

“The State’s Case”

Directions: Complete the questions below as you watch Chapter 2: “The State’s Case” from the FRONTLINE film *Death by Fire*. Then discuss the questions that follow with your group.

*As soon as the fire was out, the search for the cause of the blaze began.
Investigators came to believe that this was a crime scene.*

1. Why did fire investigators believe the cause of the fire wasn’t accidental?

2. What evidence did fire investigators find on the aluminum threshold plate that led them to believe the fire was deliberately started?

3. How did Willingham’s demeanor cause investigators to suspect that he might be guilty of starting the fire?

4. How did Willingham’s lack of injuries cause doubt in his story of trying to save his children?

5. How did Willingham’s court-appointed attorney feel about his innocence or guilt? What was his recommendation to Willingham about pleading guilty?

6. Why do you think Willingham refused to plead guilty to avoid the death penalty, despite pressure from the police and his attorney to do so?

7. What details were provided by jailhouse informant Johnny Webb? How did his testimony and the posters in Willingham’s room further implicate him as guilty?

8. What were the details of Stacy Willingham's statements during the trial?

9. How did Todd Willingham's treatment of his family possibly affect the way the jury viewed the evidence?

Discussion Questions:

- Review the state's evidence and identify which items are related to the fire investigation, which are related to Willingham's personal relationships, and which represent hearsay evidence of someone testifying about what another person has said. Which of these do you think is the most credible in a court of law?
- Todd Willingham's behavior toward his wife was described as abusive. How much does this lend credibility to the charge against him of the murder of his children?
- Do you believe that Willingham's lack of injuries and police investigator Jimmie Hensley's observation that Willingham lacked any remorse are evidence of Willingham's guilt?
- How important do you think the testimony was from jailhouse informant Johnny Webb?
- Why do you think prosecutors believed Webb's testimony was credible? Why might it not be?