

Robinson — From 41

\$1.75 million libel suit filed in 1977 by Ann Kurth against Thompson and the book's publishers that is expected to come to trial in Austin in June; a \$5.2 million suit filed by Thompson in Fort Worth in 1978 against Ann Kurth for telling a newspaper that Thompson "Clifford Irvingized" his book; a libel suit that was tried in 1978 in which Longview policeman John Raymer tried to collect \$1.5 million from Thompson but lost the case.

And CBS, which had planned to make "Blood and Money" into a multi-million dollar television mini-series, is suing producer David Merrick to renege its contract with him and recover its funds.

Robinson, 43, charges that the book as a whole implies he was responsible for the slaying of John Hill and has damaged his reputation. Thompson says, "All of my statements of fact about (Robinson) appearing in the book are true and accurate."

Although Paulus — who is described in the book as a close friend of Robinson but who Robinson says was only an acquaintance — was convicted of paying for Hill's murder, the trial did not establish a clear motive for Paulus. The confused gunman, Bobby Vandiver, was killed by Longview policeman Raymer before coming to trial.

Courtroom observers predict that when Robinson's libel case comes to trial, if it does, a spectacle will erupt that will make previous testimony involving the death pail in comparison.

Robinson is particularly angered over a line in the book's final chapter, in which Thompson writes that Robinson "walked to the very brink of confession" of his involvement in the Hill murder in a conversation with Thompson the night of Lilla Paulus' conviction.

In a sworn affidavit filed in Houston federal court, Thompson goes one step further: "In point of fact, at one point plaintiff crossed that brink: I asked him that night if he had hired Hill's killing, and he replied, 'Yeah, but prove it.'"

"He was grinning when he said this and then continued, 'Hell no. I didn't kill anybody.'"

Robinson denies that he spoke to Thompson that night, much less entertained him in his home. Thompson, a former Houston reporter, at that time was do research for "Blood and Money" and the interview was one of "eight to 10" he says he conducted with Robinson in his River Oaks home. Robinson denies that he ever said, even in playfulness, that he set up Hill's murder.

"I had nothing to do with getting John killed," Robinson says today. "I didn't want him dead. I wanted him tried."

He also says the book has subjected him to public hatred, contempt and ridicule and has resulted in his losing friends and business contracts.

On the day of his pretrial hearing last week, Robinson, a victim of Parkinson's disease, sat outside the judge's chambers, tapping his cane anxiously and impatiently on the courthouse floor. His coloring was sickly. He spoke tiredly. A cough periodically interrupted his sentences.

"I'm all crippled up," he told an acquaintance, not asking for pity but stating the obvious. "I have a good day. Then a bad day. This is a bad day."

The trial, scheduled to start Monday, was postponed last week and no new date set. The pretrial hearing centered on a motion by Robinson's lawyers to withdraw from the case, a move the judge has yet to decide.

Court briefs filed by W. Robert Brown of the Houston law firm of Liddell, Sapp, Zivley, Brown & LaRosa, cite "irreconcilable conflicts" with Robinson and claim the attorneys have been unable to communicate with their client.

Robinson wants Brown to continue as his counsel — "They're good and I've paid them an ungodly amount of money" — but would not talk about reports that his attorneys' request for more money is the root of the problem.

U.S. District Judge Ross Sterling is expected to rule on Brown's motion in the next several days.

Also curious about the cause of the conflict between Robinson and his lawyer is Thompson's lawyer, Tom Larence, of the Houston firm Larence and Thompson. Larence's partner is Larry Thompson, the author's brother.

In a brief, Larence wrote that he was ready for the Monday trial but that Robinson's lawyer wants out because he recognizes the validity of the defendants' motion for a summary judgment on their behalf, a ruling by the judge without a trial.

Thompson's lawyer bases his motion on the claim that Ann Robinson is a "public figure," and therefore cannot be libeled unless it is proved the author knowingly disregarded the truth.

Robert M. Callagy, of the New York law firm Satterlee & Stephens and a specialist in publishing law, reviewed the book for its publishers, Doubleday & Co. Inc. (hardcover) and Dell Publishing Co. Inc. (paperback) prior to its publication. Callagy wrote in an affidavit that Thompson substantiated material that he questioned "and/or agreed to modification in the text itself" to his satisfaction.

Thompson, 46, recently came out with a new book, "Serpentine." He lives in California and teaches a creative writing course at the University of Southern California. The Texas native is at work on a new book about three boyhood friends who grew up to become celebrities. Murder, trials and intrigue fashion the fictional plot.

Robinson sold his River Oaks home and moved with his wife, Eileen, to Pensacola, Fla., to escape "the hullabaloo" and persistent reporters, he says.

"It's a community of old people where you can live cheaply. Eat dinner out for \$3.98. I don't do anything but save what little I've got left," says the man who paid \$21,500 in the 1960s for a show horse for his daughter.

In his next breath he says some mineral rights he owns in the Florida Panhandle "will be worth an awful lot of money sometime." He's not sure when.

"We have no one to leave anything to."

What about Robert, the 20-year-old son of Joan and John Hill, who is a sophomore at a Colorado college and was legally under the guardianship of Hill's third wife, Connie?

"In what way have I got Robert," Robinson says, with weary resignation. His grandson has refused to speak to Robinson for several years.

Robinson's home, a half mile from the ocean, is crowded with mementos of his dead daughter.

The tragedy of all the wasted lives, Robinson says, is that "I think they've forgotten about Joan. We think about Joan all the time. It's never off our minds."