

## **Episode 135: Bonus – the James Bigby murders**

This is Scott, and this podcast is What Was That Like.

This is the show where I usually have a guest come on and talk about something they experienced, that was extremely unusual. Like crashing a skydive, or getting shot in a mass shooting, or finding a baby in the New York City subway, or winning a showcase on The Price Is Right. The guest comes on the podcast, and tells the details of what happened, first hand.

This episode is different.

In this one, I'm going to talk about a man who lived in Texas, whose name was James Bigby. You'll learn about his horrific crimes, his bizarre behavior in court, and what eventually happened to him.

This is not a case that you've ever heard about on any other podcast – at least not that I know of.

But after you've heard his story, stick around and I'll tell you exactly why I'm bringing it to you today.

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### **Scott**

I want to tell you about James Bigby.

James Eugene Bigby lived in the small, north Texas town of Kennedale.

He had a difficult childhood. His mother was an alcoholic, and continued to drink even while she was pregnant with him. His father had left the family early on. James had brothers and sisters, but his mother gave them all away to be raised by relatives – and most of them suffered from mental health issues. James grew up in fear that his mother would abandon him, like his father had.

As a young adult, he was hospitalized multiple times for schizoaffective disorder, and for depression. During one of those hospital stays, he experienced electroshock therapy. He was also arrested and served time for various robberies, and a sexual assault charge.

James dropped out of school after 9th grade, so his options for employment were limited. He was able to get a job as an auto mechanic, and he worked in the body shop for the Frito-Lay company. Yes, the company that makes potato chips. They had large fleets of trucks that deliver their products to regional grocery stores, and James worked, along with several others, in a shop that kept those vehicles running.

James was for the most part an outgoing person who loved a good laugh. But sometimes he took things a little too far. His mother was disabled, and he once played a practical joke on her by removing the screws from her crutches. He had a good laugh at seeing her fall.

At some point, James was involved in an accident at work, and he was injured. Since it happened while he was on the job, he filed a claim for worker's compensation in order to have the medical bills paid.

One of James' co-workers was Michael Trezell. Trezell lived in a mobile home in Arlington, Texas, and he and James were friends, both on the job as well as outside of work. Michael lived with his wife, Grace Kehler, and their 4-month-old son, Jayson.

James Bigby suffered from severe mental illness. He was later diagnosed as being paranoid and delusional. For unknown reasons other than his mental condition, Bigby had convinced himself that Michael and some other co-workers were deliberately sabotaging his worker's comp claim, by trying to get the claim denied. There was no validity to this thought, but he was convinced they were conspiring against him.

On the evening of December 23, 1987, James went to Michael's house with some steaks for the two of them. Michael's wife was out at the time, so the only people there were Michael, James, and the baby.

While Michael was preparing the steaks, James approached him from behind and shot him in the head. He then got some cellophane from the kitchen, and went to the baby's room. He tried suffocating the baby with cellophane, but was frustrated that it was taking too long. He filled the bathroom sink with water, and held the baby's head under until he drowned.

James left, and drove across town to the apartment of another friend and co-worker, Wesley Crane. He visited with Wesley for a while, then the two of them left in Wesley's pickup truck to go to the store. On the way back from the store, James forced Wesley at gunpoint to pull over and get out of the truck. He shot Wesley in the head, killing him, and left his body on the side of the road. James then drove the truck back to Wesley's apartment, and he got a bag out of his car, which contained a pistol and a shotgun. He left his car there, and drove away in Wesley's pickup truck.

His next stop was at another co-worker's house, Frank Johnson. He arrived there at 3:20 am and rang the doorbell. Frank came to the door, confused because of this visit in the middle of the night. They had a brief discussion, then James shot Frank three times with the shotgun, killing him. He then fled the scene in the pickup truck. The four killings had happened over a span of about seven hours.

While the last two murders were taking place that evening, Grace Kehler came home to the mobile home she shared with the first victim, Michael Trezell. When she entered the trailer, she discovered Michael lying on the kitchen floor. Initially she thought he was just unconscious, so she dialed 911 to get help. While she was speaking with the 911 dispatcher, Grace suddenly remembered that her 4 month old baby, Jayson, was also at home and went to look for him. She discovered him lying face down in the sink full of water.

Later, when she was being questioned by police, she mentioned that she thought James Bigby might be a likely suspect. She noted that when she got home, she saw the steaks that weren't there when she left home earlier, and she knew that James was a common visitor there.

