

Serial Link Explored in Old Murders: Goleta, Orange County Cases Similar

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By Dawn Hobbs

Two Goleta double murders that have remained unsolved for two decades may be the work of a serial killer, according to Orange County sheriff's detectives. They say the same person who killed two Goleta couples and tried to kill a third also may have killed a husband and wife in Ventura, a Laguna Niguel couple and two Irvine women -- all between 1979 and 1986.

While Santa Barbara sheriff's detectives say there may be a connection between the Goleta killings, they are not convinced the same person is responsible for the others.

"There was DNA evidence in our investigation that does not match the DNA from their killer," said Lt. Mike Burridge, spokesman for the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department. "We obviously would like nothing more than to solve these homicides. There are still surviving victims, and surviving and grieving family members who would like to see these cases resolved."

But while there are similarities among the cases, there are just as many inconsistencies, Burridge said.

"I would say that it is not outside the realm that they could be connected," he said. "It's also not outside the realm that they are separate killers."

While the Orange County detectives say a serial killer is responsible for these slayings, they have not yet identified a suspect.

They hope DNA evidence pointing toward a killer will soon turn up in a prison or sex-offender registry database.

The Orange County detectives began to look into the unsolved homicides in 1997, when they received funding to form a "cold-case team."

"Our crime lab in Orange County began looking at sexual assaults and homicides and analyzing the evidence," said Orange County sheriff's Detective Brian Heaney. "In doing that, we discovered that the two single murders that occurred in Irvine had the same DNA contributor as our double-murder in Laguna Niguel." After looking into the 1980 murder of the Laguna Niguel couple, the detectives then began to examine other unsolved double-murders -- particularly those involving a husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend.

That's when they came across the attempted murder of a Goleta couple in October 1979 and three other double-murders that occurred over a seven-year span.

In December 1979, Robert Offerman, 44, and Alexandria Manning, 35, were shot to death in a condominium at 767 Avenida Pequena in Goleta.

Three months later, Lyman Smith, 43, and his wife, Charlene, 33, were found bludgeoned to death in their Ventura home.

Then in July 1981, Gregory Sanchez, 27, was shot and then he and Cheri Domingo, 35, were beaten to death at their home at 449 Toltec Way in Goleta. From the beginning, Santa Barbara sheriff's detectives say they saw similarities between the Goleta attempted murder and the double-murders.

News accounts from August 1981 indicate detectives thought there may be some link between the Goleta murders and the ones in Ventura and Orange counties. But then information also surfaced that showed inconsistencies.

However, authorities in Orange County maintain there are enough similarities to consider the serial-killer scenario.

"All of these neighborhoods either back up to a park or a greenbelt area, allowing for a casual prowling of these one story-homes," said Heaney, adding that the killer may have waited to watch each of the couples have sex before breaking into their homes and attacking them.

"We can't turn away from the Goleta murders," Heaney said. "We can't ignore them. We have no conclusive evidence to say they aren't related or they are." But he says the progression from the unorganized nature of the first murders to the more organized slayings of the Orange County people indicate the killer perfected his technique.

They believe the sudden stop in the murders in May 1986 was only because the killer was either killed himself or ended up serving prison time for another crime. "He could be doing time for murder, rape or robbery," Heaney said. "What's disturbing is that if he was sentenced 20 years ago, he could soon be looking at parole."

Anyone with information about these homicides may call the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department at 681-4100 or the Orange County Sheriff's Department at 1-888-390-2583.