

# OKLAHOMA MAGAZINE

## Cold Case Oklahoma

By

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After dark on the snowy evening of Feb. 5, 1975, Geraldine Martin, 28, left art class at Tulsa Junior College to walk to her Volkswagen parked nearby. Nineteen days later, construction workers renovating the abandoned Osage Hills Apartments north of downtown found her nude body stuffed into a built-in cupboard. She had been strangled with a ligature, her body mutilated.

The case remained unsolved for nearly three decades.

More than 6,000 killers get away with murder every year in the United States. One third of all homicides go unsolved. Clearance rates for murder and manslaughter have dropped from nearly 90 percent in the 1960s to less than 65 percent. While FBI statistics show Oklahoma's murder clearance at above 80 percent, that still means two of every 10 killers in the state avoid apprehension.

"A case may go cold, but it is never closed," points out retired Tulsa Homicide Detective Sergeant Mike Huff. "There is no statute of limitations on murder."

Huff and a string of Tulsa detectives before him kept the Martin case active for 27 years. In 2002, FBI agents arrested long-haul truck driver Clyde Carl Wilkerson in Little Rock, Ark., on California fugitive warrants. DNA technology unavailable in the 1960s and '70s linked him to the 1965 sex-slaying of Cheryl Burnett in El Cajon, Calif., and to the murder of Louis Mercer and brutal rape of Mercer's wife two weeks earlier in the same city. DNA also pinned Wilkerson to the 1975 Tulsa case.

Wilkerson pled guilty in 2004 to snatching Martin off the TJC campus and dumping her body in the Osage Hills Apartments. Now an old man in a wheelchair, he is expected to die in prison. Police continue to investigate unsolved murders he may have committed while criss-crossing America in his 18-wheeler.

### Most Famous Unsolved Murder

#### *E.C. Mullendore*

A forest of trees has been sacrificed to newsprint in speculation of who killed 32-year-old millionaire rancher E.C. Mullendore III. Estranged from his wife pending divorce, the rancher was on his sprawling 40,000-acre Cross Bell Ranch in Osage County with ranch hand Damon "Chub" Anderson the night of Sept. 26, 1970, when he was beaten and shot to death. Summoned by Anderson, deputies found Mullendore dead in a pool of blood in the basement and Anderson shot once in the back of his arm. There was evidence of a savage struggle.

According to Anderson's statement, he was upstairs getting ready to take a bath when two intruders broke into the house and attacked Mullendore, beating him before shooting him between the eyes. Hearing the gunshot, Anderson rushed downstairs and exchanged fire with the assailants.

Investigators learned the rancher was deeply in debt and had reportedly obtained loans from underworld crime figures, leading to rampant rumors that his slaying was a mob hit. Anderson was widely regarded as a prime suspect, possibly having cooperated with the mob.

Tulsa private investigator Gary Glanz, a former Tulsa Police detective, arrived at the murder scene within hours, having been contacted to provide security for the dead man's wife. News outlets such as the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times have referred to Glanz as a "super sleuth."

"This was never about a contract hit," he states flatly. "The case should have been solved within the first 72 hours."

Anderson died in Kansas in 2010 at 70-years-old after a medical release from prison on other convictions. Glanz, who had maintained contact with the case, arrived at his deathbed in time to tape a stunning statement.

"We have got the answer," Glanz reveals. "There was another man with Chub the night of the murder, who helped cover it up. I'm working with the DA in Osage County to resolve it."

An indictment may be pending.

## **Terror on Cache Road**

### ***The Lawton Serial Killer***

Crimes of passion and run-of-the-mill "Saturday night" shootings, stabbings and bludgeoning tend to sort themselves out quite readily. "Whodunit" homicides associated with crimes like robbery, rape and drug activity are more likely to go cold. Serial killers are especially difficult to track down. The longer a case drags on, the less likely it will be resolved. A handful of unsolved crimes in Oklahoma have particularly captured the attention of the public and law enforcement.

"We never stop looking," says Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation Agent Robert Williams, case agent for a series of murders that occurred in the Lawton area from 1999 to 2003.

The reign of terror began mid-summer of 1999 when a passerby spotted a nude corpse bobbing in shallow Sandy Bear Creek six miles northeast of Velma in rural Stephens County. Forensics identified the body as that of Jane Marie Chafton, 28, from Lawton. She was last seen on Aug. 9.

Cassandra Lee Ramsey, 25, was next, disappearing on Oct. 10, 1999. Her naked body turned up five months later beneath a bridge along a rural road in Jefferson County.

Mandy Raite, 25, vanished from Lawton on June 15, 2000. She reappeared two days later, nude, dead and dropped in a streambed in Comanche County.

There are more than 50 children still listed as missing in Oklahoma, some from as far back as 1985.

Janice Buono, 29, went missing for nearly two months before her body was recovered in Comanche County on Feb. 23, 2002. Her remains were likewise stripped and dropped into a streambed.

Pam Woodring, 34, was the most recent victim in succession, her naked body recovered in Kiowa County on June 5, 2003.

The modus operandi of the murders coupled with the history of the victims indicate a Jack the Ripper-type suspect. According to Richard Goss, OSBI agent-in-charge of the investigation, all five young women were known prostitutes and drug abusers who haunted the sleazy, low-rent motels and underground world of drugs and prostitution along Cache Road in Lawton. One by one they were seized and left naked, and presumably raped, in streambeds. Medical examiners discovered cocaine residue in each of the five bodies.

Decomposition made causes of death difficult to determine. However, detectives emphasize that the women did not die of natural causes.

