

This story was initially published in The State on Sept. 1, 1991. Gaskins was executed on Sept. 6, 1991.

Death will be no stranger to Donald "Pee Wee" Gaskins if he stares it in the face Friday morning from South Carolina's electric chair.

By his own account, he knows what it's like to crush a man's windpipe and watch the blood gush. He's drowned a pregnant woman and a baby. He's laced a soft drink with the acid used to develop photographs and watched it develop a corpse.

He's beaten young girls to death with his fists, stabbed a woman in the chest with a long-bladed knife and shot people in the back of the head, execution-style. An autopsy showed that one of his victims died when a gun was held under her halter, with the muzzle pointed at her head.

Gaskins gave a 331-page statement in 1978, describing 15 murders as casually as most people tell what they had for breakfast.

That's why Tom Henderson of the State Law Enforcement Division was not surprised when he heard in 1982 that Gaskins was linked to the explosion on Death Row that killed inmate Rudolph Tyner. The 24-year-old prisoner from New York, serving time for a double murder, was blasted off a toilet seat in his cell by a booby-trapped radio that exploded in his hands.

"That sounded like it was right up Pee Wee's alley," Henderson said.

Henderson, now a SLED captain, helped trace a string of missing persons to Gaskins in 1975. He was present when their bodies were dug up from makeshift graves, most of them in the Florence County community of Prospect, and he was there when Gaskins finally gave the confession, in which he said he wished he'd killed Henderson.

The SLED agent had heard Gaskins tell 12th Circuit Solicitor Kenneth Summerford, now retired, that he liked to keep dynamite on hand "in case that I wanted to blow somebody up."

"Well, you must have had somebody in mind when you bought the dynamite," Summerford said.

"I always had people in mind," Gaskins replied. "Yessir, I always kept people in mind."

There were three or four, he went on to say, that he'd considered blowing to smithereens, including his wife and mother-in-law.

The digression was informative. It showed that Gaskins knew how to detonate explosives with a fuse or battery. Those that killed Tyner four years later were set off by an electrical connection, although it's not clear whether Tyner plugged in the device or Gaskins did it after running a wire between their cells.

Either way, Tyner's murder is the one that Gaskins is scheduled to die for Friday.

THE BODIES IN PROSPECT

Donald Henry Gaskins was known to law enforcement authorities long before they discovered that he was South Carolina's most prolific killer. Beginning at 13, when he hit his cousin in the head with a hatchet and left her for dead in a ditch, Gaskins spent most of his life in reform school and prison.

But it took years to see that everywhere Gaskins lived while free — in Charleston, Florence, Sumter and Williamsburg counties — people died.

Law enforcement officers in Charleston County were first to suspect the gruesome truth in 1975. Investigating the disappearance of a 13-year-old North Charleston girl, Kim Ghelkins, they discovered she had been at Gaskins' home, although she was no longer there. He was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

While he was in jail for that and for stealing cars, authorities found that several other missing people were either kin to Gaskins or knew him. L.E. Simmons, then North Charleston police chief, said, "The investigation revealed that a lot of people connected seemed to have dropped off the face of the Earth, but there was a common thread that ran between them all."

By then, SLED had been called into the case of Gaskins, who was still missing. Henderson was assigned.

"We talked several times to an associate of Gaskins' named Walter Neely, and he told us he didn't know anything," Henderson recalled last week. "Finally, he said that Pee Wee had told him he'd killed some people and had his own private graveyard."

Neely admitted being present when two of the victims were murdered, and he led officers to the graves of Dennis Bellamy, 29, a Charleston carpenter, and 15-year-old John Henry Knight of North Charleston. The victims were half-brothers.

Digging began Thursday, Dec. 4, 1975, in a wooded grove near a plowed cornfield at Prospect, fertile farming country halfway between Lake City and Johnsonville.

By dusk, three bodies, including Bellamy's and Knight's, had been found. Two dozen lawmen combed the area for more graves, and by Saturday, three more bodies were located. The searchers borrowed a vapor-sensing device from Florida law enforcement agencies and kept looking.

The digging continued for six days and three miles. Searchers found the corpses of a woman and a child in shallow graves.

