Tex Watson: The Grisly Story Of The Making Of Charles Manson's Right-Hand Man

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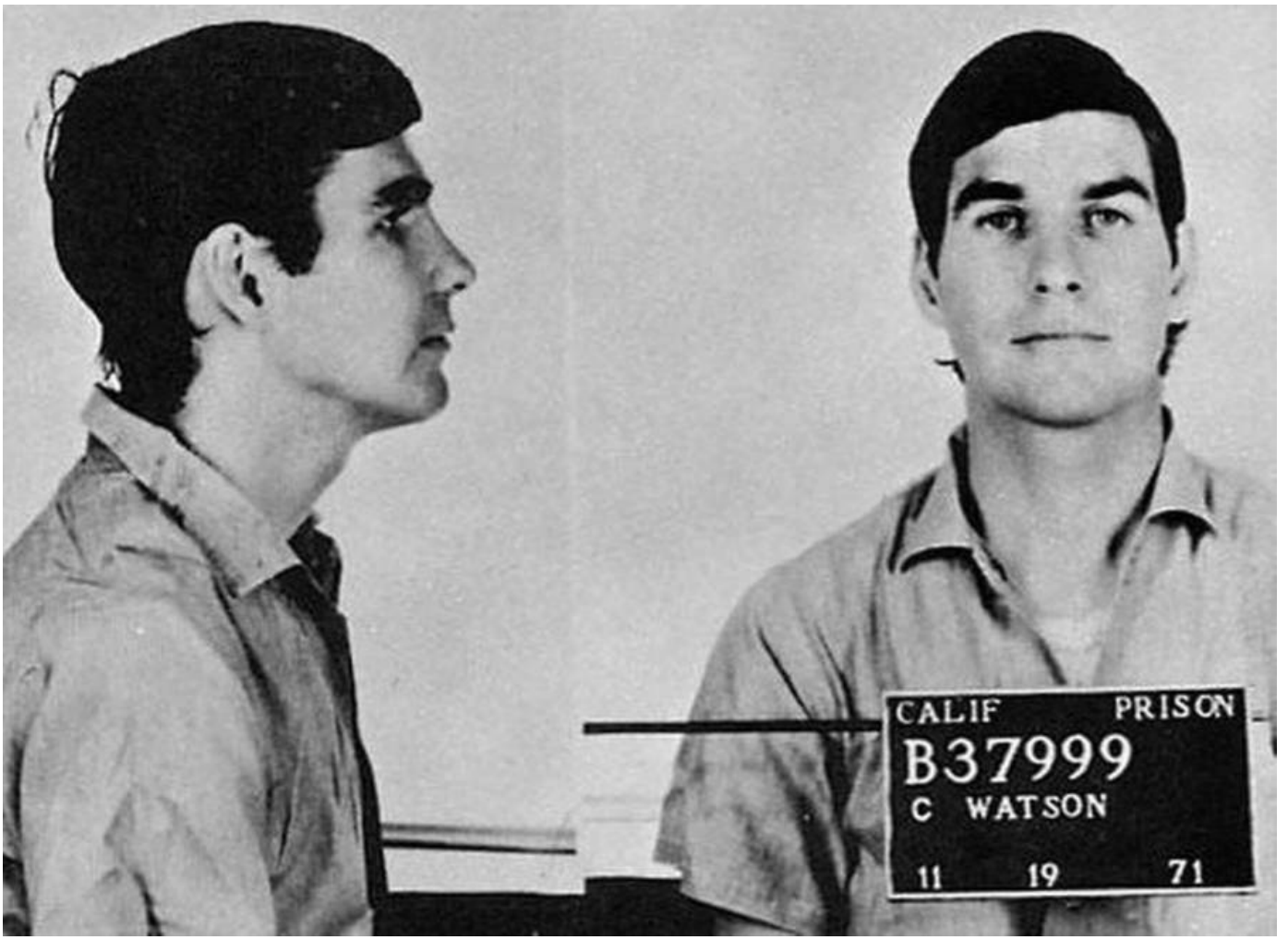


Wikimedia Commons Tex Watson's mugshot from prison in California, 1971.

