

60 Years Later, Woman's Death Remains A Mystery
News

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(semissourian.com)- The note - written on torn, now-yellowed paper in a traditional, slightly shaky cursive -- arrived in a postage-paid business reply envelope marked, "Please give to man who wrote articles on Huffman case."



It implored a reporter to visit its author at her home north of Benton, Missouri, "and please keep plans quiet."

"Because of health, I can't come there. And because of family objections," the author wrote. "I am sure the Bonnie Huffman case can be solved even at this late date. Please come."

Bonnie Huffman disappeared July 3, 1954, just after midnight.

Her car was found the next day, a Gene Autry cap pistol lying on the ground nearby.

Two days after the 20-year-old Delta woman's disappearance, a couple found Huffman's badly decomposed body in a ditch next to Route N, her neck broken and her jaw dislocated. Huffman's shirt was torn, and her watch, glasses and underwear were missing, along with her purse.

Police suspected she might have been sexually assaulted, although the condition of her body made autopsy results inconclusive.

The cryptic note that arrived at the newspaper office nearly eight years later was one of countless leads authorities have chased -- to no avail -- over the past six decades.

"Someone got away with murder," Huffman's niece, Wanda Ross, recently told the Marble Hill, Missouri, Banner-Press. "Somebody knows what happened. It's a shame no one ever came forward all those years."

Every year, the likelihood of solving the case diminishes as memories fade and potential witnesses die.

"Once in a great while, we'll have somebody call in and say, 'I have a thought: There was this one guy, and he used to run around,' but it's just so generic," said Capt. David James of the Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Department.

Most of the tangible evidence -- including the toy gun and Huffman's clothing -- is long gone.

"I don't know that there's much of anything physical left in that case," James said.

Many of the possible witnesses are dead. There's "a high probability" the killer is, too, James said.

"[Officers] worked [the case] as hard as they could work it and exhausted all their leads," he said.

Searching for a 'sex fiend'

An Unsolved Murders magazine dated summer 1964 includes a long, sensational article about the case, detailing some of those leads.

If nothing else, the magazine article illustrates how little authorities understood about sex crimes at the time.

Police administered about 100 polygraph tests to possible suspects, searching for what the article describes as a "merciless sex fiend" responsible for "Bonnie's savage slaying," according to the article.

The article emphasizes Huffman's appearance, describing her as "attractive" and noting when she was found, "her skirt and white slip had been pushed up to her shapely thighs."

Today, investigators know physical attraction usually isn't the motive behind sexual assault, and the victim's appearance seldom -- if ever -- has anything to do with the attack.

Instead, attackers have a range of motives, from jealousy to a desire to control someone else, said Chris Limbaugh, Cape Girardeau County prosecuting attorney.

"It's not necessarily lust," Limbaugh said. "It's domination; it's anger; it's hate; it's power."

Sixty years ago, however, sexual gratification was presumed to be the motive behind rapes, so police investigating Huffman's murder questioned anybody who seemed to have an unusual sexual appetite: a man who had molested his two preschool-aged daughters; a tattooed man with "sinister eyes" who talked "constantly about sex and women"; a mechanic who wore women's undergarments at home, according to the Unsolved Murders article.

Investigators were unable to link any of the men to the murder.

Suspicious

When the note about the murder arrived at the newspaper office in 1962, reporter Cecelia Sonderman went to interview its author.

Typewritten notes from that interview say the woman outlined her suspicions about her daughter's ex-boyfriend and two of his relatives.

Among her concerns:

- * When the family heard a radio report about Huffman's disappearance, the daughter's then-boyfriend said he knew about it. He said Huffman was "a tramp and deserved to be killed," and, "They won't find her alive."
- * Whenever the case was brought up, the boyfriend seemed upset and refused to talk about it.
- * The boyfriend's sister and brother-in-law came to visit the woman shortly after Huffman's death. During their visit, their young son said police had found his toy gun at the scene of the murder and that one of the men the woman suspected of killing Huffman had said they were "going to have some fun with it."
- * A couple reported seeing a gray car following Huffman's car the night of the murder. The letter writer said one of the men she suspected in the murder had just painted his car a grayish color, but after he learned officers were looking for the car seen following Huffman, he had his car painted

blue.

The letter writer offered to take a lie-detector test and asked that the three men she suspected in the murder be given lie-detector tests as well.

A March 30, 1962, article in the Southeast Missourian reported several people had been questioned and had submitted voluntarily to lie-detector tests at Cape Girardeau police headquarters, but all of them passed, and the suspects were cleared of any involvement in the murder.

Polygraph tests can be a useful investigative tool, but their results are not admissible in court, Limbaugh said.

"It's simply perhaps another clue, another piece to the puzzle," he said.

Another letter

Ten years ago, another lead surfaced.

In 2004, the Cape Girardeau Police Department received a mysterious letter from someone in Florida who reported seeing a car stopped on a curve half a mile from Delta -- the same spot where Huffman's body was found -- on the way home from a dance.

The writer, assuming someone was having car trouble, stopped to help, the letter stated.

Two men "came in a hurry and hollering, 'What the hell are you doing? Get the hell ... out. Then I saw someone in the ditch, hollering," the letter stated.

One of the men tried to pull the writer out of the car, the letter stated.

"I got my foot against the car-body, and my hand on the steering [wheel], my other hand was on the door handle," the letter stated. "The other fellow was trying to get in the other door. Luck is that that door was locked. How I ever got the clutch in and shifted, I will never know."

The men tried to block the road and chased the writer's car as far as the Diversion Channel bridge, the letter stated.

Police have been unable to locate the writer, and the identity of Huffman's killer remains unknown.

James is not optimistic that will change.

"It's just one of those things that ... some cases can't be solved. It's just as simple as that," he said.

After all these years, Huffman's family would just like a little closure, Ross said.

"I just want to know why things are not as they should have been," she said.