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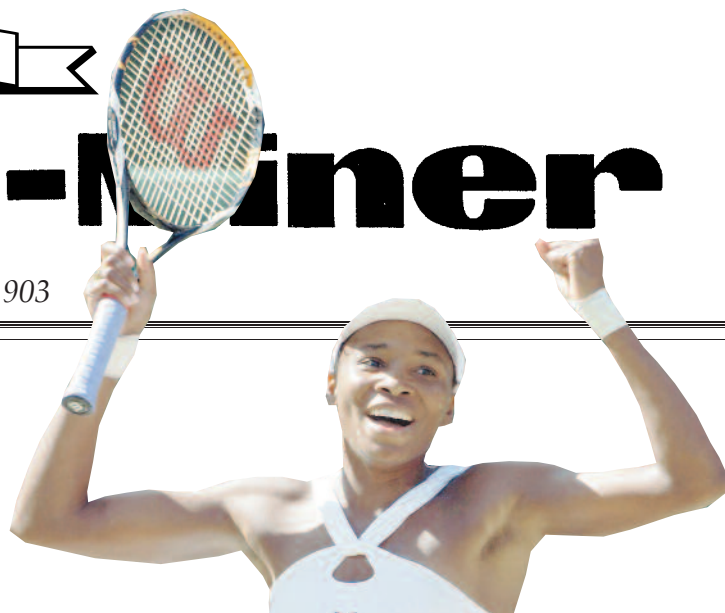


HARVEST

SMOKY

Haze hits the Interior
INTERIOR/ALASKA B1

SPORTS C1



SIBLING RIVALRY

Decade of Doubt

John Hartman's 1997 murder remains divisive for the Interior

CONTENT WARNING: This series contains references to vulgar language and violent acts that may be objectionable to some readers and that parents may find inappropriate for their children.

Editor's note: This series is the product of a six-year investigation by former Daily News-Miner reporter Brian O'Donoghue and his journalism students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, with support from the News-Miner. Part one of seven.

By **BRIAN O'DONOGHUE**
Special to the News-Miner

The victim's waist straddled Ninth Avenue's curb. His head rested on the pavement.
"Look, look," cried the front passenger of the approaching Cutlass that Saturday, Oct. 11, 1997. The time was about 2:45 a.m.
"There's a little boy."
Drawing closer, the driver noticed puffs of breath rising in the early morning chill. The youngster looked bruised and battered but alive.
The woman who first spied him began getting out. Friends stopped her; what if those responsible were still around?
The group roared off seeking help. John Hartman, then just weeks past his 15th birthday, would linger in a coma at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital until his death the following evening.



Police swiftly arrested four suspects. Marvin Roberts, Eugene Vent, George Frese and Kevin Pease stood trial and were convicted in 1999. They are serving prison sentences ranging from 33 to 79 years for the teenager's slaying.
A decade after Hartman's murder, Alaska courts still wrestle with the case. The Alaska Supreme Court has agreed to review Pease's conviction. This week, a lower court is scheduled to hear Vent's claims of new evidence.
Procedural issues dominate these ongoing court reviews.
It's the larger questions about the integrity of the system that trouble Athabascans tied by family and heritage to three of the convicted men.
"We call forth and challenge the legal community and the institutions to revisit this case," said Jerry Isaac, president of Tanana Chiefs Conference, speaking this March at a rally supporting the men convicted of Hartman's murder. The chief executive of the Interior's largest



Court officer Cheryl Jasper, bottom left, escorts the four men accused of killing John Hartman into Fairbanks Superior Court for their arraignment in October 1997. From left are Eugene Vent, George Frese, Marvin Roberts and Kevin Pease.



Photo courtesy Hartman family
John Hartman, a linebacker for the city's youth league Redskins, had ambitions of landing a college football scholarship, according to friends, before his murder in October 1997.



Heather Taggard/News-Miner
The late Shirley Demientieff leads a 2003 protest march in support of the four men convicted of murdering John Hartman in October 1997.

Sealaska could see land claim resolution

By **ANNE SUTTON**
Associated Press Writer

JUNEAU — An Alaska Native corporation will receive tens of thousands of acres of federally owned land — including prime timberlands and sacred tribal sites — under legislation being advanced by U.S. Rep. Don Young.
Sealaska Corp., which represents 17,000 shareholders across southeast Alaska and beyond, claims it was shorted of land given to the other 11 Alaska-based regional Native corporations under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The 13th — called the 13th Regional Corp. and based in Seattle — did not receive any land.
Under Young's bill, the corporation will pick and choose about 125 square miles from public lands across the region, bypassing a pool of land already set aside for the purpose — some of which



Young

Please see **LAND**, Page A7

3 die, 2 hurt in crash on Parks Hwy.

