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A MAN OF LEISURE



Cox News Service

Embattled former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell has found relative peace in his 8,000-square-foot home west of Austin.

Feazell can afford to choose his fights

By LAYLAN COPELIN
Cox News Service

AUSTIN — He has been called the \$58 million man — winner of the largest jury award for libel in the United States.

Vic Feazell, the crusading Waco prosecutor who accused Texas Rangers in 1985 of spoon-feeding bogus confessions to killer Henry Lee Lucas, survived what he calls “my story of Biblical proportions.”

He beat federal bribery charges by arguing that authorities targeted him for his attack on the Rangers and for helping discredit Lucas as America’s

most prolific serial killer.

Feazell then won his libel suit against a Dallas television station that questioned whether he had taken bribes from defense attorneys. The station, WFAA, appealed, and in 1991, Feazell settled the historic judgment. He will say only that it was for more than \$10 million.

Three days after the windfall, Feazell, his wife, Berni, and their son, Greg, fled the fishbowl of Waco, a community of 100,000 polarized by the six-year ordeal, to a reclusive life in the hills west of Austin.

“Everyone knew us,” said Berni

Feazell, “and everyone had an opinion about us.”

The family now lives in an 8,000-square-foot home on three acres behind a security gate. Semiretired at 41, Vic Feazell screens calls to his unlisted phone number, picking and choosing what legal causes he will champion.

“If it were up to me, I’d never handle another case,” he said. Quoting Al Pacino’s character in *Godfather III*, Feazell drew his arms to his chest and added, “They keep pulling me

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Embattled attorney finding peace now

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back in."

Last month, Feazell volunteered to defend state Rep. Betty Denton of Waco, who was indicted on charges of lying on her campaign finance reports. He will work free because Denton was among the few Waco officials who did not turn their backs on Feazell when he was accused of wrongdoing.

Last year, Feazell also won a \$21 million judgment against Lone Star Gas for a Belton man who lost his hands and business in an explosion.

Otherwise, Feazell sometimes goes weeks without practicing law. But he remains committed to clearing the man at the heart of his clash with authorities.

Murder confessions

He is helping defend Lucas at no charge in three Florida murders. Feazell is convinced Lucas never killed anyone but his mother in a drunken brawl in 1960, a charge he already has served time for.

"He's innocent," Feazell said of the hundreds of cases Lucas once confessed to. Lucas later recanted all but killing his mother.

Feazell even disputes the "Orange Socks" murder conviction against Lucas in Georgetown. Lucas confessed to the Halloween 1979 murder of an unidentified woman whose body — nude except for a pair of orange socks — was dumped along Interstate 35.

"If they had to try it again, they'd have no evidence beyond his confession," Feazell said.

Feazell is pressing his case for Lucas' innocence wherever he can. Last month, a London television program repeated Feazell's allegations that law enforcement officers, including Williamson County Sheriff Jim Boutwell, fed confessions to Lucas.

Boutwell and Texas Ranger Capt. Bob Prince, who led the task force focusing on Lucas, denied the allegations. To believe Feazell, Prince said, "We'd have to have a massive conspiracy between law enforcement officers all across the nation."

Boutwell, whom Lucas once described as a father figure, disputes Lucas' claim of innocence: "In my mind, I think he's probably responsible for better than 100."

Despite his cause celebre, Feazell said he eventually wants to limit his legal work so he can travel more. He is writing a novel, *Kingpin*, loosely based on a drug dealer he once defended.

He has been negotiating to sell his life story to Hollywood. During an interview last week, Feazell showed a snapshot of himself with Aidan Quinn, who starred in



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Vic Feazell stands in the back yard of his West Austin home.

his first brush with notoriety about 1980.

A young man had been arrested on a minor charge but was lost for weeks in the crowded McLennan County Jail, where other inmates were brutalizing him. After getting the man released, Feazell took the story to reporters and embarrassed county officials.

In 1982, after receiving a \$120,000 fee from a lawsuit against a prominent Waco bank, Feazell decided to enter politics and challenge the incumbent district attorney.