“The Lawton murders seem to have stopped with Woodring,” says Goss. “But whoever did it will not quit. He’s moved elsewhere, is in prison for other crimes, or something else has happened. Someone out there knows something or has suspicions. We hope they come forward. Lifestyle aside, these women were human and did not deserve this.”

## They Went for a Walk

### *Skyla Whitaker and Taylor Paschal-Placker*

The genesis of the OSBI dates back to the 1920s when gangs of outlaws roamed Oklahoma, requiring a statewide response from law enforcement. The Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation reduced the number of bank robberies in the state by 75 percent after Gov. Martin E. Trapp created it in 1925. In 1939, the agency became known as State Crime Bureau, evolving into the OSBI in 1957. It assists rural and small town law enforcement in investigating major crimes for which locals do not possess adequate manpower and resources. With only about 80 agents to cover the entire state, investigators find themselves swamped, each of them working as many as 17 or 18 cases at a time.

“We do not have enough personnel to work any single case full time,” explains OSBI spokeswoman Jessica Brown.

Nonetheless, Agent Kurt Titsworth spends at least three-quarters of his duty time sorting out clues and hunting suspects in the baffling murders of 11-year-old Skyla Whitaker and 13-year-old Taylor Paschal-Placker. An investigator for the Okfuskee County District Attorney when the homicides occurred, he later went to work for the OSBI in order to pursue the investigation. It is one of the most intensive probes in the history of the OSBI.

On June 8, 2008, at about 5 p.m., the two children left the rural Placker residence on County Line Road near Weleetka to stroll to Bad Creek Bridge, less than a half-mile away. Shortly thereafter, Okfuskee County Sheriff Jack Choate’s office received a frantic 911 call.

“Somebody killed two little girls! My baby, my grandbaby and her friend... They went out for a walk and now they’re dead...Oh, my God, help me, please...”

The little girls’ lifeless bodies lay sprawled in a shallow roadside ditch near the bridge, Skyla shot eight times in the head and torso, Taylor five times. Two separate weapons were involved. The crime was so horrendous, so apparently random, that detectives have yet to establish a motive for it.

The sole “person of interest” to date is described as an American Indian male in his mid-30s, six feet tall, slender, with a ponytail dangling down his back. He was seen driving a white Ford or Chevrolet pickup in the vicinity minutes before the girls were gunned down.

“We are constantly working new leads,” Brown stresses.

## Pick a Motive

### *Lauria Bible and Ashley Freeman*

Identifying motive in a crime can often – but not always – lead to a solution.

“We think we know the motive,” says Brown, referring to Lauria Jaylene Bible and Ashley Freeman, who disappeared on a winter’s night in 1999. “But we’re not willing to share it yet.”

At 6 a.m. on Dec. 31, 1999, a passing motorist reported a fire at a mobile home in a remote, wooded area near Welch in Craig County. Authorities subsequently recovered from the trailer the charred remains of Danny Freeman and his wife Kathy, each of whom died from a shotgun blast at point-blank range. The evening before, Kathy Freeman took her daughter Ashley and Ashley’s friend Lauria Bible, 16, to a Pizza Hut in Vinita to celebrate Ashley’s 16th birthday. The three returned to the Freeman home afterwards. By dawn, the trailer house was smoldering down to its wheels, the parents were dead and the two 16-year-old girls were gone. They have not been seen again in nearly 12 years.

Authorities have considered several motives for the crime – revenge, drugs, a feud, jealousy. They are not willing to divulge the one they have settled on as most probable. A bizarre phenomenon of high-profile homicides is the number of people who, for notoriety or other perverse reasons, will confess, even though they didn’t do it. At least four people claimed to have killed Geraldine Martin. Withholding key facts about a crime from the public allows detectives to sort out deceivers from actual perpetrators.

“There are no indications that Lauria and Ashley are alive,” Brown concludes. “They’ve literally vanished. But we can always hope.”

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## Lack of Evidence

### *Jack and Eaine Denney*

Hope is what keeps Cherokee County Undersheriff Jason Chennault going in his investigation of the bloody Denney double homicide. On Christmas afternoon 2007, Chennault and his deputies responded to a call for help on Iron Post Road near Locust Grove in northeast Oklahoma’s Green Country. Jack Denney, 65, and his wife Elaine, 66, were shot to death on the floor of their home. There were no signs of forced entry, nothing appeared stolen from the residence. The Denneys had no known enemies. They were, in fact, the beloved “unofficial grandparents” of the community, always willing to lend a helping hand to neighbors, friends, family, even strangers.

Chennault’s dilemma, he says, is not lack of motive or suspects. It’s lack of evidence.

“We have some good suspects that we’re looking at,” he explains. “One was recently released from state prison after conviction on an unrelated charge following the murders. We don’t have enough to charge him with homicide – yet.”

“They were inseparable,” Chris Denney says of his parents. “They were always together, they’ve always been together, and now they’ll always be together.”

### **“We Never Give Up”**

Oklahoma averages more than 200 homicides each year statewide; about 40 of them go unsolved. To a detective, victims are more than statistics. An investigator comes to know as much about them as anyone who knew the person alive. He talks with the deceased’s friends and relatives; he reads diaries and letters; views home videos; talks to neighbors and employees. In the process, he shares and understands the victim’s innermost thoughts, feelings and aspirations. The dead were once people; they deserve justice.

“We never give up – no matter how long it takes,” affirms OSBI Agent Robert Williams.

Law enforcement officials urge anyone with information about any of these homicides, or any other unsolved murder, to contact the nearest police, OSBI or sheriff’s station.