

Trial of ex-LTBMU chief's accused murderer begins

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

In 1990, when his father was about to remarry, Andy Harris' grandmother took him aside and told him there was something he should know about his stepmother-to-be.

Four years earlier, the grandmother told him, Colleen Ann Batten had been tried for murder in the shotgun killing of her first husband, James Batten. It was a sensational murder mystery, played out in 1986 in a Placerville courtroom as a trial headline in the local *Mountain Democrat* asked the question, "Colleen Batten – murderess or martyr?"

The jury found her not guilty. Andy Harris, now 51 and an attorney in Grass Valley, said he questioned his father, Robert Edward "Bob" Harris, a U.S. Forest Service supervisor, avid baseball umpire, traveler and conservationist. He said his dad had known Colleen as a high school teenager in Oakland and that they had reunited decades later.

Bob Harris told his son that Colleen had a "hard life," that the shooting of her husband was "unfortunate." But he said he cherished her and was determined to marry her. "He said, 'I love her, and I want to provide for her.' That was basically his response," Andy Harris said. "That was about as much as he wanted to talk about it."

Now Colleen Ann Harris – the former Colleen Batten – is facing a second murder trial for the shotgun killing of another husband.

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