

Testimony underway in PETA trial



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By Staff Reports (<https://www.roanoke-chowannewsheald.com/author/bniweb/>).

Email the author (<mailto:bniweb@boonenewspapers.com>).

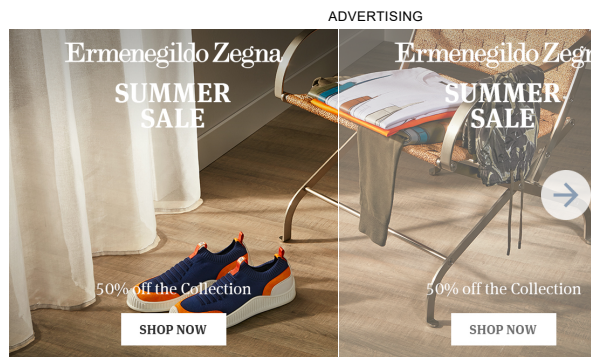
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WINTON – A jury of six men and six women will determine the fate of two PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) employees charged with cruelty to animals.

After a day and a half of jury selections, testimony got underway here Wednesday morning in Hertford County Criminal Superior Court in a case involving Adria Hinkle and Andrew Cook, two Virginia residents charged with 21 felony counts each of animal cruelty as well as other charges.

At the center of Wednesday's opening day testimony was Ahoskie Police Detective Sgt. Jeremy Roberts, the lead investigator on the case.

Questioned by District 6B Attorney Valerie Mitchell Asbell, Roberts began his testimony by providing a timeline of the events that led to the arrest of Hinkle and Cook on June 15, 2005.



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Roberts said he became involved in the case on May 19, 2005 after being dispatched to an area behind the Piggly Wiggly Supermarket in Ahoskie's New Market Shopping Center. There he was met by Kevin Wrenn of D&E Properties, a local firm that handles the maintenance of the shopping center. During his early morning rounds disposing of trash, Wrenn had discovered what appeared to be some sort of animal in a trash bag that was tossed in the dumpster behind Piggly Wiggly.

"I immediately noticed a strong odor coming from the dumpster," Roberts said.

Probing inside the dumpster, Roberts discovered 20, heavy duty trash bags. He eventually discovered a total of 21 dead dogs inside those bags.

After using the Town of Ahoskie's help to bury the dogs at the town's old landfill, Roberts told Asbell he launched an investigation of how the dead dogs wound up in an Ahoskie dumpster. He said he checked with the local animal hospitals and animal shelters to inquire of how they discarded of dead animals.

Two weeks later (June 2, 2005) dead animals – 17 dogs and three cats – were discovered within 20 bags in the same dumpster. Photographing the dead animals, Roberts took those photographs to Bertie County Animal Control Officer Barry Anderson from whom Roberts had learned was working with PETA through an agreement to come to the Bertie shelter to collect unwanted, unclaimed animals. Anderson told Roberts he could not positively identify the animals by the photos.

Another report of dead animals found in the same dumpster came in on June 9. Eighteen bags containing 20 dead dogs were discovered.

On this particular occasion, Roberts said he contacted Anderson who drove to Ahoskie and, prior to burial, identified the animals as coming from the Bertie shelter.

From that point, Roberts said he became suspicious of PETA's possible involvement in the case.

Through conversations with Anderson, Roberts understood that PETA workers came to the Bertie shelter every Wednesday to pick-up animals. Each of the dumpster discoveries to that point were always on Thursday mornings.

Working with the Bertie Sheriff's Office, Roberts hatched a surveillance plan. To properly document the plan, Anderson photographed and charted each of the animals in the Bertie shelter on June 14, 2005, one day prior to PETA's normal Wednesday pick-up.

The following day (Wednesday, June 15) when Hinkle and Cook, who was making his very first work-related trip to North Carolina on that particular day, arrived at the Bertie shelter, they immediately became the targets of surveillance.

Upon picking-up and transporting an injured dog to the Ahoskie Animal Hospital (AAH), the PETA van in which Hinkle and Cook were traveling was followed by Bertie Sheriff's detectives Frank Timberlake and Marty Northcott. While at AAH, employees there, through a pre-arranged pick-up, released a mother cat and two kittens to Hinkle and Cook.

The van traveled back to the Bertie shelter where Hinkle and Cook took possession of several animals. At some point (PETA officials attending the trial said it occurred in the van while parked at the Bertie shelter), all of the animals were euthanized by Hinkle.

After leaving the shelter, the van was tailed as it made its way to Ahoskie. The van turned into New Market Shopping Center and headed behind Piggly Wiggly. There, according to Roberts, a female, later identified as Hinkle, was behind the wheel. She made a u-turn and parked the side doors of the van next to the door of the dumpster.

Roberts said while he and Bertie Sheriff's Detective Ed Pittman were approaching the van on foot from their surveillance locations behind the grocery store, he could hear the "thump, thump" of heavy objects striking the bottom of the empty dumpster.

Before the two lawmen could reach the van, it took off, heading out the same way it entered the back area of the grocery store. At that time he made contact with Timberlake who performed a traffic stop on the van while it was still in the New Market parking lot.

Meanwhile, Roberts performed a brief search of the dumpster, discovering the same type of trash bags found during the previous three weeks. At that point he placed Hinkle and Cook under arrest.

Dressed later in a hazmat suit, Roberts retrieved nine trash bags containing 16 dead dogs. Those animals, like their predecessors, were taken to the old landfill for burial. However, this time Anderson was at the burial site documenting the animals as they were removed from the bags. He confirmed they were the same animals picked-up earlier that day by Hinkle and Cook at the Bertie shelter.

A short while later as Roberts said he was preparing to inventory the van, held at the Ahoskie Police Department, he discovered another 12 bags containing eight dogs and 14 cats inside the van. Roberts confirmed that the mother cat and two kittens picked-up from AAH were among the dead animals.

Roberts also revealed during his testimony that he took into evidence several items found in the van. Included were boxes of trash bags, PETA manuals, doggie treats, cat food, animal toys, leashes and a tackle box containing syringes, needles and bottles of liquid substance, later determined by the SBI Lab in Raleigh as the drugs used to euthanize animals.

Following the lunch break, Asbell and Roberts spent the entire afternoon formally entering as state evidence the items found in the van.

During Wednesday morning's opening statements, Asbell said she would prove that Hinkle and Cook acted with malice and without justification or excuse to kill the animals. She said she would also prove that Hinkle and Cook deceived local officials into believing that efforts would be made to find homes for the animals they were collecting.

Blair Brown, who along with Jack Warmack is representing Hinkle, said his client loved animals and performed her job with no criminal intent.

"The only thing she and Andy Cook did wrong on June 15, 2005 was to dump the animals in the dumpster," Brown said. "Placing animals in a dumpster is not cruelty to animals."

Brown went on to praise the work of PETA in northeastern North Carolina, saying they worked to help clean up what he termed as "deplorable" conditions in county operated animal shelters. He added that due to the overpopulation of animals and with animal shelters overflowing with unwanted pets, hundreds of thousands of animals are euthanized every year across the nation.

Brown added that it is PETA's normal operating procedure to place dead animals into heavy duty black trash bags. However, those bags were to be properly disposed in a landfill or incinerated at PETA headquarters.

Mark Edwards, representing Cook, said in his opening statement that his client loved three things: his girlfriend, Penn State football and animals. Edwards said Cook worked to eliminate animal suffering. He added that the animals euthanized in the presence of his client was not performed maliciously, but humanly.

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