

Jimmy Lee Gray - released to kill again.

Background and first murder.

Jimmy Lee Gray was born in 1949 in Whittier, California. At the age of 18, Jimmy murdered his girlfriend Elda Louise Prince. 16 year old Elda was a sophomore at Parker High School in Parker, Arizona, where Jimmy was also a student and a school friend of Elda's brother, 18 year old Ervin. The Prince family had made Jimmy welcome in their house and even helped out by buying him clothes. They also took him to ball games and on fishing trips. On the day of the murder, January 5th, 1968, Elda was to leave school early for a doctor's appointment and her mother, Opal, was going to the doctor's office to pick her up at 4.30 pm. The receptionist told her that Elda had not shown up so Opal went home presuming that her daughter had caught the school bus as usual. When this arrived without her, Opal called the police and reported her daughter missing. Jimmy went with the Prince's to the sheriff's office and later that evening helped in the search for Elda. The sheriff was suspicious of Jimmy, having noticed his shoes and under questioning the following day he led deputies to a culvert near the Colorado River, and showed them where he had dumped her body. The shoe's pattern exactly matched the prints at the crime scene. Examination showed that the Elda had been strangled and had her throat cut, before being thrown into the culvert. It appeared that Jimmy had met Elda after school and that walking home they had quarreled and he had killed her. Elda was buried in the Cottonwood Cemetery on 11th January. Jimmy was convicted of 2nd degree murder and received a sentence of 20 years to life. Sadly he was released on parole after just six years, despite the protest of the trial judge who regarded him as a dangerous individual. How right he would be proved to be.



A poor quality photo of Elda from her High School yearbook.

The second murder.

Nothing much was heard of Jimmy until June 25th, 1976. After release from prison he had moved first to California and later to Mississippi. On that day three year old Derissa Jean Scales disappeared from her parents' apartment in Pascagoula, Mississippi. They reported her disappearance to the police around 5 pm that afternoon. Jimmy lived in the same apartment complex as the Scales' and was questioned by police after neighbors mentioned that they had seen Derissa with a man with a red Volkswagen car, whom they identified as living in the apartments. When Jimmy showed up in the car police noted that the lower legs of his jeans were wet, which he explained by his having been swimming in the complex's pool. Under questioning he admitted to them that he had taken Derissa for a ride in the country and that on a back road had touched the little girl. He claimed that she had wandered off and fallen into a shallow ditch. He rescued her from the ditch and put her, still breathing into the trunk of his car. He then began the homeward journey, stopping on a bridge over Black Creek where he removed Derissa from the

trunk and threw her into the water below. Once again he led police to the crime scene at 3.30 am the following morning.

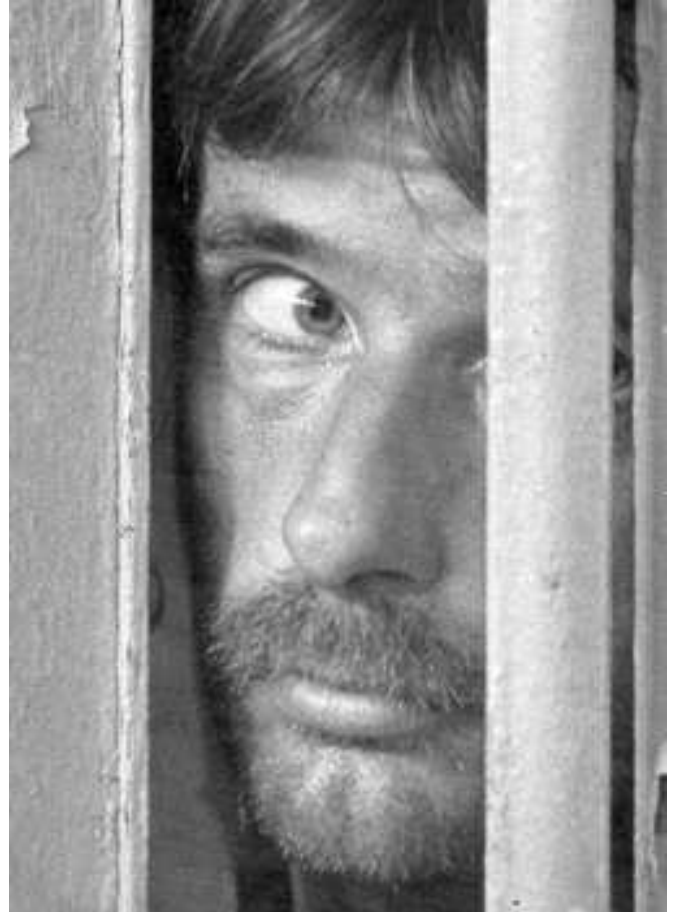
The Medical Examiner found that Derissa had been gagged, sodomized, her underpants forced down her throat, and finally suffocated by being held face down in the mud in the ditch. Mud was found to have been inhaled.

Trial.

Jimmy came to trial in Pascagoula on December 13th, 1976, before Judge Merle, charged with 1st degree murder and sodomy.

