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Prosecutor admits 'psyching out' Spence at his capital murder trial

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Prosecutor Vic Feazell, whose tactics during a capital murder trial have been criticized by the defense attorney, readily admits that he rattled the defendant by symbolically shoving a fountain pen at his own arm as though administering a lethal injection.

"Prosecutors do that kind of thing all the time," the M c L e n n a n County district attorney said Tuesday. "It's part of the psychological aspect of the trial. It's what you call psyching out the opponent."

Lethal injection is the method of execution in Texas.

But the attorney for David Wayne Spence, 27, who was sentenced to die for the 1982 murders of two teen-agers, doesn't find Feazell's antics humorous.

Attorney Walter "Skip" Reaves says he will appeal last week's conviction of Spence on grounds that a mistrial should have been declared because of Feazell's efforts to unnerve his client.



Vic Feazell

Reaves' motion for a mistrial was filed after Feazell wrote notes — some that Reaves says ridiculed Spence's defense attorneys and the hopelessness of Spence's case — during jury selection.

A state district court jury in Bryan took only 10 minutes to sentence Spence to die for the murder of Kenneth Franks. He now has been convicted of murdering Franks and Jill Montgomery, two of the three teen-agers found stabbed to death at Lake Waco in July 1982.

Feazell said his "needle" gesture occurred during Spence's first murder trial, which was in Waco. He confirms writing notes during jury selection of the second trial, but says they are not grounds for appeal.

Spence was sitting next to Feazell, and the district attorney said he couldn't help it if Spence looked over his shoulder to see what he was writing.

"I didn't give Mr. Spence any notes. He was reading my writing over my shoulder. They were just things that I had written down, and he peeked over and read them," Feazell said.

Reaves said one Feazell note said one death sentence might be all right in the federal court of appeals, "but with two, your coffin is shut."

Feazell said he did not write a note to that effect.

Copies of Feazell's notes, scribbled on the back of juror questionnaires, were placed in the court's official records of the trial, but State District Judge W.T. McDonald denied Reaves' mistrial request.

McDonald called Feazell's notes "rather innocuous."

The judge said at one point, one of Feazell's assistant prosecutors got his words twisted and said, "You're presumed guilty until proven innocent."

"Everybody knew what he meant, and even some of the jurors laughed, but the defense didn't jump right up and object," McDonald said.

Then, the judge added, Feazell "wrote a note to Spence saying, 'You're drowning, and your life-guards can't swim.' Meaning his attorneys were not doing everything just right."

Reaves said Feazell's notes caused mental anguish and trauma for Spence and so disillusioned him about defense attorneys' efforts that he tried to fire Reaves and co-counsel W.W. Vance five times during the trial.

McDonald said that, although he denied the motion for a mistrial, he had Spence separated from Feazell.