

'EAR' STILL AT LARGE 70S RAPE CASES VEX RETIRING DETECTIVE

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By Wendy McClellan

—A burdened detective Richard Shelby drove west on U.S. 50 one night in 1976. He looked down from the foothills at the expanse of lights shining up from Sacramento County. All those lights, and there's one weirdo out there, Shelby remembers thinking. "And I'm expected to find him."

That weirdo was the **East Area Rapist**, referred to as "EAR," "pervert" and other more obscene names around the sheriff's department downtown, where Shelby worked.

The rapist assaulted dozens of women from 1976 to 1978, causing residents to lose sleep and take self-defense classes. The county's gun sales doubled between 1976 and '77.

"I had to pull over and think about it," said Shelby, who retires Tuesday after 26 years with the sheriff's department.

He was one of the key investigators who spent countless hours hunting for a man who may have been blond, blue-eyed and about 19 years old. Or maybe not.

One victim said he had dark hair. Another said he had hazel eyes. Another said she refused to look because she thought he would kill her.

He raped 42 women in Northern California, several of whom lived in Citrus Heights, Orangevale, Fair Oaks and Rancho Cordova.

He was never caught.

Shelby was the first person to recognize that the rapes were being committed serially, said Ray Root, who was put in charge of an 80-member task force out to catch the **East Area Rapist** a few months after Shelby put the first pieces together.

"Shelby was probably the most prolific and active member of the task force," Root said. "Though he was not thrilled about the task force helping him unless he was totally and completely in charge of it."

Jim Bevins was the chief investigator in the case until he retired about a month ago.

"Puddin' cup," as Shelby called the detective with soft brown eyes, is leaving the state and wants to put it all behind him.

Although Shelby was taken off the case officially after rape No. 25, on Gold Run Avenue in Antelope, he has never stopped working on it.

"He'd drive you crazy," Root said. "Once he got hold of a thread, he didn't want to let it go 'til he unraveled it and found out what was there."

Shelby could be "occasionally abrasive with his superiors," said Root, who was one of them.

"He has said really ugly things to me from time to time. Occasionally Shelby would be assigned, by me, a suspect to investigate.

"He would look me right in the eye, and say, "This is wrong. This guy had nothing to do with it. This is a waste of my time.'"

Then Shelby would investigate the suspect thoroughly for two reasons.

"One was so he would never be embarrassed," Root said. "The other reason was to prove me wrong."

Shelby, 54, rummaged in vain for keys in the North Station desk he had already vacated by Thursday. The desk's new occupant came in and found them, so Shelby could open a shed mostly dedicated to the EAR.

Four file cabinets and several boxes hold files on 5,000 suspects, including many law enforcement officials. Shelby recalled accusations that the sheriff's department was protecting one of its own.

"Any one of us would have turned in our own son, we wanted this guy so bad," he said.

Shelby himself was not a suspect. "I'm too tall."

The EAR was no taller than 5 feet 9 inches and wore a men's size nine shoe.

Boots at first and later athletic shoes. He smoked a brand of cigarettes with two yellow stripes around the filter. Butts were always found in yards surrounding the residences he hit.

All this information is organized in the shed's files, charts and generic-looking sketches of suspects, victims and patterns. They grow in response to a couple of tips each month. Someone thinks they've seen him or a series of rapes elsewhere resembles the series here in the '70s. But he is always too tall. Or too careless.

"The pervert is a prowler par excellence," Shelby said.

His gut tells him the **East Area Rapist** is still alive somewhere, though he has not acted since 1978. But Shelby hopes "he's done us all a favor and killed himself."

Shelby and his family lived in Rancho Cordova from the late '60s to the EAR years, but he said they did not leave for the foothills because of the rapist. He now lives between Auburn and Grass Valley.

One night in the '70s his young son said a man's face had appeared in his window, upside down. He shined a flashlight inside, then disappeared. The boy couldn't sleep alone in his room until he was 13 years old.

Shelby did not tell his wife, Ann, that he thought it was the EAR for years.

"If he had known whose house it was, he would have come in," Shelby said.

The department released information intended to intimidate the rapist. They called him a coward and said his penis was deformed.

"We didn't know that," Shelby said. "We'd insult him any way we could."

Shelby believes the rapist felt challenged, and began raping women who were in bed with their husbands to prove his bravery.

He would appear without warning at the foot of a bed, kick it, and shine the flashlight into the victim's eyes.

Wielding a gun or knife, he would force the woman to tie the man up, turn him face down and stack dishes on his back. He would take the woman to another room, telling the husband he'd kill her if he heard anything.

He would remain in the victims' homes for hours. When they thought he had gone, he would reappear and begin it all again.

Shelby said his approach to EAR was "pro-active," whereas Bevins' was "reactive."

Bevins would trace the rapes backward to try to find out who had done them. Shelby would try to predict the next hit and catch him.

After several rapes in Rancho Cordova and Carmichael, EAR raped in Citrus Heights, then Oct. 18, 1976, he raped two women in neighborhoods near, but on opposite sides of, the American River. Then back to Fair Oaks and College Greens. Shelby compared the neighborhoods and guessed where the next hit would be.

A superior told him he was crazy.

Then a woman in the 5800 block of Primrose Drive in Citrus Heights was raped Jan. 24, 1977, where Shelby had predicted.

"He's very intense, very aggressive," Root said. "Kind of like a bulldog."

Shelby said administrators in city and county law enforcement did more to let the **East Area Rapist** evade capture than the rapist himself did.

"There were a lot of problems with that case," he said.

Though he said some superiors would undo his work, Shelby credits the EAR case with the creation of a sexual assault unit and the addition of a helicopter to the department.

He said he believes his use of a bloodhound to try to find the EAR contributed to the eventual formation of the department's K-9 unit.

Shelby said luck was the main thing on the EAR's side. He can tell stories endlessly of how many times they came close to catching him.

Shelby, the father of two sons, said he does not know what he will do in retirement, other than pursue a favorite hobby, gold dredging. But he won't say where.