Tex Watson, known as Charles Watson to his family, was a normal kid — an exceptional one, even. In his hometown of Farmersville, Texas, about an hour northeast of Dallas, he attended church and became a youth group leader in his

home state of Texas, was an A student, and a star athlete in football, basketball, and track. He attended college at North Texas State University.

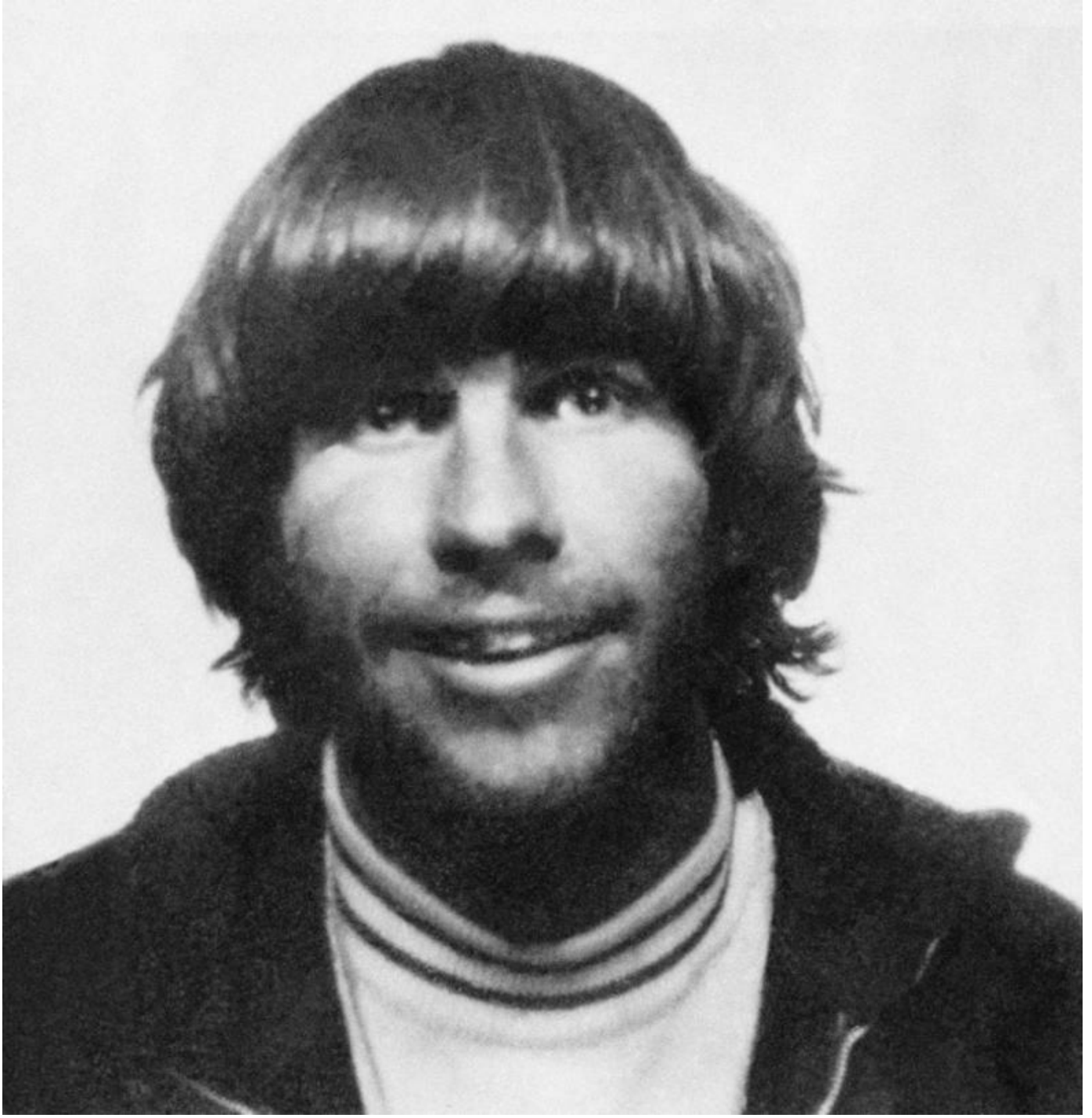
But then, a visit to a friend in California changed Watson's life forever.

