Stranger Than FICTION

Pulaski County Investigator Talks About Serial Killer Case, Experience

KELLY FOREMAN | PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

T he darkness enveloped a humble Pulaski County home on a frigid January evening. A knock on the door allowed the stiff, winter air and icy snow to blow into 79-year-old Jack Roerink’s home, as he welcomed his neighbor in from the cold.

Roerink had started a pot of coffee in the kitchen and was trying to keep warm in his flannel shirt and house shoes. His neighbor, Michael Abner, talked to him about meaningless things.

“I went in there and sat down with him at the table, trying to think of how I could do it,” Abner told Pulaski County Lt. Detective Brett Whitaker. “I knew it was coming. I just wanted to know how. So, I did what I did.”

One evening after Deloris left for work, Mamie in Mamie’s bed had seen him — so he decided to kill.

“Jaime” Abner — the Mercer case became cold. No one ever

By BILL MADRIS
C-J Assistant Managing Editor

80-year-old woman died of strangulation

An autopsy report on the body of Mrs. Mamie G. Mercer indicates that, the 80-year-old woman’s untimely death. But investigators found nothing missing in the house and were left without leads.

“We have no suspects … nothing,” then-Sheriff John Adams told the newspaper.

Abner got only $30 to $40 from Mercer after he killed her, according to a case file supplement. Soon after Mercer’s death, Abner was convicted on a third-degree burglary charge and served time in prison.

Despite what was described as an intense investigation and polygraph testing of multiple suspects — including Abner — the Mercer case became cold. No one ever was charged in the case. >>

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“Yes,” Abner replied.

Abner left the house after committing the crime, but came back a short while later. Altman, unaware of what had occurred, left the house with Abner and drove to a gas station for cigarettes. They returned to find a door to the home suspiciously standing open.

“Went to the door propped open,” Abner said. “My inten-ions was that when we got back, it would look like somebody came in there. And so I went and looked around, but I already knew she was dead. I said, ‘Somebody broke in there and killed Deloris’ mama, what should we do?’ She (Altman) said, ‘We better go get Deloris.’

So we went and got her, we might even have called her. But when we got in the car with Deloris, naturally she was upset and scared. She got there (to the house) and was getting ready to get out the pistol.

I said, ‘No, give me that pistol, somebody might be in that house.’ So I went in and acted like I looked around, you know, faking like somebody might be in there. I come back out, give her the pistol and she called the law.”

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Death by Strangulation

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In October 1983, Abner was barely 20 years old. He was dating a woman named Deloris, who worked the evening shift at a local factory and lived with her 80-year-old grandmother, Mamie Mercer.

One evening after Deloris left for work, Mamie was alone with her 4-year-old grandson. Another 17-year-old girl who lived in the home, Kim Altman, was showering. Abner decided to search the home for things he could steal to get booze and drugs.

“Yeah, I knew I was going to kill him,” Abner said.

“My intentions was that when we got back, it would look like somebody came in there. And so I went and looked around, but I already knew she was dead,” Abner said. “Somebody broke in there and killed Deloris’ mama, what should we do?” She (Altman) said, ‘We better go get Deloris.’

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FIVE YEARS LATER

In 1988, Abner had moved back to Somerset after a stint in South Carolina and was sleeping on his sister’s couch. Across the street from Abner’s sister’s home lived an 83-year-old minister’s widow named Mae Stringer.

“Abner said. “I was a drinker back then and I smoked some pot,” Abner said. “I grabbed all the perfume I could find in there and poured it all up under the bed and on the floor.” Abner said. “She had an old heating pad laying beside the bed. I lit it in there against the bed and plugged it up. I lit it, got the guns and I left.”

Abner ventured into the woman’s bedroom looking for jewelry and Stringer stirred. “I had no intentions on killing her,” he said. “She moved around and stuff and I thought she might have seen me. So, I jumped on her and strangled her.”

Stringer’s death and a photo of her burned home topped the front page of the Somerset newspaper the following day. Firefighters and arson investigators suspected the electric blanket had something to do with the blaze. Based on the scene, the Pulaski County coroner at the time said foul play was not suspected.

Abner decided to set fire to the house. “I knocked on the door and nobody came,” Abner continued. “I knocked loud enough I could have woke anybody up. So, I took my elbow and knocked out the window closest to the knob and went in. I seen her laying in bed, so I know she didn’t hear me bang.”

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Abner, again, escaped prosecution.

GOING TO PUT ME DOWN

After Stringer’s murder, Abner spent several years in prison, mostly on multiple theft-related charges. He married a woman named Tamara Martin and the two had a daughter, Haley, then a son, Christian. Abner also served quite a bit of time in the county jail for violating emergency protection orders Tamara took out against him, in which she alleged abuse and threats Abner made of burning down her home.

“Tamara befriended an elderly neighbor, Jack Roerink, a widower who was nice to her kids and had never been in any trouble with the law. Abner, however, believed that Roerink held a grudge against him. Abner did a little work for Roerink but complained that Roerink didn’t pay him when he said he would. He also believed Roerink was telling Tamara that Abner was “no good,” and that Roerink was trying to get Christian to call him Daddy.

Abner admitted he was on pills at the time and was heavily intoxicated. Because of his state, Abner’s story changed a few times, sometimes waverin into stories of breaking into the home, sometimes changing where the argument took place and other times claiming he went back to the home later to help Roerink and realized it was too late.

