February 1976 in a rundown beer joint to find out if he knew of someone who could commit a murder for them. "I told them I didn't know if I could find one but I'd look around," Tabor would later testify. "I decided I was going to beat them for their money so I later told McManus I had talked to the hit man — (they) didn't bat an eye when I told them it would cost \$12,000." The hired killer was nothing more than another creation of Tabor's imagination. Posing as the middleman between the non-existent hired killer and the two Vernons, Tabor took their \$12,000 from them and left town. Tabor said he blew much of the money at a horse track in Louisiana and on his pick-up truck. The \$3,000 he had when the police picked him up was the last of the roll. Tabor said he was in Odessa when he read about the Cantrell murders. He promptly went underground, using an assumed name before police nabbed him in September.

Paula was to be tried first. But on the day her trial was to start in late January 1977, she made a surprise about-face and changed her plea from not guilty to guilty, agreeing to turn the state's witness against McManus. In exchange, prosecutors agreed to reduce her sentence from capital murder to first-degree murder. It was the difference between living with a possibility of parole and death in the electric chair.

The day before his trial in late April of 1977, McManus skipped out on a \$50,000 bond and disappeared. His car, the interior smeared with blood, was eventually found abandoned on a deserted road. Police found his billfold nearby. From the start, police were sure of a scam. Their suspicions were confirmed a few days later when a waitress told them she helped McManus set up the scene and make his get away. Six days later, police broke in the door to room 14 of the [Sea Ranch](#) Motel in Jacksonville Beach, Fla. and arrested McManus, who was asleep in bed with a teacher from Cincinnati. The woman expressed amazement that she had slept with a murder suspect, though she noted, he had not laid a finger on the \$400 in traveling money she had stashed in her purse.

When his capital murder trial finally began in May 1977, McManus was painted as a bar-hopping drunk saddled with a failing business — a compulsive womanizer who had sunk low enough to commit cold-blooded murder.

According to Derese, a simple comment to McManus one afternoon set in motion the plot to kill Paul and Mary Cantrell. Derese said her parents were attempting to control her life. At one point, she testified, they threatened to secure legal custody of her 2-year-old son if she tried to reconcile with her ex-husband, of whom they disapproved. "I was still upset about (the argument)," Derese told the court. "I told (McManus) about the situation and said I'd do anything to be free to think for myself. He told me he knew a way it could be taken care of and I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore — he said he knew people who killed for money and there had already been a payment made to them to have my parents killed and there was no backing out." She added that McManus demanded one-third of the Cantrell estate. Derese also testified that the afternoon prior to the killings, McManus telephoned her to warn her away from the house. She also alleged the accused killer warned her that if she talked, he would kill Derese and her young son.

Since police never found any weapons used or hard evidence placing McManus at the scene of the killings, his attorney offered no defense, confident his client could beat the rap. Instead, he sought to implicate Derese and Tabor as the real conspirators and partners in the crime. But, as the trial progressed, circumstantial evidence piled up against McManus.

The car parked in front of the Cantrell home that night had been rented by McManus from Intercontinental (now Bush) Airport using a Lamar University credit card. Several witnesses testified to seeing him in the rental car at several points near the Cantrell home the day of the slayings. Others saw him circling the Cantrells' block in the car. Banking records corresponding with Tabor's money claims were also produced. Telephone records showing calls having taken place from McManus' business offices to a lake home owned by Tabor's parents were submitted as well. Furthermore, a local man who had gone to high school with him, testified McManus had also asked him about finding someone to commit a murder. It was also pointed out that McManus had a beard the day before the Cantrells had been killed and shaved it off the day after. After reportedly giving conflicting accounts as to why he shaved, a witness testified McManus told her it because police were looking for a man with a beard in connection with the Cantrell murders.

On June 20, 1977 the jury found Vernon McManus guilty and sentenced him to death. Shortly after Derese was convicted and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences.

With two down in the Cantrell murder case, the state went to work on the alleged third member of the trio, Vernon Olney. At one point in the investigation, Olney was offered immunity by the state on two conditions: if he would tell the whole truth about what he knew about the Cantrell killings and if he had not been in the house at the time of the slayings. Olney reportedly considered the offer, but, after conferring with his attorneys, turned it down. Despite the evidence against him, however, Olney proved more complicated to convict. Juries in two trials deadlocked — the first 8-4 in favor of conviction, the second split 6-6. After two mistrials, the state ceased to pursue him further.

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Part III

In May 1980, McManus, awaiting execution on Death Row in Huntsville, appealed his death sentence, charging that his lead defense attorney had an affair with his wife during his trial. Indeed, the attorney married McManus' ex-wife and had even handled her divorce from the death row inmate after his murder conviction. But, the lawyer maintained, the affair with Regina McManus began after the jury's verdict. In addition, the lawyer said he filed the divorce petition at the request of her husband and not on behalf of Regina. McManus' prosecutors seized upon the two points to argue that no conflict of interest existed. At a hearing into the question, a district Judge I.D. ruled that McManus' defense did not suffer from the entanglement between Smith and his wife and denied the inmate a new trial. Despite the ruling, McManus' quest for a new trial continued.

