

Rhodes pleads guilty to murder

By Joyce Trent
Gazette Telegraph

With his hands and feet shackled because of the escape risk he poses, James Lamar Rhodes pleaded guilty Friday to the first-degree murder of a young mother abducted in 1982 from the shopping center where she worked.

Under terms of the agreement, Rhodes, 26, will serve a life term instead of receiving the death penalty. The sentence will run concurrently with the six life sentences and 420 years he is serving for similar crimes in Florida.

In the Colorado Springs case, he abducted 22-year-old Cynthia McLuen, a cosmetologist, from the Uintah Gardens Shopping Center on Dec. 7, 1982.

Ms. McLuen was scraping ice off her car after leaving work at the Walgreens store when Rhodes grabbed her, according to police reports.

Rhodes told 4th District Judge William Rhodes on Friday he lived in Colorado Springs at the time and was waiting for his wife to get off work at her job at the nearby Woolco.

"I started committing a series of acts that resulted in the death of Cynthia McLuen," he said.

The woman's car was found a short time

later by a police officer on routine patrol. The lights were on and the motor was running.

Her clothes were picked up the same night behind the Holiday Inn at Eighth and Cimarron streets, but Ms. McLuen, the mother of a 5-year-old girl, was missing for 42 days.

Then a jogger discovered the woman's body lying on the ground in an isolated area of Fairview Cemetery.

Ms. McLuen had suffered a blow to the head, had been stabbed 25 times and had been sexually assaulted.

The case fit the criteria of the death penalty in three ways, Chief Deputy District Attorney Bill Aspinwall said Friday.

The murder was committed during a class two sexual assault, the woman would have been a witness against Rhodes and she was killed in an especially heinous, cruel or depraved manner, Aspinwall said.

But the district attorney's office could not seek the death penalty, he said.

The case went unsolved until July 1985 when Colorado Springs police detective Lou Smit looked over some information he received on similar crimes Rhodes had committed in Florida and was informed the man once lived in the Springs.

On a hunch, Smit went to see Rhodes in Florida. Rhodes confessed. That confession was the only evidence that would allow

successful prosecution, Aspinwall said, and Rhodes would not confess on the record unless he could be guaranteed his life.

So District Attorney Barney Iuppa decided to forego asking for the death penalty, Aspinwall said.

But Aspinwall said it is a good plea bargain.

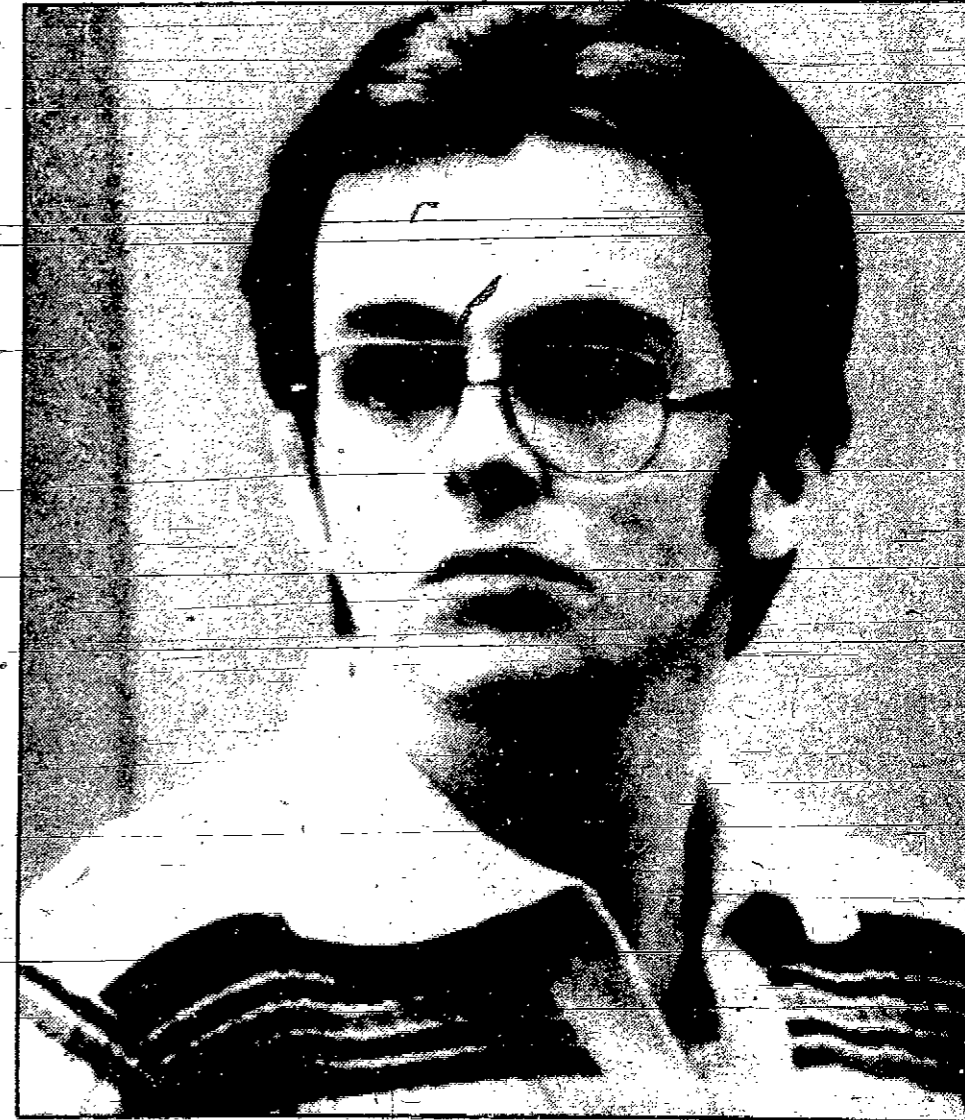
"It's not as if he would get out of prison in 20 years. With all the sentences he is serving in Florida he will be in prison for the rest of his life," Aspinwall said. "And time in a Florida prison is not as pleasant as it is in a Colorado prison."

Rhodes was convicted in Florida on charges of first-degree attempted murder, kidnapping and four counts of sexual battery for the abduction in June 1984 of an ice-cream shop clerk in St. Petersburg. The 17-year-old girl was stabbed, raped and left for dead. For that crime, he received the six life sentences.

He then pleaded guilty to three similar attacks and was given an additional 420 years which he is serving in the Florida State Penitentiary at Raiford.

In the unlikely event that all of Rhodes' previous convictions were overturned, he would be brought to Colorado to serve his local life sentence, Aspinwall said.

Sentencing on the Springs case was set for April 11.



James Rhodes sits in a courtroom in December.