The Associated Press

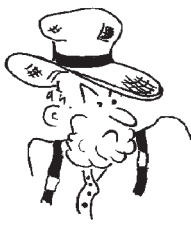
ANCHORAGE — Three California men died and two Michigan men were critically hurt in a vehicle rollover on Alaska's Parks Highway, state troopers said Saturday.
Troopers identified the dead as 21-year-old William Bradley, 21-year-old Nathan Pollard and 21-year-old Jerry Luzzi. The injured were identified as 20-year-old Matthew Holmes and 19-year-old Christopher Niles.
The hometowns of the five were not immediately available.
Bradley was driving a 2003 Infiniti on Friday night when the vehicle rolled several times,

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Costly



Wildfires put a strain on California
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Sourdough Jack sez:

"An open mind is like a savings account. We all need one, but few of us have a real good one."

A father's grief inspires new generation of military robots

The Associated Press

TYNGSBOROUGH, Mass. — The knock on Brian Hart's door came at 6 a.m. An Army colonel, a priest and a police officer had come to tell Hart and his wife that their 20-year-old son had been killed when his military vehicle was ambushed in Iraq.
Brian Hart didn't channel his grief quietly. Committed to "preventing the senseless from recurring," he railed against the military on his blog for shortcomings in supplying armor to soldiers. The one-time Republican teamed with liberal Sen. Edward Kennedy to tell Congress that the Pentagon was leaving soldiers ill-equipped.
And then Hart went beyond

Please see **ROBOTS**, Page A7



The Associated Press
Black-I Robotics founder Brian Hart, whose son was killed during an ambush in Iraq in 2003, is seen with a six-wheel cost-effective robot that his company designed to protect troops and perform certain risky missions.



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John Hagen/News-Miner

Attorney Dick Madson addresses the Alaska Court of Appeals on May 6, 2003, in the Rabinowitz Courthouse in Fairbanks. Madson failed to persuade the panel that his client, Marvin Roberts, deserves a new trial. From left are Judge David Mannheimer, Chief Judge Robert Coats and Judge David Stewart.

HARTMAN: Teen’s murder creates racial rift throughout Interior, villages

Continued from Page A1

Native nonprofit corporation criticized the prosecution’s use of “questionable evidence.”

Don Honea, ceremonial chief of more than 40 Interior villages, is characteristically blunt about the message he and others see delivered in the Hartman verdicts. “Those boys were railroaded,” he said, adding that Natives feel “they don’t have a chance if they go against the white system.”

Fairbanks Police Chief Dan Hoffman counters by noting that Pease, who isn’t Alaska Native, received what amounts to a life sentence. “That defendant was treated no better, or no worse,” the chief said last spring.

For his part, chief prosecutor Jeff O’Bryant draws confidence from the collective nature of those verdicts, which stemmed from not one but a series of trials. “Thirty-six different people, looking at all the evidence — three different times,” O’Bryant said in an interview several years ago. “Basically, arguably, coming to the same general conclusion.”

This seven-part series offers no proof of guilt or innocence. It does document gaps in the police investigation that raise questions about the victim’s last conscious hours. It points out that the group convicted of the teen’s murder may have been prosecuted with forms of evidence identified later in national studies as contributing to some wrongful prosecutions elsewhere. And it shows how rulings from this state’s courts have undermined Alaska Native confidence in the justice system by keeping juries from weighing all that’s known about the crime.

Among the series’ observations:

- The police investigation remained focused on suspects flagged through a pair of confessions, subsequently retracted, despite lab tests that yielded no supporting evidence.
- Jurors remained unaware that state crime lab experts couldn’t match Frese’s boots with photos of Hartman’s bruises. Though it bore the lab’s logo, the suggestive exhibit presented at trial was a non-scientific photo overlay assembled by police and the district attorney. Recent studies have shown that evidence lacking forensic merit often figures in convictions that are later overturned.
- Detectives referred to fictitious evidence throughout the interrogations that yielded confessions from Vent and Frese.



Frese



Pease



Roberts



Vent



Eric Engman/News-Miner

Above, supporters of the four convicted men rally Oct. 12, 2007, in front of the Rabinowitz Courthouse to bring continued attention to the 10-year-old case of four young men found guilty of beating 15-year-old John Hartman to death. Many people continue to voice the innocence of the four men.

