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Wednesday, July 5, 2006

Ricky Wilson Sentenced to Ten Years

Stephen Crews
Geneva Newspapers

Circuit Judge Ben McLaughlin sentenced former Geneva resident Ricky Wilson to 10 years in the State Penitentiary on Thursday for a March 2006 conviction of theft by deception. He was not sent to jail at the sentencing hearing because he is filing paperwork in hopes of receiving probation for his crime.

Wilson was found guilty on Wednesday, March 8, 2006 by a Geneva county jury on the charge of theft by deception in the first degree. Wilson, 31, is a former contractor in Geneva County and was found guilty of deceiving James and Linda Strickland, both senior citizens, out of approximately \$22,785 for remodeling and construction work on their home.

Wilson was found not guilty of the same criminal charge for taking over \$69,000 from Jerry and Mildred Grimes in January 2005. The deception preyed upon the Grimes occurred prior to the deception levied upon the Stricklands. A civil judgment was later rendered against Wilson in the Grimes case.

During the sentencing hearing, Chief Assistant District Attorney Bill Filmore stated the crime was "the worst type of theft crime" because Wilson preyed on the elderly by gaining their trust and then getting them to give up their hard-earned money.

Wilson's Attorney, David Harrison, stated, "my client is willing to make restitution immediately," in a statement with Geneva Newspapers

Wilson, see page 5A



Swimming Fun
True Kraner sails off the diving board at the home of Dr. John Simmons and Mayor Karen Simmons on Thursday morning. Children from First Baptist Church in Geneva enjoyed a few hours of swimming on Thursday as temperatures were once again in the mid to upper 90's across Geneva County. It was indeed a great day to take a swim or head to the lake or beach. (Staff photograph by Stephen Crews)

Geneva County E911 Raises Rate to \$3

Ann Henderson
Geneva Newspapers

Land-line telephone users will pay an extra \$1 this summer for the E911 service.

The decision to raise the rate from \$2 to \$3 was made Tuesday, June 27 during a special meeting of the E911 board of directors. But the vote was not unanimous.

David McGowan, a state trooper and member of the Samson fire and rescue teams, voted against the increase because he wanted a public hearing. "People in the towns get to voice an opinion on raises to services," he said.

David Hall, a former Geneva County deputy and resident of the Slocumb area, wanted all members present before a vote was cast "I don't want someone to say they weren't here so they didn't vote on it."

Sheriff Greg Ward was absent from the June 27 meeting. But he was present at the June 13 regular monthly meeting and did say he supported the increase.

The board members who voted for the rate hike were Tammy Dodson, the captain of the Geneva Rescue Squad; Roger Williams, the assistant fire chief in Samson and the supervisor of the Covington Electric Cooperative in

Samson; and Lamar Tindell, a resident of Malvern who recently retired from CenturyTel. Board chairman Freddie Shehee supported the measure but only votes in a tie.

Williams said he agreed with the rate hike because other utilities have raised rates when they needed to cover new expenses. "And most don't give anybody the opportunity to voice an opinion."

The basis for the rate hike is the financial constraints of rising equipment costs and the fact that the dispatchers have not received a raise in three years and their salary is not quite competitive with surrounding 911 services.

The board members have asked for an inventory of the 911 center and an asset summary.

The inventory list was provided June 27.

After reviewing the four pages, McGowan suggested only listing items that were valued at \$200 and above. Hall amended the amount to \$100 and the board approved the change.

E911 Director Richard Underwood said the inventory list did not adequately indicate the amount of assets. But a further review showed the accountant for E911, Ron Byrd, has taken depreciation each year since the service began collecting the \$2 fee in

1997. "I can lay my hands on 99 percent of it," Underwood said of the equipment and furniture purchases.

The appearance of discrepancy in the asset came when the list was made of the equipment that was placed in the police dispatch centers in Geneva and Hartford to create the two PSAPs (public service answering point), said Underwood. "It looked as though the equipment was listed twice and that some old equipment that was replaced was never taken off the books."

But he said he had to learn how to read the inventory information.

"He (Byrd) was allowing the depreciation value of the equipment on a yearly basis," said Underwood.