“I’m straight up with you, I went over there to kill that (expletive deleted),” Abner told Lt. Detective Whitaker.

“Do you remember where you stabbed him?” Whitaker asked.

“I tried to stab him in the heart so he would die quick and there wouldn’t be no pain,” Abner explained. “Listen here, we’re men. I know that’s a cruel (expletive deleted) thing. But like I said, between Tamara calling and getting DVOs on me, trying to feed my family … I knew it was too late. So, I knew if I didn’t kill him he’d know who done it.”

Abner told Whitaker that Roerink asked him not to kill him. “But I knew if I didn’t kill him he’d know who done it,” Abner said. “So, you cut him some more after that?” Whitaker asked.

“Quite a few times.”

“When you stabbed him, did you say anything?” Whitaker asked.

“Yeah,” Abner said. “I’m ready to go, dude. When I tell you what I’m going to tell you, they’re going to put me down.”

CONNECTING THE CRIMES TO THE CONFESSION

I believed him, but I wanted proof of what he was saying before I really believed him,” W Whitaker said of his reaction as Abner retold his crimes. “When I heard the descriptions he was giving me of these crimes I felt >>
W hitaker contacted Pulaski County Dep. Coroner Jim M CW hortor who, ironically, worked the Mercer case as a trooper in 1983, but also worked the Roerink case in 2010 as the coroner, never knowing the suspect for both cases was the same.

"When I talked to Jim M CW hortor, he remembered the case very well, " W hitaker said. "I don't know if he was surprised [about Abner's confession]. Obviously, any time you uncover evidence in a 20-year-old case, it's something you don't expect. But he knew this guy because he had questioned him in the original investigation. ... Although he was interviewed as a potential suspect, there was no evidence to show that he actually did it."

In a Commonwealth Journal newspaper article following Abner's conviction, M CW hortor said, "[The conviction] just tickled me to death. We never feel no relief.

The Stringer family, however, brought no relief.

Mrs. Stringer's death was originally ruled an accident, " McWhorter said, "[The case proceeded quickly. On March 3, just seven weeks after Roerink had been killed, a grand jury indicted Abner on three counts of murder, three counts of first-degree robbery, two counts of first-degree burglary and first-degree arson. Three weeks later, Pulaski County Commonwealth's Attorney Eddy >>
Montgomery filed with the court his notice of intent to seek the death penalty against Abner.

A SERIAL KILLER CONVICTED

But Abner’s stories of how he attacked and senselessly murdered three, innocent, elderly individuals would never enter the court room. The crime scene photos of a home ripped apart by flames, a helpless woman’s channel remains, or of a widowed man’s home slashed with blood would never make it into the hands of Abner’s peers.

On April 24, 2010, a tearful Abner pleaded guilty to all counts in exchange for a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Montgomery explained to the Roerink, Mercer and Stringer families that 60 to 70 percent of death penalty cases get overturned, that the appeals process can take 15 to 20 years and that at a jury trial, there was a risk of getting a lower sentence than what Abner agreed to serve. The victims’ families were pleased knowing Abner — now 47 years old — would never again be a free man.

“The victims all wanted justice,” Montgomery said of Abner’s penalty. “They wanted to make sure he could never hurt anyone again.”

“I’m just glad it’s over,” Andy Mercer, Marnie Mercer’s grandson, told the Commonwealth’s Journal following Abner’s plea. “You learn to live with this, but it’s never forgotten. It rocked the neighborhood.”

While Montgomery has worked many multiple-victim homicides in his service as commonwealth’s attorney since 1998, he said the Abner case was his first conviction of a serial killer.

“They all want to be attended to,” Montgomery said of Abner. “They all want to justice to be done. They all want to be heard. They all want to make sure justice is served.”

Though Montgomery has worked several multiple-victim homicides, the Abner case was his first conviction of a serial killer.

“His acts are brutal and heinous, speaking to a complete lack of respect for human life,” Montgomery said of Abner. “It’s a complete lack of respect for human life.”

“When you work your cases, make sure you cover all areas,” he said. “Even if it looks like an accidental case, make sure you document the crime scene and how it happened, just in case something comes up in the future that links back to that. So, you can go back and say, “Yeah, I know his statement is true because it’s right here in this report.’”

Whitaker said he learned a lot from working this case, and his most important piece of advice to share with other officers is to be consistent and detailed in documenting their cases.

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Spree killings generally have been defined as “two or more murders committed by an offender or offenders without a cooling-off period,” according to the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit. Similarly, a mass murder has been defined by the FBI as a number of murders, typically four or more, occurring during the same incident, such as in a school shooting.

So, after much discussion based on this definition and the many others that have come before it, the FBI symposium attendees developed this definition: “The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events.”

Defining the Serial Killer

A singular definition accepted worldwide by law enforcement, legislators and medical professionals alike never has been established for the term serial killer. However, there are some basic principles most who study serial killers agree must be addressed.

Time, number of decedents and the number of events are among these principles. Separating a serial murderer from similar, categorial multiple-murderers such as spree killers or mass murderers has been a challenge for many years.

In 2005, however, the Federal Bureau of Investigation hosted a symposium of subject-matter experts to “identify the commonalities of knowledge regarding serial murder,” according to the symposium report. Prior to this symposium, the closest solid definition derived from legislation passed by the United States Congress in 1998, regarding the protection of children from sexual predators.

It states: “The term ‘serial killings’ means a series of three or more killings, not less than one of which was committed within the United States, having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors.”

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