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## Survivor remembers

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### **Taken for dead, David Small survived capture, shooting by escaped convicts in Yell County in 1977 [By Brooke Chambers](#) Reporter**

David Small of Danville can still feel the itchy insulation on his skin as he lay cramped in the trunk of the patrol car. He can remember in vivid detail the smothering heat of the tight space, the intense pain in his shoulder, and how those five hours seemed like an eternity.

Thirty years ago today, Small, then 27, experienced a day he now only wishes he could forget.

"Our day started out as usual," Small said of June 29, 1977, in a recent interview with The Courier. "Opal James and I drove around Blue Mountain Lake to check the parks, we marked some timber to be cut, and headed on up the road to Ashley Creek Park."

Small was working part-time with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that summer, as he had for the previous six years. He was also serving as principal of Plainview-Rover High School.

An eerie feeling passed through Small as he and his partner reached the park entrance. They met a Magazine city patrol car that was blocking the road.

"I didn't recognize the driver," he said. "But at the time, we didn't know."

James and Small were spotted and ordered out of their park ranger truck by two men with handguns. They were robbed of their wallets and shirts and placed in the back seat of the stolen car with Magazine Marshal Marvin Ritchie, who had been captured shortly before James and Small approached the park.

"Ritchie said he was afraid of those two guys," Small said. "I was scared, too. I didn't know who those guys were, and I didn't know what to do."

But there was nothing he or the other men could do. The men with the guns, later identified as escaped convicts Earl Van Denton and Paul Ruiz, already had their minds made up about their victims' fate.

Denton and Ruiz drove about 100 yards down an old dead-end logging trail, handcuffed Ritchie and Small together and ordered them into the trunk of the patrol car. Ritchie was shot in the back of the head, and Small was shot in the chest before the convicts slammed the trunk door, believing they were both dead.

Ritchie, a husband and father of two, was killed instantly by the gunshot.

James, a Havana (Yell County) native who knew the area well, was taken hostage as a way for the convicts to find their way off the mountain. But the 58-year-old father of three would never return to his wife and children, or his job as park ranger of Blue Mountain Lake. He was found dead two days later in Montgomery County.

### **Ray of hope**

Although Small was unsure if he would live or die as he climbed into the trunk of the patrol car, when he gained consciousness and opened his eyes, he knew he would be OK.

"When I woke up, I could hear the officers talking on the police radio. They were searching for us," Small said. "I couldn't find a way out of the trunk, but I was able to kick out part of the back seat to let a little light in."

The light, he said, shown on his chest so he could see where he was shot. With the summer sun beating down on the car, and with two collapsed lungs, it was hard to catch his breath.

"I think I was probably in and out," he said of his consciousness.

But Small was fully awake when he heard the deputies approach the car.

In a July 2, 1977, interview, Bill Kimbriel, the deputy who discovered the car, said, "I knew something was in the trunk. ... I hit on the trunk

of the car with my hand and said 'Marvin, are you in there?' Someone answered, 'Oh God, I've been praying that you would find me since 9 o'clock this morning.'"

A shaken and wounded Small was taken to Sparks Medical Center in Fort Smith.

"The doctors said the bullet missed my heart by one-eighth of an inch," he said. "It's a miracle I survived."

Small's mother, Mittie, said, "The doctors told us that if he hadn't been slumped over in the position he was in, he wouldn't have made it. The bullet went in his right side, through a lung, missed the heart and lodged in his shoulder. ... It's just one of God's miracles that he's here."

### **Justice is served**

A massive local manhunt ensued for nine days following the incident. It took only a few days for authorities to realize the incident on Blue Mountain Lake was not isolated. The men were suspects in several other murders from Oklahoma to Louisiana. It would, however, take years to connect the men to all seven of the killings they were charged.

Denton, 27 at the time, and Ruiz, 29 at the time, were captured in Portland, Ore., nine days after the Arkansas murders - the same day Small was released from the hospital.

The men had been serving life sentences in the McAlester, Okla., prison for murder and armed robbery when they escaped June 23, 1977. A Colt .38 and a Smith and Wesson .357 were found in the vehicle they were captured in.

Though their arrest was quick, justice would take 20 years to be served. Two trials took place in Arkansas alone, along with countless hearings and re-sentencings. Each jury sentenced the men to the death penalty.

It wasn't until Jan. 8, 1997, Small would rest easy knowing the men who left him for dead could no longer threaten him.

Asked how he would feel today had the men not been executed, Small said, "It would have always been in my mind. What if they got out and killed more people, or what if they came after me again?"

Although he said "20 years is way too long to wait," and he still can't understand why it took "the system" so long to work, "I finally got the satisfaction of knowing that the two men that affected so many lives finally got the punishment the court said they should get."

When Denton and Ruiz were executed, Small wasn't allowed to view it, but the officers at the jail informed them of what was happening. Denton was executed first, Small said, then Ruiz one hour later.

"When they first told me about Denton, it didn't have much of an effect on me," he said. "But when they told me about Ruiz, and I knew that both of them had been executed, it was like a huge burden had been lifted, knowing it was finally over."

### **Carrying on**

Small, who still teaches at Danville, also still works as a ranger at Blue Mountain Lake in the summer. Each time he drives past Ashley Creek Park, however, "it brings back memories" of that horrible day.

"People at the lake still ask me about it - the ones who know I was involved," he said.

And although his partner is no longer with him, a monument still stands at the Opal James Overlook.

Small's mother still tells the emotional story with tears in her eyes about the day she received the news of her son. She vividly remembers receiving her son's blood-stained wallet from the hospital staff and what Small said to her when she first saw him in the hospital bed.

"He said, 'if they would give me a cigarette and a drink of water, I'll go home,'" Mittie Small said smiling through her tears.

Asked why he continues to work at the park, Small said, "I enjoy the job. We were all just in the wrong place at the wrong time when that happened."

Small and his wife, Patsy, have three children, Alicia Elmore, 27, of Fayetteville; Kimberly Allison, 25, of Russellville, and Tiffany Small, 20, of Danville.

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