The assets in October 2005 were listed at \$762,575.56. Those same assets now are valued at \$615,689.47.

Equipment ages and loses value, said Underwood. "We didn't lose \$163,000 all of a sudden. It takes 10 years to amortize."

An example is a 19-inch computer monitor. "We paid more than \$500 for it new," said Underwood. "I think we can sell it for \$25 or \$30." He noted a similar monitor at Wal-Mart is sold for \$199.

In the E911 center on Geneva County 41, there is a

storage room filled with outdated monitors and servers.

"I've cannibalized all that I can to keep the equipment working," said Underwood. "But I'm hoping the board will now let me start to dispose of this old equipment."

The next board meeting is set for July 11 at 9 a.m.

During the June 27 meeting, the discussion about the rate increase began with a review of the minutes from Feb. 8, 2005. The board had voted then to increase the rates by \$1.

But some members wanted to get an attorney general's opinion to see if the board could vote an increase. For counties with less than 25,000 population, the rate must remain at \$2.

The rate can change when the population increases past that point, said Underwood from the opinion sent June 9 by Alabama Attorney General Troy King's office. In King's response, the letter mentioned a similar opinion that was sent on Feb. 23, 2004 to Chambers County about the rate structure in that emergency communications district.

Since the 2000 census has the population of Geneva County at 25,764, the rate can now be adjusted to 5 percent of the highest charge for a land-line phone in the

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Byrd Resigns From County BOE

Ann Henderson
Geneva Newspapers

Warren Byrd has worked as a substitute rural mail carrier out of the Dathan Post Office for six years. But his job never interfered with his political life until June 27.



Warren Byrd

That night, he announced his resignation from the District One position on the Geneva County School Board due to a conflict with his federal job and the elected post.

He also said he would resign as a Republican candidate for District One on the Geneva County Commission.

Byrd was set to be in the July 18 run-off with incumbent Larry Everett.

"I got a call about 4:30 p.m. today (Tuesday, June 27) from the federal attorneys from the U.S. Post Office," said Byrd after he left the school board meeting.

The representatives with the labor relations board said he would have to choose - political service or the post office.

"Since I earn almost twice as much as a carrier as I would as a commissioner, it was a simple choice," said Byrd. "I have to send a daughter to law school and a son who will be in college next year."

Byrd said the potential for problems began on June 15 when Sen. Harri

BYRD, see page 3A

Geneva County Resident Lucky to Be Alive

Greg McCord
The Opp News

A woman fishing Saturday at Lake Frank Jackson in Opp was injured when she fell onto a cut-off sapling near the water's edge.

Patricia Gibson, 48, of Black, Ala. was trying to free her fishing line from a submerged tree limb when she fell into a one-inch diameter sapling.

"It went in her right calf between the muscle and the bone and almost went all the way through," said her husband, Jimmy Gibson.

He said his wife is expected to recover from the injury and had returned to Covington County for a follow-up doctor's visit Wednesday morning.

After she was impaled on the sapling, Gibson struggled to free herself while trying to keep her head above water.

Three men in a nearby pontoon boat heard cries for help from Gibson's grandchildren and went to investigate.

Tom Wismer, son Jamey



Rescue crew that found Patricia Gibson in Lake Frank Jackson recently.

Wismer and son-in-law Skip Spurlin found Gibson bleeding and exhausted.

"We found this lady in the water impaled on a stick. She couldn't move and was on her elbows and knees like she was weak," Jamey Wismer said.

"Skip held her head up

above the water. She wanted us to pull the stick out, but we were concerned that it would bleed worse, so we sawed the limb off and left the stick in," Wismer said.

Gibson was transported to Mizell Memorial Hospital by Opportunity rescue squad, where an orthope-

dic surgeon removed the piece of wood from her leg.

Despite the ordeal, Jimmy Gibson said the family hopes to return to Lake Frank Jackson in the future.

"That's a pretty lake y'all have over there. We hope to come back again," he said.