Entranced by the hippie counterculture brewing on the West Coast, Watson decided to move there — where he met mass murderer Charles Manson. Watson became Manson's right-hand man and stood by his side through seven grisly murders.

Tex Watson's Early Life

Charles Denton Watson Jr. was born on December 2, 1945, in Dallas, Texas. He grew up in a Methodist family, believing that the best way to achieve the "American Dream" was to work hard, get an education, and lead a moral life.

For a long time, Charles Watson complied with this vision. He was an honor-roll student and a church youth group leader.



Bettmann/Getty ImagesCharles “Tex” Watson.

Upon graduating from high school, Watson chose to go to North Texas State University in Denton. Denton was a far cry from his small-town upbringing and some believe that it was here that Watson’s character began to slip as he descended into the party scene.

When funds ran low, Watson took a job with Braniff Airlines as a baggage handler. He got free flights as a perk of the job, so he flew to Los Angeles about eight times in two months to visit an old fraternity brother.

He quickly fell in love with California — and he never looked back.

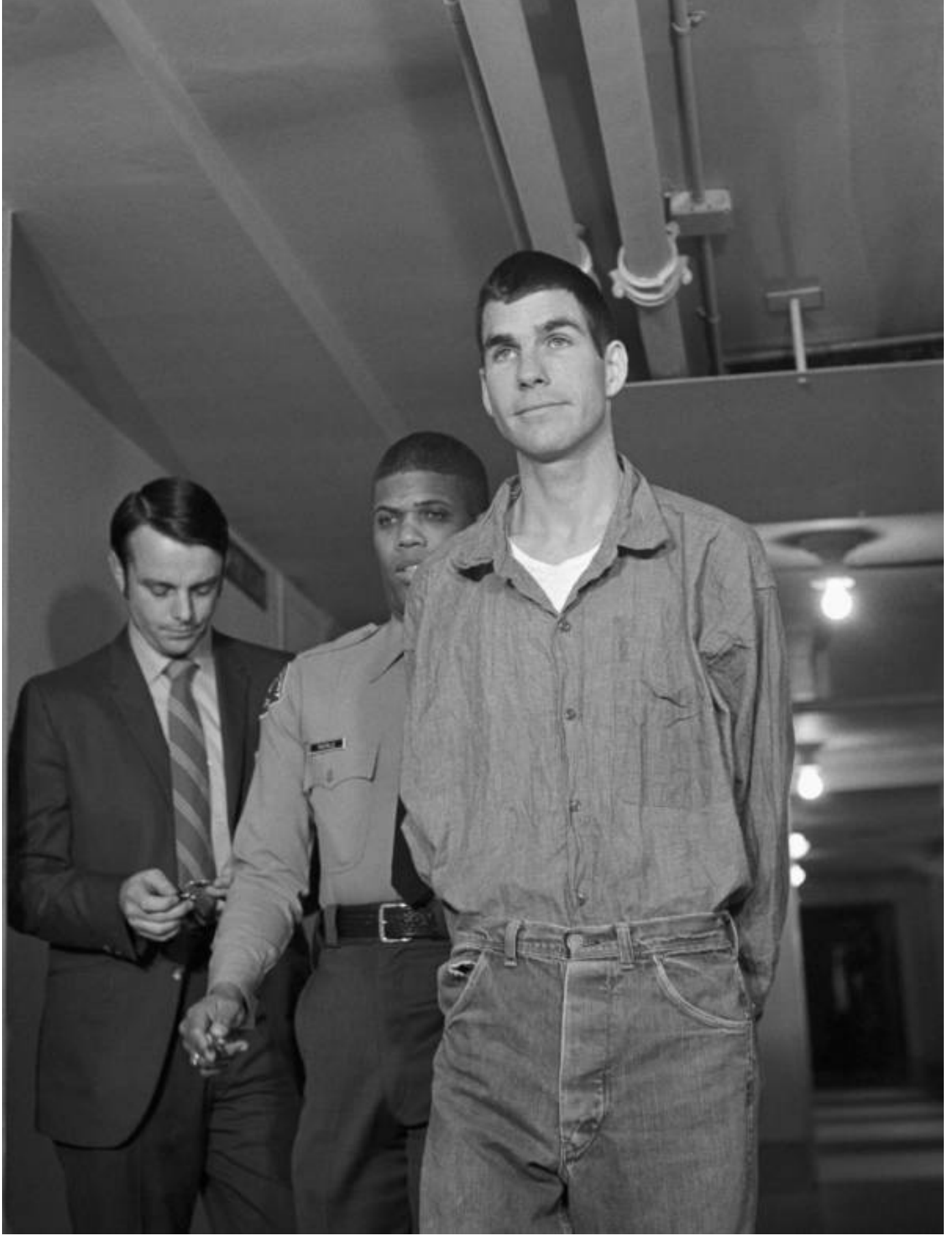
Charles Watson Meets Charles Manson

Charles Watson attended Cal State Los Angeles with the idea that he'd finish earning his degree, but he dropped out after less than a semester to enjoy life in the fast lane. He got a job selling wigs and got his fraternity buddy, David Neale, a job at the same store.

One fateful evening, he was driving home and picked up a hitchhiker.

In Watson's words,

> "Hitchhikers were pretty common on Sunset, and I pulled over to pick one up. When he told me his name was Dennis Wilson, it didn't mean anything to me, but when he said he was one of the Beach Boys, I was impressed."



Bettmann/Getty ImagesCharles “Tex” Watson arrives for his arraignment on charges of conspiracy and murder.

Wilson, The Beach Boys' drummer, then directed Watson to his home on Sunset Boulevard, in the Pacific Palisades area of Los Angeles.

Charles Watson was shocked when he pulled up — the place was enormous, far different from his modest home in Texas — and even more surprised to be invited in.

In the living room, Watson found a man sitting on the floor with his guitar, surrounded by five or six young women. "He looked up," Watson later recalled, "and the first thing I felt was a sort of gentleness, an embracing kind of acceptance and love."

Another man at the house introduced them: "This is Charlie, Charlie Manson."