Once again shoe prints would help convict the killer and chemical analysis would show the presence of semen in the little girl's body, although at that time DNA was not sufficiently advanced to enable it to be linked to Jimmy. It took jurors just an hour to convict Jimmy and he was then sentenced to death in the gas chamber. Jimmy's mandatory appeal to the Mississippi Supreme Court reversed the original verdict and gave him a new trial in 1978, where Jimmy was allowed to address the jury on his own behalf. However they were not impressed and reached the same verdict. Both juries recommended the death penalty at the conclusion of the sentencing phase, as the victim's age and sodomization were aggravating factors. In 1979, the same court upheld the verdict and sentence from the second trial. Further appeals followed, including one based upon the cruelty of execution by lethal gas in which the 5th Circuit Court sitting in New Orleans granted a stay of execution in July 1983 hours before he was due to be executed.

Parchman Prison's chaplain, Rev. Ronald Padgett, told reporters that Jimmy "was relieved and pleased with the decision." Mississippi Governor, William Winter refused clemency. In the photo Jimmy is seen peering out of his cell on death row.



On September 1st, 1983 the US Supreme Court dismissed Jimmy's final appeals in a 6 to 3 decision, so clearing the way for his execution the following day, Friday, September 2nd, 1983 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. Chief Justice Warren B. Burger said: "This case illustrates the recent pattern of calculated efforts to frustrate valid judgments after painstaking judicial review over a number of years. At some point there must be finality." Mississippi State Penitentiary is generally known as Parchman, after its first warden, J. M. Parchman.

One of Jimmy's spiritual advisor, Rev. Joseph Ingle, stated at the time that Jimmy should not be executed because he was a "devout Christian who committed crimes. He's a sensitive, caring and humorous person. I want us to focus on Jimmy's humanity because I am sick and tired of hearing about the crime."

Execution.

At about 8:30 pm. on the Thursday evening, Jimmy received holy communion from several ministers. According to prison officials, he had earlier had a final meal of Mexican food, strawberries and milk.

Three hours before the execution, members of the Mississippi Coalition Against the Death Penalty held a peaceful candlelight protests outside the gates of the prison and outside the Governor's mansion in Jackson.

At 12:01 am., Central daylight time, Warden Eddie Lucas, gave the order to staff to commence the execution procedure. At 12:08, Jimmy was brought into the 20 foot x 12 foot white painted execution room wearing a red death row jump suit, and strapped into the gas chamber's perforated steel chair with the head of a Bowles stethoscope taped to his chest. The heavy door was closed and sealed and at 12.12, the gas was released when Mississippi's executioner, T. Berry Bruce, operated the lever to lower the cyanide pellets into the vat of sulfuric acid below the seat of the death chair. At this time the head restraint shown in the photo was not present, but the metal pole behind the chair was. 15 official witnesses, including four journalists, watched the execution and noted 11 gasps, followed by moans and a single loud groan. Jimmy appeared to gulp down the gas, as had no doubt been instructed to do to hasten his death. He strained against the restraining straps and his head slumped forward, then violently backwards hitting the metal pole with such force as to rattle the whole apparatus. The exact time of death is disputed. Prison officials claimed that Jimmy suffered cardiac arrest at 12.15 am., but the witnesses saw that he was still gasping for breath and convulsing eight minutes later when they were asked to leave the witness area. According to the execution log, all movement had apparently ceased by 12.21 am, 9 minutes after the execution began. His attorney, Dennis Balske, told reporters that Jimmy had suffered "a painful death".



A gold-colored hearse took Jimmy's body to a funeral home at Indianola, about 40 miles away. It had been claimed by a Natchez church group that had befriended him and was buried in an undisclosed plot after a brief private service.

This would be the second execution in the USA in 1983 and the eighth since the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of capital punishment in 1976. Mississippi's previous execution had been that of Tim Jackson by lethal gas on May 1st, 1964 for a rape/murder. Three more men would die in Parchman Prison's gas chamber, the last being Leo Edwards on June 21st, 1989. After that Mississippi moved to lethal injection.

Reactions to the execution.

Jimmy's mother, Verna Smith, who was living in California, urged the State of Mississippi to execute her son.

Ministers, social workers and lawyers who got to know him on death row, described Jimmy as a born-again Christian and spoke of him as "sensitive," "shy," "gentle," "bright" and "troubled."

Richard A. Scales Jr., Deressa's father told reporters "I'm glad it's happening," it should have happened years ago." "Even in prison he had been able to talk, to breathe and to laugh and he had taken all these things from my little girl." "He didn't have the right to continue living."

Opal Prince, Elda's mother, hailed his execution as "our big day." "I've put better dogs to sleep than that man." said Mrs. Prince, who was then director of rabies and animal control in Mohave County. She told reporters that the execution "is overdue." "It should have been done in 1968 in Arizona," she said. "I know I come on hard, but this is a hard thing. With all the jail overcrowding, let's get rid of people like him and make room for the people who can be rehabilitated."

UPI reporter, Dan Lowasser, who had witnessed the gassing, said afterwards "I thought I had some pretty hard bark on me from being in Vietnam, but I was pretty shook up."