

Destined for disaster

Accused killers walked troubled path

By Emily Stone
Free Press Staff Writer

Robert Lee walked into the bedroom of the Rutland apartment in a stupor. Through a doorway he spotted a woman's body on the floor. It was covered in blood.

Lee started to panic. His friend Donald Fell stepped out of the shower and tried to snap him out of it.

He "grabbed me by my shoulders and said bobby bobby do you know what we just did do you know what just happened," Lee wrote.

Lee and Fell had just killed Fell's mother and her friend, according to a government indictment and Lee's writings.

The young men had drunk more than a case of beer, smoked crack and pot on that evening in November 2000. Years of animosity Fell harbored toward his mother were ignited when she complained the stereo was too loud.

Fell stabbed Debra Fell's friend and demanded that Lee kill Debra Fell, according to court papers and Lee's writing.

Soon there would be a third victim. Fell and Lee are accused of carjacking a stranger from a Rutland parking lot, driving her to New York, and beating her to death.

Today, Fell sits in a St. Albans jail cell, awaiting trial in federal court this fall. Prosecutors will argue for the death penalty.

A tale of two lives: Donald Fell and Robert Lee

Donald Fell and Robert Lee were charged with the November 2000 kidnapping and killing of Teresa King of North Clarendon. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty in the case. Fell and Lee allegedly carjacked King from a Rutland parking lot after killing her mother and her friend. The writing below is from papers Lee wrote in jail.



Donald Fell (left) is in jail in St. Albans awaiting trial this fall. Robert Lee (right) hanged himself in jail last year. He is pictured here while working with exotic animals in Florida.



I am a fruid that I am a fruid that if I tell you the things that float around in my head when I read them

VICTIMS (left to right): Debra Fell, Donald Fell's mother; Charles Conway, a friend of Debra Fell; Teresa King whom Fell and Lee allegedly abducted from a Rutland parking lot and killed in New York.



think straight the visions of death tacking over my mind the racer the pain to the face, be hatered and my person



Fell and Lee allegedly kidnapped Teresa King and stole her Dodge Neon. Fell and Lee were arrested in Arkansas driving her car.

If they succeed, he will be the first Vermont prisoner executed since 1954.

Lee hanged himself in jail in September. The state determined his death was accidental.

At the time of the kill-

ings, Fell was 20 and Lee was one day shy of his 20th birthday.

The three killings shocked the state for their brutality. They surprised few who knew Fell and Lee while grow-

ing up in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. The killings genuinely stunned some family members. They were outnumbered by those who said they saw this coming

Fell and Lee's stories

can be pieced together from interviews, court papers, and state and federal documents obtained through Freedom of Information requests. Lee's father supplied a stack of

See ACCUSED, 4A

Lee's letters and personal writings, which contain spelling and grammar errors. These papers fill out the picture.

Together, the materials reveal lives filled with drugs, violence, and a fierce rage toward the world.

The family of the woman Fell and Lee allegedly kidnapped couldn't care less about the men's backgrounds. No amount of personal trauma excuses murder, the woman's sister said.

Fell suffered through a childhood of tremendous abuse and neglect. Both parents abandoned him by the time he was 13. He talked of going on a killing spree, a family member said.

Lee's horror was internal, a mental illness that ate away at him. He wrote that he always knew he would end up locked in a cell.

Lee was less prone to violence while on his own, those who knew him said. When he and Fell were together, anything was possible. The two had matching tattoos on their biceps of upside down crosses with three sixes underneath.

Lee's writings are filled with details of his misery and of his wish to die.

"I hate everyone I hate myself I hate everything I hate the breeze that flows through the air I hate the air I breathe," Lee wrote. "I hate the way I'm me I hate the way the grass grows I hate the way nobody knows."

Fell's early years

"I can hear (the family) tell me how stupid I am ... for hanging out with donnie again and not learning my lesson the last thousand times."

Robert Lee in a letter to his father from jail

Bloody battles between Donald Fell's alcoholic parents marked his childhood.

