

# For police, OC's unsolved murders have life of their own

By Steve Eddy, *The Orange County Register*, January 17, 1988

The vast majority of murder cases are solved almost immediately.

In fact, homicide detectives say that the guilty party in 90 percent of the 100 or so murders in Orange County each year is identified within a day: The victim obviously knew his or her killer; they were friends, perhaps relatives. There was an argument and someone heard or saw it. The killer's license-plate number was obtained.

"The first 24 hours are critical," said Lt. Pete DePaola, head of the Anaheim Police Department's homicide bureau. "At that point, everything's `hot' -- you've got a fresh crime scene, and it's usually easy to put the facts together and sort out the players."

Those are the easy ones.

Then there are the other cases, the remaining 10 percent, the ones detectives must dog for months, even years. They are unsolved, but not unsolvable, detectives say. Many will be cleared eventually through one means or another.

But in the meantime, such cases bring detectives sleepless nights and gray hair.

In some cases, the motive is a mystery, or there may not be enough information available to trace a victim's last hours or days -- the time in which he or she might have met the killer.

But since there is no statute of limitations on murder in California, unsolved homicide cases remain open. Orange County has dozens of unsolved homicides dating to the 19th century.

"Even when cases are considered inactive, a detective is always assigned to them. They are never forgotten," La Habra Police Capt. John Reese said.

And though other trails dead-end, detectives continually review teletypes about crimes in other jurisdictions in which the modus operandi, or mode of operation, matches their case, Reese said.

"No matter what, you just keep digging," Anaheim police Lt. Billy Wright said. "It's just a question of being tenacious."

In Anaheim, detectives periodically hold "brain-trust" sessions, in which they take turns looking at each other's cases, Wright said.

"Sometimes it might just be a matter of having a fresh pair of eyes look at the same reports and material and starting from square one," Wright said. "Sometimes you get so close to a case, it's like you can't see the forest for the trees."

There also may be technological solutions to old cases. In 1984, a re-examination of a fingerprint led to the arrest of a security guard in the 1979 slaying of an Irvine woman, Savannah Anderson.

The killer, Robert Sellers, was convicted of first-degree murder and is serving a life sentence.

The most exotic recent breakthrough in crime-solving technology is the Cal-ID fingerprint system, a statewide computer network that allows for almost instant comparison of latent prints against those of jail inmates.

That system helped identify Richard Ramirez as the suspect in the "night stalker" killings.

At Orange County Sheriff's Department headquarters last year, a technician was demonstrating how the system works and inadvertently matched up a latent fingerprint found at the scene of a 1985 bludgeoning death of a 61-year-old Orange woman with the print of a former county jail inmate. Tracked down in Phoenix and arrested, the man faces murder charges.

Meanwhile, a tiny percentage of murder cases exist in a sort of nether world, where there are far more questions than answers.

Cases such as these:

Patricia and Amanda Dixon

It was a sight veteran Anaheim police detectives never will forget.

Lying nude next to the bed in a motel room within walking distance of Disneyland was Patricia Ann Dixon, 25, of Seattle.

In bed was the pajama-clad body of her 5-year-old daughter, Amanda. The little girl was clutching a Minnie Mouse doll.

Both had been shot several times in the head early March 28, 1984, only a few hours after returning from the amusement park.

There was no sign of forced entry into the room of the West Street motel, leading investigators to believe the woman was killed by someone she knew.

While numerous gunshots were fired, no one reported hearing any.

Neither victim was sexually attacked.

Police investigated leads and suspects in Seattle, including some former suitors of the woman.

"We just recently had another lead come up, within the past few months," DePaola said. "It was in another state. We checked it all the way through. It didn't pan out. The case is still open."

Sharon Duncan

"Senseless."

That's how Orange County sheriff's spokesman Lt. Richard Olson described one of Orange County's most baffling homicides, the October 1983 slaying of Sharon Duncan, 20.

On a Friday afternoon, a bicyclist riding through a parking lot at Bolsa Chica State Beach found Duncan's body, dressed in a one-piece turquoise bathing suit, next to her gray 1977 Toyota Corolla.

Duncan had been stabbed once in the back. Investigators believe the killing occurred about 4 p.m.

Robbery apparently was not the motive; her purse, containing about \$100, was found in the car. And there was no evidence of sexual assault.

Duncan was a junior business student at California State University, Long Beach, and was seeking a career in the computer field. She had lived with her family in Fountain Valley but recently had moved to the Huntington Beach area. To earn money for school, the woman had been working as a waitress.

Her brother guessed that she went to the beach to study and sunbathe.

Investigators say there never was much progress in the case.

"It was the off-season, but it wasn't a cloudy day," Olson said. "There must have been people out there who saw something -- somebody loitering, or hiding. This investigation is very frustrating, because we essentially have run up against a brick wall.

"It all seemed so senseless. To this day, we believe someone out there must have seen something," Olson said.

Patricia Lopez

The little girl they found down by the river on a sweltering summer afternoon had been beaten to death.

On June 3, 1987, 9-year-old Patricia Lopez walked out of her third-grade class in Room 26 at Monte Vista School in Santa Ana.

The pretty, dark-haired youngster was never seen alive again.

Two days later, her battered body was found in the Santa Ana River bed near Fairview Street. She had been bludgeoned with a blunt object.

Initial police reports indicated the girl had been abducted on or near the school grounds. But a week after the slaying, police concluded that no one had seen anything unusual and that Patricia "either voluntarily walked to the riverbed or was transported there part of the way."

Police said witnesses saw the girl alone in the riverbed, and a burly Hispanic man in his 30s also was seen nearby. Adding to the puzzle were reports that a late-model gray mini-truck was seen parked on Fairview.

Police believe the driver might have seen something pivotal to the case. He has not been located. Although police never said the girl was sexually molested, investigators say they have "looked at" 6,000 registered California sex offenders as possible suspects in the case.

"They were all screened in one way or another," said Santa Ana police spokeswoman Maureen Thomas. "And they all were eliminated as good suspects."

In some cases, the men's previous crimes did not fit the circumstances of the Lopez slaying.

Some were in jail at the time she was killed. Some were dead. Some had ironclad alibis.

The detectives on the Lopez case won't give up, she said.

"It is being actively investigated. In fact, I would say the investigators are quite passionate about it, although I can't say right now that there are any new leads."

Marie Malmgreen

"I'll pick you up. Remember, I'll be a little late."

Those were the last words Marie Malmgreen of Brea spoke to her son on the morning of April 22, 1986, when she dropped him off for school.

She was never seen alive again. A week later, her blue Cadillac was found parked behind a Fullerton apartment complex.

In the backseat was her strangled, decomposing body. The wife of a Los Angeles police officer, Malmgreen, 38, had been sexually molested, according to coroner's investigators.

The case remains as mysterious as ever.

Investigation initially centered on transients who sleep in Craig Regional Park and under the Orange (57) Freeway near the Brea Mall.

Two young men were arrested in connection with the murder. One of them, Scott Katzin, described as a mentally deficient transient, claimed on a police videotape to possess specific knowledge of what happened.

But his information never could be confirmed. And although he was charged twice with the killing, the charges were thrown out of court. The other suspect also was released.

Fullerton detectives say the Malmgreen case is one of the most perplexing they have handled. Even a \$10,000 reward has failed to turn up the killer or killers.

Sgt. Roger White once commented sullenly: "If we didn't have bad luck in this case, we wouldn't have had any at all."

CUTLINE: Patry assaulted