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VanMeter Found Guilty

John “Homer” VanMeter, the 54-year-old Rhinelander logger charged with two misdemeanor counts of providing false information to police officers, was found guilty of obstruction on Wednesday, August 6 in Lincoln County Circuit Court. VanMeter faces a maximum \$20,000 fine and 18 months in jail. Sentencing is scheduled for September 11, 2008, with continuing bond.

The charges stem from an alleged shootout between VanMeter and two unidentified assailants on April 19, 2006 while logging near Poplar Road in the town of Tomahawk. VanMeter claimed the men had followed him in a black SUV, with one of the suspects missing his right arm.

He later changed his story, saying he knew the suspects as part of a California cult and was involved in a similar shootout with them in 2004. His story changed once again when he claimed the suspects had died in Illinois and Colorado of wounds sustained in the April 19 gun battle, but refused to provide law enforcement with more details.

VanMeter sustained four gunshot wounds, including a life threatening wound to the abdomen. After a two month investigation of the incident, authorities believe the story was fabricated and the shots self-inflicted.

Attorney Marcus Burghahn of Madison represented VanMeter in the two day jury trial. In his opening statement, Burghahn suggested that “truth is stranger than fiction” and that “the mystery may remain at the end of the trial”. He reinforced that there is no forensic evidence that proves VanMeter staged the incident or shot himself. VanMeter did not testify on his own behalf.

District Attorney Kurt Zengler represented the State of Wisconsin. He asked the jury to “use common sense” when assessing the “many fabrications of Mr. VanMeter’s active imagination”. Witnesses for the prosecution included Deputy Andy VanderWyst, the first officer called to the scene from the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Department.

In his closing argument, Zengler stated it wasn’t his duty to determine whether VanMeter shot himself, but rather that he provided false information to Deputy VanderWyst. “We’ve got elements of three Hollywood movies,” Zengler said. “You should be thinking about an attention grabbing old man as opposed to a cult infiltration from the state of California.”

The Honorable Jay Tlusty presided over the two day trial. The jury of 3 males and 9 females reached the unanimous verdict after an hour and 15 minutes of deliberation.