At right, Don Honea, a Ruby elder and ceremonial chief of more than 40 Interior villages, vents frustration to reporters following the 2003 appellate hearing in Fairbanks. Honea contends white suspects would never have been convicted on such evidence.

Sean Bigge/UAF Journalism

Employing such trickery on suspects who profess no memory of a crime, while standard practice in 1997, today draws specific cautions in the nation’s standard-setting criminal interrogation manual. The revisions reflect lessons learned from re-examining tactics used in obtaining confessions later proven false in cases that sent innocent people to jail.

- The state’s case strongly relied upon identifications made by an eyewitness standing 550 feet from a robbery. The distance raises the possibility of witness misidentification, which has emerged as the leading common denominator among hundreds of errant murder and rape convictions.
- Police paid scant attention to the last person known to have been with Hartman. Chris Stone, a 14-year-old self-described methamphetamine addict, had been hospitalized following a similar assault only weeks prior. And

jurors never heard about Stone’s attention-getting entrance into Carrs-Foodland about the time Hartman lay dying in the street. Also, no one involved in the Hartman case had access to Stone’s sworn statement, sealed in an unrelated juvenile proceeding, suggesting, under one interpretation, awareness of his friend’s plight.

All of this has contributed, in the eyes of many, to a decade of doubt.

Swift arrests, shaken spirits

Two days after Hartman’s fatal beating at Ninth Avenue and Barnette Street, four current and former basketball players from Howard Luke Academy, a predominantly Alaska Native alternative high school that has since closed, faced murder charges. Bail was set at \$1 mil-



lion apiece for 20-year-old Frese, 17-year-old Vent, and Pease and Roberts, both 19.

At a news conference that day, Fairbanks Police Lt. Paul Keller explained that detectives had statements from two of the young men acknowledging their own roles in Hartman’s death and implicating the others. “After the physical assault, he was sexually assaulted,” the detective said.

Police hadn’t found ties

between the suspects and the victim or determined any motive for the crime. Keller characterized the murder as an act of “random street violence.”

Prior to the crime, locals drew a sense of security from the Interior’s daunting winters and relative isolation. Savagery of this sort was more commonly associated with Los Angeles, New York and other major population centers. Most perceived Fairbanks and its surrounding urban

community of roughly 52,000 as fundamentally different, a special place united by shared hardships and rooted in a self-reliant frontier heritage.

Hartman’s brutal murder downtown prompted civic leaders to convene a rare town meeting. “I’m not satisfied to live in a community where someone cannot walk down the street without getting assaulted or killed,” then-

Please see HARTMAN, Page A6

Same streets, different lanes: Paths tragically cross

By **BRIAN O'DONOGHUE**
Special to the News-Miner

That Friday in October 1997 held promise for John Hartman. The 15-year-old and his new sweetheart planned to exchange gifts during her morning class break.

Marvin Roberts, 19, entered the weekend renewed by a traditional hunting trip with the father he hadn't known, a welcome, if temporary, escape from the choices confronting a disappointed scholar.

Arlo Olson, 20, then visiting from Kaltag, his Yukon River village, began partying mid-afternoon with a cousin attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The cousins shared a pot pipe with friends in the bushes behind Lola Tilly Commons.

Hartman, Roberts and Olson — three young Alaskans embracing adult freedoms.

All were about to collide through a life-shattering crime — the first, murdered for no apparent cause; the second, jailed and convicted with three others in the slaying; the third, destined for the misery that dogs life as a reputed snitch.

Hartman and Roberts had several things in common.

Both spent good portions of their childhood in single-parent households.

Both had mothers who scraped by selling pull-tab cards.

Both came from homes occasionally rocked by alcohol-related troubles.

And while both came of age in Fairbanks, they moved in circles — one white, one Native — that seldom overlapped.

'Birthday' tokens

Lean and athletic, Hartman played linebacker for the Redskins, a club team in the city's youth league. He had suited up for the previous Arctic Bowl, where his team earned bragging rights as the league champions. "He would try anything for us," his coach of three years, Ken Ferring, would later say.