What most people involved in the search would remember later was the stench. SLED spokesman Hugh Munn warned reporters to stuff cotton in their noses.

"Some of (the victims) were so young," Henderson said. "You could tell they were young. And there was the baby. We all knew that we were involved in something that wasn't like anything we'd ever seen before."

Gaskins was charged with eight murders. He was a suspect in as many as 39. Law enforcement officers in several counties started sifting through their unsolved case files, looking for ties to Gaskins.

Prosecutors literally could pick and choose their cases against Gaskins, and tried him first for the murder of Dennis Bellamy. Gaskins and Neely both were convicted and sentenced to death for that murder in May 1976, but the sentences were commuted to

life when South Carolina's death statute was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court later that year.

Meanwhile, bodies linked to Gaskins kept turning up. He led authorities to three in exchange for a conjugal visit with his wife:

- Patricia Ann Allsbrook, 17, of Sumter was found stuffed in a septic tank in Sumter County on Nov. 4, 1976. She had been missing for six years.
- A week later, Kim Ghelkins was found dead in Williamsburg County.
- On Dec. 8, 1976, a mile from where the Ghelkins girl was found, searchers found the body of Silas Barnwell Yates, 45, a prosperous Florence County farmer.

Gaskins was charged in Yates' death and was sentenced to his second life term in April 1977, just a couple of months before the death penalty was again legalized in South Carolina.

Two days after the Yates trial ended, the body of 20-year-old Martha Dicks was found in Sumter County. She had been missing since 1971.

Only then, with multiple murder charges still pending, did Gaskins begin to consider dealing with solicitor Summerford, who was threatening to seek the death penalty against him for the murder of John Henry Knight.

But it wasn't clear then whether the death penalty could be sought for a murder that had happened before the law was re-enacted. Gaskins' present attorneys say that Summerford couldn't have gotten a death sentence that would stand up on appeal because the timing of the law.

Gaskins' lawyers in 1978 were not so sure. That April, for four grueling days, Gaskins talked.

In addition to the two murders he'd already been convicted of, he confessed to killing the eight people buried at Prospect and two others in Charleston, whose bodies have

never been found. And, under truth serum, he confessed that he'd killed Ghelkins, Allsbrook, Dicks, and his own niece, 15-year-old Janice Kirby.

Afterward, Gaskins led authorities to the Kirby girl's grave, one they'd missed in Prospect.

'I BEAT 'EM TO DEATH'

Some investigators didn't know what to make of Gaskins' detailed confession, which became the key issue last week in his last-ditch efforts to avoid execution. He says it was obtained by trickery and shouldn't have been used to convince a jury that he deserved death after killing Tyner.

At the time, it wasn't clear why Gaskins would admit killing so many people but hedge on details. Some didn't jibe with what forensic pathologist Joel Sexton had found in autopsies. Others didn't agree with what they'd heard from witnesses. More than once while the statement was being taken, Summerford accused Gaskins of lying, and Gaskins dared God to strike his mother dead if he wasn't telling the truth.

"Why, if I wasn't telling the truth, why did I take you down there this morning and give you another body?" Gaskins retorted.

The confession is the only known document in the reams of paper Gaskins has generated that puts in chronological order who he killed, how and why.

Gaskins said he murdered his first victim in 1970 in Sumter County when his niece, Janice Kirby, ran away from home with her friend, Patricia Allsbrook. When Gaskins found the girls, "They was both under drugs bad. And I started in on 'em about it and we had a fight in there and I beat 'em to death . . . with my fist and hand."

He stuffed the Allsbrook girl in what he called "a cement pit" but couldn't leave his dead niece in the septic tank. He took her to Prospect in the trunk of his car and hid her body under pinestraw, then buried it two days later near his boyhood home.

Gaskins said the dead girls had gotten drugs from Martha Ann Dicks, called "Clyde" because she dressed in men's clothes. "That night that Janice and Patricia Allsbrook died, I promised after it was over that Martha Ann — well, I called her Clyde — would never live a year after that."

Gaskins killed Dicks, 20, with acid he'd stolen from a photographer after hearing him warn people, "Don't never handle this stuff up here. It would kill you if you did." Gaskins said he poured a strong dose of the fluid into a Coca-Cola.

