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Retired officer looking to solve 1975 cold case 'Ransacker' linked to murder, multiple crimes

By Natalie Garcia
Staff writer

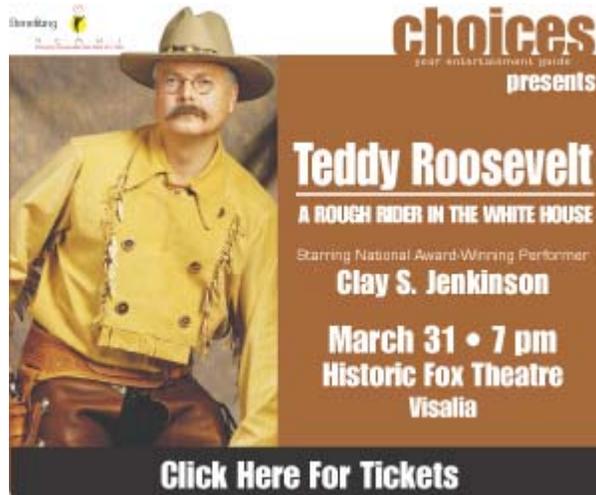
A retired police detective says his six-year obsession with a string of California rapes and murders has led him to the conclusion that they started in Visalia.

Private investigator Russ Whitmeyer, in his quest to identify the so-called "Visalia Ransacker" who terrorized the city more 30 years ago, says letters he is sending to every address with a Visalia zip code should be arriving in mailboxes Feb. 19.

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Whitmeyer is asking Visalians to help him discover the identity of the person who killed a College of the Sequoias teacher in 1975 and may have committed other crimes, including rapes and murders.

The two-page letter contains a vague physical description of the suspect, whose face was always covered by a ski mask during his crimes, a summary of his crimes, the reward

offer for the tip that leads to the correct identification of the man and where he was thought to have lived during the span of his criminal career.

Whitmeyer, a retired Ventura County sheriff's deputy turned private investigator, has made finding out the identity of the prolific criminal his full-time job since retiring from his own private investigation company in 2000.

Whitmeyer left the Ventura Sheriff's Department in 1976 after a work-related injury.

"People don't understand that it is basically like a hobby in retirement to solve the case," Whitmeyer said. "I set a goal in retirement that I would solve the

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case."

Whitmeyer said the man, who would be in his late 40s to early 50s now, has been linked to at least 20 murders, 70 rapes and 200 burglaries across the state. Law enforcement officers have not made such a firm connection between all the crimes.

In Visalia, Whitmeyer said consistency in the crimes' circumstances has led him to believe the man committed at least four murders, 10 rapes and more than 125 burglaries.

The man is a white male, about 5-feet, 10-inches tall with a stocky build and brown hair. He wore a size-9 shoe.

Because he used an unusual knot, called a diamond knot, to tie his victims, Whitmeyer thinks the suspect had a military background, particularly in the Navy or Air Force.

Whitmeyer believes the Ransacker is the same man also known by the monikers the "Original Night Stalker" and the "East Area Rapist," for crimes he is believed to have committed in Southern California and east Sacramento.

Visalia police Sgt. Allyn Wightman said he has talked with Whitmeyer and has provided him with information.

One notable case that Whitmeyer believes was committed by the Ransacker was the murder of College of the Sequoias journalism professor Claude Snelling in 1975.

Snelling was shot trying to prevent the kidnapping of his 16-year-old daughter after a man broke into their Visalia home.

Wightman said the Visalia police do not have any physical evidence to connect the man Whitmeyer is looking for with Snelling's killer, but that the killer's method did appear similar to cases that Whitmeyer is investigating in other cities.

Wightman, who spoke to Whitmeyer as recently as Wednesday, said Whitmeyer told him he was close to identifying someone.

"Whatever we can produce for him, we will assist him," Wightman said. "There were similar circumstances, but that was it."

Wightman said if Whitmeyer identifies the man the police will seriously look into whether he could be the same man who murdered Snelling.

A few months after Snelling was killed, Whitmeyer said, Visalia police Officer William McGowen caught up with the Ransacker while he was breaking into a house.

The Ransacker shot at McGowen, hitting his flashlight, and eventually got away. That is when the crimes of that particular nature stopped in Visalia.

His crimes didn't stop altogether though, with several murders and rapes attributed to him in east Sacramento and Southern California after he was believed to have left Visalia. The crimes mysteriously ended in 1986, leading

Whitmeyer to think that he is either dead or was incarcerated for other crimes.

Whitmeyer said he will pursue the identity of this man as long as it takes. He said he is trying to raise \$250,000 as a reward for correct information that leads to the identification of the man who terrorized several California communities for more than 10 years.

"This particular suspect is probably the biggest serial killer and burglar in California history," Whitmeyer said. "I don't know of any other cases that include this many murders, rapes and burglaries. I just want to identify this killer. It is a goal that I have set, and I want to accomplish this goal."

- The reporter can be reached at ngarcia@visalia.gannett.com.

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Originally published February 8, 2007

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