

**Investigators Haunted by Murders Past Mysteries: Unsolved killings, which number 111 in Ventura County since 1975, stay on the books and in law enforcement officers' minds.;** [Ventura County Edition]

CAROL WATSON. *Los Angeles Times* Sep 4, 1990, pg. 1

On May 30, 1975, Lynn Mueller, 21, returned home from an evening church service in Ventura and called her husband. Two hours later, he found her stabbed to death, her head nearly severed from her body. On Dec. 3, 1987, Pedro Pachuca received an emergency phone call at 6 a.m. telling him his younger brother had been injured in a car accident. As Pachuca, 34, rushed out the door of his Santa Paula house, he was shot in the face and chest and instantly killed. On Sept. 9, 1989, 90-year-old Florence Hackney was found strangled in the Fillmore home she had lived in for more than 30 years. A coroner's autopsy revealed she was sexually assaulted. These murders are but three of the estimated 111 homicides since 1975 that remain open in Ventura County, according to county law enforcement agencies. "The tough ones to solve are murders where the body is not immediately found or it's a professional killing or it's committed by someone who's carefully thought out the crime," said Dist. Atty. Michael D. Bradbury.

"Those types of cases are very difficult to apprehend the killer." Bradbury said many of the homicides committed in the county are "self-solving" crimes—those committed in the heat of passion while friends or family members are present. In such "smoking gun" cases, police often are called immediately and find both the body and the killer at the scene of the crime. Murderers who kill while committing other crimes, such as rape or robbery, also tend to leave evidence behind, Bradbury said. "The fact those are solved are not attributable to some kind of Columbo-type sleuthing," Bradbury said. But whodunits are often more intricate puzzles, detectives said. The first 48 hours of an investigation are widely believed to be the most important. And after a month goes by, the chances of solving the homicide diminish dramatically. "If the case is not solved in 30 days, you've got some serious problems on your hands," Bradbury said. Physical evidence is destroyed. Witnesses begin to disperse. People's memories dim. And the extra time may give the murderer a chance to intimidate those who know something about his crime, Bradbury said. But those odds do not stop some of the county's top investigators from doggedly pursuing cases years, or even decades, after they have occurred. "You don't forget about them," said Cpl. Russ Hayes of the Ventura Police Department, one of the original detectives assigned to the Mueller case. "They're always there in the back of your mind." Hayes and his former partner, Richard Haas, both of whom have switched assignments since Mueller was killed, continue to field tips on the case, keep in touch with her family and mull over what they term one of the most brutal murders they have ever seen. "He'll call and say, 'Hey Russ, I've got some information on the Mueller homicide,' " Hayes said. "I say, 'I'll grab my coat. I'll meet you, and we'll do it together.' " Hayes, a 20-year homicide detective now in charge of the Ventura Police Department's crime-prevention program, said he still talks to Lynn Mueller's father

and her husband, who has since remarried. He has searched for her tombstone in a local cemetery to pay his respects. And he thinks about the case every time he passes the house on Main Street where she was killed or when he sees the church she last attended, which has been converted to a wedding chapel. The case has stuck with the two detectives because Lynn Mueller was so innocent and her death so brutal, they said. Haas, who now works as an investigator for the district attorney's office, said Mueller was over-killed-stabbed many more times than was necessary to kill her. "I can still picture that scene in my mind all the time," Haas said. "She was almost decapitated." On the day of Mueller's death, her 27-year-old husband, Mike, took her to the dentist because she had a toothache, Hayes said. After Mike Mueller fixed his wife some soup, he left for his job on the swing shift at an oil refinery off the Rincon, Hayes said. Lynn Mueller, who was devoutly religious, went next door to a service at a Pentecostal church that evening. After returning to her home at 880 E. Main St., she called her husband at work and chatted with him for about 15 minutes, Hayes said. Mike Mueller returned home at 12:14 a.m. Failing to find his wife waiting for him on the couch, as was her habit, he began searching the house for her. He discovered his wife of more than three years in the bedroom, dead of multiple stab wounds, Hayes said. Mike Mueller called police and went outside to escape the horror in the house. But when police arrived, the man, suffering from shock, continued to pace back and forth from the house to the yard. Bradbury, who was a deputy district attorney called to the scene, said he still remembers it vividly. "You could smell the blood from the sidewalk," he said.

Hayes and Haas began working that night and worked the next 36 hours straight, interviewing all the members of the church, the Muellers' neighbors and every stranger they could find who happened to be in the area around that time. "We worked that and worked it and worked it," Hayes said. Lynn Mueller's parents came to California to meet the detectives and offered a \$25,000 reward for the arrest and conviction of their only child's killer. They finally were forced to withdraw it. The investigation focused on one individual, who remains a suspect in the case, but police never were able to gather enough evidence for prosecution. The suspect was later convicted of a murder that occurred about a year after the Mueller homicide, authorities said. He is serving a life sentence for the later murder, but he already has come up for parole eight times, said Deputy Dist. Atty. Carol Nelson. The parole board, which has been given information about the Mueller case, withdrew the last parole date it had set, which would have released him at the end of this year, Nelson said. Haas will not give a motive for Mueller's killing, saying only that the suspect apparently had known Mueller. But he said the case haunts him each time the man comes up for parole. "Even though we have a hunch this is the right suspect, we'd still like something to convict him on," Haas said. "Then I can let my mind rest." Other detectives in the county continue to work unsolved cases for which there are no suspects. Santa Paula police said they have no idea why Pedro Pachuca, a labor foreman who enjoyed playing soccer on weekends, was shot to death. "He was just a normal family-type person who worked and went home," said Sgt. Mike Saviers of the Santa Paula Police

