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Killer linked to area

Investigator follows serial rapist's trail to Shasta County, Ray case

By Ryan Sabalow, Record Searchlight
October 1, 2006

Russ Whitmeyer is hunting a monster.

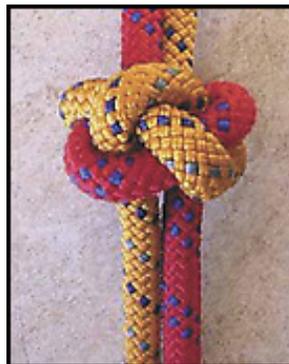
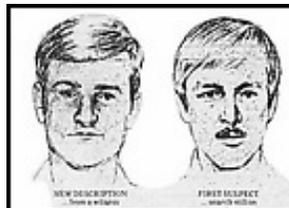
From 1976 to 1986, a man went on a rape and killing spree from Sacramento to Orange County, raping at least 50 women and killing at least 10 and maybe as many as 17 people.

The killer was never caught.

Whitmeyer, a 63-year-old private investigator from Southern California, believes he's found the killer's trail -- a trail he says leads to Shasta County.

And Whitmeyer believes a 30-year-old unsolved murder that recently was resurrected from the Redding Police Department's cold case files may be connected.

He says there's a remote possibility that Terri Lynn



TIED UP: Police say a serial rapist and killer tied his victims using a diamond knot.

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Ray, the 15-year-old Anderson High School student found stabbed to death in a creek near her mother's south Redding home in 1976, may have been one of the killer's first victims.

Police say advances in DNA technology could help them learn who killed Terri.

Hair evidence -- long thought to be useless -- found at the scene of Terri's death is to be examined at a California Department of Justice crime lab in Sacramento, police said.

Patterns of evil

Whitmeyer, a former Ventura County sheriff's detective, has spent the past six years of his retirement trying to find the serial killer now known by two monikers: the East Area Rapist and the Original Night Stalker.

He says he gets no money from his investigation and his only motivation is to solve the crime.

"There are just so many victims and so many victims' families that have been affected by this serial rapist and murderer," Whitmeyer said. "Somebody should try to find him."

The serial killer is thought to have begun his criminal career as a rapist in Sacramento in 1976, earning himself the name East Area Rapist because many of his attacks occurred in the Rancho Cordova, Citrus Heights and Orangevale areas east of Sacramento.

The man would later become known as the Original Night Stalker, because his crimes started before those of convicted serial murderer Richard Ramirez, known as the Night Stalker.

Ramirez was convicted in 1989 for killing 13 people in similar home invasion attacks in the Los Angeles area.

Ramirez is on death row awaiting execution. He's been cleared of crimes connected to the East Area Rapist, the FBI said.

The East Area Rapist attacked at least 50 women between June 1976 and July 1979 in a path from Sacramento to Contra Costa counties, according to press reports and an FBI alert issued to law enforcement in 2002.

Originally, he attacked single women, often after prying open sliding glass doors or windows of their homes with a screwdriver.

He haunted upper-middle-class neighborhoods, prowling at night looking for unlocked doors.

The FBI describes the man as most likely being white with fair to light olive complexion and dark hair. He stood between 5 feet 7 inches and 5 feet 11 inches tall. He would now be in his late 40s or early 50s. He wore a size 9 shoe.

The rapist frequently wore a ski mask and would often carry pre-cut lengths of shoelaces or twine. He would tie his victims up with an intricate sailor's knot, called a diamond knot, which is incredibly difficult to tie and points to a possible naval background, Whitmeyer said.

His victims weren't just women. In 1977, he started attacking couples in their homes.

Detectives hosted town hall meetings after the Sacramento rapes to address residents' concerns. At one meeting, a man stood up and boldly proclaimed that he could protect his wife from the rapist, Whitmeyer said.

The couple were the rapist's next victims, Whitmeyer said.

The rapist would break in, often waking the victims by shining a flashlight on them or speaking.

He would separate the woman from the man, often having the woman tie up her companion.

Speaking through clenched teeth in a whispering falsetto voice, he would tell the bound man he was going to kill him and the woman if he heard a sound.

