Jack B. Swerling

THEY CALL HIM

'Mr. Murder'

By J.F. Feild

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The 6-foot 5-inch, 250-pound man in the double-breasted, dark blue suit looks like a well-dressed detective tackle or a professional wrestler — anything but "Mr. Murder."

But Jack B. Swerling of Swerling & Harpoldian here, has earned that sobriquet from his courtroom colleagues and opponents for having had a hand in nearly all the state's big murder cases in the last decade.

"He's one of the top criminal attorneys in the state. If there is a big murder here, he's going to get the call. He has a reputation around the state for taking the murders on no one else will touch," said Richland County prosecutor James C. Anderson, who has faced Mr. Swerling in court many times.

Mr. Swerling has given plenty of opportunity to play his trade, being called on to represent mass murderers and serial killers as well as some of the state's single murder homicide cases.

In his 15-year career as a defense attorney, Mr. Swerling has handled 250 murder cases in the state. That equals almost a murder a trial a month.

"Once you try a homicide case, every other case pales in comparison to Mr. Murder. He is the ultimate human drama," said Mr. Anderson. "These cases involve a lot of emotion and I get emotional about them," said the 65-year-old attorney.

I've tried so many of them by now that I feel comfortable with them. They are second nature. I guess I've made them my specialty," he said.

The case that really propelled Mr. Swerling to prominence in South Carolina legal circles was his court appointment in 1982 to defend Donald "Pee Wee" Gaskins, a convicted murderer charged with carrying out the contract killing of a fellow death-row inmate in prison.

Mr. Swerling spent eight weeks trying to convince a Richland County jury that Mr. Gaskins was not hired by a South Carolina family to send a bodytrapped radio to Rudolph Tyner on revenge for Mr. Tyner's killing of an elderly couple.

The radio killed Mr. Tyner instantly when he turned it on in his cell at a Columbia prison.

Although Mr. Gaskins — who also was serving multiple life sentences for killing nine people — ultimately was sentenced to death, Mr. Swerling's name was in the newspapers throughout the trial and the case later was turned into a TV movie.

"That case established me as a criminal attorney. People know that if I would take Pee Wee's case, I would take their armed robbers." Mr. Swerling said in State v. Gaskins, 242 S.E.2d 240 (S.C. 1985).

Mr. Gaskins brought him fame, what solidified Mr. Swerling's reputation as "Mr. Murder" was when he was hired to defend Larry Gene Bell, an electronics technician accused of kidnapping and killing two girls in 1985.

Mr. Bell, a sexual sadist with a history of assaulting young women, kidnapped the two girls — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week — two girls a week -

Mr. Swerling took a lot of heat for agreeing to defend Mr. Bell, and a sheriff's deputy who had to keep a 24-hour watch on his Columbia home because of death threats.

"Being a defense attorney is like being a con man. You are the only one on your side of the barroom that gives a damn about your client and you have to face down the whole town to make sure he gets a fair shake," Mr. Swerling said.

"Representing someone like Larry Gene Bell keeps the system honest. Making sure Mr. Bell receives all his rights protects all of our clients," the attorney said.

Some of Mr. Swerling's adversaries poke at his record in capital cases, saying he's put more people on the electric chair than any prosecutor in the state.

We kid him, but he really does a great job. He takes the worst cases and does an exemplary job. He's very smooth in court and gives a great jury argument," said his courtroom adversary Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Swerling said he doesn't base his success in murder cases on whether he wins an acquittal.

"It's a guy who comes in with murder charges against him and comes out convicted of manslaughter that's a win," the attorney said.

Tried success even in a loss when I knew my client...