His mother and father stabbed each other during one fight. Police arrived at the house to find Debra Fell sitting with a beer in her hand and a knife sticking out of her thigh, according to court papers. A trail of blood led to a local bar where Donald Fell Sr. sat drinking a beer, a broken blade in his back. Fell, then about 4 years old, and his younger sister, Teri, were upstairs at home.

School officials and family members who visited the house over the years described finding trash, rats and feces.

Life outside offered little escape.

When Fell was 4, the state discovered that a neighbor who baby-sat for Fell and his sister was sexually abusing both children, according to court papers. One family member said the abuse had lasted two years.

Fell started drinking in third grade from a beer keg his father kept in the basement, court papers said. The next year, Fell's father left the family. They never heard from him again.

By sixth grade, Fell was stealing cocaine from his mother and using marijuana and LSD, according to court papers his lawyer prepared. Debra Fell sent him to a hospital for psychiatric evaluations at least three times. He was diagnosed with a conduct disorder and later with major depression with periods of psychotic thinking, and hyperactivity. Doctors prescribed anti-psychotic and anti-anxiety medications. His mother sometimes sold his pills, according to government documents.

Fell's grades declined sharply as he grew. Despite promising test scores early, he was failing most classes in middle school. He was absent for nearly a third of seventh grade, court papers said.

Fell's relationship with his mother deteriorated, too.

On Christmas Eve 1993, Debra Fell was nowhere to be found. Fell, then 13, and Teri Fell, 11, wrapped their own presents, Fell's lawyer wrote in court papers. Christmas morning, the children came downstairs and found their mother passed out on the couch. They couldn't wake her. Fell and his sister unwrapped their presents alone.

Debra Fell got up that Christmas afternoon and said she was going out for a ham. She never returned home.

She was soon in prison for a street fight, and the children went to live with family.

Lee's early years

"You tried to get me help but you believed in the system ... You were playing the role of my father worrying about ... what's he going to put me through next."

Robert Lee in a letter to his father

Robert Lee's angry, violent outbursts began when he was a toddler.

At 3, Lee knocked out his older brother, Shane, by hitting him in the head with an ashtray. In preschool, he attacked a teacher.

Lee's mother, Bonnie Lee, now Bonnie Tonte, said she was depressed and suicidal while Lee was young. Court papers said she sometimes locked the boys in a closet. Tonte denied the allegation in an interview this spring.

Robert Lee Sr. a trucker, was rarely home when his children were young. When he was around, he and his wife often fought, sometimes violently. Lee's parents divorced when he was 5.

Lee bounced between grandparents and foster parents for about five years. His father eventually took custody of Lee and Shane. Their younger brother, Anthony, stayed with Tonte.

Lee continued to misbehave. He set fires at home and school, beat up a female classmate and threw severe temper tantrums, according to court papers.

He was hospitalized for psychiatric problems two weeks before his 11th birthday. Six more hospitalizations would follow by the time he was 16.

"He has been given detention frequently for punching, throwing objects, pushing over chairs and desks," said a hospital report when Lee was 11. "He had to be physically restrained on the floor by several staff members. ... He cried profusely and showed severe mood swings from anger to depression to silliness."

Lee's initial diagnosis of having a conduct disorder worsened steadily until he was deemed to have severe depression with periods of psychotic thinking, according to hospital records, which Lee's father gave the Free Press. Lee was prescribed at



least eight medications, including three anti-psychotic drugs, medications to stabilize his behavior, and an anti-depressant. He often refused to take his anti-psychotic medications.

The hospital records are sprinkled with references to Lee's feeling that his mother abandoned him.

"She does not like to take me," Lee said when he was 8 and being treated in out-patient therapy.

For a while, Lee had no contact with his mother. In 1994, he went to live with Tonte and her new husband and son. Lee was fiercely jealous of his 4-year-old stepbrother, Tonte said, and became a physical threat to him. Lee threatened to kill Tonte and her husband when they confronted him about his behavior. Tonte sent Lee back to the hospital.

Tonte said a tape player in the room happened to record the argument and her son's rant was captured on tape. She discovered the cassette at home this year.

He said he would kill people, slit their throats, shoot them, Tonte said. Lee told his mother that if he was caught and went to jail, he'd simply kill himself.

"Bobby told me his future when he was 12 years old," Tonte said.

