

The Mississippi Jury Verdict Reporter

The Most Current and Complete Summary of Mississippi Jury Verdicts

March 2026

Statewide Jury Verdict Coverage

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Employment Contract

(University) - A tenured transportation engineering professor at Mississippi State alleged he was fired in violation of his contract – he is also separately pursuing civil rights claims related to his termination in federal court, this state court case advancing to a jury trial on a parallel track, while the federal case is still pending as the university's summary judgment motion is pending there

Zhang v. Mississippi State University, 23-441

Plaintiff: Grafton E. Bragg, *BraggLaw*, Ridgeland and Derrick S. Godfrey, *Godfrey Law*, Ridgeland
Defense: Charles E. Winfield and Ashlyn B. Matthews, *The Winfield Law Firm*, Starkville

Verdict: \$493,000 for plaintiff

Court: **Hinds**

Judge: Adrienne Wooten

Date: 3-27-26

Dr. Li Zhang, who is of Chinese origin, started working as a professor in 2005 in the engineering department at Mississippi State University in Starkville. Zhang received tenure in 2021. His expertise is in transportation engineering with a focus on traffic simulation. In recent years Zhang had concerns about the quality of the students. Many were failing a preliminary engineering exam and there were numerous honor code violations.

Moving forward to December of 2021, Zhang was dealing with personal challenges. His son had a rare form of autism and had moved

to Brandon for treatment. Zhang made the two-hour commute every day to campus. He also suffered a disc condition and underwent a surgical repair in December.

The case was very fact dense but returning in 2022, Zhang was delayed (because of his injury and other personal issues) in grading papers. He'd become frustrated with the process and emailed his students. MSU bigwigs believed that email was hostile. Ultimately (there was a long course of interactions and the record was voluminous) the university instituted a process to terminate Zhang. This wasn't a quick process because he had tenure.

Zhang received the termination letter in February of 2024. MSU cited student complaints, irregular grading and a decline in his research, among other things. A three-day hearing was conducted in March of 2025. The vote was 4-3 to terminate. That decision would become final on 2-28-26. At this time Zhang was let go and has since separated from the university. Zhang had complaints about how the hearing was conducted, the constitution of the panel of hearing officers and the maintenance of the hearing file.

In the interim from the problems in the Spring of 2022 through the February 2026, Zhang filed two lawsuits. The first was in federal court in Aberdeen, *Zhang v. Mississippi State*, 1:23-71, in May of 2024. He alleged a variety of counts including disability discrimination as well as national origin and race discrimination. Zhang also asserted

Wrongful Death - A young mother was killed in a collision with a pick-up truck on a rainy road – a jury in Brandon awarded a then-record verdict of \$50,000 (\$525,000 today) in May of 1964 – the plaintiff’s legal team included Gov. Ross Barnett who just months before had ended his “I Love Mississippi” gubernatorial term that culminated in the riots on the Ole Miss campus

Coker v. Gilchrist Trucking,

Plaintiff: George McClintock and Ross Barnett, Jackson

Defense: H.H. Goodman, Jr. and W.E. McIntyre, Brandon

Verdict: \$50,000 for plaintiff

Court: **Rankin**

Judge: O.H. Barnett

Date: May 9, 1964

Edna Coker, age 36, was a passenger in a vehicle driven by her husband, Fred, on 7-18-63. They traveled on Fannin Road near the Pearl River. A heavy rain was falling. Fred lost control and spun out in the roadway. The vehicle was facing the wrong way.

A moment later, James Beard,

driving a pick-up truck for Gilchrist Trucking, rear-ended the Coker vehicle. Edna was seriously injured and died at a hospital the next day.

Coker’s estate sued Gilchrist Trucking in Rankin County and sought damages. The estate’s legal team included Ross Barnett who at the time of trial was just a few months out of his tumultuous term as the Governor of Mississippi. See the excerpt below from our publisher’s book, *The Thin Thirty* (2007), which recounts the University of Kentucky’s fateful 1962 football

Governor Barnett descended from his choice seat and strode to midfield at the sparkling stadium, 42,000 fans rising to their feet. Bright hats were worn and confederate flags were waved, it looking a bit like a “silent show of sparkling fireworks” at a Fourth of July picnic. The spectacle was made even more vibrant, Memorial Stadium being extremely well-lit. It made the flags, the people, the field, the players, almost technicolor in the artificial brightness.

As the players strained and struggled on the field of gleaming emerald, the real event was in the stark gray concrete stands. The women were decked out in fur hats, leopard skin jackets and a touch of mink was even seen in the stands. The women carried expensive alligator handbags. Mississippi’s last stand was the social event of the season.

This lily white audience, all the faces at Memorial were white, there not being enough room at such a big game to accommodate blacks (as if they would have come this night anyway), waited for their Governor. Reaching the field at the fifty-yard line, Barnett had a furious look on his face.

Barnett then thrust his clenched fist in the air and froze in defiance. It wasn’t just an event for the stadium, the game and his speech being broadcast across all of Mississippi.

At this moment, thousands of confederate flags began to fly throughout the stadium, a journalist describing that they “were like a forest fire running before the wind.”

Barnett’s first words sent the crowd into delirium, “I love Mississippi.” He paused for the roar that swelled across him. At that moment, had he directed the crowd to exit the stadium (after the game had ended, of course), it would have followed him out into the parking lot and to the Lyceum at Mississippi. A revolution was brewing and Barnett was stoking the fires.

Underneath the stadium, Kentucky was making its halftime preparations. They were longer than usual, players remembering it was the longest halftime ever.

The Thin Thirty

As Barnett spoke to the raptured crowd, the stadium began to literally shake. Kentucky players looked up and away from Coach Bradshaw for an instant, a few thinking to themselves that the stadium might just collapse around them.

But in a moment, it was back to business. Kentucky had come to play football and integration had nothing to do with it.

Back on the football field, Barnett continued his rant.

“I love her people!”

“Our customs.”

“I love and respect our heritage.”

He said no more. For a long time, Barnett stood in the glow of adulation that washed over him, wave after wave. It was to be his finest moment, his worst moment and his last moment as the unchallenged potentate of Mississippi.

When he finally left the field, the University of Mississippi marching band took the field for what the local paper called “a brilliant halftime show.”

Several times over, the band played the state song. In a tip of the hat to Kentucky and their bourbon tradition, it also played “Little Brown Jug”. This brought a roar of laughter from the crowd. It was all so genteel, like the crowds that gathered at Bull Run in the first real battle of the Civil War.

This was Mississippi’s Bull Run, an expected massacre of the relative Yankees from Lexington. It was all so pleasant, the rebellion against integration, the defeat of Kentucky, that like 100 years before, the ladies came in their finest garb. Ole Miss made its last stand with the Governor’s halftime speech.

An excerpt (pp. 194-195) from our publisher’s book, The Thin Thirty (2007) that recounts the 1962 UK football team and which describes Gov. Barnett’s appearance in Jackson for the Ole Miss-UK football game

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