

Amarillo and the case of Cullen Davis

The richest man tried for murder - Part One

Editor's Note: Caprock Chronicles is edited by Jack Becker, Texas Tech University Librarian Emeritus. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. Today's article is the first of a two-part series about Amarillo's Cullen Davis trial by frequent contributor Chuck Lanehart, Lubbock attorney and award-winning Western history writer.

Amarillo was the site of one of the most notable trials of the 20th Century, a case which combined sex, violence and immense wealth with flamboyant legal maneuvers and saturation publicity. Amarillo jurors sat through the longest criminal trial in Texas history; listened to the most witnesses to testify in a criminal prosecution in Texas history; and decided the fate of the richest man ever tried for murder in American history.

Born in 1933, Cullen Davis was the son of legendary Fort Worth oilman "Stinky" Davis. Upon Stinky's death in 1968, Cullen inherited a fortune which would be worth \$750 million today.

Within days of his father's death, Cullen married 26-year-old Priscilla Lee Childers, a flashy, petite blonde from the small Texas town of Dublin. She had three children from prior relationships, including Andrea Wilborn, born in 1964.

Cullen insisted Priscilla transform herself into a sex symbol with dyed platinum hair, huge breast implants and the skimpiest of glitzy gowns and skimpy bikinis. He also insisted she sign a prenuptial agreement.

He was arrested for two murders and two attempted murders. Less than 24 hours later, Cullen posted an \$80,000 cash bond and was released. Publicity in the Metroplex was intense. Tarrant County District Attorney Tim Curry came under pressure to upgrade the charge to capital murder, which would empower the court to deny bond.

The couple launched an ostentatious spending spree: a Lear jet, world travel, jewelry, art and a multi-milliondollar home on Fort Worth's Mockingbird Lane known as Stonegate Mansion.

By 1974, the marriage was on the rocks. As both spouses dated others, the divorce judge granted Priscilla the right to live in Stonegate and ordered Cullen to make substantial support payments. Cullen was furious with the ruling.

On the night of Aug. 2, 1976, an ambulance was dispatched to the mansion. The driver spotted a blonde, bosomy woman limping across the lawn. It was Priscilla.

"What happened?" he asked as he jumped out of the vehicle.

"I've been shot!" "Who shot you?" "My husband!" "Who is your husband?" "Cullen Davis." Meanwhile, 18-year-old Beverly Bass and her boyfriend Bubba Gavrel arrived at the mansion. They were confronted by the gunman, who shot Bubba, paralyzing him for life. Beverly, a family friend, told police Cullen was the shooter. "I've known him since I was a little girl."

Inside the mansion, investigators discovered a bloody, horrific scene. Priscilla's 12-year-old daughter Andrea was found shot dead in the basement. Priscilla's live-in boyfriend, Stan Farr, was also dead.

Police questioned Cullen. "What would be a good enough reason for two people ending up getting killed like this?" a detective asked. Cullen looked directly at the detective. "Sometimes, a man doesn't need a reason."

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As Cullen — reportedly bound for Venezuela — approached the door to his Learjet, he was arrested for the capital murders of Stan Farr and Andrea Wilborn. Bond was denied.

He hired the best attorneys money could buy, including powerful Dallas lawyer Phil Burleson. For lead counsel, Cullen chose Richard "Racehorse" Haynes of Houston, master of winning impossible cases.

Haynes, 47, was short, barrel-chested, big-headed and bow-legged. He wore the most expensive suits and cowboy boots and by 1974, no one doubted his claim to be one of the best criminal defense lawyers in Texas. "If Nixon had hired me," he boasted, "he would still be President."

Cullen's lawyers immediately filed motions to release him on bond. At the bond hearing, DA Curry produced wheelchair-bound witnesses and shocking revelations about Cullen's history of brutality toward women, children, and small animals. It was a public relations victory for the prosecution. It hardened the public's heart against "the millionaire who thought he could get away with murder." Cullen would remain incarcerated through his trial.

The over-the-top publicity meant a fair jury could not be found in Fort Worth, so a change of venue was granted to Amarillo, 340 miles to the northwest. It was an isolated Panhandle city of less than 145,000.

The new judge would be George Dowlen, a toothpick-chewing good ol' boy known to be honorable, fair and gentlemanly.

Jury selection took place in the summer of 1977, and when the dust settled, nine men and three women between the ages of 26 to 64 were seated. Most were working people. The prosecution thought they'd be fair. The defense thought they'd hate Priscilla because of her flash and sordid lifestyle.

When Priscilla arrived in Amarillo, she and her entourage landed in a baby-blue jet and were whisked off in a limousine to the Presidential Suite at the Amarillo Hilton. Dressed in a white dress with ruffles, she wore a gold cross around her neck and carried a white, leatherbound Bible.

Cullen, the tall, slim, handsome millionaire, seemed like a movie star to many in Amarillo.

Haynes was determined to put Priscilla on trial, not his client, Cullen Davis.

Part Two of "Amarillo and the Case of Cullen Davis, Richest Man Tried for Murder" will be published in next Sunday's Avalanche-Journal.

LANEHART
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Stan Farr and Priscilla Davis, circa 1976. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PORTAL TO TEXAS HISTORY



Cullen Davis, 1970s.



Caprock Chronicles Chuck Lanehart Guest columnist

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