

Ramirez Ordered to Stand Trial in 14 Stalker Murders

By PAUL FELDMAN, *Times Staff Writer*

LOS ANGELES—Night Stalker suspect Richard Ramirez was ordered Tuesday to stand trial on 14 murder charges and 36 other felonies stemming from a brutal crime spree that gripped Los Angeles County in a wave of terror last year.

Los Angeles Municipal Judge James F. Nelson issued his ruling without comment before a packed courtroom at the conclusion of an arduous, 29-day preliminary hearing in which 143 prosecution witnesses took the stand.

Ramirez, 26, a drifter from El Paso, Tex., occasionally flashed a grin and scratched his face as Nelson went through the charges, one by one, before scheduling a May 21 arraignment date in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Nelson ordered Ramirez, who also faces charges in Orange County and San Francisco for two other 1985 shooting incidents, to remain in jail without bail.

In all, Ramirez will be tried for 14 murders, five attempted murders, 15 burglaries, five robberies, four rapes, three acts of oral copulation and four acts of sodomy, involving attacks on 16 Los Angeles County households between June, 1984, and his arrest in East Los Angeles on August 31, 1985.

Nelson also ruled that because of special circumstances—multiple murder counts—Ramirez could face the death penalty if convicted.

The judge dismissed 18 additional felony counts at the request of the prosecution, which declined to

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present witnesses to buttress the charges. Many of those counts involved alleged sexual molestations of three young boys and girls whose parents requested that they not testify at the public court sessions.

"The preliminary hearing has gone quite smoothly," a smiling Deputy Dist. Atty. P. Philip Halpin said after the judge's decision. "I'm satisfied. I felt confident that we had the evidence to bind him over [for trial]."

While the prosecutor made no opening or closing statements to explain Ramirez's alleged motives, he said late Tuesday that the crimes were "predicated on a series of burglaries . . . which led to a series of other crimes."

Halpin emphasized that he will request that Ramirez's trial, which he predicted could take six months including jury selection, begin this summer.

Plan Many Motions

However, defense counsels Arturo Hernandez and Daniel Hernandez countered that the proceeding may not begin until early 1987 because they plan to file a slew of pretrial motions, including a request for a change of venue.

"Obviously, anybody in this county who lived through the year of the Night Stalker incidents is going to have a very strong feeling about it," Daniel Hernandez said. "The change of venue issue is going to be a primary issue in this case."

If possible, the lawyer said, he will seek to have the trial held in the Oakland area, although he conceded that it will be an uphill battle to convince a judge to move the case from Los Angeles County.

Both defense counsels practice law in San Jose.

Daniel Hernandez added that there is a "very strong possibility" that Ramirez will testify during the trial and added that there is also a possibility that he will choose to plead insanity.

Ramirez's lawyers presented no affirmative defense during the preliminary hearing and made no closing statement. Arturo Hernan-

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Richard Ramirez as he entered the courtroom on the last day of his preliminary hearing.

dez said the lawyers will wait until the trial to present their defense because they did not receive needed evidence from the prosecution in time to prepare their case and because "there's no reason to use up all our ammunition at this time."

Arturo Hernandez said his client was not surprised by the hearing's outcome because he "felt there was a lot of politics involved in the decision of the judge" due to public outcry on the case.

But the attorney added that Ramirez felt the dismissal of the 18 charges suggested that "we won . . . a significant breakthrough." The child molestation counts in particular were "bogus," the defense counsel said.

Over the course of nine weeks, Halpin presented 531 exhibits and a steady stream of eyewitnesses, police investigators, physicians and scientific experts to link Ramirez to the seemingly random series of shootings, slashings, robberies and

rapes, most of them in the San Gabriel Valley.

In all, six surviving victims identified Ramirez in court as their assailant. The victims, all women, spoke emotionally of being surprised in their bedroom by a tall, lanky attacker with poor teeth who brandished a gun. Four of the women were sexually assaulted, while the other two survived being shot in the head.

Other key evidence included 84 pieces of jewelry and other stolen goods recovered from acquaintances and relatives of Ramirez in Los Angeles, the Bay Area and El Paso. Each of the items—including a television taken from a Diamond Bar murder victim and rings taken from a murdered Glendale couple—were identified in court by surviving victims or relatives of deceased victims.

During the last week, Halpin called a handful of scientific experts to finish weaving an elaborate web of physical, eyewitness and circumstantial evidence, all aimed at tying Ramirez to each of the crime scenes.

For example, a ballistics expert testified Monday that a Monterey Park homicide victim, William Doi, 66, was shot with a bullet from a gun previously linked to Ramirez in court.

And on Tuesday an expert testified that shoe prints found at the scene of several crimes came from the same type of Avia aerobic shoes. Police, however, never recovered such shoes from Ramirez.

The lengthy hearing generally proceeded smoothly, except for occasional bickering between Halpin and the defense attorneys and also a courtroom scuffle last week in which Ramirez was pummeled by bailiffs who apparently became upset when he turned his head in the direction of a witness who was being escorted past him.

At other times during the hearing, Ramirez stared eerily at witnesses and grinned broadly during the presentation of such graphic details as the discovery of the mutilated body of Whittier resident Maxine Zazzara, who was found in her bedroom last March.