

Daily News: Monday, March 30, 1987. Reprinted by permission.

False arrest might be movie material

By RICHARD VARENCHIK

Daily News Staff Writer

VAN NUYS — The story of Etta Smith, the Burbank woman who won a false-arrest suit because she was jailed after telling police a psychic vision led her to the body of a slain nurse, might move from the courtroom to the movie screen.

Smith, 39, won't discuss the case with reporters, but her attorney, James Blatt, said he has received calls from at least six movie producers since Smith's wrongful-arrest suit went to trial March 18.

But Blatt said he isn't ready to talk about movie contracts.

"It's nothing I've even thought about," Blatt said. "I've been concentrating on winning this case."

Blatt gained half a victory for Smith on Thursday when Van Nuys Superior Court Judge Joel Rudof ruled that Los Angeles police did not have probable cause to arrest Smith on Dec. 17, 1980.

Rudof told the 12 jurors Friday that the only matter left for them to consider was what amount of money, if any, Los Angeles should pay Smith for wrongful arrest.

Blatt told the jury that Smith should receive \$750,000 for spending nearly four days in jail without being charged with a crime.

"This case is about a woman who cared a little too much and paid a price," Blatt said.

The jury received the case Friday afternoon, and deliberations will begin today.

In testimony during the seven day trial, Smith told of working at Lockheed in Burbank the afternoon of Dec. 16, 1980, and hearing a radio news broadcast about Melanie L. Uribe, 31, a Sylmar nurse who had disappeared on her way to work the night before.

Smith testified that she had a psychic vision when the broadcaster talked of police launching a house-to-house search for Uribe.

"Mentally, somewhere, something registered and said, 'She's not in a house,'" Smith said.

Smith testified that she visualized body in an open area in a canyon.

"I was very confused," she said.

"I couldn't understand what was happening."

She reported her thoughts that afternoon to a detective at the Los Angeles Police Department's Foothill Division police station, then went home. But thinking that police might not believe her, she took her children and drove up Lopez Canyon Road, above Lake View Terrace.

She said her daughter, Tina, 8 at the time, spotted something about 400 feet off the road. They walked up and looked, at first not being aware they were looking at Uribe's battered, naked body.

"When I saw the shoes I said. 'Oh, my God. Those are white nurse's shoes. It's got to be her.'" Smith testified.

Foothill homicide investigators began questioning her about an hour later. Early the next morning, she was arrested on suspicion of murdering Uribe.

After nearly four days in jail, Smith was released when three men were arrested in the kidnapping, rape and murder of Uribe. Smith never was shown to have any connection to the men or to the crime.

Repeatedly during the trial, Smith denied she had any desire to become famous because of finding the body. But an undercover woman police officer put into a cell with Smith said Smith talked about writing a book and making a movie from her experience.

Smith testified that she made some reference to the whole situation being so strange that it sounded like a movie.

Nick Grillo, a producer at Mace Neufield Productions in Beverly Hills, agrees with Smith. He is one of the producers who telephoned Blatt after Smith's story hit the papers.

He said Blatt told him that nothing can be discussed until the trial ends.

"Here is a woman who has these psychic powers," Grillo said. "The whole thing turns against her and she becomes a victim."

"The story is a little different, and we are always looking for something that's just a little different," he said.

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Psychic 'Vision' Suit Settled

\$26,184 Awarded for Arrest

By JAN KLUNDER

Times Staff Writer

A Van Nuys Superior Court jury Monday awarded \$26,184 to a Burbank woman who was arrested and jailed for four days after saying that a "psychic vision" enabled her to lead Los Angeles police to the body of a slain nurse.

"I'm just relieved that it's over and that I've been vindicated in the public eye," Etta Louise Smith said.

Smith, a 39-year old mother of three, sued the City of Los Angeles, alleging that police lacked sufficient evidence to arrest her on suspicion of murdering the nurse. Superior Court Judge Joel Rudof ruled last week that the arrest was unlawful and left the question of damages to the jury.

Smith's attorney James E. Blatt, requested \$750,000, but the panel awarded \$25,000 for pain and suffering and \$1,184 for lost wages and attorney's fees.

Jurors said there was no evidence that Smith suffered grave emotional distress because of the jailing. Jury foreman Janet Fowler of Burbank said that most jurors believed Smith's story that she had a psychic vision and that they felt that an award equivalent to a year, salary for Smith was fair.

Smith, who makes about \$25,000 a year as a shipping clerk for Lockheed Corp. in Burbank, testified during the eight-day trial that she heard a news report about the missing nurse and immediately visualized the woman's body in a rural area above Lake View Terrace.

After reporting her experience to police, Smith, accompanied by two of her children and a niece, found the body of Melanie L. Uribe, 31, in Lopez Canyon, then led detectives to it.

Investigators doubted Smith's story of a "vision" and suspected that she might have been connected to the killing, testimony revealed. Smith, who then lived in Pacoima, was arrested after 10 hours of questioning.

She was released four days later after a man confessed to the killing and implicated two others. The three, who have no known connection to Smith, are serving sentences of up to life in prison.

Assistant City Atty. Michael K. Fox said police continue to believe that Smith learned of the body's location through Pacoima neighborhood gossip or other natural means.

Fox said he doubts that the case will spark a rash of wrongful-arrest suits against the city.

"These were unusual, bizarre circumstances," Fox said. "We don't have too many people who fall into this category."