

The Death Sentence that Exposed the American Justice System



The Wrongful Execution

He always maintained his innocence. The arson investigation used to convict him was questioned by leading experts. Further evidence led squarely to the conclusion that he did not set the fire that took the lives of his children. This is the story of a young father who loved his children, but who fell victim to a blind and deeply flawed system of justice.

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Fire leaped from one room to another with incredible speed, consuming the entire one-story home. The voracious monster grabbed eagerly at anything in its way: wood, furniture, beams. The thick, black smoke sought a way out through the roof, but eventually settled back down, filling every inch of the house until it seeped out through the cracks of the windows and then rose to obscure the clear sky behind a smoky haze.

It was the morning of December 23, 1991, in a middle-class section of Corsicana, a city in northeast Texas. Eleven-year-old Buffie Barbee was playing in the street when she looked up and suddenly noticed billowing clouds of smoke pouring through the windows of the neighboring house. She ran inside her home and screamed to her mother that the street was on fire. Mrs. Barbee rushed out and immediately saw for herself what her daughter was talking about. She rushed in the direction of the burning house.

There she found Cameron Todd Willingham standing outside on the terrace. He was barefoot and covered from head to toe with black soot, his hair and eyelashes singed by the fire. He stood there shouting, "My children! My children are inside!"

He had left his two-year-old daughter and one-year-old twin girls behind in the conflagration. The moment he saw Mrs. Barbee he yelled for her to call the fire department.

While Mrs. Barbee ran back to her home to phone 911, Willingham grabbed a piece of wood and smashed open the window to his children's room. He was met immediately by fiery tongues of flames. His attempt to enter through a different window met with the same results. He backed off and collapsed in a heap, crying "My babies!" Then he fell silent.

He was in shock.

When Mrs. Barbee returned, she felt the heat of the flames

pressing on her. She watched the five windows of the children's room explode in a flaming inferno.

The firefighters began to arrive a few minutes later. Willingham ran to them and shrieked that his children were in the bedroom, pointing to a section of the house that was engulfed in the worst of the flames. One of the firemen yelled into his radio that the others should hurry because there were children trapped in the burning house.

Willingham tried desperately to enter, but one of the firefighters held him back, warning him that the fire was too strong.

More firemen arrived. In a blink, they unloaded the long ropes and began pouring water through the windows into the angry, red flames. One of the firefighters donned an oxygen tank and mask and tried to jump through the window, but the heavy stream of water from one of the hoses knocked him over.

He ran to the front door and pressed through a wall of fire and smoke. He managed to locate the main hallway and ran to the kitchen, but there his progress was blocked by a heavy refrigerator that sat in front of the back door.

Willingham watched the entire time, and he became more hysterical with each passing minute. Police chaplain George Monaghan led him by the hand behind a fire truck and tried to calm him down. Willingham told him that his wife had gone out to do some shopping, leaving him sleeping in bed. He only woke up from his two-year-old's shrieks, "Daddy! Daddy!"

"My little girl tried to wake me up and warn me about the fire," Willingham sobbed to the police officer, "I couldn't save my kids."

As Willingham spoke, a fireman appeared carrying the older daughter. An EMT immediately began performing CPR. The moment Willingham noticed his daughter he ran to her, and then he turned suddenly and headed back to the children's bedroom. With the help of another official at the scene, Monaghan restrained Willingham and handcuffed him, explaining to Willingham that this was for his own good.

Willingham was transported to a hospital where the police had the unenviable task of breaking the news to the unfortunate father. The two-year-old daughter—who, incidentally, had been found in her father's room, not in the children's room—had died of asphyxiation in the heavy smoke. The twins, found on the floor in their room, also succumbed to the fire.

Investigators: Fire Was Arson

The city of Corsicana had once been at the center of the Texas oil boom, but with the passage of time most of its oil wells dried up, leaving nearly one-fourth of the city's 20,000 residents impoverished. Many of the storefronts on Main Street were boarded up and the struggle to survive could be seen and felt everywhere.

Willingham was no exception. Providing bread for his family was a daily struggle and there was no escape from the grinding poverty. While Mrs. Willingham worked for her brother's restaurant, her husband, an unemployed mechanic, looked after the children. As news of the tragedy that struck their home spread, neighbors and other locals got together to raise money for the penniless parents to cover the cost of the children's funeral.

Meanwhile, an investigation opened into how the fire had begun and why it ended so tragically. Willingham made no attempt to stop the investigators from combing through the remains of his 975 square-foot home.

"I may never know the answer," he said sadly, "but I would like to know the reason my babies were taken from me."

The first investigator to enter the home was Douglas Fogg, Deputy Fire Chief of Corsicana. Fogg had grown up in Corsicana and in 1963 had enlisted in the Navy. Serving as a medic, he was wounded numerous times in the Vietnam War and was awarded a Purple Heart on each occasion. Upon his return to civilian life he joined the fire department, and by now had served in the fire department for 20 years.



Willingham's house after the terrible fire was extinguished.



Top: the house after the fire.
Bottom: the house as it was recently rebuilt.

Fogg's experience and additional training earned him a license as a fire investigator. He would boast that he had learned to "talk to fire."

Fogg was joined by another official, Deputy Fire Marshall Manuel Vasquez, one of the highest ranking fire investigators in Texas. He had already conducted over