

Serial killer's case goes to jury in Tacoma

Robert Yates, guilty of 13 murders in Spokane, could face death if convicted

BY ELIZABETH GILLESPIE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TACOMA — Serial killer Robert Lee Yates Jr. sought out the vulnerable and killed them in cold blood, a prosecutor told the jury Tuesday in Yates' murder trial.

"He was a husband who frequented prostitutes. He was a father of five children who murdered other people's children," Pierce County Deputy Prosecutor Barbara Corey-Boulet said in closing arguments.

Yates, 50 and the father of five, confessed in 2000 to 13 murders and was sentenced to 408 years in prison under a plea deal with Spokane County prosecutors.

Death penalty

Pierce County prosecutors refused to sign the deal and are pressing for the death penalty for his slayings of Melinda Mercer, 24, in 1997 and Connie LaFontaine Ellis, 35, in 1998.

The case went to the Superior Court jury here late Tuesday. Deliberations were set to begin today.

Defense attorneys opened their case by conceding Yates killed the two women, who, like many of his victims, were prostitutes who were shot to death.

But they contend the crimes do not meet the criteria for a



Robert Lee Yates Jr. shakes the hand of his attorney, Mary Kay High, as he leaves the courtroom Tuesday after his murder trial went to the jury in Tacoma.

The Associated Press

a common scheme of crime.

For weeks since the trial began Aug. 12, prosecutors went through the cases chronologically and in exhaustive detail to underscore the similarities.

Character witnesses

The 12 women killed by Yates since 1996 all were involved in prostitution. All were shot in the head.

Most of the bodies were

plan, noting that Yates hired many prostitutes he did not kill.

Four of them testified last week for the defense, describing Yates as a "good date" who paid up

front, did not request kinky sex and wore a condom.

The state called 90 witnesses, including detectives from the Spokane Serial Homicide Task

Force that arrested Yates, an FBI profiler and friends of the victims.

Defense attorneys presented their case in less than two days last week, calling 10 witnesses.

Yates did not take the stand, but may do so if he is convicted of aggravated murder and the trial proceeds to a death-penalty sentencing phase.

Yates and his family had lived in Spokane since 1996. As a helicopter pilot and instructor for the Washington Army National Guard, he was in the Tacoma area frequently for work at nearby Fort Lewis.

Grisly toll

Yates has been jailed in Pierce County since he was sentenced in the Spokane County plea deal, in October 2000.

His family has left the Spokane area.

In addition to the 12 women murdered since 1996, he admitted killing a young man and woman — Patrick Oliver, 21, and Susan Savage, 22 — near Walla Walla in 1975, when he was a guard at the Washington State Penitentiary; and a Seattle woman, Stacy Elizabeth Hawn, 23, in Skagit County in 1988.

Yates grew up on Whidbey Island.

He served in the Army until shortly before he and his family moved to Spokane six years ago.