

## Chowchilla bus kidnapper James Schoenfeld's own words add insight to crime

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The questioning began in the afternoon with parents like Joan Brown.

“Jeffrey, Jennifer? Where are you? Come on, you guys. I know you’re hiding. Don’t play games with me now.”



James Schoenfeld is one of three men convicted in the kidnapping of 26 children and their school bus driver nearly 40 years ago in Chowchilla. He was granted parole this year and released from prison Aug. 7.

Something was wrong at the Browns' Chowchilla home. What was it?

Then she noticed. The peanut butter wasn't out. There were no chairs in front of the television. She looked at the clock. It was 5 p.m. Where could they be?

From there, one of America's most bizarre crimes against children began to play out over two horrific to joyous days. Twenty-six schoolchildren from Dairyland Elementary School and their bus driver, Ed Ray, were abducted from their school bus by three young men, transported hours around the state in two vans, then buried alive in a moving van. In a daring escape, the bus driver and the older boys clawed their way out of their underground prison, leading the younger children across a rock quarry in a sprint to freedom.

And so, until last month, we have been left with many of those questions. That has changed since James Schoenfeld's testimony to the State Board of Parole in April was released in a [transcript obtained by the Bay Area News Group](#).

From the beginning, there was little to go on but those horrendous questions.

The three male kidnapers were in their 20s. Frederick Newhall Woods, James Schoenfeld and his brother, Richard, were caught within two weeks and given life sentences after pleading guilty to kidnapping charges.

James recently was released on parole after being incarcerated for 39 years. His younger brother, Richard, was released a couple of years ago. Woods remains in prison.

I wrote a book myself with a colleague, Sandra Tompkins, edited by Desa Belyea, then The Bee's features editor. The motive was always said to be kidnapping for ransom, end of story. But any thinking person, survivor or parent is tormented with additional questions.

Why? The young men were healthy and wealthy by any measure. They came from good homes, went to college. Why torment a school bus filled with country kids when none came from great wealth? Why not capture a billionaire if money was the goal? The questions go on and on.

Finally, we have some answers. The questions are ours. The answers are edited excerpts from the transcript, which is public record.

## **Why did you take the children?**

*In Atherton, I was no longer something special. I was just – in fact I was not special at all, so I wanted to be – have that feeling again. I wanted to fit in with these new people that we moved next to. And, you know, my friend's parents had twin Ferraris, you know, his and hers with telephones in them. I had no money of my own. My dad lent me some money. I bought a Jaguar. I found out that the insurance was more than I made in a whole year, so two months later I had to sell the Jaguar. I was 19. I was working full time as a busboy. I was also going to college.*

*I had envy issues trying to fit in with one crowd, and my other friends, they were getting married. They were buying houses. They were on their own career paths, and I was falling behind them and I just figured I need money. Money would solve all my problems. I felt I couldn't earn my way out of my problems.*

James was about \$23,000 in debt. At the time of the crime, with an eerie choice of words, he said he felt “buried. I felt there was no way out.”

Some of the money he owed to Fred Woods, his crime partner, as his share in another money-making scheme. Woods had borrowed money from a cousin to move to a mansion in Mountain View. That did not pan out. They used some of the money to buy cars and boats from surplus. And to finance the kidnapping.

## **Why didn't you ask for money from your father?**

*My dad had an investment group that hired a man to sell bonds, and he ran off with \$5 million, so I knew my father was having financial problems of his own.*

*I was rationalizing. Nobody would do this if they weren't lying to themselves. I twisted things around. I was telling myself I'd never get out of debt. My dad was pressuring me to get a profession. He wanted the best for me. He wanted me to have a profession, something I could fall back on. I wasn't ready to settle down and get a profession. I just wanted to play. I wanted to ride motorcycles and fly balloons and stuff.*

*I had very low self-esteem because since high school, everything I'd tried I'd failed at. I tried getting my broker's license. The real estate market fell through. I couldn't even get a job as a salesperson. My dad couldn't accept failure or weakness, so I couldn't tell anybody in my family about what was going on with me.*

## **Why a kidnapping?**

*I saw a headline. Ronald Reagan put out a headline to the press that the state of California had a billion-dollar surplus. I kept thinking the state's got more than it needs. They won't miss \$5 million. I wasn't going to commit any crimes, risk my life or risk my reputation for anything less than a million, so a bank robbery wouldn't work. A drug deal wouldn't work. I didn't know anything except a kidnapping that I'd seen on TV that would provide sufficient reward.*

## **Why did you choose these children?**

*We needed multiple victims to get multiple millions. We picked children because they are precious. The state would be willing to pay for them. And they don't fight back. They are vulnerable. They will mind. They will do what we tell them to do. And I was a coward not to pick a different target.*

## **What was the plan?**

*We hijack the school bus. We hold them in the underground van. The state pays the ransom. We're happy forever. All our troubles are solved. We let the victims go. Everybody's happy. I lied to myself thinking no one would get hurt. I had no consideration for the feeling and the trauma I was causing.*

## **How did you come up with the buried van idea?**

*The first place I picked was a barn. Mr. Woods had seven acres in Fremont that had a barn on it. But the barn was old and full of holes. You'd need four people on each side to keep anybody from escaping. So I thought, how about a moving van? I just wanted something that everyone would fit into that they couldn't get out of. We thought that in a moving van they could just cut through sheet metal walls and get out. Then the idea came to bury the van. If it was underground, they couldn't just cut through the walls and get out.*

## **Do you really understand what you did?**

*The 27 people aren't the only victims. In (a class for long-term offenders) we take a pen and we draw a circle and another circle and they actually take the students and they put us in another circle. OK, you're the perpetrator and you're the victim. And then the next circle they move the students in there. OK, you're the family of the victim. You're the family of the perpetrator. And then they put more students in the next circle. And they show that it just starts with the crime and it just spreads out.*

*They teach you a parent is affected by something that happens to a child because the parents expect to be able to protect the child. But when they can't protect the child, something happens. They feel responsible, so they've got anxiety, bitterness, anger, self-esteem. They weren't able to protect their child. The same thing happened to all of their parents. We took their kids, and the parents couldn't do anything about it.*

*We took the victims by force. They were completely helpless. That leaves a victim with poor self-esteem. They might even question God. There is emotional, financial, spiritual and physical injuries. I put them in a place that endangered their life. There was a hundred things that could have happened that this really could have come out far worse.*

*Gail Marshall, a member of The Fresno Bee Editorial Board, also is a co-author with former Bee reporter Sandra Tompkins of ["Kidnapped at Chowchilla: The School Bus Hijacking."](#)*