His warning came after he'd place perfume bottles or dishes on the man's back. He'd then leave to rape the woman in another room.

He left DNA evidence behind.

The East Area Rapist had other quirks, including eating food from the victims' refrigerators and telling his victims all he wanted was food and money. He would rarely take anything of value, but occasionally would grab jewelry as a memento.

In 1979, the rapist turned even more violent.

He started targeting couples in Southern California coastal communities in Santa Barbara, Ventura and Orange counties. He wasn't picky about his weapons and would shoot, stab or bludgeon his victims -- both men and women. The rapist frequently held a knife to his victims' throats.

In May 1986, Janelle Lisa Cruz was found bludgeoned to death in her home in Irvine.

Police think it may have been the last time the East Area Rapist struck.

A hiatus

"A serial killer doesn't usually stop," Whitmeyer said. "He's most likely

incarcerated, or he's deceased."

But Whitmeyer said there's a chance the killer is still loose.

In 2001, the San Francisco Chronicle quoted retired Sacramento County sheriff's detective Richard Shelby as saying the rapist called one of his victims in 1990 or 1991.

Shelby told reporters the victim heard children in the background and a woman speaking, possibly indicating the rapist had a family.

The media's interest in the case was piqued in 2001 after crime labs in the Bay Area and Orange County connected the East Area Rapist to the Southern California homicides through DNA evidence.

He's now known as California's most prolific at-large serial offender, Whitmeyer said.

The private investigator says the killer once may have called Shasta County home.

He said he's "almost 100 percent sure" the killer either had family here or lived here at some point.

As evidence, he cites a Sacramento Bee article from December 1977, reporting Sacramento County sheriff's deputies chasing a suspect wearing a ski mask on a bicycle through the same area the rapist was known to stalk.

The deputies never caught the man, but they found his bike. It had been reported stolen from the Redding area, the article said.

The bike rider wasn't the rapist, the cops said in the story. But Whitmeyer isn't so sure -- after other crimes, the rapist fled on a bike.

"Just because they had a profile years ago doesn't mean that with years of further investigation that that profile was correct," he said.

Whitmeyer is sure the bike links the rapist to Shasta County. He claims to have other credible evidence, although he would not be specific.

He asks anyone with information about the case to call him at (805) 432-0054. He said he would forward tips to the appropriate law enforcement agency.

Whitmeyer hopes that renewed interest in the case -- and reward money he's gathering -- will get residents thinking, specifically about unreported or unsolved rapes and murders in Shasta County.

Murders, he said, like the case of Terri Lynn Ray.

Possible hope

Whitmeyer says the timing of Terri Lynn Ray's death puts her eerily close to the East Area Rapist's original reign of terror in Sacramento County.

On July 8, 1976, Terri's body was discovered by a pair of children in Clear Creek near her mother's home on Canyon Road in south Redding.

The girl had been stabbed 15 times.

Whitmeyer says Terri's murder falls within weeks of the rapist's attacks in Sacramento, the first of which was reported on June 18, 1976.

But a coroner's exam found that Terri had not been sexually assaulted, something her mother, LaVerne Ray, 79, was quick to point out when asked by a reporter about a possible connection to the rapist.

DNA may be the key to discovering a connection, if one exists, says Capt. Peter Hansen of the Redding Police Department.

Hansen said around a month ago, investigators sent a hair sample found at the Ray crime scene to be examined by Department of Justice forensic scientists.

The hair had been in Terri's file for years, but was long thought to be useless because it didn't have a root attached. Advances in DNA technology mean there's the chance the rootless hair can be sampled, Hansen said.

This is a boon for investigators because other clues, including blood samples from the scene, were found years ago to be corrupted, and suspicious flowers left mysteriously on the girl's headstone recently turned out to be dead ends, Hansen said.

If DNA is found, it will be added to the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, a national database of criminals' genetic markers, and cross-checked with other DNA in the system.

Hansen said that presumably would include what was left behind by the East Area Rapist.

LaVerne Ray said she's optimistic, but she has been down this path too many times in the 30 years since her daughter's death to be overly hopeful.

"I'll wait," she said. "That's all I can do."

Reporter Ryan Sabalow can be reached at 225-8344 or at rsabalow@redding.com.

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