"I gave her the Coke Cola and she drank that and she tried to scream. . . . She turned it up to her head and the next thing I knowed, the bottle hit the floor."

He said he loaded the body in his car and "flipped her over in the ditch."

Gaskins said he next killed in 1973, when friends of Doreen Dempsey, 23, divorced and seven months pregnant, brought her and her 2-year-old daughter, Robin Michelle, to his home in Prospect. Dempsey had stayed with Gaskins and his wife before and assumed she'd be welcome again.

But this time, Gaskins said, she was asking too much because he knew the father of her daughter was black. Dempsey was white. Gaskins would later explain why he killed them both: "When you go to mixing, I don't hold with that one bit in the world."

While her friends waited in the car, Gaskins took Dempsey behind the house. "I was gonna talk with her, and she was about seven months pregnant at the time again, and so I asked her who the daddy of the kid was that . . . she was carrying right then, and it was another black kid from what she told me.

"We went on around to the fish pond . . . and we walked around the edge and I just shoved her right in the pond and grabbed her by the feet and held her under and then I went back and got the kid and done the same thing."

After killing the mother, Gaskins said he told her friends she'd be welcome to stay. Then he lifted the child out of the car, waved good-bye, walked back to the pond, and held the baby under for several minutes.

Gaskins swore he wasn't responsible for the child's crushed skull. That must have happened in the trunk of his car, a purple hearse equipped with steel casket-holders, he said.

By Gaskins' account, the next to die, in June 1974, were Johnny Sellers, 36, and Jessie Ruth Judy, 22, who lived together in Charleston. Sellers owed Gaskins money for getting him out of jail and agreed to split the proceeds from a stolen boat, Gaskins said.

But the fence didn't want to pay Sellers and suggested to Gaskins that they just get rid of him. Gaskins invited Johnny to the woods, saying he had stashed stolen goods there.

"Me and Johnny walked around there in the woods and I pretended I seen a snake, and I asked Johnny did he have his gun with him. . . . So Johnny says, 'I ain't got no bullets for my gun.' I went back to my car and got my gun and I shot Johnny."

Gaskins said he left Sellers lying in the woods and went back to the fence's house to get Judy. "I told Jessie that Johnny said for her to come on with me. So I . . . carried her back there and killed her and then I buried 'em."

Gaskins said he told Judy he was going to kill her, but she "didn't have nary a word to say" because he'd told her that "hundreds of times." Gaskins said he was a little sorry about that murder because he'd been intimate with Judy, but he "stuck her in the heart" because he knew she'd be upset when she found out that Sellers was dead.

That fall, Gaskins said, he and three other men decided to kill two white carnival workers they knew only as Linda and Jeanette because they'd heard the women dated black men. He said he shot both in the head at the Isle of Palms.

Those bodies were never found and are not usually counted among Gaskins' victims.

The next February, Gaskins said he helped three friends kidnap and murder a wealthy Florence farmer, Silas Barnwell Yates, 45, who was known to carry large amounts of cash. While Yates lay in the trunk of his car, Gaskins said he scooped up 21 \$100 bills from his house, then drove to Williamsburg County, where Yates was killed.

Although Yates was believed to have died from stab wounds, Gaskins said, "I always was satisfied that I killed the man . . . with my hands." He said he crushed Yates' windpipe with a karate blow.

"Pee Wee, his throat was cut," Summerford said.

"I told you I busted his throat," Gaskins replied.

Yates was buried in a field.

The next April, Gaskins said he decided to kill Walter Neely's wife, 29-year-old Diane Bellamy Neely, and Avery Howard, 35, with whom she was having an affair.

The affair didn't bother Gaskins, he said. He was letting them use his workshop for sex. But the Neely woman had threatened to report one of Gaskins' friends for statutory rape, and Gaskins — then on parole — feared he'd be implicated, since the liaison had occurred at his house.

Gaskins said he gave his workshop key to Neely and Howard and his favorite boning knife to the friend who was about to be turned in for having sex with a 14-year-old girl. By his account, the next time he saw Neely and Howard, they were slumped in the front seat of a car, dead from stab wounds.