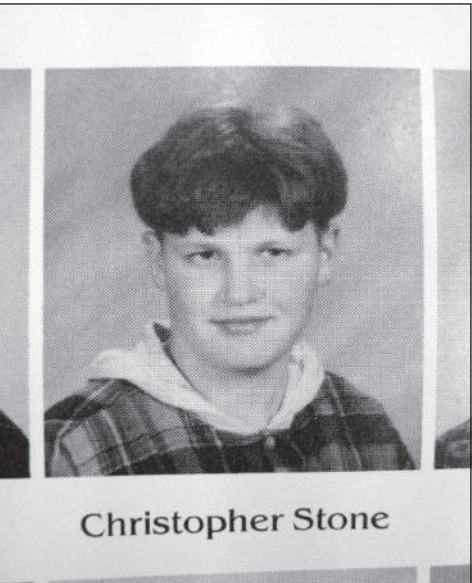
The amiable teen known as "JG" talked about landing a college football scholarship. For now, he was a "home schooler," according to family, making up a class he needed to complete middle school.

That fall, Hartman had become a morning fixture at the McDonald's restaurant on Geist Road.

Credit a girl for the restaurant's lure.

Elishiva Corning, "Sheva" to friends, was a freshman across the street at West Valley High. Corning had a long break between classes at around 11 a.m. Most weekdays, according to friends and relatives, she and her new boyfriend got together at McDonald's. That Friday, Corning and Hartman planned on swapping "birthday" gifts. His birthday had come in September. Hers was months away yet. No matter. The planned show of affection wasn't subject to the calendar.

Waiting for his girl, Hartman shot the breeze with Chris Stone.



Chris Stone, a friend of John Hartman's, would come to play a vital part in the Hartman trial.

Wouldn't name names

Chris Stone hadn't seen much class lately even though he was enrolled as a freshman at the school across the road. An assault a couple of weeks earlier had landed him in the emergency ward.

At the hospital, Stone initially said he "couldn't remember what happened," Trooper Richard Quinn noted in his report.

Follow-up efforts proved futile. Stone refused to cooperate, the trooper wrote, "stating that it would just happen again."

He closed the case.

In the aftermath, Stone assured friends he was recovering, albeit in a manner no doctor would prescribe. He skipped school and hadn't been home for at least a week, relying on friends for places to crash.

Before visiting McDonald's that morning, Stone and another friend, Lathrop sophomore Elijah "EJ" Stephens, smoked crystal meth, a form of methamphetamine.

The drug use came as no surprise to EJ's mom.

"Yeah. It was just the newest thing,



In fall 1997, Gerry Roberts took this riverboat, shown outside his home in Tanana in 2004, down the Yukon River on an extended moose hunting trip with his 19-year-old son, Marvin. Within days of that trip, Marvin Roberts faced murder charges in Fairbanks.

back then," Melissa Stephens said in a 2003 interview. "They were all trying to make it in their basements."

Such was the life of Chris Stone, then five months past his 14th birthday.



Ten years after the murder, Mary Reynaga has fond memories of her "guy friend," John Hartman.

Family exception

By all accounts, Hartman had more going for him.

Lathrop student Mary Reynaga got to know Hartman through a girlfriend. "He was someone you could trust."

Hartman and several friends were forming a band. The Sentinels was the working name, according to Trent Mueller, who figured to be the outfit's drummer.

A true baby of the family, Hartman was the youngest of four boys. His closest siblings were twins, born five years before.

"JG, he was kind of my favorite," said his oldest brother, Christopher "Sean" Kelly, who shared a love of comics with the kid brother seven years his junior.

"I'd be over at someone's house and trade a lid of pot for a pile of comics," he recalled in a 2004 interview. "I gave them to JG."

Hartman shared his older brother's fondness for getting stoned, friends and family agree. But he reportedly shunned booze and harder drugs.

Hartman's mom, Evalyn Thomas, worked low-end jobs keeping a roof over her brood. For a time, she'd managed the Yukon Quest store downtown, where JG playfully staffed the souvenir counter.

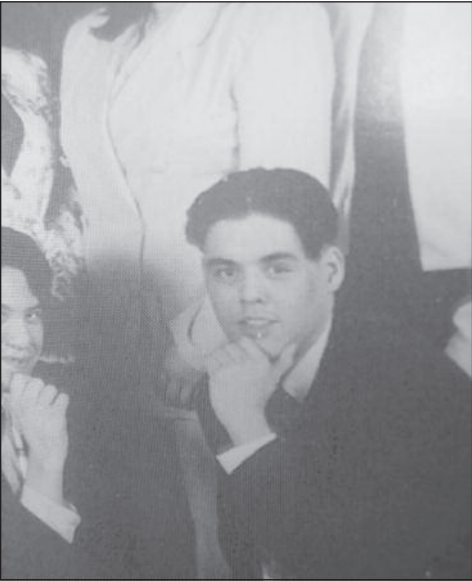
Thomas' second marriage had dissolved a few years before in a series of domestic violence orders. She'd recently been arrested on a drunken-driving charge for the second time in five years.

