



150th Anniversary Chronicle of Events

Event: Symposium: “Big Dan’s” 25 Years Later

Date/Time: May 7, 2009, 5:00 – 7:00 P.M.

County: Bristol

Location: Fall River Superior Courthouse

Presenters: Panel moderated by Justice D. Lloyd Macdonald

Members of panel: U.S. District Court Judge William Young, who presided at the trial; one of his law clerks at the time, James Ring; Judge Robert J. Kane, one of the prosecutors now a Superior Court Judge; two defense attorneys, Kenneth Sullivan and Louis Coffin, now a judge in the Falmouth Juvenile Court; the chief court officer in charge of security, Peter Cordeiro; Pamela MacLeod-Lima, Executive Director of the New Bedford women’s Center; Maria Tomasia, Elections Commissioner for New Bedford, whose husband, John Tomasia formed the Committee for Justice, which sought to ensure that the defendants received a fair trial; Zita Lovett, who interpreted the trial for the defendants; and a sociologist on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Gloria de Sa.

Audience Description & Size: Courtroom was full to capacity – approximately 90 attended.

Media Coverage / Available Documentation: Newspapers: The Portuguese Times, O’Jornal, The New Bedford Standard Times, The Fall River Herald News; Radio: WPSM, WPRO. Reporter from WPRO tape recorded entire discussion.

Event Overview: A quarter of a century has passed since the trial of what became universally known as the “Big Dan’s Rape Case.” The name is taken from the bar in New Bedford where in March 1983 a woman was raped, allegedly on a pool table while certain patrons cheered. There were six defendants, and in February-March 1984 they were tried simultaneously in the Fall River Superior Court: two in the morning before one jury and four in the afternoon before a separate jury. Four defendants were convicted of aggravated rape. Two were acquitted.

The case attracted sensational national and international publicity and became a rallying cry for the growing movement organizing in opposition to sexual violence against women. The trial was the first in the country that was televised from beginning to end. The local and national coverage also precipitated passionate complaints of ethnic stereotyping by the local Portuguese community due to what was characterized as the media’s preoccupation with the circumstance that the six defendants were of Portuguese origin.

The symposium was held in the same courtroom where the case was tried. Its object was to assess the legacy of the case and the trial. Participating were now-U.S. District Court Judge William Young, who presided at the trial; Judge Robert J. Kane, now a Superior Court Judge, who was one of the prosecutors; two of the six

defense attorneys; the chief court officer in charge of security; a representative of the New Bedford Women's Center; a person who was active at the time in the Committee for Justice, an organization formed in protest of the media's treatment of the Portuguese community; and a sociologist on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Associate Justice D. Lloyd Macdonald of the Superior Court moderated the discussion.

The panelists reflected on strategic aspects of the trial, the logistical challenges posed by the simultaneous trial of two complex cases, the competing claims of fair trial/free press, the case's influence on society's response to sexual violence against women, and the trial's impact on the Portuguese community of the South Coast.