



The Galveston County Daily News  
Copyright © 2005 The Galveston County Daily News

## **'They Were Screaming'**

By Scott E. Williams  
Published December 13, 2005

TEXAS CITY — The second week of trial for a man charged with murdering his grandparents began with jurors hearing from the defendant via a taped statement he made to investigators.

Thomas Justin "T.J." Thomas was 17 on Feb. 11, 2004, when he described to detectives how another teen coerced him into beating his grandparents to death in their home hours earlier.

Thomas, on the tape, said he kicked in the back door of grandparents William and Pearl Clement's home in the 1200 block of Third Avenue South and then dealt with the elderly couple.

"My grandparents started yelling, and I started hitting them. I have no idea why," Thomas said, sobbing. "They were screaming, and I started hitting them. I'm so sorry."

Defense attorney Tad Nelson worked to establish that Thomas' lack of mental acumen kept him from understanding both his right to remain silent and many of the questions he was asked.

In cross-examining Texas Ranger Joe Haralson, who conducted the interview, Nelson quizzed him about a period of questioning that was not taped, suggesting that investigators prodded answers out of the teen.

In questioning Haralson, County Criminal District Attorney Kurt Sistrunk suggested that Thomas did understand his rights and the questions asked of him.

Dozens of family members sat in the courtroom during testimony Monday. During Thomas' taped account of the Clements' deaths, some of them stared straight ahead, some cried and some hung their heads.

In the taped interview, Thomas blamed co-defendant Daniel Robert Northrup for involving him in the scheme. Thomas said that they had been trying to find ways to get money so they could go to Dimitri's Cabaret, a strip club on the Gulf Freeway.

But Thomas said his only answer was "yes" when Northrup suggested killing his grandparents

and taking valuables from their home.

“I was thinking to myself, ‘What am I doing?,’ but I couldn’t control my head,” Thomas said.

Police pulled over a van containing Thomas, Northrup and two other teens half a block away from the Clement home, just as their daughter, Thomas’ mother, was calling 9-1-1 after discovering their bloody bodies.

Inside the van was a rifle belonging to Mr. Clement, his wallet, his wife’s purse and a small container with change inside.

Because prosecutors are not seeking the death penalty, a guilty verdict in this case would mean an automatic life sentence for Thomas.

Daniel Robert Northrup, 19; Eric Lee Kilman, 21; and Christine Marie Cox, 21; also face capital murder charges in the case. Thomas is the first to go to trial.

Testimony in the trial continues today.