Hospital Administrator Al Alred Resigns

Ann Henderson
Geneva Newspapers

Citing an unbelievable opportunity with a Florida medical group, Al Alred



Al Alred

confirmed Friday, June 30, he has resigned as chief executive officer and chief financial officer at Wiregrass Medical Center in Geneva.

"They came looking for me, I didn't seek them out," said Alred from his office at the hospital. "It was too good of an opportunity for my family and for me to turn down."

He will remain at Wiregrass Medical Center through July 21.

But the family will not move from Geneva. "Our son, Matthew, graduates from Geneva High School and the job is within driving distance for me."

While Alred would not disclose the name of the

medical group, he said the facilities where he works will not compete with Wiregrass Medical Center.

He will be performing the same type of work he was doing before being hired in Geneva, setting strategy and growth potential.

The facilities will be managed by the acting administrative team who will remain in place until a new CEO and CFO can be hired. The team consists of Doreen Bock, chief nursing officer; Steve Hughes, administrative director; Greg Dykes, chief operations officer and administrator at the nursing home; Tina Segers, chief accounting officer; Lesa Hatfield, vice president of human resources; and Steve Florentine, director of behavioral health.

Alred said any one of this team can apply for either of the posts.

"The board will organize a search committee and has asked me to help search for the two new offi-

Alred, see page 7A

E911

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 county. That phone charge is \$74 for a business with several telephone lines. The rate the Geneva County E911 board could have voted is \$3.70.

The extra monthly surcharge will generate \$138,204 to bring the yearly income to \$414,612. The amount is based on a total

of 11,517 telephone lines in the CenturyTel database, he said.

The first purchase Underwood wants to make is a new voice recorder because a copy of each E911 phone call must be maintained for five years. "The one we have is the original and its operation is day to day." The cost is estimated at \$70,000.

The second expenditure is the dispatcher salaries.

"They haven't gotten a raise in three years," said McGowan.

The starting salary for a dispatcher is \$7 per hour. The rate is increased to \$7.28 after a probation period of a month. The dispatcher supervisor works a shift and earns \$8.35.

Underwood would like to amend the salary rates to \$8 as the base pay, \$8.50 after the probation period

and then incentive pay similar to a merit system.

"E911 is doing exactly what it's supposed to do," said Underwood. "It's providing a central dispatch capability for all emergency services in the county."

Shehee agreed and said the system is the "best thing for emergency response in Geneva County. No matter if you're a resident or someone traveling through, you

can get help when needed."

But even with the monthly rate increase, Underwood said the service still will need the annual payment of \$18,000 from Hartford and the Geneva County Commission.

When asked why the commission wasn't charged a higher amount since the residents in the rural areas equal one-half of the county's population, Underwood

said there are the same amount of deputies on duty during a shift as in any of the police departments.

"In the fall of 2004, we struggled to get a balanced budget," said Shehee. "The rate CenturyTel charged for the database doubled to nearly \$6,000 per month, without any warning."

Filmore Running Day to Day Operation in DA's Office

**Stephen Crews
 Geneva Newspapers**

Chief Assistant District Attorney Bill Filmore is now running the day to day operations in the Geneva County District Attorney's office. Filmore is handling the duties while Assistant District Attorney Stephen Smith is in Iraq serving in the Alabama National Guard in the Iraq War.

Smith, son of Jack W. Smith and Vernelle Turlington, was deployed in May of 2006 to serve in the war with Iraq. Smith is an alum of Geneva High School and has been serving in the Geneva County District Attorney's office as an assistant district attorney for the past three years. He served for just over a year under former District Attorney David Emery and remained on staff when Kirke Adams was elected District Attorney.

Filmore came aboard as the Chief Assistant District Attorney when Adams took office in January of 2005. He has tried several cases in Geneva County during the past year and a half including the state versus Franklin Eugene Herring case in which Herring was found guilty of manslaughter in the death of William Travis Thames and the state versus John Gilbert Rodgers

in which Rodgers was found guilty of four sexual abuse charges.

Filmore practiced law in Ozark for 20 years and then served as District Judge for 2 years before becoming the Chief Assistant District Attorney for the 33rd Judicial Circuit which consists of Dale and Geneva counties. As a practicing attorney, Bill was the youngest top rated (AV) attorney in Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory for Dale County, Alabama.