At just after 5 am, on what was now Christmas Eve, Officer James Greenwell arrived at the Trezell mobile home. He was there as the crime scene investigator. He took many photographs of the kitchen and the bathroom, and he created a diagram of the layout of the trailer. He also performed gunshot residue tests on both Michael and the infant, and he obtained postmortem fingerprints from Michael. Looking in the trash can, he discovered some beer cans and a wine cooler bottle, which he retrieved and later had them checked for fingerprints.

Autopsies were performed on both victims by Dr Charles Harvey, the Tarrant County Medical Examiner. He determined that the manner of both deaths was homicide. Michael's death was due to craniocerebral trauma due to a gunshot wound from a .357 Magnum revolver. The infant died as a result of drowning.

It didn't take investigators long to figure out that these seemingly separate murders had one common factor: James Bigby. With James being named as a suspect and accused of murdering his two other co-workers, a widespread manhunt was underway to find him, before he could kill again.

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### **News Reporter**

A national search continues tonight for a Fort Worth man wanted in connection with a Christmas Eve killing spree. Authorities are looking for 32-year-old James Bigby. The former auto mechanic is accused of shooting three former coworkers and strangling a 4-month-old baby. We have more in this NBC report.

The 4-month-old baby is carried from an Arlington trailer. Michael Trell, the boy's father, is inside dead from a gunshot wound to the head. The boy was drowned. The body of Frank Johnson was found just outside the door of his southwest Arlington home. He was shot three times. In Fort Worth, Calvin Crane was shot in the head. His body was dumped along the side of the road. Right now, everybody's trying to find him. The man that police are looking for as a suspect in all four murders is James Bigby. He is 32 years old, 5' 7" tall, and 170 pounds. He has brown hair and green eyes. Bigby may be driving a 1978 Chevy pickup truck. The vehicle is silver with a blue hood. The Texas license number is 528CF.

### **Officer**

All the patrol units are looking for him as well as the stolen pickup truck out of Fort Worth, and all the detectives available are being used.

### **News Reporter**

The search for Bigby has been intensified tonight because he has stated he would like to go out in a blaze of glory and he would like to kill a bunch of people, and that has police very concerned.

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Two days later, on December 26, the Fort Worth police were called to a Tarrant County motel for a complaint about a man in one of the rooms who was threatening suicide. This eventually escalated to a standoff. Ft Worth Police detective Larry Ansley was called to the scene to act as a negotiator. The man inside the motel room was James Bigby.

Detective Ansley made contact with James, and told him, "This is America. You're an American. You're presumed innocent until proven guilty. Everything's gonna be all right." Soon after that, James opened the door slightly and said to the detective, "I know that I'm guilty, and so do you". Shortly thereafter, James surrendered to police, and was taken to John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth.

The next morning, Fort Worth Police Homicide Detective Curtis Brannan interviewed James. He first advised him of his Miranda rights, and then asked him a long series of questions about his potential

involvement with the four murders. In the early hours of December 27, James provided a written statement in which he confessed to killing Michael and the baby, as well as the two other men. In the statement, he said, "I regret killing the baby, but not the other." Later, James' fingerprints were matched to the prints taken from the wine cooler bottle that was found at the trailer crime scene.

James was charged with capital murder, and in court, his lawyers presented a defense based on insanity. They argued that he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. They enlisted the expert witness Dr James Grigson. At the time, Dr Grigson was nicknamed "Dr Death" because his testimony was usually relied upon to convince jurors about how dangerous a defendant was. In this case, he was testifying on behalf of the defendant. He stated that James Bigby was suffering from a serious, severe mental illness, and was not aware of the difference between right and wrong. The defense team also brought in a different doctor's report that concluded that James believed that Private Investigators from Frito-Lay were trying to kill him. James' childhood was also part of his defense, with his lawyer's claiming that he was raised by an alcoholic mother who breast-fed him up to age seven.

The trial was presided over by Judge Don Leonard. The trial was moving along fairly routinely, until Bigby came up with a bizarre plan to escape.

During a brief trial recess, Judge Leonard was in his chambers behind the courtroom. James stood up at the defense table, as if he were going to go and get a drink of water from the water fountain. Instead, he ran to Judge Leonard's unoccupied bench in the courtroom, and he found a loaded gun in a drawer, and took it out. The bailiff in the courtroom saw this happen, and drew his weapon, and told James to stop. James pointed the gun at the bailiff, who then ducked down behind a desk. When he looked up again, he saw James running. The bailiff started to chase him, but James turned around and pointed the gun at him again, so he again ducked for cover. By the time the bailiff could get back up, James had run through the door into the hallway.

