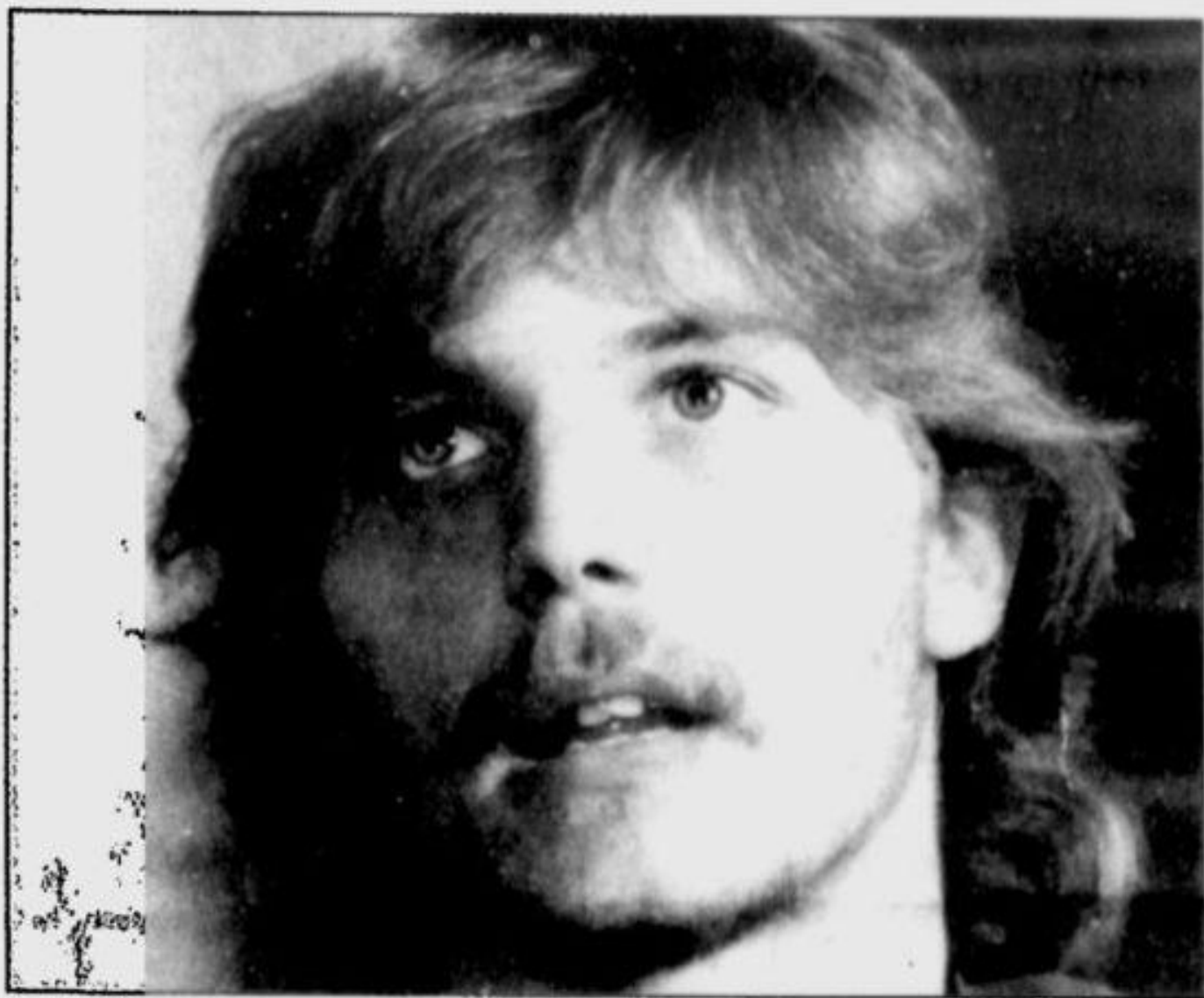


*'I was
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THOMAS COPE



Rape charge against Cope dropped

By **MARTIN MELENDY**

Staff Writer

Thomas Cope's two-week stay in the Spartanburg County jail after his December arrest on rape and kidnapping charges taught him a painful civics lesson.

"I was guilty until proven innocent," Cope said Wednesday after his charges were dismissed because his teen-age accuser changed her story.

The 13-year-old girl who told police she was abducted and raped by three men on Nov. 30 has repeatedly changed her story, authorities said. At one point she told a Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office the rape didn't happen.

"I feel they just wanted a quick conviction," said Cope, 19, of 2 Williams Court. All along he had maintained he was at his job as a roofer and then at home with his wife and child when the girl claimed she was assaulted.

Cope's \$100,000 bond was dropped and he was released from jail Dec. 16 after prosecutors talked with his co-workers and family members.

"Anyone can say, 'Yeah, he done it,'" Cope said. "They ought to have more

'I knew
he didn't
do it.'

TERESA YOTHER



than that."

Cowpens police arrested Cope on Dec. 3 after the girl identified him twice in a lineup of photographs. But she picked no other people.

Cope's wife, Tammy Yother, never doubted him.

"I knew he didn't do it; I wasn't scared," she said.

Seventh Circuit Assistant Solicitor Beverly Jones said Wednesday there is no evidence of a rape or evidence the girl was beaten.

Jones said another reason the charges weren't pursued was because Cope had a "verifiable alibi." Jones also said the girl has said she can't identify Cope as an attacker.

The charges were dropped by Magistrate Georgia Anderson when Jones said she had no evidence to present at Cope's preliminary hearing.

Cope and his attorney, Roger Poole, believe Cowpens police had an obligation to check out Cope's side of the story before he was arrested and jailed.

"Nobody bothered to check my alibi," Cope said.

It wasn't until Poole brought Southeastern Roofing Co. co-workers to talk with Solicitor's Office investigators that authorities heard Cope's side.

"I think police are under an obligation to speak with any alleged alibi witnesses," Poole said.

Cowpens Police Chief Wayne Butler said he wanted Cope arrested on the girl's word in case he fled.

"We felt like we had enough probable cause," Butler said. "I can't explain why she changed her story."

Butler said his department would continue to investigate the girl's allegations, even though they have changed.

"If it did happen, I wish they would catch him," Cope said. "If it didn't hap-
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pen, I don't think there was ever a need for this."

Butler said there might be two suspects living out of state. But the girl told police she was abducted by three men as she walked on a trail near the practice field of Cowpens Junior High School.

The girl told police three young men abducted her and then took her to an unknown location and raped her at gunpoint.

The girl, almost naked, walked to a nearby apartment complex and asked for help from a woman doing laundry.

"There could be some uncertainty, but I feel like something happened," Butler said. "No child would walk half a mile in cold weather almost nude."

Butler defended his department's arrest of Cope.

"You have to believe the victim especially the story she had," he said. "I'm real sorry it happened."