

# Snyder guilty on all counts

■ *The jury took two hours to convict the Wright Township man in the 1982 arson death of his wife and infant son.*

**By JERRY LYNOTT**

Times Leader Staff Writer

WILKES-BARRE — The smoke from a 1982 fatal fire cleared Monday afternoon with guilty verdicts against Keith Snyder for the arson murders of his wife and baby son.

The jury deliberated only two hours while making its decision.

"Praise God," proclaimed Margaret Howarth, whose daughter Diane, and grandchild, Brian, perished in the fire.

"Twelve years of anguish. I'm just glad it's over."

Snyder's family did not share her relief.

Shouts from bystanders of "it's not over!" accompanied the 41-year-old Wright Township man as he left the courtroom in the Luzerne County Courthouse about

5:30 p.m.

Outside, Snyder maintained the straight-ahead gaze and sealed lips that met the reading of the verdicts inside. Missing was his current wife, Elaine, who had clung to his right arm minutes before at the jury's pronouncement of guilt.

Snyder heeded the order of his attorney, John Moses, and refused to comment as sheriff's deputies led him in handcuffs to the Luzerne County Correctional Facility.

Judge Hugh Mundy revoked Snyder's \$60,000 bail and commit-

ted him to prison. The judge set sentencing for 10 a.m. on Aug. 15.

The defendant faces mandatory life sentences for each of two counts of first-degree murder. The arson charge carries a maximum 20-year sentence.

"Obviously we're disappointed with the verdict and we'll be filing the appropriate appeals," said Moses, dejected due to the loss.

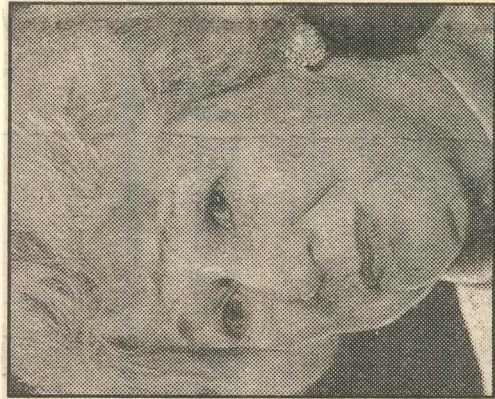
Earlier that morning in closing arguments, Moses told the jury the

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Keith Snyder is escorted from county court on Monday.

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A relieved Margaret Howarth said the verdict Monday ended 12 years of anguish waiting for justice in the murder of her daughter, Diane, and grandson, Brian.

# Snyder

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prosecution proved Snyder's innocence. The defense attorney likened the trial to a puzzle the jury had to piece together to reach a verdict.

The key pieces were the time the fire started and where Snyder was when it began burning, Moses said.

The July 2, 1982, fire started after Snyder left his Yeager Road home to go to work at a Hazleton department store, according to the defense.

Moses contended Diane Snyder started the fire while suffering post-partum depression after the birth of her baby boy. He argued that she mixed alcohol with barbiturates after lighting the fire in the bedroom of their house.

A final defense witness Monday, Dr. John Shane, said Diane Snyder had sloe gin in her stomach at the time of the autopsy. The exam also revealed traces of barbiturates in her blood.

Shane, chief toxicologist with the Lehigh Valley Hospital Center in Allentown, told the court that Brian Snyder had undigested milk in his stomach, saying the milk proved the mother and child were alive after Keith Snyder left the house that afternoon 12 years ago.

The testimony of fire expert John S. Barracato, a prosecution witness, cleared Snyder, according to Moses. Based on the expert's review, the fire burned between 45 and 60 minutes before it was extinguished around 1:40 p.m. That time line put Snyder in the Zayre Department store at the Laurel Mall for nearly an hour.

mixture of oil and gasoline on the bedroom carpet and lit the fire, which smoldered for some time before flashing into flames. The delay allowed him enough time to drive to work and have an alibi.

## The long road

The case sat idle for more than 10 years until last summer. At the urging of Jack Hlivia, a county detective and former state trooper who investigated the deaths, Olszewski reopened the probe.

Olszewski praised his staff, state police and the FBI for their work on the case.

"This is the big leagues. I don't think it gets any better than this," Olszewski said.

The case was based solely on circumstantial evidence, Olszewski said. What took place in court over the past two weeks was a "judicial reproduction" of the fire.

No single piece of evidence made the case. "Everything was important," Olszewski said.

The prosecution's work almost appeared to be in vain. The jurors alarmed the district attorney when they deliberated for only two hours.

"Quite candidly, I thought it was going to go the other way," Olszewski said.

The thought vanished once the sound of the jury foreman's first "guilty" echoed through the courtroom, he said.

The verdict brought shrieks from Snyder's supporters. Their wailing continued after the judge excused the jury.

Two floors below, Margaret Howarth and others celebrated. Howarth said her daughter, Diane, made the ordeal bearable.

"She was with us in spirit throughout the whole thing," Howarth said. "She gave us strength to get through this."

## Olszewski's turn

But District Attorney Peter Paul Olszewski Jr. challenged the defense claim that the mother killed herself and her son on her 24th birthday, the day before a major event in her life — the baby's baptism.

Olszewski urged the jurors to use their common sense when considering the evidence and testimony, especially the statements of the defendant.

Snyder told police that his wife could not even light a charcoal fire.

"He puts her right out of the picture" with that statement, Olszewski said.

Add Snyder's testimony about his knowledge of fire and he becomes the prime suspect, Olszewski said. Add more testimony about his affair with a co-worker and it creates a certain amount of ill will toward the dead woman and her child.

The prosecution alleged Snyder drugged his wife, poured a