

Eric Laughlin (Mountain Democrat)

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Jury: [REDACTED] not guilty of manslaughter

PLACERVILLE -- Not only did all 12 jurors find former South Shore auto mechanic [REDACTED] not guilty of manslaughter, but the majority of them shook the Kyburz rancher's hand and wished him well outside the courtroom.

One even inquired when the party would be held at his ranch.

"I'm glad you finally got this behind you," one juror said to [REDACTED], a former South Lake Tahoe auto mechanic.

"Yeah, it's been a long five years," [REDACTED] replied.

Guilty verdicts were reached on the two lesser misdemeanor charges of illegal moving of a body and failure to notify the coroner of a death, which together carry a maximum sentence of six months. Most jurors who spoke about the case said [REDACTED] character combined with victim Edward Ortega's violent past clinched their finding that the 56-year-old [REDACTED] acted in self-defense.

Juror Rachel Manley was surprised the manslaughter charge was even filed.

"It just seems like a total waste of time and money," she said.

Manley said [REDACTED] testimony made her decision clear.

"He just came across as sincere and unwavering in his testimony," she said. "He was never once caught in a lie."

A juror who declined to give his name said, "To me it just didn't read. It just didn't add up."

[REDACTED] attorney William Routsis said the wait for the verdict was the toughest he experienced.

"I'd been shaking all morning up until it was read," he said. "Not only did I know my client was not guilty, but I liked him so much as a person."

Prosecutor Worth Dikeman stayed in the courtroom with Ortega's family members after the verdict was read.

Most were in tears and appeared devastated at the four-week trial's conclusion. Ortega, who was employed by [REDACTED] as a masonry worker, died during a July 31, 2002, confrontation at the 40-acre ranch off Silver Fork Road. [REDACTED] struck the 45-year-old worker with the handle of a sledgehammer after Ortega became angry when [REDACTED] told him he was being fired.

"There was not one mark on ([REDACTED]) body," said Ortega's sister, who was present for every day of the trial. "And if he claims it was self-defense, why did he wash the knife?"

Ortega's son, Edward Ortega III, criticized jurors for not listening to the facts. He added [REDACTED] financial status helped get him off.

"He spent a lot of money to get his experts to say what he wanted them to say," the junior Ortega said. "But there was not one person here to speak on behalf of my dad."

John Runnels of Runnels Automotive said he expected the verdict because of the lengthy time between crime and prosecution.

"I think he's already paid his price in attorney fees," Runnels said. "I think it's time to move on with it."

The defense's case primarily revolved around the elder Ortega's extensively documented history of violence. Superior Court Judge Eddie T. Keller allowed five violent incidents, including a 1975 incident where Ortega beat a man with a tire jack after mistaking him for someone else, into trial. Another incident was an assault in the 1980s of a sleeping cab driver. Both were cases in Arizona, where Ortega had resided for decades before relocating to Northern California.

The defense's downfall was [REDACTED] attempt to cover up the death by pushing the body off an embankment to make the killing appear as an accident. In last week's closing argument, Routsis raised eyebrows in the courtroom when he told jurors they should convict [REDACTED] on the misdemeanors related to the cover-up. Routsis said it will be the toughest lesson his client will ever learn.

District Attorney Vern Pierson said the manslaughter charge might not have been filed had [REDACTED] done the right thing after Ortega's death.

"His actions the day of the incident made it very difficult for law enforcement to trust him as to what really happened," Pierson said. "If he would have come forward to the coroner right away, it might have been ruled self-defense initially."

Pierson added his office's prosecution came after an El Dorado County Grand Jury indictment of [REDACTED] on the manslaughter charge in 2003.

Ortega's family still plans to go forward with a wrongful death lawsuit against [REDACTED], but [REDACTED]'s civil attorney, Andrew Woll of Placerville, said this verdict will make their battle difficult.

Keller will deliver a sentence on the two misdemeanor convictions at 1:30 p.m. on Friday. Although the maximum penalty is six months in county jail, [REDACTED] could receive a lighter sentence of probation.

[REDACTED] refused comment but appeared relieved as he placed a few phone calls from the steps of the Main Street courthouse. He appeared much grayer since his initial court appearances nearly five years ago.

Earlier this year, Routsis described the stretch of uncertainty for his client as a "nightmarish limbo."

-- Tribune staff writer William Ferchland contributed to this report

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