Teen-age years

"A piece of falling snow with know were to land just forever drifting above the land."

Robert Lee

Newspaper articles about Fell and Lee's arrest take up a prominent position in teacher John Kozerski's "wall of shame" at the Wilkes-Barre Area Vocational-Technical School.

Kozerski taught social studies to both Fell and Lee. The boys, friends since childhood, often found themselves in the same programs for troubled teens as their lives veered further off track.

Kozerski remembers Fell. "He was just God awful," said Kozerski, 28. Fell yelled at and threatened him and other teachers, he said.



Debra Fell (left), her great-aunt Stella Banas and Donald Fell pose for a snapshot in Debra Fell's apartment on Robbins Street in Rutland in September 2000.

Courtesy of Jeannette Banas

Fell may be first Vermonter executed since 1954

By Emily Stone
Free Press Staff Writer

Federal prosecutors in the case against Donald Fell have refused to accept a plea deal, deciding instead to go to trial and seek the death penalty.

Fell's trial in U.S. District Court in Burlington is scheduled for November. Fell was charged along with his friend Robert Lee of kidnapping Teresa King from a Rutland parking lot, driving her to New York, and killing her in November 2000. The case is being tried in federal court because the men crossed state lines before allegedly killing King.

Fell and Lee also were linked to the deaths of Fell's mother, Debra, and her friend Charles Conway. State murder charges could be brought if the federal case fails.

Lee hanged himself in his jail cell in September. The state ruled that his death was an accident.

Fell's lawyer has asked the judge to prohibit the government from seeking the death penalty. If prosecutors are successful, Fell could be the first Vermont prisoner put to death since 1954. That year, two men who had escaped from the Windsor prison were electrocuted for killing a Springfield woman in her home.

In federal death penalty trials, a jury must first determine the defendant's guilt or innocence. The jury then moves on to a second proceeding, during which the men and women decide whether the defendant should be put to death. The jury must unanimously agree on the death penalty, otherwise the defendant will receive a sentence of life in prison. Occasionally a judge, not the jury, will make these decisions.

Vermont's state death penalty was removed from the books in 1980. Numerous attempts to reinstate capital punishment, including one by King's family, have failed in the Legislature.

"I'm not talking about, 'This place sucks,' kind of stuff. It was more, 'I'll kill you.' Bizarre stuff," Kozerski said.

Lee was less memorable.

"Over the course of the entire year he barely said a word," Kozerski said, describing Lee as a follower and not a leader, something others echoed. "He was kind of a social misfit."

Both boys stood out in the way they looked and were ostracized by the already fringe group of at-risk youth. They wore their hair long and preferred dark clothes and black combat boots. They often came to school dirty and disheveled.

Fell and Lee were seasoned drug users by this time, according to court papers.

Lee started with marijuana and alcohol, and moved on to LSD, crack and prescription painkillers, according to papers written by Lee's lawyer, John Pacht. He sniffed glue, gasoline and spray paint.

Fell had similar tastes. A veteran psychiatrist who evaluated Fell after his arrest described him in court papers as "the most drug-abusing and chronically intoxicated individual whom I have evaluated."

Both dropped out of school before graduating.

News of the homicides spread quickly through the vocational school.

"When I read the paper, I just thought this is the kind of thing I expected Fell to do," said Kozerski, the boys' teacher. "But Lee, I knew he would never do it unless someone took him by the hand."

Other reactions

"There is a bunch of people out there that love me and care for me."

Robert Lee in a letter to his father.

Fell's aunt, Donna Williams, said her nephew was nothing but kind and helpful.

He would run errands or watch her young kids so she could have a break from her responsibilities as a single mother, she said. He built

steps for her front porch and repaired his grandmother's swing.

"For him to do what he allegedly did, it's beyond me," said Williams, 42, who has gone back to school to become a nurse.

Lee Sr. is equally at a loss to explain how his troubled son ended up killing others and then himself.

"The kid was a mystery," he said.

He describes his son as having two sides. There was the violent, angry Bobby of the hospital and school records. Then there was the quiet, caring Bobby who liked to fish, ride dirt bikes and play in the woods.

