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SURVIVOR RECALLS TERROR OF SUPERMARKET MURDERS

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A survivor of the **National Supermarket** slayings testified Thursday that as he lay on a floor with doomed co-workers, he jerked his head out of the path of a bullet in the nick of time to save his life.

The survivor, Harold Meyer, said a bullet intended for his head had hit his right hand instead.

"After he shot me in the hand, I kind of rolled over toward Rose (Brown, another victim), and I prayed. He thought I was dead," said Meyer, 30, who was manager of the store.

Meyer appeared in St. Louis Circuit Court on the first day of testimony in the trial of Marvin Jennings, 27, of the 2800 block of West Pasture Drive, Overland.

The case is one of the worst multiple murders in St. Louis history. The trial drew an audience of more than 80 people in a hot and stuffy courtroom with no air conditioning.

Jennings is being tried on five counts of first-degree murder, two counts of first-degree assault, one count of first-degree robbery and eight counts of armed criminal action. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

A second man faces the same charges and is scheduled to be tried separately. He is Donnie Blankenship, 26, of the 7800 block of Utica Drive in Hanley Hills.

The crime was committed shortly after 11 p.m. on Sept. 4, 1987, at the **National Supermarket**, 4331 Natural Bridge Avenue, in north St. Louis. Seven workers at the store were shot; Meyer was one of two who survived.

Meyer, of Spanish Lake, testified that the killers were two gunmen who appeared in the store at least an hour after it was closed to the public. But Meyer said he was unable later to pick out either Jennings or Blankenship from a lineup.

Meyer testified that he had been in his office working on employees' time cards when he heard a nearby door jiggling.

"I stood up to look, and I saw a guy with a gun," Meyer said. "My first thought was, 'What's he doing with a gun?' Then it hit me. . . . He came in the door and shoved the gun in my face."

The man announced a holdup and ordered several employees to open the safe. When Meyer and other employees could not open the safe, the gunman got more nervous and abusive.

At one point, "the gunman put the gun to my ear and said he'd blow off my head if we didn't open the safe," Meyer said. "I just said, 'Calm down, we'll get the safe open.' "

But the gunman hit Meyer in the head, and Meyer staggered aside, bleeding. Eventually, Rose Brown got the safe open and the gunman loaded its contents into a bag, Meyer said.

Meyer said he then noticed a second gunman nearby in the store. Both gunmen made store employees lie on the floor. Meyer quoted one of the killers as saying: "Lie down and put your heads up against the wall and get close together." The gunmen then began shooting. Meyer said that five or six shots were fired from each of two guns in that first round.

"The first two or three shots, I closed my eyes and started rolling between the wall and Rose," Meyer said. "I was hoping they wouldn't have a good shot at me." After the first round of shots, the gunmen got more bullets from the gun of David Spahn, the store security guard. Spahn was on the floor in another area of the store. The gunmen reloaded and began firing again. Meyer was shot in the hand in the second spate of shots.

Prosecuting the case is Garrett L. Randall, first assistant to St. Louis Circuit Attorney George Peach.

In an opening statement to the jury, Randall called the crime an "inside job" because Jennings had worked on a cleanup crew at the store within a week of the crime.

Randall said Jennings used his identification card for the cleaning company, Building Butlers, to get into the supermarket on the night of Sept. 4. The cleaning company was working for the supermarket.

Bradford Kessler, Jennings' attorney, said in his opening statement that the case against Jennings was shaky at best.

Kessler noted that four other men had been arrested and charged with the murders shortly after the crime and then had been released for lack of evidence. At least two of the four accused police of beating and harassing them into making false statements.

The arrest and release of those suspects was an embarrassment to the police and to Peach, who later acknowledged that no evidence linked the four to the crime. Kessler indicated that botched police work in the early cases could erode the case against Jennings. Kessler said that some state witnesses against Jennings have said they lied to police about Jennings' role in the crime.

Those witnesses include Blankenship's brothers, James and Leroy, and Jennings' former girlfriend, Sharon Lewis, Kessler said.

"Statements were put in their mouths by police in the same way (the early suspects) had statements put in their mouths," Kessler told the jurors.

Randall said that Jennings told James Blankenship that Jennings had participated in the crime and that he "specifically admitted murdering Michael Marr," one of the victims.

About a week after the crime, Jennings dropped off Donnie Blankenship at Leroy Blankenship's residence, Randall said. Left at the residence was a gun that authorities say was used to shoot five of the seven victims and to kill four of the five who died.

Left with the gun were 1,200 one-dollar bills wrapped in plastic, plus about \$200 in loose dollar bills, Randall said. "It will be obvious that this is the loot from this

robbery," he said.