Bill was born in Florence, Alabama, on July 6, 1958 and was admitted to Alabama Bar in 1983 and soon thereafter admitted to practice. A member of the Christian Legal Society, Filmore was also a former Special Assistant Attorney General.

While in private practice he was the only attorney in Dale County that was a Certified Civil and Domestic Relations Mediator with special training in Domestic Violence. As a private Attorney, Bill represented both the Ozark and Daleville City Boards of Education and served as a member and Director of Alabama Council of School Board Attorneys. As an attorney Bill served as the Prosecutor for the City of Daleville for over 10 years.

An active member of the Daleville Baptist Church



The Geneva County District Attorney's office is led by an outstanding legal team that consists of Chief Assitant District Attorney Bill Filmore, Assistant District Attorney Cathey B. Wood, District Attorney Kirke Adams, Assistant District Attorney Stephen G. Smith and Assistant District Attorney Al Danner. Currently Smith is overseas serving our country in the Iraq War. While he is away doing this, Filmore is running the day to day operations in the Geneva office.

to have Bill working in our Geneva office on a day-to-day basis while Stephen is away serving our country," said District Attorney Kirke Adams. "Bill looks forward to working with the citizens of Geneva and is available to assist in any way that he can."

While Smith is away serving our country, Adams says that himself, Filmore, Al Danner and Cathey Wood

will be rotating duties in the Geneva office with Filmore being the main one responsible for the day-to-day operations. "Our primary objective is to serve the citizens of Geneva County as they have elected me to do."

Governor Riley, DPS Announce Fatality Victims Memorial Web Site

**Special to Geneva
 Newspapers**

During a highway safety conference in Montgomery today, Governor Bob Riley announced a new effort has been launched by the Department of Public Safety that is designed to have an impact on traffic safety.

A new web site recognizes the victims of fatal traffic crashes on Alabama's roadways and lets victims' family members share the stories of their loved ones.

"When we hear that more than 1,000 people die on our roadways each year in Alabama, there is a tendency to reduce this problem to mere numbers. We must get out of that habit. We need to remind ourselves and the rest of the public that there is a person, a face and a story connected with each one of those numbers and also a grieving family," Governor Riley said. "That way, hopefully, we'll have a greater impact and make people stop and think about safety each time they get behind the wheel."

DPS is inviting the fami-

lies of those killed in motor vehicle crashes to submit a written tribute and photograph for the Alabama Public Safety Fatality Victims Memorial.

Colonel Mike Coppage, Director of Public Safety, said the goal of the web site is to protect Alabama motorists and save lives. "Our hope is that by sharing the stories of motor vehicle crash victims, we can help other motorists become safer drivers and spare others the anguish of losing a loved one," he said.

DPS is inviting the families of those killed in motor vehicle crashes in Alabama to submit a written tribute and photograph for inclusion on the Web site. Families who wish to include a tribute on the web site may contact DPS at www.dps.alabama.gov or 334-242-4445.

To view the web site and read the victims' stories, go to www.dps.alabama.gov and click on "Fatality Victims Memorial" in the DPS links section.

Wilson

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following the hearing.

Geneva County District Attorney Kirke Adams was pleased with the sentencing. "We will continue to go after individuals in this county that take advantage of our senior citizens," said Adams. Adams said that his office will oppose any attempt at probation for Wilson.

Andrew Helms Sentenced

Circuit Judge Ben McLaughlin sentenced Geneva resident Andrew Helms to the state penitentiary to complete a substance abuse program before he can return to court to seek probation according to Geneva County District Attorney Kirke Adams. The actual sentence was a five-year, split sentence.

Helms agreed to a five year sentence for unlawful manufacture of controlled

substance and possession of precursor chemicals. The agreement was reached with Helms and his attorney Phil Eldridge on two felony charges.

Geneva County Drug Task Force Agent Annie Henderson and Geneva County Sheriff Greg Ward both testified in the sentencing hearing that Helms had not learned his lesson since his arrest. Both testified that he continued to keep a routine consistent with drug activity.