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LEE MAN FATALLY SHOT IN ENCOUNTER WITH POLICE

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Article Text:

ST. HELENS -- Jennifer Shelton knew there would be trouble when she saw her friend Luke Thorpe walk through the front door of her family's general store Monday evening carrying a shotgun.

He headed straight for a box of shotgun shells and asked to buy them. She tried to talk him out of it, but was too scared to tell him no.

Shelton said Thorpe told another store worker he would die that night and kill the first cop he saw.

About an hour later, Thorpe was shot to death by a Kentucky State Police trooper behind the general store near St. Helens, a community about 7 miles northeast of Beattyville. Police said they acted after Thorpe fired at the officers.

It was the second fatal shooting of an armed suspect involving the state police in two days. A Letcher County man was shot Sunday after a confrontation with police in a cemetery. In that case, police said, the man had a knife and was moving toward the officers.

In Lee County, authorities said Thorpe, 37, of Butler Ridge, had been fighting with his estranged wife, Virginia Thorpe. She had filed a petition for a restraining order against Thorpe earlier on Monday.

According to the petition, Thorpe grabbed and squeezed his estranged wife's arm and threatened to hit her. He also threatened to kill her and retaliate if she called police.

Witnesses said Thorpe was wandering through the St. Helens area near his home Monday firing the shotgun randomly and threatening violence.

Thorpe's friends and acquaintances said he would frequently have these outbursts after he had been drinking.

"He was a good old boy until he got on the liquor," said Thomas Shelton, Jennifer Shelton's husband. "When he got wild, he was wild."

Thorpe had been cited twice in May for alcohol intoxication by the Lee County sheriff's office.

Monday's incident began when Lee County Sheriff Harvey Pelfrey went to the St. Helen's community to investigate reports that Thorpe was firing the shotgun. He also was supposed to serve Thorpe with the papers on his wife's emergency protective order.

Pelfrey witnessed Thorpe's actions and called for backup from the KSP in Richmond.

Troopers arrived on the scene and found Thorpe in a grassy lot behind the general store.

Shelton confirmed police reports that Thorpe fired at the officers first and then reloaded and continued to threaten officers.

Police said Thorpe raised his gun during the standoff to fire at an officer, but Trooper Brian Judd shot Thorpe first.

State police didn't say how many shots were fired, but Jennifer Shelton, who heard the shooting, said Judd fired three times.

Thorpe was hit once, she said.

Thorpe was pronounced dead a short time later at a hospital in Jackson. State police said an autopsy was conducted yesterday by the state medical examiner's office in Frankfort.

KSP procedure calls for Judd to be placed on leave while the investigation is under way. Three KSP lieutenants are in charge of the investigation.

Thorpe's neighbors said they thought the officers should have worked harder to end the standoff peacefully.

"They had always been able to talk him out of it before," said Herbert Noe, an owner of a grocery store where Thorpe sometimes worked. "I don't think he had that kind of trouble in him." But KSP investigators said Thorpe posed a threat to the officers.

"Right now, that's the way it appears," said Sgt. Brent Roper.

Others said the normally mild-mannered Thorpe had a more violent streak.

Thomas Shelton said Thorpe was shot more than a decade ago outside the same general store where he was killed.

During one of his alcohol-related episodes, the store's owner had locked Thorpe out and told him not to come in.

When Thorpe tried to break in the front door, the owner shot him with a .22-caliber rifle, Shelton said. Thorpe was only slightly injured, but it helped solidify his reputation in the community.

"He was a nice guy," Shelton said, "but a lot of people were pretty scared of him when he got wild."

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He fired at trooper, officials say; shooting is KSP's second in 2 days

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