Hartman's oldest brother, meanwhile, owned a lengthy criminal record. In 1995, the year Kelly turned 21, he faced, among others, felony forgery, theft and burglary charges.

JG seemed to benefit from such examples and generally steered clear of trouble.

He had a reputation as a kid more likely to calm situations than get in anybody's face.

"When he did get pissed off," Reynaga said, "he'd just go sit quietly and steam about it. Then, he'd just be done. You know? I never saw him fight anybody."



Arlo Olson, of Kaltag, showed promise as member of the Yukon-Koyukuk Academic Decathlon Team.

Explosive relationship

Only two years earlier, Arlo Olson had made the front pages of his Bush school district's yearbook pictured in coat and tie, one of two students kneeling in the front of the region's Academic Decathlon Team.

He came from a mixed household. His mother is Athabaskan. His father, Glenn Olson, is a white teacher who advanced to superintendent of the Yukon-Koyukuk School District, overseeing 10 village schools including Arlo's K-12 school in Kaltag, a Yukon River village with fewer than 250 residents.

Drinking and a troubled relationship undercut Olson's youthful promise.

A drunken scuffle at a village dance in January 1996 marked the first of many episodes of domestic violence between Olson, then 18, and his younger sweetheart.

In July 1997, the young woman awakened another Kaltag household. She was intoxicated, half-naked and screamed for help. Olson showed up, punched his girlfriend, according to the criminal complaint, then grabbed "the hair on her head and dragged her across the street back to their house."

Charges were pending as the young couple visited Fairbanks. Olson's girlfriend wasn't drinking. She was pregnant.

Wore 'Desert Storm' suit

After Hartman's girlfriend returned to class that Friday, he and Stone ambled downtown. They visited the borough library, an outdoors store and, finally, the Five Aces pull-tab shop, where JG's mom worked.

"I was busy. I had like eight or nine customers," Thomas told the News-Miner later that week. "He asked me if he could have like \$5 to go to McDonald's at Bentley Mall."

Thomas wasn't paying close attention, but she noticed, as a mother would, that JG wore his Desert Storm-pattern outfit, a recent birthday gift. "He had just gotten that jacket and pants about two weeks before," she later testified. "It was the first time I saw him wearing it."

She recognized Stone, though he wasn't part of her son's usual circle.

Thomas gave her son \$5, perhaps \$10. It was her understanding JG might grab a bite to eat and then head

back across town for a baby-sitting job. He'd be spending the night with John Durham, a friend who lived in that area.

Caught between cultures

Roberts, like many contemporary Athabascans, grew up calling two very different communities home.

Marvin was 2 and his sister, Sharon, 6, when Hazel and Gerry Roberts split up. She and the kids left Tanana, a village of just more than 200 residents, mostly Native, located where its namesake river flows into the Yukon.

They moved to Fairbanks.

When relatives from the village weren't staying with Hazel in town, she and the kids were often visiting her sister Kathy in Tanana. Marvin's village connection deepened the year he turned 13.

Troubled by his mother's drinking in Fairbanks, he moved in with his religious, tea-drinking auntie.

That fall he attended Tanana's K-12 school.

By then, Gerry Roberts was busy raising another family, distancing the teenager from his dad though both were again living in the same village.

Hazel Roberts cleaned up her act, and Marvin returned home to finish high school at Howard Luke Academy. It was an alternative school, smaller than Fairbanks' other high schools, and boasted the district's largest percentage of Alaska Native students.

The setting suited Marvin, who earned recognition as a News-Miner "student achiever" in May 1996.

"Marvin Roberts plans to make a couple of million dollars," stated the article, which cited the influence of "The Count of Monte Cristo," his favorite book. "It shows how anybody in the pits can get to the top of the world," Roberts told the reporter.

Along with studying business, Roberts said he planned to learn Japanese, "because it would open up so many possibilities for me after college."

The article described Roberts' involvement in a Native dance group's performance at a gubernatorial ball. It noted he was co-captain of the school's basketball team.