With gun in hand, James went immediately to Judge Leonard's chambers. The judge was sitting at his desk. James calmly took a few steps toward the judge, pointed the gun at his head, and said, "Let's go, Judge". The judge looked up at James and immediately jumped out of his chair and grabbed the hand holding the gun and slammed it against the wall. The two of them ended up against the wall, struggling.

In the judge's office at the time was Barbara Hackney, who was also a bailiff. She saw what happened, and immediately ran to get help. Deputies came in quickly and were able to restrain James and get the gun away from him, without any shots being fired.

So James was not successful in trying to escape, but this bizarre action somewhat changed the course of the trial. The defense used it as a reason to move for a mistrial, which the judge denied. James' lawyers also moved for Judge Leonard to recuse himself, on the basis that the attack on him personally would cause him to be biased against James. The matter was referred to the presiding administrative judge, and a hearing was held for this specific matter. Judge Leonard testified that the assault in his chambers had not prejudiced him against James. The presiding judge came to the conclusion that Judge Leonard did NOT have to recuse himself, and thus, the trial continued.

One thing to keep in mind is this – James' attempt to escape by grabbing the gun and pointing it at the judge was done during a trial recess, so it was not seen by the jurors. They were not aware that any of that had happened. However, after the defense rested, Judge Leonard allowed prosecutors to introduce testimony telling the jurors about the attempted escape. The state claimed that James' actions were

evidence of his “consciousness of guilt” about the murders he was accused of, and therefore his claims of insanity were not valid.

The trial ended, and the jury rejected his insanity defense. They found him guilty of capital murder for the double homicide. Following that, they determined that the sentence for his crimes was the death penalty. That was in 1991. He was never tried for the murders of the two other men.

After the sentencing, James Bigby was transported to his new home – the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas.

The Huntsville Unit, also known as the Walls Unit, is the oldest state prison in Texas, having opened in 1849. It’s the home of the execution chamber of the state of Texas. The death penalty was reinstated in Texas in 1982, and since then there have been almost 600 executions at this facility. That makes it the most active execution chamber in the United States.

With the death penalty involved, most cases are appealed automatically. And James attempted many times to appeal his case, with a variety of arguments. For the most part, those appeals were unsuccessful. But there was one appeal that did work in his favor.

The US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit overturned the sentencing decision of the district court, and granted a certificate of appeal. This ruling did not acquit him, but it did give him the opportunity for a new hearing about what his punishment should be. Of course, he was hoping for anything less than the death penalty that he got originally. The second punishment hearing began in September of 2006 – fifteen years after the first trial. This jury of six men and six women came to the same conclusion as the first jury – and Bigby was once again sentenced to death.

After the sentencing was read, the sister of Michael Trezell, Deborah Jameson, tearfully read a victim impact statement to James.

“James Bigby, what happens to you will be God’s will. Now, keep this in your mind: this court is your authority. May you stop these appeals. May you stop this begging, and heed the punishment delivered.” She closed with: ““This day will be yet another remembrance in the history that was forever changed by James Bigby for our families”

His further appeals were all unsuccessful, but they did buy him some more time while they made their way through the courts. Eventually, he either came to the realization that he might just be getting what he deserved, or maybe he just grew tired of the seemingly endless process. But for whatever reasons, on August 1, 2016, James Bigby wrote a letter to Texas governor Greg Abbott. In the letter, he requested that the governor set his execution date.

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**James Bigby**

Dear Honorable and Righteous Governor Greg Abbott,

May this letter find you well in Jesus’ name.

Governor Abbott, sir:

My death penalty appeals are finished now for about a full year, yet I still have no execution date set.

This is wasting about \$47.50 per day in Texas taxpayer dollars, and furthermore it is wickedness and corruption, which me being a born-again Christian – John 3:3 – cannot be a part of. I have waited and waited to be bench-warranted back to trial court for my execution date, and I in good conscience cannot be waiting in silence like this any further. It is wickedness and a lie to the judicial process in my death penalty case.

I am asking you Governor Abbott, sir, to get my execution date set now, which is not only legally correct to do but binding upon you a true believer in Lord Jesus Christ for righteousness' sake.

When I heard you were running for Governor of Texas, I prayed many prayers for you in Jesus' name after I learned you were in a wheelchair, to God the Father, for your success.