Hulton Archive / Stringer 1969 police mug shot of American cult leader and murderer Charles Manson.

Then they all got stoned.

Watson was hooked, but not on drugs — at least not at first. It was the sense of community that drew him in.

> “Here I was, accepted in a world I’d never even dreamed about, mellow and at my ease. Charlie murmured in the background, something about love, finding love, letting yourself love. I suddenly realized that this was what I was looking for: love. Not that my parents and brother and sister hadn’t loved me, but somehow, now, that didn’t count. I wanted the kind of love they talked about in the songs — the kind of love that didn’t ask you to be

> anything didn't judge what you were, didn't set up any rules or regulations."

Manson's "family" turned also to LSD. Regular acid trips, combined with Manson's bizarre teachings, led to strange behavior — behavior that started to draw attention to the group.

Tex Watson Becomes Part Of The Manson Family

Tex Watson moved in with Manson and his followers at Spahn Ranch, a run-down former movie set, in November 1968. This is where Watson got his nickname; George Spahn, the 80-year-old, nearly blind owner of the ranch, immediately placed Watson's Texas accent.

In isolation at the ranch, Manson began to preach a strange gospel: he convinced his followers that he was a god-like figure whose every word should be obeyed.

Ralph Crane/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty ImagesWatson lived with the Manson Family at Spahn Ranch from late 1968 until he fled California for Texas in October of 1969.

Manson used the term “Helter Skelter” — borrowed from a Beatles song – to describe a coming “race war” between black and white people. According to him, all his “family” had to do was burrow underneath Death Valley, wait out the battle, and emerge as the only remaining white people and heir apparent to the human legacy.

The only trouble was that it was taking too long for war to break out — which meant the Manson Family would have to incite that war themselves.

Watson described the events leading up to the murders in

an interview:

> "After about two weeks of taking these drugs and becoming just void of conscience, Manson said, 'Hey, I want you to go out and kill these people. To go up to this place and kill everyone who is there.' He gave us the orders, the directions...he told the girls to write something witchy on the walls. Here I was, a naïve Texas boy without a conscience...thinking that the world was going to come to an end tomorrow."

