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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date: March 30, 2015
Re: Darren Lee Denied Parole

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Modesto, California - Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager announced today that Darren Lee, age 51, of Modesto, was found unsuitable for parole at a hearing of the State Board of Parole Hearings held at San Quentin Prison. Deputy District Attorney Elizabeth O'Hara De Jong appeared at the hearing and argued for continued confinement based on Lee's lack of insight into the crime and his lack of programming in self-help. The Board of Parole Hearings agreed and denied parole for five more years.

On June 25, 1979, Darren Lee (age 16 at the time), along with three crime partners, planned a home invasion of Philip and Kathryn Ranzo's Modesto home. Under the guise of being out of gas, they asked to use the telephone. The telephone was out of order, but Philip Ranzo offered to give them a can of gas. He went to the garage for the subjects and Darren Lee held a gun to him. Darren Lee and his accomplices tied up Mr. Ranzo. Once tied up, Mr. Ranzo was beaten over the head with a baseball bat and an axe. Lee then entered the house where Kathryn Ranzo was in the living room. Mrs. Ranzo was ordered at gun point to go upstairs. The crime partners took her into an upstairs bedroom and proceeded to rape and murder her. They beat Mrs. Ranzo over the head with an axe and stabbed her in the throat. The partners then made their way back to the garage and stabbed Mr. Ranzo multiple times in the face and neck inflicting fatal injuries. Lee and his partners ransacked the house stealing cash and diamonds from the residence. The Ranzos' death orphaned their only child. Their 10-year-old son, Mark, had spent the night at his grandmother's house with a visiting 11-year-old cousin, Mike Naranjo.

Twenty-three hours before the Ranzo murders, Darren Lee and his three accomplices robbed and assaulted a caretaker of a home in Newman. Lee and his accomplices told the caretaker, Leonard Luna, that they had run out of gas. Once inside the house, they "hog-tied" Luna, beat him in the head with a revolver, cut his scalp and knocked him unconscious. They then proceeded to ransack the home, stealing multiple guns and weapons, which Darren Lee used while at the Ranzo home.

Elizabeth O'Hara De Jong argued to the Board that continued confinement was necessary to keep the public safe. Phillip's sister, Sandy Ranzo-Howell, addressed the Board and asked for

the maximum denial of parole. She said that her brother and sister-in-law were beautiful people, not just a “case file.” She added that Phillip was a local pharmacist who loved to help people and Kathryn owned her own beauty shop and worked diligently to reach her own dreams.

Also present was Mark Ranzo, who attended to ensure that Lee was not released on parole.

Mike Naranjo was present at the hearing as well, supporting his family in opposing parole.

Lee was convicted of two counts of murder in the first degree and one count of robbery while armed with a firearm. The case was moved to Sacramento County in 1980 based on a change of venue motion. Originally, Lee was sentenced to life without parole. His sentence was later reduced based on the argument that such a sentence was “cruel and unusual punishment” for a minor. Lee is currently serving two consecutive sentences of 25 years-to-life. He has now served 34 years in prison.

Lee will be scheduled for another hearing in 2020.

In 2012, Lee was found unsuitable for parole and given a 7-year denial with a new hearing date to be held in 2019. However, in light of SB 260 (Youthful Offender Legislation), Lee received an advanced hearing date four years early. He was advised at the end of this hearing that he continues to have the right to advance his hearings if he believes he has made progress towards release.

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