My dear mama was on crutches since before my birth, and when I was age 9 had to have her hurt leg cut off. I can clearly remember how some people loathe my dear mama, who taught me about my Lord Jesus, because of her disability. So I prayed many prayers in Jesus' name for you to be elected Governor of Texas.

I celebrated when you won. "Victory in Jesus" with my arms raised to heaven in a "V".

I know you are a righteous man in Lord Jesus Christ, and I ask you, even beg you, please please make whoever is sitting on my case go forward now without any further games, and set my execution date.

I do NOT need any attorney to stand with me at my bench warrant to get my execution date. Just get me my execution date now please Governor Abbott.

Thank you kindly in the name of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

James E Bigby #000997

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### **Scott**

On Monday, November 28 of 2016 – a full ten years after the second hearing – and 29 years after the murders - James Bigby was delivered the news. He got what he requested. At 4 pm that afternoon, he was told that a date had been set for his execution. That date was just 4 months away. He was scheduled to die on March 14, 2017.

### **News Reporter**

A convicted murderer who tried to kidnap the judge during his trial is scheduled to be executed tonight. James Bigby was convicted of killing Michael Trezell and his 4-month-old son on Christmas Eve, 1987. During his trial though, Bigby grabbed a loaded gun from behind the judge's bench during a recess and

tried to kidnap the judge. So far, there have been no last-minute appeals filed. Bigby would be the fourth inmate executed in Texas this year.

### **Scott**

On March 14, 2017, just after 6 pm, James Bigby was strapped to a gurney and rolled into the prison's death chamber. This room had a large window, and on the other side of that window was a room for those who wished to be present for the execution. Seated in that room on that day were six people – relatives of the people James had been convicted of murdering.

Before he died, James looked directly at those six people and said, "I hope this will bring you peace, and I'm sorry for all the pain and suffering." His voice was cracking at times as he felt the emotion of the moment. "I hope that you can forgive me, but if you don't, I understand. I don't think I could forgive anyone who would have killed my children".

At 6:17 pm, James was injected with the lethal dose of pentobarbital, and the officials waited for it to have its full effect. During that time, James prayed, and he repeated several times, "I promise, I'm sorry". As the effects of the drug kicked in, he was singing the children's song, "Jesus Love Me". He took a few breaths, and then all movement stopped.

At 6:31 pm, 30 years after he had taken the lives of four people, James Bigby was pronounced dead.

Following the execution, Deborah Jameson, the sister of Michael Trezell and the aunt of little Jayson, released a statement about why she was present to witness the execution.

She said that she was there not to judge him, but to "support the completion of what James Bigby began with my family almost 30 years ago when he committed such a heinous crime".

Why am I bringing you the story of James Bigby today?

Back in the summer of 1995, James had been in prison, on Death Row, for about 8 years. Aside from being a terrible place to live, and often dangerous, prison life is also pretty boring. Time drags by, and there are a lot of hours in the day with not much going on.

James decided he wanted to have some kind of contact with the outside world. This was in the very early days of personal computers and the internet. Most people didn't even have an email address at that point. So the only way an inmate could communicate with anyone outside the prison was by regular mail.

So James somehow figured out a way to take out a classified ad in the back of some magazine, like Popular Mechanics or Popular Science. And that ad made its way to be listed on some website. He wanted to have a pen pal. Today, a lot of people wouldn't even get the concept of being a pen pal. This is where you would physically write a letter to someone, and mail it to them through snail mail, and they would get it a few days later and then they would write you back. It's pretty much unheard of these days, with email and text messaging, but at one time it was a fun thing to do – especially with someone you didn't know.

I lived in Maine at the time, and I would sometimes read those magazines. I think I even had a subscription to Popular Science at one time. Even as a kid I would look through these magazines and read the articles about the newest tech gadgets and that kind of thing. I remember looking at the ads in the back where they would be selling instruction plans for a single-person gyrocopter. I always thought it would be so cool to have something like that, and the ads made it look so easy – all you need is lawn mower engine and a few other parts, and before you know it, you'll be flying all over town in your little one-man flying machine. Thankfully, I never tried actually doing that, because I probably would have killed myself on the first flight. But it was fun to think about.

I was looking through those classified ads online one day, and I saw this one in particular that caught my eye. It said, "Texas Death Row inmate looking for pen pal". And it gave an address to write to.

When I saw that, I was really intrigued. If you've been listening to this podcast, you know I have a big sense of curiosity about all kinds of things. And here was a chance to actually communicate directly with someone who was in prison, waiting to be executed? So I had to write to him. And of course, that Death Row inmate was James Bigby.

