

Elusive Bedroom Killer Haunts Detective *Ex-Private Eye Takes New Look at Goleta Slayings*

Santa Barbara News-Press, 8 December 2002
By Camilla Cohee

A serial killer who preyed on couples in their bedrooms in Goleta 20 years ago was never caught.

And that keeps retired private investigator Russ Whitmeyer up at night.



Standing just feet from the Avenida Pequena condominium where physician Robert Offerman and psychologist Alexandria Manning were shot to death Dec. 30, 1979, Mr. Whitmeyer said cracking the case has become his obsession.

"This case is so fascinating ... the brutality is incredible. Solving it would really be a life achievement," said the 59-year-old retired Ventura County sheriff's deputy who became a private investigator 20 years ago. Back troubles forced him to leave the Sheriff's Department in 1976.

A resident of Ojai for 25 years, he's spent the last couple of months conducting interviews and reviewing details of two unsolved double homicides, and one attempted killing, that all occurred in the same Goleta neighborhood, around Cathedral Oaks Road and Patterson Avenue, between 1979 and 1981.

On July 27, 1981, two years after the murders of Drs. Offerman and Manning, Gregory Sanchez and Cheri Domingo were killed in the same fashion at the Toltec Way home where Ms. Domingo was house-sitting.

The killings bear a chilling resemblance to an attack on another Goleta couple. On Oct. 1, 1979, Jennifer Horinek and Abraham Himmel were asleep in their Queen Ann Lane home when an intruder tied them up and threatened to kill them. They managed to escape from the man who investigators believe is the killer of the other two couples.

Around the same time, Lyman Smith and his wife, Charlene, were found bludgeoned to death in their Ventura home.

Now retired from private investigator work as well, Mr. Whitmeyer said boredom caused him to take an interest in the slayings. He worked the Ventura homicide when he was still with the Sheriff's Department, but didn't realize the connection back then. A string of clues, such as similar methods of operation, has led Mr. Whitmeyer, and sheriff's investigators in Orange County, to believe the Goleta killer is also responsible for a series of murders in Ventura and Orange counties that occurred over a seven-year span, up until 1986 when the crimes stopped.

Those cases have also been linked through DNA to a string of at least 50 rapes committed in east Sacramento in the mid-1970s.

"By assuming the cases are connected, by solving one you solve them all," Mr. Whitmeyer said. "But I'm focusing on the Goleta cases, because that's where all the major clues are.

"These victims were in their beds and late at night or early in the morning, they were savagely beaten ... and the suspect would tie them up using this very special knot, and it's this special knot, and the way the victims were tied up and beaten, that connects them all," Mr. Whitmeyer explained.

Witness descriptions of the killer -- a white male in his late teens or 20s who attempted to disguise his voice by making it sound deeper and wore a distinct Adidas running shoe -- also link the cases, he said.

Mr. Whitmeyer believes somebody around here knows something that would help crack the case. By establishing a reward, and circulating brochures that detail major clues in the case, he believes someone may come forward with information.

"After the last murder in 1986, the killer just disappeared," Mr. Whitmeyer said. "It's possible this person might still be living in Goleta. You never can tell."

He said an anonymous donor in Ventura put up a \$100,000 reward, but recently backed out. Now he's hoping someone else interested in seeing the cases solved will come forward with a \$100,000 reward, and another \$20,000 to create mailers that would be circulated throughout Goleta to help trigger residents' memories.

Santa Barbara sheriff's deputies say they are still working the case as well.

"Those cases are currently under active investigation, assigned to two detectives," said sheriff's spokesman Sgt. Phil Willis. "We're constantly reviewing technology and how it might impact how we solve this and other unsolved crimes."

Santa Barbara sheriff's detectives have said they are not convinced, but have not ruled out the possibility, that the Goleta killer is connected to the other cases.

"There was DNA evidence in our investigation that does not match the DNA from their killer," Lt. Mike Burrige told the News-Press in October of 2000.

It was the Orange County sheriff's "cold case" investigative team that announced two years ago that the cases were all linked. The office pushed for legislation allowing DNA samples to be taken of death row and prison inmates in an effort to crack unsolved cases like this one.

Orange County sheriff's investigator Larry Pool, who has worked this particular serial killer case exclusively for several years, described the killer he believes is responsible for 10 murders and 50 rapes along the state.

"He is a cat burglar rapist who prowls and selects his victims and targets couples, and it is his desire to have a man and woman that he takes on at the same time," he said. "He brings pre-cut ligatures to the scene to tie them up, may bring a flashlight, a firearm, covers his face with a ski mask.

"In my opinion, he's the most brazen serial killer in American history," Mr. Pool said. "In each of these cases, the suspect enters the victim's world, which makes it high risk for him. He's choosing to have a male present as well, which means this guy is extremely bold and arrogant, and even more dangerous."

Mr. Whitmeyer and Detective Pool agree the killer is either dead, in prison, or out there in society somewhere. He would be in his mid-30s to mid-40s now.

"I'm open to him being the quiet guy next door who neighbors only saw on Saturday mornings when he mowed the lawn," Mr. Pool said.

"I think everybody who comes into contact with this case is haunted by it," he added. "We have a body count here that needs to be solved."

YOU CAN HELP

The Orange County Sheriff's CLUE team is seeking tips from anyone who might have known or currently knows the killer. Call Investigator Larry Pool at 1-888-390-CLUE.

Locally, call the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department at 681-4100, or private investigator Russ Whitmeyer at 640-1480.