

Governor of Louisiana To Spare Inmate's Life

By PETER APPLEBOME
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BATON ROUGE, La., Aug. 16 — Gov. Buddy Roemer of Louisiana said today that he planned to commute the death sentence of a convicted murderer to life in prison without parole because of doubts that have been raised about the case.

The prisoner, Ronald Monroe, 35 years old, who was scheduled to die in the electric chair on Aug. 30, was convicted in 1980 of stabbing to death a neighbor, Lenora Collins, in 1977 as her horrified children looked on.

Governor Roemer said he was convinced that Mr. Monroe was guilty, but that enough doubts had been raised that he was not prepared to go forward with the execution.

'Is There Any Doubt?'

"In an execution in this country, the test ought not to be reasonable doubt," the Mr. Roemer said. "The test ought to be is there any doubt.

"And I came to the very difficult conclusion that the Pardon Board did, that while he met the test for guilt, the test for execution was not met."

After a hearing last year, the Louisiana Pardon Board recommended that Mr. Monroe's sentence be commuted to life. But it said the recommendation was based on "a deprivation of due process of law" and was not a comment on Mr. Monroe's guilt or innocence."

The Governor announced his decision this evening after meeting with defense lawyers and then with prosecutors and the victim's daughter.

The case has gained national attention because of assertions by defense lawyers that another man, a former husband of Mrs. Collins, murdered her.

Twelve years after the crime, the facts in the case are tangled and haunting, with the prosecution and defense presenting two radically different versions of the murder.

Witnesses Insist on Guilt

Despite questions raised by the defense, the case remains one where the two witnesses who identified Mr. Monroe as the killer 10 years ago continue

But Roemer says the prisoner is guilty.

to insist that he was the killer.

Mrs. Collins's daughter, Theodise, who is 23 years old, today told Mr. Roemer, as well as reporters at a news conference, that Mr. Monroe was the man she saw murder her mother at their home in New Orleans. Her brother, Joseph, now in the Air Force, told the Governor the same thing in a telephone call from South Korea.

Mr. Monroe's case seemed unlikely to attract much attention after his conviction.

Mr. Monroe, who lived next door, was being evicted by Mrs. Collins at the time of the murder. The two children insist that they saw him clearly with the lights on when their mother was murdered. Theodise Collins, then 12, testified that she was stabbed by him as well. Her brother Joseph, then 11, testified that he fled as Mr. Monroe chased him with a knife.

Questions Are Raised

But in recent years, a determined defense effort, largely financed by the New York law firm Paul, Weiss, Rife, Wharton & Garrison, has raised

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Ronald Monroe, a convicted murderer on Louisiana's death row, has received national attention because of recent assertions that another man may have committed the crime.

serious questions about almost every element of the case.

The defense's position is summed up in an appellate brief, which says: "Each new piece of evidence to appear in this case has fit into the same overall design: Lenora Collins was not murdered by Ronald Monroe, a borderline mentally retarded man who has neither a criminal record nor a history of violence. She was murdered by George Stinson, her recently estranged husband who has a history of brutally attacking people and intimidating witnesses."

Mr. Stinson was charged in 1980 with killing his common-law wife, Erma Jean Lofton, in Pontiac, Mich., by stabbing her repeatedly in the chest and neck. He was later convicted. His first wife, Maria Lendo Lee, has submitted an affidavit saying he tried to stab her to death in 1959, and the defense has presented affidavits attesting to another knife attack by Mr. Stinson.

Remarks to Cellmate

While in jail, Mr. Stinson made remarks that his cellmate took to be a confession to the Collins murder. The information was turned over to the authorities in New Orleans but was not made available to defense lawyers until they learned about it independently.

The defense has added some critical elements to its case. Most dramatic is an affidavit from a neighbor who said that Theodise Collins was sexually abused by Mr. Stinson in the years immediately before the Collins murder. The defense says that blunts the credibility of what remains the heart of the case against Mr. Monroe.

No gun, fibers, blood or other physical evidence was produced.

"When you look at everything that has developed, it all goes in the same direction — it all supports his innocence," said Douglas G. Morris, a lawyer for Mr. Monroe.

The prosecution said there was no significant new evidence in the case. Brian Treacy, an Assistant District Attorney for Orleans Parish, said the case remained one with eyewitness testimony that was as strong as anything a jury gets to hear: two witnesses in good lighting who know an assailant and see him committing a crime.

He said virtually none of the speculation about Mr. Stinson was reliable or would be admissible in a court of law. And he said much of what the defense had put together had been a publicity campaign with little judicial weight.

'An Attempt to Sensationalize'

"It's all been an attempt to sensationalize this story and get media coverage," he said. "They're trying to win in the media what they can't win in the courts."

Theodise Collins said today that she had never been abused in any way by Mr. Stinson, and that she was certain that Mr. Monroe was the killer.

"Of course, I'd like it very much if he died in the electric chair," she said after meeting with Mr. Roemer but before he announced his decision. "I want that known. I mean, he's guilty."