Home video from that year's graduation ceremony shows Roberts grinning as he was summoned for the salutatorian's speech. He rose from a folding chair attired in dark gown, cap and dangling tassel. A gold sash circled his neck, attesting to his academic success. Taking the podium, he bantered with Tisha Simmons, a girl in a wheelchair who narrowly out-pointed him for class valedictory honors.

Mirth faded as Roberts solemnly faced the crowd.

In a firm, practiced voice, he praised the school's teachers for instilling the tools necessary for success. He thanked his mom.

Then he touched upon the hazards ahead.

"Every choice we make is important," he said, surveying his classmates, "because it often determines what our future pathway will be."

Roberts left the graduation stage to applause. His stride and rolling shoulders conveyed relief and a bit of a swagger.

received an official letter — a mistake had been made. The school had miscalculated grade point averages. Roberts should have been named class valedictorian.

It meant more than bragging rights. A foundation associated with Doyon Ltd., the regional Native corporation for the Interior, awarded a \$500 scholarship to the valedictorian of the academy named for an esteemed Athabaskan elder.

When Roberts and his mother inquired about the prize, they were told it was too late; the award had already been claimed.

"It really bummed Marvin out," recalled Hazel Roberts.

In his graduation speech, Roberts had warned that life after high school might come as a "wake up call."

He called that right.

The boy whose schoolwork garnered praise dating back to elementary school lasted a single semester at UAF. "He wasn't ready for college," Hazel said of her son. "He needed a break after all those years working so hard."

Marvin, likewise, rationalized that he simply needed time off.

A year later, Roberts hadn't gone back.

And he'd given up his job as a youth guide with The Riverboat Discovery tourism operation.

He had enjoyed explaining trapping, fish wheels and other aspects of life in Interior villages.

But Marvin couldn't pass up his Uncle Pat's offer to fight wildfires with the crew out of Ruby, a smaller village perched on a sunny bluff about 120 miles downriver from Tanana.

Drawing on the pay earned chasing sparks and eating smoke, Roberts invested in new clothes, complete with designer shades. He got ahead on payments for the Dodge Shadow parked outside his mother's home in South Fairbanks.

That fall, Roberts called his father out of the blue and asked to go hunting.

In a 20-foot open riverboat, propelled by a 45-horsepower kicker, father and son followed the big river 270 miles downstream to the village of Koyukuk, then upstream another 120 miles on a tributary.

Wrong turns, missed chances

Not long after graduation, Roberts

ON THE WEB

Visit www.newsminer.com/hartman for more on "Decade of Doubt."

- Download full murder trial transcripts, searchable by witness.
- Hartman soundscape: Voices from trial witnesses, lawyers, street protests and one of the men convicted echo across a decade. <http://www.newsminer.com/hartman/archives/audio/soudscape/>
- July 2007 Appeals Court decision reinstating Kevin Pease conviction
- Village and regional tribal resolutions supporting the accused
- Trooper notes lack of cooperation investigating Chris Stone's recent assault
- Criminal complaints detail Arlo Olson's village brawls

HARTMAN: Court of Appeals denies a new trial

Continued from Page A4

Borough Mayor Jim Sampson declared.

Local officials caught an earful.

"You're ruining the most beautiful place I've ever been to," said Southside resident Jada Humphrey, chastising authorities for not confronting violence sooner.

"God help you people if something happens to my daughter in this town ... because you've done nothing."

Speaking on behalf of the police, Lt. James Welch asked for the larger community's help. "I'm not asking for people to be vigilantes," he said. "I'm asking for people to get together."

Native activist Shirley Demientieff challenged others to join community policing efforts. She also announced plans for a candlelight walk, honoring all victims of violence. The route she proposed — starting at the hall where the suspects were among those attending a Native wedding reception and ending at the intersection where the white victim lay dying — aimed at diffusing racial tensions heightened by the crime.

Being Athabascan, Roberts, Vent and Frese possessed family scattered up and down the Yukon River. That kindled regional interest in the Hartman case.

"What happened to 'innocent until proven guilty?'" wrote Carla K. Bonny, a non-Native resident of Tanana, in a letter published in the Daily News-Miner two weeks after the arrests. Like many others in her Yukon River village, she was sure there was more to the story. "Such violence sickens everyone I know in this village," she wrote. "But none of us know what happened that night, and won't know until evidence is presented at trial."

Others rendered swift judgment.

"As for Hartman's assailants," Jackie Dupree of Fairbanks wrote the editor that same week, "I say let the punishment fit the crime. This incident represents a good argument for the death penalty."

