

For Immediate Release

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LMJC DA’s Office Cold Case Unit Secures First Victory with Conviction in 29 Year Old Case

December 13, 2023 – Lafayette, GA – On Wednesday, December 6, 2023, Robert Allen Mowry, a 53 year old man from Tullahoma, Tennessee was convicted by a Walker County jury for the 1994 murder of James Richard Harris, a 54 year old man from Chickamauga, Georgia.

In the early morning hours of December 22, 1994, a neighbor found James Harris, known as Jim to friends and family, deceased in his driveway located on Boss Road in Chickamauga. Mr. Harris had been struck in the back of the head and strangled to death during an apparent robbery. There were signs of a struggle at the crime scene, and Mr. Harris’s pockets had been emptied, his boots and belt had been removed, and his jeans were partially pulled down. A large amount of blood was found at the crime scene, however, in 1994, the capabilities of the state crime lab were limited in the performance of forensic analysis on the blood-stained items recovered from the scene.

Few leads materialized over the years despite diligent investigative efforts by the Walker County Sheriff’s Office (WCSO) and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). In 2005, the GBI Crime Lab was asked to re-analyze certain items found at the crime scene in order to determine if some of the blood could be from a suspect. Blood stains on the jeans worn by Mr. Harris, along with stains from a bloody tissue located near the body were submitted for DNA analysis, and they were determined to be from a single individual, and not a match to Mr. Harris.

Multiple individuals were contacted by the WCSO and the GBI over the years for the purpose of providing a DNA sample to compare against the DNA profile from the jeans and tissue—no matches were found. In 2009, a tip was received by law enforcement via phone, which identified the suspect in the murder as a person named “Allen”. The WCSO and GBI located an individual who worked with Mr. Harris at Miller Industries in Ooltewah named Robert Allen Mowry who had never previously been contacted in the investigation. Further investigation of Mowry revealed that he had arrived at work late on the date Mr. Harris was murdered, and that he had been seen with a black eye in the days following the murder.

In April 2018, GBI Special Agent Daniel Nicholson contacted Mowry by phone and asked to speak about Mr. Harris’s murder. Mowry replied he had already spoken to law enforcement about the case, which Agent Nicholson determined to be untrue. Agent Nicholson went to Mowry’s home in August 2019 to interview Mowry and received an angry phone call from Mowry in response to the visit. When asked to submit a DNA sample, as others had voluntarily done over the years, Mowry replied that he did not believe in DNA or the results from DNA.

Agents with the GBI, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, WCSO, and Tullahoma Police Department coordinated surveillance efforts to obtain Mowry’s DNA. In the course of their surveillance, officers observed Mowry smoking cigarettes outside his home. Officers conducted a trash pull after Mowry had

taken his garbage can to the street on trash collection day and obtained a large number of cigarette butts from the can.

The cigarette butts were submitted to the GBI Crime Lab for DNA comparison analysis against the blood from the jeans and tissue at the crime scene, and there was a match to Mowry's DNA. Upon receipt of the match results from the cigarette butts, a search warrant was obtained for Mowry's DNA, and upon comparison, there was a 1 in 3 quadrillion match to the bloody items located at the crime scene.

Following a trial lasting seven days, Mowry was convicted of Felony Murder and immediately sentenced by Superior Court Judge Don W. Thompson to serve the remainder of his life in the Georgia Department of Corrections. At the time of his sentence, Mowry was just one year younger than James Harris when he was murdered.

Testimony against Mowry was given by multiple forensic scientists from the GBI Crime Lab, neighbors and coworkers of James Harris, and several local law enforcement officers, as well as officers from the State of Tennessee. Local law enforcement officers responsible for the investigation and arrest of Mowry were Major Mike Freeman with the WCSO, who had been investigating the case since the day Mr. Harris was murdered, and GBI Special Agents Joe Montgomery and Daniel Nicholson.

At trial, the State of Georgia was represented by Assistant District Attorneys Deanna Reisman and Alan Smith. Victim Advocates Donna Howell and Ashley Nicholson provided invaluable care to the family of James Harris throughout the course of the trial. Chief Investigator for the Office of the District Attorney Christy Smith assisted in securing the attendance of witnesses for the trial and provided investigative assistance during the prosecution of Mowry.

"For 28 Christmases, the family of James Harris has carried the indescribable pain of not knowing the truth. There will not be a 29th Christmas because of Deanna, her team, and our law enforcement partners" said District Attorney Clayton M. Fuller. "The LMJC DA's Office Cold Case Unit never forgets. Years may pass and a violent criminal may go on living their life thinking they got away with murder. But we never forget. And in this office, our duty to our victims and their families will never end. Our search for the truth will never end."

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