Department. When Pachuca got the phone call saying his brother Felipe, 26, was hurt, he told his wife where he was going and left the house, Saviers said. He was shot once in the face and once in the torso. A police officer heard the shots, but by the time he arrived at Pachuca's house in the 1500 block of Prieto Street, the gunman was gone. "Nobody has any idea," Saviers said. "The brother hadn't been involved in any accident." The murder almost a year ago of Florence Hackney also puzzled sheriff's deputies and angered residents of Fillmore's close-knit community of 11,000, who said Hackney was well known and liked. The body of Hackney, who lived alone in the 900 block of Central Avenue, was discovered by her daughter, Margaret Haskell, who lives a block away, at 10:55 p.m. Haskell was checking on her mother after going out to dinner with her husband, said Sgt. Tom Odle of the Ventura County Sheriff's Department. Deputies said there was no sign of forced entry into Hackney's home and no valuables missing. Odle said detectives have a motive, which is unavailable for release, but do not have any concrete suspects. Such cases can haunt detectives, who may devote years of their lives combing through the victims' lives for clues. The process begins when they are called out, sometimes in the middle of the night, to start an investigation. The detectives often do not sleep the next two or three days as they try to hunt down leads. One detective said the first thing he looked for at a murder scene was a cup of coffee. "You are usually awakened in the middle of the night, and you work until you drop," said Sgt. Bob Elder, who ran the Oxnard Police Department's homicide unit for nine years. "You're on call every minute of every day." And every aspect of the investigation must stand up to careful court scrutiny, Elder said. "It means your work and the work of your men must be pristine," Elder said. Hayes of the Ventura Police Department said he constantly worried about overlooking a piece of valuable evidence at a crime scene or forgetting to ask a question during an interview. "I was afraid to throw away a scrap of paper," Hayes said. The information gathered in a case is collected in binders. Many of the investigations into whodunits take up volumes. In a cabinet in his office, Haas keeps 11 three-inch binders detailing the Lyman and Charlene Smith homicides, one of the most notorious cases in Ventura's history. On March 17, 1980, Lyman Smith's son went to see his father and stepmother at their house in the 500 block of High Point Drive in Ventura. The son lived about a mile and a half from his father, who was an attorney up for a judgeship. He knocked at the door, and when the couple did not answer, the son walked in the unlocked front door and found them in bed, where they evidently had been bludgeoned to death a couple of days before. Lyman Smith, 43, and Charlene, 33, apparently were sleeping when someone entered the house, which they usually kept locked, Haas said. It appeared the sleeping couple had been beaten to death with a fireplace log. Their dead bodies were then tied up, perhaps to throw off the investigation by making it appear to be a robbery, Haas said. One of Smith's business associates was arrested and ordered, after a preliminary hearing, to stand trial. The district attorney's office subsequently decided not to prosecute the case because of insufficient evidence, authorities said. Haas said the investigation took the majority of his time for a year. For years afterward, information dribbled in. The investigators on the case held brainstorming sessions. It is still under active investigation. On May 28, 1979,

Josephina Martinez's boyfriend arrived at her house in Santa Paula and discovered that her throat had been slashed sometime the night before. Her 1-year-old daughter had trailed blood through the house as she played in the puddles of sticky red liquid that oozed from her mother's wound. He picked up the baby and ran from the house screaming to his parents. Meanwhile, concerned neighbors peeked through the screen door and called police. Cmdr. Mark Hansen of the Santa Paula Police Department said he went to the grisly murder scene. "I was the one who found her lying on the floor with her throat slit in a pool of blood," he said. "It was a real gruesome murder." She had been stabbed in the chest, neck and head nine times. Her throat had been cut from side to side. There were wounds on Martinez's right thumb and palm and her left thumb, indicating that the 24-year-old had tried to defend herself from the knife-wielding attacker, Hansen said. She was last seen alive at 6 p.m. the night before she was found. The boyfriend had argued with Martinez, who was unemployed, a couple of days before and allegedly left town with another woman. Some drug paraphernalia was found at the scene of the homicide. Many people were interviewed, but no concrete suspects ever developed, Hansen said. Police estimate she must have been killed sometime during the night, but neighbors did not hear anything. All leads were exhausted, Hansen said. Several suspects also were ruled out in the killing of 20-year-old Rachel Zendejas, said Odle, who has been involved in homicide investigations for 18 of his 24 years with the Sheriff's Department. On Jan. 18, 1981, a newspaper deliveryman found the body of Zendejas in front of an apartment complex in Camarillo. She had been strangled and raped, Odle said. Zendejas had gone out drinking and dancing the night before with friends and her two brothers. She returned to her apartment building about 3 a.m., Odle said. She was grabbed there by her murderer, and her body was found at the complex across the street. There were no witnesses. Odle said he had eight or 10 suspects in the case over the years. All were eliminated either because the evidence did not match or they had alibis. Last year, Odle obtained a blood sample from a man in state prison who had been a suspect for a while. He also was eliminated. Odle, who said the family recently made an effort to have the case included on an episode of the television show "Unsolved Mysteries," believes the murderer was simply lying in wait for a young woman-any young woman. "I think that is a particularly heinous crime with an innocent girl on her way home from a good time," Odle said. "That should have been solved, and we haven't been able to." He was one of the primary investigators at the time but was transferred after working on the case for nine months. When he came back to the department two years later, he was reassigned the case, which had never stopped bothering him. But finding witnesses after nearly 10 years is difficult. People have moved. Phones have been disconnected. Odle and other county detectives said they continue to hope that each case will be solved. But there comes a point when investigators must turn the bulk of their attention to more current affairs. "Other cases become more workable because they're fresher," Odle said. "You take the ones you've got a chance of solving, and you work your hardest."