Opinions harden

Clad in orange jail suits and handcuffed to their waists by chains, the four suspects shuffled past TV cameras into the courtroom for arraignment on Oct. 21 1997. A defense attorney blasted the chains as "grandstanding" and "prejudicial," but they remained in place. The security stemmed from the "high-risk persons" involved, the officer heading the detail said, protecting against violence or escape attempts.

Three of the accused relied on public defenders. Roberts, too, came from a family of limited means, but friends and relatives in Tanana and Ruby rallied to his support. The villages raised \$10,000 in a single weekend and retained Dick Madson, a local defense attorney best known for representing Exxon Valdez skipper Joe Hazelwood.

Legal battles raged through the winter of 1997, into summer, and though the following winter.

In February 1998, indictments were dismissed against three of the four suspects because the district attorney failed to inform grand jurors of potential alibis.



News-Miner file

John Hartman's mother, Evalyn Thomas, right, listens at an Alaska Superior Court hearing in February 1998, after testifying that she did not think the four men accused of murdering her son in October 1997 should be allowed out on bail.

Only Roberts ever made bail. While that was short-lived, the prospect of accused murderers walking freely about town sparked more outrage.

"Well, Fairbanks, Alaska, looks like open season," wrote Mary Carter in a letter to the editor. "We are truly savages now. We can roam the streets raping and beating men, women, girls, boys — doesn't matter, whichever you prefer is fair game."

Describing herself as "embarrassed with Alaska's justice system," the Healy resident said it was "too bad" the victim couldn't have another 24 hours with his mom.

Comments of that sort offended supporters of the men accused.

"We aren't some Third World country where you can be locked up on a whim," fired back Fairbanks letter-writer Adrienne Grimes, a former classmate of the suspects. "Would you like to know what horrifies me? It's the judgmental way in which my fellow citizens are behaving."

The dismissals were still being processed when a grand jury charged Frese with another felony stemming from an incident two weeks prior to Hartman's murder. Several tourists said he had pulled a gun on them during a confrontation near the Westmark Hotel. His friend Pease provoked it, they said, by spewing vulgarities at women in the group. When one of the men in the group gave chase, Frese allegedly rolled up on a bicycle and pointed a pistol at the irate tourist's head.

At the time, police questioned others they picked up near the hotel but made no arrests. Three

weeks, later one of the Westmark tourists notified police he recognized Frese and Pease in news coverage of the murder case. Only Frese was charged.

In summer 1998, a pair of juries took turns with the Westmark case. The first trial ended when a juror locked himself in a bathroom rather than continue deliberating. The juror told the News-Miner he felt the tourists conspired against the murder suspect.

Tried a second time, Frese was found guilty and received two years in prison. "I look into your eyes and see a truly troubled young man," Judge Ralph Beistline observed during sentencing.

Frese offered no apology. "Just because I was convicted of this doesn't mean I did it," he said of the Westmark incident.

Meanwhile, preliminary arguments about the Hartman case reached the Alaska Supreme Court. Indictments were reinstated, a victory for the state. The defense, likewise, prevailed when courts suppressed portions of both confessions. Every development commanded headlines. Lacking fresh images, local broadcast updates inevitably featured aging file video of the Hartman suspects wearing those chains.

In November 1998, Superior Court Judge Niesje Steinkruger began selecting a jury for Frese's murder trial. He would be the first Hartman suspect prosecuted.

Ninety-eight jurors were called; more than 40 were excused for possessing "substantial knowledge" about the case. By the fourth day, a jury and

alternate were seated, but the judge remained doubtful.

Citing the possibility of "hidden prejudice," Steinkruger dismissed the panel and ordered the Frese trial moved to Anchorage, 350 miles south.

Changing venue to ensure fairness in a Fairbanks criminal proceeding hadn't been necessary in more than 20 years. The prosecutor protested, lamenting the expense associated with transporting and housing witnesses and court personnel so far away. But Steinkruger's ruling stood.

In February 1999, she presided as Frese was tried and convicted by an Anchorage jury.

Judge Ben Esch took the gavel for Vent's trial that July, followed by Roberts and Pease. All were found guilty by jurors from Alaska's largest city. All maintained their innocence at sentencing in February 2000.

"I'm a scapegoat for officers of the law," said Pease, who portrayed himself as wronged by the system.

Citing Pease's extensive and violent juvenile record, escalating from armed robbery at the age of 16, Judge Esch handed him 79 years. "It's a question of when the homicide was going to occur," he told Pease, "not if."

