

Chowchilla kidnapper granted parole at 20th hearing

By Tim
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California Men's Colony inmate James Schoenfeld, one of three men convicted in the 1976 Chowchilla school-bus kidnapping, in a 2008 handout photo from the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo. A parole hearing for Schoenfeld was held Wednesday at the prison. MARK CROSSE — Bee file photo |[Buy Photo](#)

Parole for notorious kidnapper

- *A two-member hearing panel finds Chowchilla school bus kidnapper James Schoenfeld, now 63, fit for parole.*
- *The decision comes in Schoenfeld's 20th parole hearing since his imprisonment for the 1976 crime.*
- *Younger brother Richard Schoenfeld, was paroled in 2012. A third kidnapper, Fred Woods, could have a parole hearing this fall.*

James Schoenfeld, one of three men who kidnapped a busload of Chowchilla schoolchildren and their bus driver almost 40 years ago, was granted parole Wednesday in San Luis Obispo, where he is imprisoned at the California Men's Colony.

This was the 20th time that the state Board of Parole Hearings had considered parole for the 63-year-old Schoenfeld since his conviction in 1977.

Details of the decision were not immediately available, but California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokesman Bill Sessa said the ruling will now go through an internal review that could take up to four months before a recommended parole date is sent to Gov. Jerry Brown. Wednesday's hearing was conducted by a two-member panel of one parole commissioner and a deputy commissioner.

Once that review is complete and a parole date proposed, Sessa said, the governor has several options: letting the parole order stand, changing or modifying the parole order, or referring it to the entire seven-member parole board for reconsideration at one of its regular monthly meetings.

Schoenfeld was 24 years old when he, his younger brother Richard Schoenfeld, and their friend Frederick Woods stopped Dairyland Union School District bus driver Ed Ray and 26 children on July 15, 1976. The kidnapers, all from wealthy Bay Area families, were armed with guns and wore masks as they stopped the bus, boarded it and drove to a bamboo thicket at the edge of the Berenda Slough near Chowchilla before herding their captives into a pair of vans. They then drove the vans to a quarry near Livermore and moved Ray and the children — who were ages 5 to 14 — through a hole into a buried trailer stocked with mattresses, food and water and equipped with fans and ventilation.

The kidnapers planned to ask for a \$5 million ransom for their hostages. But before they could make their demand, Ray and the children managed to dig their way through the dirt-plugged hole to freedom about 16 hours after they were imprisoned.

Richard Schoenfeld surrendered to authorities about a week after the kidnapping and implicated his older brother and Woods, who were arrested a week later — James Schoenfeld in Menlo Park, Woods in Canada. After lengthy legal wrangling and a change of court venue from Madera County to Alameda County, all three men eventually pleaded guilty to kidnapping for ransom and were sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. An appeals court later reduced their sentences to life with the potential for parole.

Thirty-nine years after the ordeal, the kidnapping continues to stir intense emotions for the victims.

Jennifer Brown Hyde, who was 9 years old when she and her 10-year-old brother were entombed in the buried moving van, wrote a letter to the parole board describing the ongoing psychological trauma. "I was honestly brutal," said Brown Hyde, now 48 and living in Tennessee. "I wrote that they buried me alive, they stole my childhood and caused me immense emotional pain over the years. It affected my life, my parents' lives and my children's lives."

"For me, it's having to deal with hatred and anger toward other human beings, and that's a struggle that almost 40 years later I still have to deal with," she added. "Until recently I slept with a night light. I have anxiety attacks when I'm in a confined space, and it's a problem living in the South when we have tornado warnings and we have to take cover in storm shelters. ... They took away my ability to be free."

Brown Hyde said it's also affected her ability as a mother to allow her two kids to have a normal childhood. "You don't go from being buried alive and thinking you're going to die to having a normal childhood," she said. "I'm fortunate I'm not incarcerated or hooked on drugs, which is how some of the kids dealt with it. ... I'm as OK as a broken person can be."

At least two of the kidnapping victims, Lynda Carrejo Labendeira and Jodi Heffington-Medrano, attended Wednesday's hearing, as well as senior prosecutor Sally Moreno from the Madera County District Attorney's Office and representatives of the Alameda County District Attorney, to argue against parole for James Schoenfeld. (An earlier version of this story misspelled Labendeira's last name.)

Madera County District Attorney David Linn said he was disappointed, but not necessarily surprised, by the decision to grant parole.

"We're very much opposed to releasing him," Linn said Wednesday. "We sent our senior prosecutor there to argue in person, rather than a letter, because we felt it is important enough for the people of Chowchilla to make sure he stay ir

prison for as long as possible.”

Linn added that he's met with several survivors from the kidnapping, “and they're still traumatically affected.” That's one of the main points he asked Moreno to make to the parole board.

But a statewide movement toward reducing prison overcrowding apparently made Schoenfeld's parole more likely than in prior years, Linn said. “The word has been on the street within government circles for the past couple of months that they were going to go ahead and grant it,” he said. “Considering what's been happening throughout the whole California prison system, I'm not surprised.”

Linn said there is not much that his office can do now except to support the kidnapping survivors. “I did everything I could to resist it. Even his current attorneys wanted to meet with me and I refused to do that,” he said. “What I want to do now is reach out to the victims, let them know we're here for them.”

Schoenfeld was last denied parole in a March 2013 hearing in San Luis Obispo. Richard Schoenfeld was paroled in 2012. Woods remains in prison after he was denied parole in November 2012 and could be up for a parole hearing this fall.

Brown Hyde said she no longer fears her kidnappers. “But for me it's a feeling of injustice because we were told they would never get out,” she said. “They got life in prison. It feels like a betrayal because the legal team that put them there, the DA and the judge, later came out on their side and said they never should have served this long. That's what I have a hard time with. ... Money can obviously buy you freedom.”

“I have to deal with the fact that I still struggle with forgiveness,” Brown Hyde said. “I will never forget, but it was such a traumatic ordeal that even as a Christian it's difficult for me to forgive. That's how bad it was.”

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