Tex Watson would head down a dark path.

The Manson Family Murders

In the wee hours of Aug. 9, 1969, Watson and three of Manson's girls — Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, and Linda Kasabian — headed to the home of Hollywood director Roman Polanski and his wife, the actress Sharon Tate.

Bettmann/GettyManson family members and murder suspects Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkle, and Leslie van Houton.

Tate was home at 10050 Cielo Drive with four other people: coffee heiress Abigail Folger, ex-boyfriend and Hollywood hair stylist Jay Sebring, Folger's boyfriend and Polanski's friend from Poland Wojciech Frykowski, and visitor Steven Parent.

Atkins later recalled Watson waking up Frykowski in the living room whispering this eerie message: "I'm the devil, and I'm here to do the devil's business."

Watson and the three others proceeded to stab Tate and her friends dozens of times. Watson himself, apparently the only one with a gun, shot 18-year-old Parent four times and

shot Frykowski twice. They scrawled “PIG” on the front door in the victims’ blood before leaving their gruesome crimes behind.

Julian Wasser/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty ImagesRoman Polanski sits on his blood-spattered porch soon after his wife, Sharon Tate, and unborn child were murdered by the Manson Family. The word “PIG” can still be seen scrawled on the door in blood.

Yet Manson wasn’t satisfied with his underlings’ work; he felt they needed a lesson in murder. So the next day, he accompanied the previous night’s killers and supervised the murder of grocery story executive Leno LaBianca and his wife, Rosemary, a businesswoman.

These murders were some of the most gruesome and

shocking in American history.

Tex Watson Tries To Escape

Tex Watson fled to Texas on Oct. 2, 1969, nearly two months after the murders. The race war that Manson predicted never happened.

Michael Haering/Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public LibraryCharles “Tex” Watson following a court appearance on September 28, 1970.

His freedom back home didn’t last long, though. He was arrested on Nov. 30, 1969, and charged with seven counts of first-degree murder. His parents and siblings were shocked and horrified. His attorneys fought his extradition

to California for nine months but ultimately failed.

After losing an attempt to plea insanity, a jury found Watson guilty of seven counts of first-degree murder. As fate would have it, California abolished the death penalty in 1972, a year after Watson was sentenced to death. So instead of the death penalty, he received life in prison.

Tex Watson In Prison

Tex Watson became a born-again Christian in prison and an ordained minister. Weirdly enough, Rosemary LaBianca's daughter supports Watson's ministry, called Abounding Love, though Watson has been accused of using money from his ministry for personal purposes.

Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public LibraryCharles “Tex” Watson holding a copy of his memoir, *Will You Die for Me?*, in 1978.

He claims to feel remorse for the crimes he committed and

the lives he ended 50 years ago. “I hate what I’ve done,” he once said. “I hate having to be the person that had committed a crime that’s so hideous. I hate that.”

Watson tried to explain why he chose to play a role in the slaughter:

> “Growing up a passive person not communicating my desires, I entered college to please my parents. I looked up to older college men as father figures, while fearing failure and angry....The crimes ended up bringing my parents to their knees, causing devastation, hurt, humiliation, and much embarrassment. My siblings were left to hold them up from all the emotional pain, which I so deeply regret.”

The prisoner married and had four kids before California banned conjugal visits in prisons. He divorced in 2003.

In October 2016, a parole board denied Watson’s request for parole for the 17th time since his conviction.

Wikimedia CommonsTex Watson in an undated prison photograph.

One prosecutor framed Tex Watson as an unrepentant mass murderer after the parole hearing: “These were some of the most horrific crimes in California history, and we believe he continues to exhibit a lack of remorse and remains a public safety risk.”

Watson, now 73 years old, remains in prison in San Diego County, just north of the Mexican border.

Though Charles Manson is dead, Charles “Tex” Watson lives on, continuing to appeal the decisions of the court in an as-yet unsuccessful bid for freedom. He has spent much more of his life behind bars than he ever spent free — and it looks like, as a result of his crimes, he’ll die there too.

After this look at Tex Watson, get more details on the Manson family and read this article. Then, take in this sad story about Charles Manson's mother.