He said he shot them both in the head, anyway.

The two were killed in Charleston, he said, and buried in Prospect. Afterward, Gaskins replaced the bloody car seat with one that didn't fit right.

That September, runaway Kim Ghelkins came to Gaskins' house, and he let her stay, first with him, then with a daughter. But he learned that she was telling people he and two other men had raped her.

Gaskins said he arranged for two friends of hers to lure Ghelkins to a dirt road near the Florence-Williamsburg county line, where he shot her in the back of the head, then stabbed her in the abdomen.

Asked why he did both, Gaskins answered, "Well, I had my knife with me at the time."

About the same time, Oct. 10, 1975, half-brothers Dennis Bellamy and Johnny Knight dropped by Gaskins' house late at night. They'd been looking since April for their missing sister, Diane, not knowing that Gaskins knew exactly where she was in an unmarked grave.

Gaskins liked the Knight youth, but he detested Bellamy. They'd feuded since 1971, when Bellamy got drunk and started a fight at Gaskins' house.

"I didn't allow people coming to my house drunk around the children," said Gaskins, who later, in prison, would attribute his lack of gray hair to "clean living."

On this night, Bellamy was drunk again and staggered into a mudhole in the yard. "I said to myself, 'You made a mistake coming here tonight.' "

Gaskins said he offered Bellamy a ride in a hot car he'd just repaired. He stopped in the woods, saying he had to relieve himself. Bellamy went with Gaskins, who shot him three times.

"I had said if I ever had the chance to kill him, I'd kill him, and I got the chance and I killed him," Gaskins said.

The car wouldn't crank, and it took a while to get home for Johnny Knight, he said. "We was just walking on down there in the woods, and like I say, when I figured it was getting pretty close to where Dennis was at, I pulled my gun out and shot him, and that was all there was to it. . . . I killed him because I done killed his brother."

Gaskins said there were others he should have killed and didn't.

Asked whether he'd ever killed anyone he was sorry about, Gaskins named two: his niece and Jessie Judy.

"I reckon really down deep, when you get to the bottom of it," he said, "why you have a little feeling towards everybody regardless of what . . . Going down deep, you get to thinking about it, why it still gets on your nerves and on your mind about it."

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He was a little man with a squeaky voice, dead eyes and a black heart.

Infamous killer “Pee Wee” Gaskins was the definition of a human paradox. At first glance, Donald Henry Gaskins was less than menacing.

But his barely 5-foot-5, 130-pound frame packed a lot of meanness. He confessed in 1978 to murdering 15 people and burying their corpses in three Pee Dee counties. At least four of his victims were 15 or younger. Gaskins admitted waiting for hours beside a dirt road until accomplices lured a 13-year-old girl close enough to apprehend her.

He once told a judge, “There’s quite a few bodies that’s never been mentioned ... but you’ve got enough for now.”

Gaskins jumped in 1964 from a second-floor window at the Florence County Courthouse when on trial for carnal knowledge of a 13-year-old girl. He scampered to nearby swamps, where he eluded police for weeks. Authorities thought he was cornered when they heard bloodhounds baying, but Gaskins had tied them to a tree.

He drove a hearse around his native Prospect, a community in Florence County.

Gaskins was serving 10 life sentences at notorious Central Correctional Institution in Columbia when, in 1982, he carried out a contract, revenge killing of Death Row inmate Rudolph Tyner. Gaskins blew up Tyner by giving him a plastic cup he had told Tyner was an intercom. It exploded when Tyner put it to his ear.

That murder landed Gaskins on Death Row. But prison walls never stopped his scheming.

Two weeks before he became the 245th South Carolina prisoner to die in the electric chair, Gaskins plotted with his son to kidnap the 3-year-old daughter of then-Columbia-area solicitor Dick Harpootlian, whose prosecution moved Gaskins from a life sentence to his own date with death.

In his last night, Gaskins slashed his wrists and the crooks of his arms with a razor blade he had lodged in his throat and regurgitated. It took 20 stitches to save him for the electric chair at 1:10 a.m. Sept. 6, 1991.