In 1983, a U.S. District Judge ordered a new trial. The basis for the decision hinged upon jury selection for McManus' original trial. Back in 1977, the original judge excluded a juror candidate because he said he could not decide if he could vote to put anyone to death. At the time, the judge's move had been a legally legitimate action. However, in the years since McManus' conviction, the law concerning "equivocating jurors" had changed and judges were denied the right to automatically exclude prospective jurors who vacillated on whether they could opt for the death penalty.

As new prosecutors geared up to take McManus on again, new obstacles filled their path. First, Paula Derese, whose testimony had been vital in convicting McManus, refused to testify in any new attempt to prosecute him. Then Ben Tabor also refused to testify. In 1984, Tabor had killed a woman in a Houston bar. Like the man he helped to convict, Tabor landed in Huntsville to serve a 25-year prison sentence for the killing. Snitches, he noted when prosecutors sought him out, are not treated well behind bars.

Without the crucial testimony of Derese and Tabor, prosecutors sought to introduce the transcripts of the McManus' trial as evidence in the new hearing. But in 1987, a state district judge granted a defense motion to ban the transcribed testimony. The ruling on the transcript left the state essentially empty-handed in any attempt to retry McManus. On January 21, 1987, Vernon McManus walked out prison a free man. On Aug. 12, 1987, Paula Derese was paroled from prison after serving 10 years of two concurrent life sentences.

In the 33 years since Paul and Mary Cantrell were murdered, the once sensational murder case has faded from memory. Many of those who do recall the killings have only murky recollections and can only snatch at pieces of the story and most of those whose lives were once turbulently lashed to the case have either died or faded back into anonymity.

Today, some anti-death penalty groups offer up an incomplete and often factually flawed recounting of McManus' legal escape from death row to lobby against capital punishment.

Some questions in the murder of Paul and Mary Cantrell remain unanswered. Who actually participated in the gruesome slayings has never been fully established. McManus was convicted, but were others involved in the killings? If so, who were they? Did Ben Tabor play more of an active role in the murder as defense attorneys argued and many jurors in the trial believed? Those who know the answers to these and other lingering questions about the incident are not talking.

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Derese is paroled after 10 years in prison

Staff

SAT 09/26/1987 HOUSTON CHRONICLE, Section 1, Page 1, 2 STAR Edition

Paula Cantrell Derese, convicted of planning her parents' 1976 slaying in which Baytown football hero Vernon McManus was convicted and then freed, has been paroled after serving 10 years of two concurrent life sentences in Texas prison.

Derese was released Aug. 12, and according to her lawyer, Ken McLean, she was surprised. She is believed to be living in the Dallas area.

McLean said Derese, 37, told him she had asked for a furlough for a few days to visit relatives but was denied because she hadn't served enough time on her sentence.

"Then, the following Monday they came to her and told her to get her stuff, she was going home," he said.

McLean said he was not notified of his client's release and had no idea what was behind the decision by the state Board of Pardons and Paroles.

"You need an IQ of 200 to figure out the Texas parole board," he said.

Derese and parole board officials were not available for comment. The board had denied parole for Derese four previous times, partly because of the brutal nature of the slayings.

Paul and Mary Cantrell were strangled in their Baytown home. Their throats were then slashed.

McManus was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. But after he served 10 years on death row, the conviction was overturned in January because a potential juror was improperly dismissed.

McManus was set free after Harris County prosecutors declined to retry the case because of lack of evidence. Derese, whose testimony was crucial in convicting McManus the first time, refused to testify in a second trial, saying prosecutors had reneged on a promise to shorten her sentence.

The charges were dismissed in a way that would allow them to be refiled if new evidence is developed.

McManus was a football coach at Lamar University, and Derese had worked as his receptionist. He was accused of plotting with Derese to kill the Cantrells for a share of their estate.

Prosecutors said he carried out the execution himself after a man who posed as a hired killer absconded with his \$12,000 without doing the job. But defense lawyers argued McManus had not been effectively represented at his first trial by Don Smith of Baytown because of a conflict of interest over the lawyer having an affair with McManus' wife.

Prosecutors, however, argued the affair did not start until after McManus' conviction.

The district attorney's office subsequently charged Smith and McManus' wife with bigamy, but the highly publicized case was dismissed when it couldn't be proved their actions were intentional.

Another man, Vernon Olney, was charged with aiding McManus in the murders. Olney went free after two mistrials. Derese had worked as his secretary also.

McLean has been Derese's attorney since 1984. Now that she is out of prison, she wants to keep a low profile, he said.

"She was certainly glad to be paroled and wanted to try and find a job and reconstruct her life."

Derese did not have any contact with McManus while in prison and would "probably absolutely not" have any contact with him now that she is out of prison, McLean said.

Though freed, McLean said Derese was considering a legal fight to have her convictions overturned, because, he said, "a conviction follows you forever." "We will contend that she received erroneous advice from one or more of her lawyers regarding the sufficiency of the evidence against her," he said.

After debts were paid, the Cantrell estate - including life insurance settlements - amounted to about \$109,000 and grew by at least \$30,000 through investments in the following 10 years.

The estate went to Derese's teen-age son, Chad. He has been living with his father, Herbie Derese, a refinery worker in Port Arthur, who acts as guardian over the trust.