"Bobby was the type of kid where if he saw an old lady trying to cross the street, he would take her bags and walk her across," his father said. "Then, because the other kids were watching, he didn't want to look like a Boy Scout. He would make fun of her. But he would always help. His first instinct was always to help."

Barbara Tuttle doesn't care how difficult Fell and Lee's childhoods were.

Tuttle's sister, Teresa King, was the woman Fell and Lee allegedly kidnapped from Rutland and beat to death in New York. Tuttle lives across the street from her late sister's house in North Clarendon. She said it has become no easier to walk out her door each morning and be reminded that her sister is dead.

King's family has pushed for the death penalty in the case. The family is angry that Fell and Lee's lawyers said the young men's troubled pasts should prevent them from receiving a death sentence.

"We know all about their backgrounds," Tuttle said.

Plenty of people have bad pasts, she said. Her and her sister's childhoods were less than ideal, even.

"It doesn't change our minds as far as feeling that he deserves the death penalty," she said. "Just because they had bad upbringings does not give them the right to go out and murder people."

After school

"I suffer from momentary lapses of reality only they are not momentary."

Robert Lee

Robert Lee enjoyed one of the most stable periods of his life the year before the killings.

He left Pennsylvania in early 1999 and went to Florida with an uncle. He found a job working with exotic animals at public demonstrations.

Lee brought the animals out for audiences, explained what they ate and how they lived. At the end of his talk, he would pose for pictures with the animals and ask for tips. His father said Lee enjoyed the work.

Lee Sr. said his son had a gift with animals. He was able to connect with the animals without threatening them, something that was particularly impressive with the

most dangerous creatures, such as alligators, cougars and snakes.

Lee stayed in Florida for slightly more than a year. He returned to Wilkes-Barre in April 2000 after his uncle left Florida. There, he met up again with Donald Fell. The two found work with Fell's cousin, who owns game booths for traveling carnivals. Fell ran a goldfish game. Lee worked the quarter toss.

The carnival circuit meant nights of hard-core drinking and drug use for the two. Toward the end of the summer, they took a side trip to Woodstock, N.Y. They were arrested for assault and lost their jobs.

Fell and Lee returned to Wilkes-Barre. It would be the last time they lived there.



EMILY STONE, for the Free Press
Robert Lee Sr., father of accused killer Robert Lee. "The kid was a mystery," he says.

Mid
1990s

1999
and
2000

A trip to Vermont

"In the book of nostradomas it states that in november of 2000 the anti crist will be born or will be revealed and I have had a very strange feeling that it is me."

Robert Lee

By fall 2000, Fell hadn't seen his mother in seven years. He decided to have a reunion.

Debra Fell had moved to Rutland on a whim in 1994. Fell seemed excited about the prospect of reconnecting with his mother, his family said. In September, Fell's aunt and great-aunt drove him to Rutland and dropped him off.

Fell hoped his mother had changed her ways, Donna Williams said — that her drinking had subsided and her affection for her son had increased. He was disappointed.

Donna Williams said Debra Fell was drunk the day her son arrived and bounded up the stairs to see her. Then Debra Fell made a joke to a visitor about Fell's being a child molester. This infuriated Fell, Williams said.

"He said she hadn't changed," Williams said. "This was heartbreaking to me."

Fell invited Lee to join him in Rutland about a month later. Lee accepted and came to Vermont.

Fell's control

"What I do see in him is a force not to be reconed with."

Robert Lee

Lee's father believes his son was somehow under Fell's spell on that November evening two years ago.

It's a notion that Robert Lee discussed in his writings.

"I am scared of him ... there is also something about him that he has ... that can control people," Lee wrote of Fell.

Fell's cousin who owns the carnival game booths said Lee was a good worker and decent person when he was alone.

(yes my life is a big lie and on in the middle) He was a person that thought of me first when a party needed to be started or finished we would drink anything under the table and be able to laugh about our drinks more he was person that wanted me around and I did not want to lose that once we started something I would really have no choice but to finish it with him because

An excerpt from Robert Lee's papers, which he wrote in the St. Albans jail while awaiting trial. He is writing here about his friendship with Donald Fell.