I wasn't really quite sure what to put in that first letter. So I kept it pretty generic, talking about my job without naming any specific company. I also used a PO Box, which I already had anyway. I think I also asked him about his background or what his life story was. At the time, of course, I had no idea what he had done to end up on Death Row. I assumed he had probably killed someone but I didn't know any of his story.

And pretty quickly, he wrote back. He told me about childhood, and family and work – but he didn't mention anything about his crimes. And I was okay with that. He could tell me as much as he wanted to or as little as he wanted to. I was just fascinated by the conversation.

Eventually he did tell me the story of what landed him in prison. And I was able to do some research on my own to get some of the details.

As I received more of his letters, some were handwritten and some were typed on a typewriter, or on a computer and printed. But it became clear that he was still suffering from mental illness. I have no idea if he was getting any treatment or therapy for that in prison, but I kind of doubt it.

Also, at the time I was operating a business called Celebrity Locators, and I had access to some mailing addresses for a lot of celebrities. So I recall helping him with getting some of those addresses. Not usually a home address – more commonly the address of their agent or something like that. One of the people he wanted to contact was Madonna – he somehow thought that she could help him expose the corruption and the conspiracy that made him kill.

In all, he wrote me 42 letters over the course of 3 years. In one of his early letters, he talked about what he would do on the day they came to get him from his cell to be executed. This is part of what he wrote:

"Scott I talk about things calmly coz I guess it's my existence here, but if that day ever comes I will NOT go quietly. I am shocked at everybody doing just that, and still have yet to figure it out, coz somebody shows up at my cell door to take me to the death house, they will see a totally different person then has been with em all these years. Death is just that, and I ain't ready to die just yet, and to hell with what anybody thinks about me not wanting to go."



I kept all 42 of those letters. Honestly, I don't know why I kept them. They range from August 1995 to September of 1998. They are a really interesting peek into the dark mind of someone whose mental illness eventually drove him to murder.

And for anyone who's a Patreon supporter of this podcast, all of those letters are now available for you to read. And this is for supporters at any tier, to read all of the letters I received from James Bigby. But if you do the \$5 level you will also get access to all of the Raw Audio episodes and those 911 calls and stories. AND, you get all of the new regular episodes of the podcast without any ads. You can get all of that by signing up at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/support).

I'd love to hear what you think about this episode. I know it's different from the typical interview-style episodes I do, but I know you enjoy true crime, and this one definitely fits in that category. I hope you join in on the discussion in the Facebook group, at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/facebook).

Graphics for this podcast created by Bob Bretz. Transcript created by James Lai.

And even though this is a bonus episode, you know we still have to have a Listener Story. This listener had a surprise while she was out walking her dog. And don't worry, no animals get hurt in this story.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in a week with the next regular episode.

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### **(Listener Story)**

I was walking my dog the other day in our neighborhood, and I saw a cop car pull up with his lights flashing probably about 20, 30 feet ahead of me and stop in front of a house - not completely unusual, but enough to be like, "Oh, maybe I'll see something interesting." As I kept walking towards the cop car with my dog, I saw a big armored car about 15 feet behind him that was camouflaged. I was kind of looking at it, like, "Okay, that's kind of weird."

Then, as I was looking at the car, I saw 3 SWAT men run out of the back of the car with their rifles drawn toward a house. Then, I looked back at the cop and he pulled his big rifle out of his car. I locked eyes with the cop and I literally say, "Nope." I turn around and I started running the other way. I was listening to a podcast as I was walking my dog, which is probably your podcast because I'm addicted to your stories and I love stories. Through my EarPods, I can hear a gunshot. Then, I really started sprinting because the neighborhood is empty right now because it was 8 o'clock in the morning. I sprinted in the other direction.

I saw a car coming up the street and I waved frantically, "No, don't go. Don't go." Then, I explained what cars were down there and, "I heard gunshots. Don't go down there." He was looking at me like I'm crazy, but I kept telling him to turn around. Then, he turned his car around for probably another two minutes before he turned around and decides to go down another street.

I'm connected with Facebook and the crime watch in the area and stuff. So I'm looking and thinking, "Surely, this is going to come up somewhere." I even posted, "Does anyone know what happened?" And nothing. No responses. It's like I almost imagined it, but I have the image of the SWAT people running

out of the back of the SWAT car with their gun drawn burned into my head, so I know I didn't imagine that. I just had no clue what happened. So thanks for listening.