Feazell won, but he ruffled feathers of other county officials with his imperious manner. His office became known as Fort Feazell as he installed a security system and barred defense attorneys from slipping in through the back door.

Gaining reputation

Feazell's reputation spread outside Waco after he met Lucas, a drifter who had become a serial confessor if not a serial killer.

It was late 1983 and Lucas was in a jail cell in Georgetown. About 1,000 law enforcement officials came from across the country to question him about unsolved cases. At one point, he was linked to 360 crimes in 26 states and Canada. Lucas obligingly confessed to the crimes, including three murders in Waco.

Feazell was skeptical about Lucas' claims. With help from then-Attorney General Jim Mattox, he got Lucas transferred to Waco. After a 1985 grand jury investigation, Feazell not only disputed Lucas' confession to the Waco murders but also accused the Texas Rangers and other authorities of using Lucas to clear their unsolved crimes.

Prince said Feazell's attack against the Rangers was wrong. He said the task force primarily scheduled interviews for other law enforcement agencies, which then decided whether Lucas was their murderer.

It surprised Prince that Waco's district attorney would criticize

the Rangers. "Who knows what his motivation was?" Prince said.

Boutwell blames "bad blood" arising from the grand jury Feazell had convened to investigate the Lucas case.

Feazell took his charges to the news media. But instead of prompting an investigation of the investigators, Feazell said, he found himself the target of state and federal officials.

TV news reports, which Feazell said were fed by law enforcement authorities, accused him of favoritism and corruption in handling cases of driving while intoxicated.

In 1986, two months before Feazell faced re-election, federal authorities led him, handcuffed, from his office. At home, his wife and 4-year-old son watched the arrest on television as agents searched their house.

Feazell won re-election anyway. But several defense attorneys, including two former law partners, prepared to testify against Feazell after federal authorities brought tax charges against them. Some said they paid bribes to Feazell for favored treatment on DWI cases.

Acquittal at last

In 1987, a federal jury in Austin acquitted Feazell after a six-week trial. Several jurors said they believed he had been framed. Feazell returned to Waco to resume his duties as district attorney. A year later, still saddled with legal debts, Feazell resigned to enter private practice and pursue his libel case.

"I felt like Jeremiah Johnson," said Feazell, citing a favorite Robert Redford movie. "Every time I turned around, there was another bad guy jumping out at me."

Now that the story is over, Feazell said, "Fiction couldn't be any stranger or wilder."

Other writers may tackle his saga — and Hollywood may yet buy Feazell's story. With no money worries, Feazell said he doesn't care which happens first. "I just want to see the movie."

County Sheriff and Boutwell, the confessions to Lucas.

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Set for life financially, Feazell seems almost at loose ends. He has no daily schedule: "I don't have to schedule anything. I can do anything I want."

Feazell has taken up golf, tried Rollerblading and took surfing lessons while vacationing in Hawaii. He joked about another diversion. "If I get depressed, I can drive my new Mercedes through the Hill Country."

Berni Feazell said the couple did nothing special to celebrate when they finally settled their legal case against WFAA. But she described the past few months as a respite from the trials, publicity and gossip.

Still looking back

Vic Feazell still feels pain and bitterness. "No, it's not like winning the lottery," he said of the libel judgment. "It's like stealing treasure from the dragon and being worried that the dragon is still after you."

Feazell said federal authorities searched his belongings in a warehouse even after he moved to Austin. He said he knows many people remain unsure about him. "I've proven myself to two juries. What else can I do? I've learned to live with ambiguity."

It wasn't always this way. There was a time when Feazell was considered a young, idealistic crusader trying to do right — if promoting himself at the same time.

Feazell, the son of a Baptist preacher, graduated from high school in Leander and worked his way through college and law school by preaching in small churches. He was a probation officer in Bell County, then became a lawyer in Waco, where he got

solved cases. At one point, he was linked to 360 crimes in 26 states and Canada. Lucas obligingly confessed to the crimes, including three murders in Waco.

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