

Case back in the spotlight as '75 killer tries to avoid execution

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William Thomas 'Tommy' Zeigler: He was convicted of a 1975 massacre in his Winter Garden store. (Florida Department of Corrections / November 19, 2009)

By Anthony Colarossi Sentinel Staff Writer

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Long before Casey Anthony, Lisa Nowak and Robert Ward became figures in sensational Central Florida crime cases, there was [William Thomas](#) Zeigler.

The West Orange businessman was convicted of a Christmas Eve 1975 massacre in his Winter Garden furniture store. The killings left his wife, his in-laws and one of his customers dead. Zeigler took a gunshot wound to the abdomen; investigators said it was self-inflicted.

A jury found him guilty and recommended life in prison, but Zeigler was sentenced to death and he has sat on Florida's death row for 33 years.

Now, Zeigler has requested a new round of [DNA](#) testing. It's his latest attempt to save himself and prove what he has maintained all these years – that he is innocent and the victim of a grave injustice.

"If the test results confirm the State's theory, it will allay doubts that a man has been wrongly imprisoned for so long," Zeigler wrote in his petition filed with Circuit Judge Reginald Whitehead. "If the results confirm my innocence, as I contend they will, the evidence can be used to finally set me free."

Aside from finding procedural issues with the request, Assistant State Attorney Jeff Ashton called the filing "ridiculous" and said, "This is just an attempt by him to delay the inevitable."

From the start, the murders at 1010 S. Dillard St. in Winter Garden had the all the makings of a true-crime book. In 1992, author Phillip Finch published *Fatal Flaw: A True Story of Malice and Murder in a Small Southern Town*. The book provided meticulous detail of the case and highlighted problems with the criminal investigation, prosecution and trial.

However, nearly 18 years later, a consistent series of court rulings have upheld Zeigler's conviction and sentence.

About five years ago, DNA testing, which was not available during the trial back in 1976, showed that blood evidence on Zeigler's [shirt](#) was linked to the wrong victim.

The prosecution intimated that Zeigler held his father-in-law, Perry Edwards, in a headlock while striking him with a metal crank. This explained the bloodstain found on the underarm of Zeigler's shirt.

But the new DNA testing showed that the blood belonged to Charlie Mays, another man killed in the furniture store. Testing further found that blood on Mays' [shoes](#) and pants was consistent with Edwards' blood.

Whitehead decided this discovery would not have changed jurors' minds and denied Zeigler a new trial

Zeigler has long claimed Mays was among a group of men — at least three — who attacked him and his family in the store that night. During a 2004 hearing, Zeigler's New York attorney, John Houston Pope, maintained that the new evidence supported Zeigler's story.

But prosecutors always have said that Zeigler killed his family members and then Mays and then shot himself to make it look as if the Zeiglers and Edwards were victims of a band of robbers. They have argued both Edwards and Mays suffered blows from the killer as well as being shot.

In his decision, Whitehead reasoned that Mays was involved in a fight to the death near Edwards' already beaten body, so his blood ending up on Mays' pants and shoes should not be a surprise.

"These findings do not show, as defendant asserts, that Mays was the perpetrator, rather than victim of the crimes," Whitehead wrote in his 2005 decision.

Now, Zeigler is asking for a new round of DNA tests on his outer shirt and T-shirt; Mays' shirts

and shoes; Edwards' shirt, jacket, pants, tie, tie clip and fingernails; and his wife Eunice Zeigler's clothing.

Zeigler also asks for the release of blood samples from all the victims, including his mother-in-law, Virginia Edwards, and another man associated with the case, Felton Thomas, who was an important witness for the prosecution.

The evidence is still with the Orange County Clerk of Courts, according to Zeigler.

"My father-in-law was brutally beaten by either his murderer or the murderer's accomplice," Zeigler wrote in his newest appeal. "Further testing on my shirts will demonstrably show that there is no blood of Perry Edwards on my clothing – as there would be had I actually beaten and killed Perry."

Testing Edwards' clothing and fingernails and Mays' clothing will "also demonstrate that I was not Perry's assailant," Zeigler wrote.

"By showing that I did not kill Perry, the testing results will destroy the State's entire theory of the case, making any conclusion that I killed my wife and her mother utterly untenable," he wrote.

Zeigler said he believes more of Edwards' blood will be found on Mays' clothing, "which substantiates Mays' role as a perpetrator of the murders that night."

Ashton said, "He's asking for things to be tested that have already been tested."

Zeigler has had a chance at post-conviction DNA testing, Ashton added, and the court remained unconvinced. If this appeal progresses, Ashton said he will fight it.

"Otherwise this can go on forever with a criminal defendant," he said.

Further, he said there's too much blood on too many pieces of evidence to test them all. "It would be virtually impossible to test every single spot of blood on every piece of the evidence," he said.

Still, back in 2004, a DNA expert said in court that only a small part of Zeigler's bloodstained shirt had been tested. The expert also said the untested stains could represent Edwards' blood. The prosecution and Zeigler's defense team argued and blamed each other for not testing more of the stains.

Normally, defense attorneys will ask for a hearing on such matters, but no hearing has been requested in the several months since the filing. Judge Whitehead could ask Ashton to respond to Zeigler's filing, but he hasn't done that so far.

Zeigler's attorneys, Pope and Dennis H. Tracey III, also from New York, have filed notices of appearance in the latest appeal, but neither returned calls from the *Orlando Sentinel*.

A separate brief in support of the new DNA testing has been filed by Orange County resident Raymond McEachern, who is described as a "citizen advocate" for Zeigler.

Chief among those is that Zeigler was set up because he attempted to expose loan sharking going on in West Orange back in the 1970s. While those claims and others have been around as long as his case, none have had a major bearing on the court decisions.

Ashton said McEachern's brief "isn't a relevant filing."

Much has changed in Winter Garden since Christmas Eve 1975. The building where the murders occurred remains standing today, however. Now it's a thrift store.

This week, customers there sifted through the second-hand clothing, toys, books and furniture, oblivious to a single bullet hole in the upper corner of one of the store's front windows -- a reminder of a terrible crime.