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Jay C. Smith, Convict Later Freed in Murder Case, Dies at 80

By Douglas Martin

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Jay C. Smith, who spent six years on death row before his conviction of the grisly 1979 murder of a suburban Philadelphia schoolteacher and her two children was overturned, died on Tuesday in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. He was 80.

William Costopoulos, his lawyer, said that Mr. Smith entered a hospital on Monday because of heart problems but that the cause of death had not been determined.

The life story of Mr. Smith, the onetime principal of Upper Merion Area High School in King of Prussia, Pa., was a convoluted one. He earned a reputation for eccentricities, including harangues lasting hours over the school's public address system. He was convicted of firearms violations and the robbery of a Sears store. His daughter and son-in-law vanished without a trace. But he became famous for being convicted of murder and then having that conviction reversed in a landmark legal ruling.

The case was the basis of four books. One, "Echoes in the Darkness" (1987), by the leading crime author Joseph Wambaugh, became a bestseller and a television movie. In the book, Mr. Wambaugh argued that Mr. Smith was the murderer.

Mr. Smith, who attacked the book for the rest of his life, responded by arguing that Mr. Wambaugh had helped convict him by paying \$50,000 to a state police investigator for information, particularly evidence that would implicate Mr. Smith. Mr. Wambaugh never denied paying the money and said in a deposition in the 1990s that he "didn't think the book would work until something happened to Smith," The Philadelphia Inquirer reported in 1998.

Mr. Wambaugh remained firmly convinced of Mr. Smith's guilt despite the reversal of his conviction, he said in an interview with The Inquirer last November.

The case, which quickly became known as the Main Line Murders, began when the naked, beaten and chained body of Susan Reinert was found in the trunk of her car in a parking lot in Harrisburg, Pa., in June 1979. Her children, Karen, 11, and Michael, 10, were missing and have never been found.

In 1983, William S. Bradfield Jr., who, like Ms. Reinert, was a teacher at Upper Merion, was convicted of conspiring to commit the killings and was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 1998. Mr. Bradfield had been the sole beneficiary of Ms. Reinert's \$730,000 of life insurance.

But the police had been unable to place Mr. Bradfield at the scene of the crime, and two friends testified that he was in Cape May, N.J., with them. The police were suspicious of Mr. Smith because on the day the body was found, he was in Harrisburg to be sentenced for robbing the Sears store and for illegal possession of firearms.

The jury accepted the prosecution's theory that Mr. Smith had killed Ms. Reinert and her two children in his basement, and he was sentenced to death in 1986. The pivotal testimony came from two of Mr. Bradfield's friends, who said that Mr. Smith had told them he was going to kill Ms. Reinert. The prosecutors said his motive had been a share of the life insurance.

John J. Holtz, the lead state police investigator, who received the \$50,000 from Mr. Wambaugh, said he did not discuss the case with the author until the prosecution finished presenting its case.

In 1992, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned Mr. Smith's conviction on the ground that the judge had erred by allowing hearsay evidence from Mr. Bradfield's friends. The high court also found fault with the prosecution for withholding evidence of sand found on Ms. Reinert during the autopsy on her body, sand that could have come from the beach that Mr. Bradfield and his friends claimed to have visited.

The prior procedure after such rulings was to have another trial. But because of what the Supreme Court deemed outrageous behavior by prosecutors, the justices said another trial would amount to placing Mr. Smith in double jeopardy. Before the Smith ruling, double jeopardy, which prevents a new prosecution, was found to exist only when defendants were acquitted or when prosecutors had deliberately provoked a mistrial.

Mr. Smith is survived by his wife, Maureen, whom he married in 2002. His daughter, Stephanie Hunsberger, and her husband were reported missing in 1978 and have never been found.

Mr. Smith filed several lawsuits against the state police and Mr. Wambaugh, accusing them of colluding to convict him falsely, but lost all of them, the last one in 2000. Since the day Mr. Smith emerged from death row in 1992 and said he wished a nuclear bomb would drop on Pennsylvania, he has proclaimed his innocence most recently in a 439-page book he self-published last year.

Mr. Costopoulos, to whom the book is dedicated, acknowledged that Mr. Smith had not convinced everybody, and certainly not Mr. Wambaugh.

"I do not celebrate the death of any man, but Satan does," Mr. Wambaugh repeated in an e-mail message yesterday. "A No. 1 draft pick has finally arrived."