

New Lead Found in Serial Rapes: After Decades, DNA Links the East Area Rapist to Crimes in Orange County.

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For a time, he was the most hunted, feared man in Sacramento County.

Terrified men and women flooded hardware stores, shooting ranges and alarm companies in desperate attempts to ward off the East Area Rapist.

From 1976 to 1978, the rapist preyed on dozens of people, many of them sleeping couples in the county's eastern neighborhoods, often tying up the male before raping the female. Anyone who could read knew about how the intruder balanced dishes on the bound men and threatened more violence if the crockery tumbled and broke.

And just about anyone knows he slipped away, leaving 36 rape victims after a two-year reign of terror, on to unsuspecting towns, leaving behind baffled and frustrated ranks of authorities.

Now, his trail may have been unearthed. New scientific evidence appears to link him with a string of killings in Southern California and has renewed the hunt for a killer-rapist. The killings, some involving couples, began in 1979 and ended in 1986. An elaborate chain has linked the same murder suspect to three Contra Costa County rapes, which have long been linked to the East Area Rapist by the crimes' similarities.

Anyone behind a badge in Sacramento County then had hoped one day to see the East Area Rapist in jail, and the newest discovery rekindles that possibility.

"I would love it," said Richard Selby, who investigated sexual assaults as a Sacramento County Sheriff's deputy before he retired in 1993.

Though DNA evidence has produced a biological profile of a suspect, no match has been found among the hundreds of thousands in the state databank, though the state has lagged in putting in criminals' DNA profiles, said Frank Fitzpatrick, director of Orange County's Forensic Laboratory. His lab discovered a link among three murder cases -- a couple and two women, he said.

The other murders were a couple in Ventura County, also linked by DNA, and two couples in Santa Barbara County linked by similar patterns in the crimes.

Authorities said all law enforcement agencies with linked cases are going to meet later this month to discuss evidence. The hope is that together they can find a key that will lead them to a suspect.

"We are going to see what we can do to assist with their investigations," said Sacramento County Sheriff's spokesman Sgt. James Lewis.

Lewis said evidence from the Sacramento County cases has never been tested for DNA because the statute of limitations had expired, meaning no charges could be filed if a suspect is caught. The state time limit to charge someone with rape was six years.

"We may try to do it now," Lewis said of the DNA. "That's part of what we will discuss in the meeting."

Recent changes in the law extend the time limit for rape cases when DNA evidence is available.

Lewis said in light of new developments, investigators are looking for what may have been the rapist's first murder.

On Feb. 2, 1978, Sgt. Brian K. Maggiore, a 21-year-old administrative specialist at Mather Air Force Base, and his wife, Katie, 20, were walking their dog on a quiet residential street in Rancho Cordova. They were attacked and fatally shot, but no apparent motive has ever been found.

"It's kind of a long-shot," Lewis said, but the timing of the shooting and because it involved a couple has left deputies with the suspicion that the killing might be linked to the rapist.

Efforts to link serial murder cases in Orange County with rapes in Northern California began four years ago, officials said.

Paul Holes, a criminalist at the Contra Costa County crime lab, said a local detective noticed a similarity to the Orange County murders, many involving couples, and asked the lab to check out the hunch.

At the time, the DNA tests being done in Contra Costa and Orange counties were not very comparable because of different technologies.

Meanwhile, Orange County authorities were doing their own tests. In October, they announced the murders were linked and developed a profile of the killer, describing him as an intelligent, methodical planner, who scouted victims scrupulously, choosing middle-class to affluent neighborhoods.

Contra Costa authorities again heard about the case and asked for a DNA profile, this time using comparable technologies, Holes said. The DNA from the East Bay rapes matched the DNA from Orange County.

"We knew he was potentially violent from the first rape he did," Selby said.

He was investigating sexual assaults for the department when the East Area Rapist first struck in Rancho Cordova. Selby believes he was looking for a teenager who was more lucky than smart, but who was cunning enough to plan his escape when he entered homes and chose victims after studying their habits.

When Selby lived in Rancho Cordova, he said his son saw someone shining a flashlight into his house and believes it was the man he spent months trying to capture. "I have no doubt it was him," said Selby, though he doesn't know if he was being watched because of his investigation or as a potential victim.

The serial rapist, who was armed with a gun or knife, used a flashlight to keep his victims blinded, which caused a range of suspect descriptions.

One of the last connections Selby had is a call the rapist made to one of his victims in 1991.

The suspect said, "'Do you know who this is?' She recognized his voice," Selby said. The woman heard children crying in the background, leaving authorities to wonder if he has a family.

The hunt for the rapist amassed huge overtime burdens on the department and involved more than a dozen investigators.

"We were all over the place," Selby said. "We were like a day behind him."