Mounting discontent

In May 2003, the state's three-member Court of Appeals convened for the first time ever in Fairbanks. The hearing concerned Roberts' application for another trial based on emerging information about Hartman's companion Stone and post-trial retractions from Arlo Olson, another prosecution witness.

murder, had little direct involvement in the investigation. While he declined to discuss specifics of a case he termed arguably "the most notorious in Fairbanks history," the chief acknowledged last spring that the murder and its aftermath pose challenges for a department striving to build confidence among the entire Fairbanks citizenry.

"The fact that three out of four of the defendants were Alaska Natives tended to generate a lot of questioning along those lines," he said.

Hoffman largely devoted his first year as chief to preparing for the influx of some 3,000 delegates to the Alaska Federation of Natives annual convention, which was coming back to Fairbanks after a lengthy absence. And it paid off. Not a single report of "serious victimization" marred the delegates' weeklong gathering at the Carlson Center in 2005. The supportive local police presence contributed to the organization's return to Fairbanks in 2007.

Even as the chief personally extended a hand in 2005, the Hartman case intruded.

"These children are innocent," declared Demientieff, the Fairbanks Native activist, who was leading a lunch-hour protest outside the convention's main door. About two dozen picketers slowly circled her, parting the flow of delegates in and out of AFN's convention. Most carried hand-lettered signs. "Retrial: Yes!" proclaimed one. "Alaska Natives Standing Up for Justice," read another.

"We come from all walks of life and we believe in them," shouted Demientieff, referring to the group convicted in the Hartman case.

The chief, who was related to the late activist by marriage, paused to talk.

"Oh Dan," he recalled Demientieff saying, as she often did at such times. "This isn't directed at you."

Hoffman didn't take offense. He and Demientieff, who died in January 2007 of lung cancer, had their differences over the Hartman verdicts. But the pair weren't far apart concerning what's best for their town.

"How can I fault someone," he said last spring, "for wanting to stand up and say, 'Let's make sure we're all on an even footing here. Let's make sure justice is indeed done fair, straight, and across the board.'"

It isn't unusual for courts to take years digesting fundamental questions about evidence, interrogation practices and the reliability of witnesses, all of which are present in the Hartman case. The agitation outside the courtroom distinguishes this case. That can be traced to Roberts, whose character inspires faith among those who know him.

He owned the car police say was used in the crime.

It's also Roberts, alone among the defendants, who professes to have a time-referenced alibi.

That's the nugget many find hard to overlook.

Tomorrow: "A cry in the night"

Brian O'Donoghue is a UAF assistant professor of journalism. Former students Sean Bledsoe, Rachel Dutil, Gary Moore and Nate Raymond contributed to this report.

PATHS CROSS: Fateful night

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ingrained through a lifetime threading logjams and the Yukon's braided channels. Marvin caught up on years of lessons missed reading currents, sandbars and shallows. Days passed as the pair stalked through forests. Nights, they warmed by a campfire.

Nearing the trip's end, the hunters weathered a long night on the river. Their moose-laden boat had become stuck on a sandbar within sight of village lights.

Even that annoyance suited Marvin.

He got to know his dad.

Hurtling toward each other

Later than afternoon Hartman and Stone caught a ride to Noah's Rainbow Inn, a cheap motel located directly below the UAF campus.

Their destination was Room 244 where Stone's buddy, Elijah "EJ" Stephens, had the babysitting gig watching his uncle's

toddlers.

Olson and his girlfriend, meanwhile, spent the early part of the evening "emptying the refrigerator" at his grandfather's apartment in Golden Towers.

Afterward, they set out with friends for the wedding reception at the Eagles Hall.

Friday marked Roberts' second day back from the hunting trip.

His friend Dan Huntington called, suggesting they check out the reception. Everyone would be there. Roberts offered to drive.

Huntington had called from an apartment in Birch Park, the home of a younger kid from Roberts' old basketball team. Roberts didn't need directions to Eugene Vent's place.

After years of sharing the same streets with nary a passing glance, young lives were about to tragically intersect.

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Eric Engman/News-Miner

Hazel Roberts, mother of Marvin Roberts, one of the four convicted, listens to speakers during a rally Oct. 12, 2007, in front of the Rabinowitz Courthouse in Fairbanks. The rally aimed to bring continued attention to the 10-year-old case of four young men found guilty of beating 15-year-old John Hartman to death.