"He seemed like a real good kid when Donnie wasn't around. But when Donnie was around, he really changed," said the cousin, Jesse Williams. Lee would adopt the same defiant, aggressive attitude as Fell when they were together.

Fell was always acting out, said Williams, 19. He said Fell used to say, "I'm going to go on a killing spree and I'm not going to stop until the cops kill me."

Donna Williams said she never saw her nephew's violent or domineering sides.

"I can't imagine Donnie controlling anyone," she said.

Two killings

"He kept saying kill her come on you have to."

Robert Lee

Fell and Lee spent the evening of Nov. 27, 2000, at Debra Fell's apartment smoking crack, drinking a couple of cases of beer and smoking pot, according to Lee's writing and court papers by the men's lawyers. Debra Fell and her friend Charles Conway partied with them.

Conway started to pass out in a chair in the living room. Fell and Lee went into the kitchen to play cards.

Debra Fell became upset that their music was too loud and complained, according to court papers prepared by the U.S. Attorney's Office and the men's lawyers. Fell left the kitchen with a knife. Lee followed.

Fell allegedly stabbed Conway, who was still sitting in the chair, the papers said.

Then, according to Lee, he demanded that Lee kill Debra Fell.

Nov.
27,
2000

Fell heard his mother tell him that she loved him, Lee's lawyer wrote in court papers. "Donnie told Bobby to stop cutting, and he did," the papers said.

Getaway

"My electric chair gets to be personally cleaned by me."

Robert Lee, writing "My list of demands" for his execution.

Fell and Lee knew they had to leave town quickly.

They wandered through Rutland with an unloaded shotgun Fell had brought from home, according to court papers prepared by Fell's lawyer, Alex Bunin.

In the parking lot of the Price Chopper they found 53-year-old Teresa King, who was arriving for her morning shift wrapping meat, according to the government's indictment. They forced King into the back seat of her car and drove off.

About 160 miles away, near Pawling, N.Y., they let King out. She immediately tried to flag down another car, according to the lawyer's court papers. Fell and Lee ordered King into the woods, and beat her to death as she lay on her back, praying.

The two continued on in King's Dodge Neon. Three days later, they were pulled over on a traffic stop in Clarksville, Ark. Police learned the car was stolen and detained the young men. That day, police in Rutland found the remains of Conway and Debra Fell.

Conway was beaten so badly he could be identified only by his belt buckle and tattoos.

In jail

"I am facing life or death and quite frankly I could care less. ... Sometimes I wonder if I belong here in all actuality I feel right at home locked in a cell for 23 hours a day."

Robert Lee

Donna Williams twice visited her nephew, Fell, at the Northwest State Correctional Facility in St. Albans.

The first time she was able to give him a hug. Later, he was put on more restrictive watch and visitors were allowed no contact, Donna Williams said.

"I'm sure that bothered him," she said. "Deep down inside he's a good person."

Donald Fell spends his time reading medieval fantasy books and watching television when he's allowed, she said. He's good about writing to the family, she said. He says he misses them and that he is eager to be transferred to a federal prison where he can get a job and more freedom.

Robert Lee, too, wanted out of the Vermont jail.



RON WYLIE,

Johnson County Graphic

Robert Lee is escorted to a security van after he was arrested in Arkansas.

On Sept. 20, Lee hanged himself by a sheet in his cell. The Corrections Department ruled the death was accidental. The U.S. Marshals Service determined Lee likely died from autoerotic asphyxiation syndrome, meaning he was masturbating while cutting off his oxygen flow, according to federal documents made public at the request of the Free Press.

Lee's father wonders whether the hanging was intentional. He continues to investigate the circumstances of his son's death with the help of a local advocacy group for people with disabilities, including mental illnesses.

Lee wrote that death was the easiest way to escape his own mind. He composed a long poem whose first line is: "All I want for Christmas is the death penalty." In it, Lee contemplated different ways he could die. He wrote that he curses himself for not shooting himself when he had the chance.

I "want to be able to get the help I need or I want to die," Lee wrote. "It is very inhuman to live with the (expletive) I have inside me I would not wish it on my worse enemy (myself.)"

2001
and
2002