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## Owner of dogs acquitted in mauling case

By IRVIN GOODWIN  
News Director

It took about three hours Thursday for a jury to return a not-guilty verdict for Frank Paul Speagle of Winnsboro on a charge of involuntary manslaughter in the dog-mauling death of John Wesley Mickle.

In addition to involuntary manslaughter, Speagle, 22, was acquitted on two counts of failure to restrain a dangerous animal.

Upon hearing the not-guilty verdicts, Speagle and his family members gave a huge sigh of relief. Some even let out a semi-yell of celebration.

On the other side of the courtroom, the fami-

ly of the victim, John Wesley Mickle, 45, also of Winnsboro, sat quietly as if in a state of disbelief.

They immediately and quietly left the courtroom, declining comment.

Speagle said after the verdict he was happy that justice prevailed. However, he still appeared bitter toward Fairfield County authorities.

"They put two innocent dogs to sleep," he said. "My dogs were never guilty and were not vicious as were claimed."

"You have children, two- and four-years old, who played with these dogs," he said.

Speagle said he thinks he should get an apol-

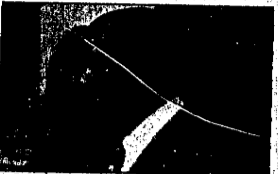
ogy from Fairfield County Sheriff Herman Young and his staff for being charged, and, also, for being taken through this entire ordeal.

"If he (Sheriff Young) cannot come and give me an apology, then he needs to come down from his pedestal," he added.

He also said he did not believe he would have gotten a fair trial had it been held in Winnsboro.

"In Fairfield County, I was guilty before the case went to trial; that is why they moved it up here to Chester where I got a fair trial."

Mickle died in Fairfield County on December 4, 1999, from multiple injuries sustained when



John Wesley Mickle is interviewed by reporters after he was acquitted Thursday.

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## Winnsboro man acquitted

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he was attacked by dogs. The prosecution said the dogs belonged to Speagle.

The case concluded after three days of testimony. It was turned over to the jury Thursday morning after they had listened to lengthy closing arguments late Wednesday afternoon.

Speagle's attorney, John Mobley of Columbia, questioned if the dogs actually belonged to Speagle.

"This was a rush to judgment," said Mobley. "His body was found and immediately they (authorities) rushed to Speagle's house when he was just a concerned citizen."

"And I have no explanation as to why no one bothered to check any other dogs in the area," before drawing the assumption that the vicious animals belonged to Speagle.

Mobley said the Winnsboro community has more than 200 pit bulls, and 20 are in the area where the attack occurred.

That, said Mobley, is further proof authorities displayed a rush to judgment.

Mobley also used closing arguments to criticize Fairfield County authorities' handling of evidence.

"The investigation required chess, but they (investigators) were playing Chinese checkers."

"The crime scene was not secured," he said. "Therefore, there was no way to establish a time. There was no way of knowing whether the body was attacked before or after he died, especially when there were 20 pit bulls in the area and dogs all over the place."

Mobley also accused authorities of botching the crime scene, which contained DNA evidence.

DNA findings were crucial state evidence in the case.

He also contested previous testimony of Frank Shirley, who said he had been attacked by Speagle's dogs several days before Mickle's death.

He said Shirley was not sure if it actually was Speagle's dogs that attacked him.

The defense attorney also noted the testimony of several neighbors, who described Speagle's dogs as being friendly enough that they played with their children.

In the state's closing arguments, Sixth Circuit Solicitor John R. Justice methodically attempted to shoot down Mobley's claims.

He accused the defense of diverting attention from the dog attack, and, instead, focusing on the professionalism of authorities.

"They want to try something other than the facts of this case and divert the focus of the case

on something else," Justice said.

"In other words, they want to put someone else on trial. He first attempted to divert attention to the Police Department and the way they investigated this case."

"This is being done to divert the main thrust of this case away from the innocence or guilt of Paul Speagle."

Justice said that authorities did a fine job in handling this case. He also explained the reason no other dogs were considered in this incident.

"This investigation was anything but a rush to judgment. They went there (to Speagle's house) because they were the closest dogs to the scene of the crime."

"And early during the investigation, police began learning about the dangerous nature of these dogs."

The solicitor also used the alleged words of Speagle himself as proof as to which dogs committed the crime.

He said that when informed by authorities about the death, Speagle responded by immediately asking whether or not it was his dogs.

"He said, 'If it is mine, then I will kill them.'"

Justice went into detail about other evidence, particularly teeth marks and DNA

sampleings.

He said experts found where the teeth pattern of one of the dogs is very unique.

"It showed that no other dog could have caused those bite marks."

"And the DNA is a conclusive match where it was a one-in-three trillion," as to identifying the blood of the victim on the dog.

"You are talking about more people that exists on this Earth."

He concluded his argument by showing where testimony pointed to other vicious incidents committed by Speagle's dogs.

Justice said the pit bulls bit parts of vehicles on two separate occasions, to the extreme where two tires were flattened in one incident.

He also mentioned that the dogs attacked and injured a neighboring cat, and also, wounded Frank Shirley.

"He was walking down the same path that John Mickle was walking," when he was attacked.

Justice told the jury he was not trying to paint Speagle as being a cold-hearted criminal.

Instead, he said the defendant was negligent in not securing dangerous animals, which is a violation of state law.

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Free man  
John Wesley Mickle, right, leaves the Chester County Courthouse with his attorney, John Mobley, after being acquitted Friday in a dog-mauling case.



Correction  
Frank Paul Speagle of Winnsboro, right, was misidentified in photos in the Friday edition of the newspaper. Speagle, who was acquitted Thursday on charges in connection with a Fairfield County dog mauling case, is shown here with his lawyer, John Mobley.