

Killer's age may make ID difficult - Defense lawyer expects memory problems from state witness in 1979 Detroit case

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FERNDALE ? Twenty-two years after taking his last life, confessed serial killer Coral E. Watts is showing his **age** . It could be his best hope to walk free.

Gone is the Afro of the Inkster native who confessed to killing 13 women in Michigan and Texas from 1979-82. He now wears big black glasses. After two decades in a Texas prison and prostate surgery, the 50-year-old is leaner.

The differences **may** form the crux of Watts' defense that the state's secret star witness can't be sure who killed Detroit prostitute Helen M. Dutcher, 36, in Ferndale in 1979.

"I have some serious questions about a witness who says he saw something for a few fleeting moments in a dark alley on a dark night 25 years ago," said Ronald Kaplovitz, Watt's court-appointed attorney.

He'll likely **make** the argument during a June 2 preliminary hearing in District Court in Ferndale to determine if there's enough evidence to bring Watts to trial for Dutcher's murder.

The hearing was delayed Thursday because Kaplovitz needs to review 3,000 pages of evidence. Much of it is background intended to show the pattern of one of the nation's most prolific serial killers.

Watts is suspected of killing as many as 80 women but is set to walk from a Texas prison in 2006. An immunity deal allowed him to plead guilty to burglary in exchange for a 60-year sentence and confessions to 13 murders, including that of Detroit News reporter Jeanne Clyne.

Credit for good behavior cut Watts' sentence by more than half.

Michael Clyne initially was a suspect in the death of his wife, who was stabbed at least 11 times on Kercheval between Lothrop and Merriweather in Grosse Pointe Farms on Oct. 31, 1979.

He's followed the Watts case for years and plans to attend the hearing. Clyne said he would prefer a stronger case, but dreads the alternative.

"If this doesn't work, we're going to have that man on the streets," Clyne said. "At least we have this. There doesn't appear to be many other options, and I'm afraid that once he's released, he'll come back to Michigan."

Michigan authorities extradited Watts from Texas this month, the culmination in a year-plus effort to scour more than 100 unsolved cases in southeast Michigan in search of DNA or other evidence against Watts. The witness emerged when Attorney General Mike Cox appeared on national television to discuss the case.

Watts was arrested in Houston in 1982, trying to drown a women. He is housed in the Oakland County Jail.

Caption: Watts

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