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After three hours deliberation

Jury finds John Keep 'not guilty'

By Paul Boswell

John Fitzgerald Keep, the 18-year-old Hoffman man charged with the beating death of his fiance, Karla Jo Nieland, also of Hoffman, was found not guilty late Wednesday afternoon by a 12 member jury on the sixth day of a trial held at the Grant County courthouse in Elbow Lake.

Upon hearing the verdict announced by Clerk of Court Lena Greeley, Keep burst into tears and embraced defense co-counsel Kent Marshall, from Barrett.

Members of Keep's family, sitting in the front row of the courtroom's gallery, also broke down crying. James Keep, sobbing loudly, looked at his son through tear-filled eyes as John Keep turned to look at his family for the first time as a free man in 1982.

Keep had testified Tuesday that he had not killed Nieland, who was found dead in Keep's red Ford Mustang parked at the Jeral Fibreco farm two and a half miles southeast of Hoffman in Land Township of Grant County on May 17, 1981.

Keep had been charged with second and third degree murder. The trial began on May 19, 1982 and evidence and testimony had been presented to the jury during the first five days. Closing statements by prosecuting attorney Jon Stafsholt, from Elbow Lake, and defense attorney Joseph Friedberg, from Minneapolis, had been presented to the jury Wednesday morning. The case was then officially submitted to Judge Stahlor to the jury for their consideration.

The jury, made up of eleven women and one man, deliberated at five minutes past 12 noon Wednesday and, after having lunch together at a local Elbow Lake cafe, returned to the county courthouse and entered the jury room.

The Keep case was discussed by the jury until shortly after 3 p.m. when the prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, and Keep were summoned back to the courthouse. After the arrival of the attorneys and Keep, the jury re-entered the courtroom at 3:22 p.m. Judge Stahlor asked the jury foreman, Ken Langner, from Wendell, if the jury had reached a verdict.

"Yes, we have, your honor," was Langner's reply and he handed four slips of paper to Clerk of Court Greeley. The

judicial verdict forms, each bearing separate charges, were then handed to Stahlor. (In addition to possible second or third degree murder charges, Keep could have been charged with first or third degree assault.)

Keep, dressed in a dark brown, three piece suit, sat between Friedberg and Marshall and watched as Greeley handed Judge Stahlor the four documents. Marshall, who had represented Keep at prior hearings and acted as co-counsel throughout the trial, placed his hand on Keep's shoulder in anticipation of the announcement. All of the persons present in the courtroom grew silent, awaiting proclamation of the verdict.

Following careful examination of the documents presented to him by the jury, Stahlor handed the forms back to Greeley and she announced that the jury had found the defendant John Keep "not guilty."

The former defendant burst into tears while members of his family also began to cry. Several people in the courtroom's gallery stood up to congratulate the Keep family. James Keep, John's father, clutched the armrest of the chair he sat upon with his right hand and raised himself to greet his son.

Stahlor's announcement that the \$50,000 bond had been lifted and that John Keep was free to go was nearly inaudible over the eruption of emotion by Keep's family. James Keep, overwhelmed by the excitement, was helped outside the courtroom where he sat for a moment, clutching his chest and breathing heavily.

Stafsholt was the first attorney to leave the courtroom following the announcement of the verdict. Friedberg, avoiding the flash of cameras and glare of TV lights, also exited the courtroom shortly after the announcement. Keep left the room soon after Friedberg had.

The verdict had been reached one year and nine days after Keep had been arrested as a suspect in the brutal murder of Nieland, his steady girlfriend during the two years prior to her death. Nieland, who was 18 at the time of her death, had been a member of the Hoffman-Kensington Class of 1981 and was to have graduated one week later.



JOHN KEEP (Center), Hoffman, leaves the Grant County court room after being found not guilty in the murder of Karla Jo Nieland, also Hoffman. The 1/2-12 member jury, made up eleven women and one man, acquitted the 18-year-old Keep, who had denied killing Nieland. Herald photo by Paul Boswell

Stafsholt: No plans to reopen murder case

By Paul Boswell

Although the person or persons who murdered Karla Jo Nieland have not yet been convicted, Grant County Attorney Jon Stafsholt said Thursday he has no plans to reopen the case.

"The Grant County Sheriff's Department and the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (MBCA) thoroughly investigated the case before John Keep was charged with anything," Stafsholt said.

"After he (Keep) was charged, there was a follow-up investigation that lasted almost a year. At no time was there any evidence discovered that anybody other than John Keep committed the crime. So there are no other suspects. There's no evidence to indicate that anybody else was involved so we have no alternative but to close the case."

According to Stafsholt, the case has been solved but the murderer has not

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