

# \$461,000 awarded in brutality lawsuit

■ Monroe County will have to pay damages after a jury ruled this morning in favor of a Frenchtown Township woman.

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Evening News staff writer

A civil trial jury ruled today in favor of a Frenchtown Township woman who claimed she was treated roughly by Monroe County sheriff's deputies in 1986.

The verdict was returned about 10 a.m. today after 2½ days of deliberation.

The case was tried in Monroe County Circuit Court before Judge Daniel L. Sullivan.

The jury awarded Martha Vandergriff, 57, \$376,000 in compensatory damages and punitive damages of \$50,000 against former Sheriff Walter Trowbridge, \$25,000 against Deputy Maryanne Ortman and \$10,000 against Deputy Lois Bivins, officials said.

Damages will be paid by Monroe Coun-

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ty's insurance carrier, Risk Management Authority, which defended the case. The county has a \$75,000 deductible.

Monroe County Administrator/Auditor Charles A. Londo said he was in the courtroom when the verdict was read.

Asked whether the county would appeal, he said, "I really don't know; I haven't spoken to attorneys yet."

The suit resulted from an incident at Mrs. Vandergriff's home on March 2, 1986, according to Mrs. Vandergriff's attorney, Michael Haddad of Goodman, Eden, Milender and Bedrosian of Detroit.

Deputies Ortman and Bivins arrived at the Vandergriff house to arrest Mrs. Vandergriff's son, Johnie Vandergriff. The deputies had a warrant, but did not bring it with them, Mr. Haddad said.

The deputies "went on a grudge" to arrest Mr. Vandergriff because the family's dog had bitten another deputy, Mr. Haddad said.

Unprovoked, Deputy Ortman

attacked Mr. Vandergriff, kneeling him in the groin, Mr. Haddad said.

"She wanted to lord some authority over him," Mr. Haddad said. Meanwhile, Deputy Bivins only looked on, he said.

The defense, however, claimed the deputies were attacked first. Deputy Ortman testified she is 5-foot-4, 120 pounds. She said she was picked up by Mr. Vandergriff's brother, Greg, thrown onto a couch and struck in the face. Johnie Vandergriff then jumped on top of her and choked her to the point of unconsciousness, she said in court.

Deputy Ortman also said Mrs. Vandergriff struck her in the face and shoved her.

But Mr. Haddad said that when Mrs. Vandergriff told Deputy Ortman to get out of the house, Deputy Ortman threw her against closet doors, which broke, and then threw her against a stereo.

Mr. Vandergriff then grabbed Deputy Ortman and started choking her, Mr. Haddad said. Other

deputies then arrived and broke up the fighting.

Deputy Ortman then allegedly said, "Where is that black-haired b——? Her a—— is going to jail." Mr. Haddad said.

Although former Sheriff Trowbridge was not at the scene, the jury faulted him for allowing "an atmosphere of encouraging excessive force," Mr. Haddad said.

Witnesses to the incident included two friends of the Vandergriff family and two neighbors, Mr. Haddad said.

Mr. Haddad said the jury was swayed in part by a recording of radio transmission in which Deputy Ortman said before the incident that the Vandergriffs were "a bunch of lunatics." The statement showed she had a prior bias against them, he said.

Deputy Bivins is a reserve deputy and a member of the sheriff's posse, a volunteer organization. Deputy Ortman is still a member of the force.