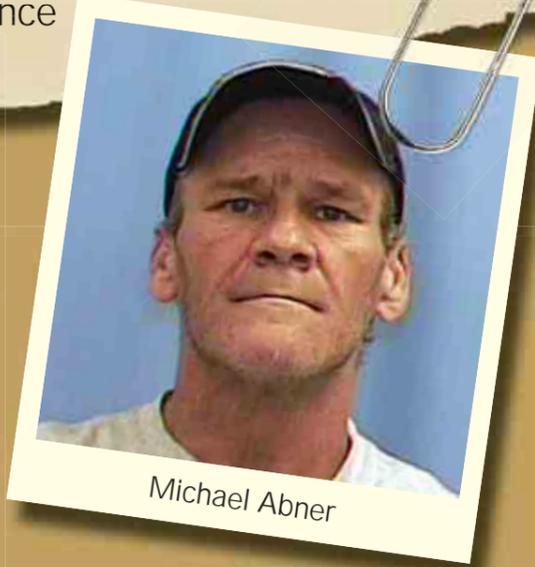


STRANGER THAN FICTION

Pulaski County Investigator Talks About Serial Killer Case, Experience

KELLY FOREMAN | PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER



Michael Abner

The 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."

"What did you do?" Whitaker asked.
 "I stabbed him," Abner said.
 "Did you have a knife with you?" Whitaker asked.
 "No, I got one of his," Abner replied. "I think I used more than one knife."
 "What did you do with the knife?" Whitaker asked.
 "I left it," Abner said. "I didn't give a (expletive deleted), dude. I told you. I was ready. I'm tired. ... I'm just sick of going to jail. I'm sick of the law knocking on my door."

There was little hesitation in Abner's voice as he confessed to brutally stabbing Roerink more than 30 times, leaving him alone to die in his own dining room while Abner ravaged the home and nearby shed for loot.

"Yeah, I knew I was going to kill him," Abner continued. "That makes it premeditated. I'm not dumb, you know, I know the law. You know what I'm shooting for? I'm ready for this (expletive deleted) to end, dude."

And with that, on Jan. 12, 2010 just hours after committing his third murder, 46-year-old Abner began to unravel more than 20 years of murders, arsons

and thefts for Pulaski County sheriff's investigators, pleading with them to connect the dots that would lead him to a death sentence.

DEATH BY STRANGULATION

Since he was 13 years old, Abner told investigators he had been "doing dope." His lengthy criminal history is evidence of his habit.

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 asleep 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.

"I left the door propped open," Abner said. "My intentions was that when we got back, it would look like somebody came in there. And so I went in 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."

The Somerset newspaper reported the following day that foul play was suspected in Mamie Mercer's



While pillaging the house, Abner said he became concerned that the boy sleeping in Mamie's bed had seen him — so he decided to kill Mamie.

"When you do somebody the way I did somebody, there ain't no noise," Abner said. "So she (Altman) didn't hear."

"You jumped on her in the bed and strangled her, right?" asked Lt. Detective Whitaker.

"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.

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. >>

STATE, YEAR, NUM

ARREST DATE	VIOLATION TIME	EXACT LOCA
04 2010		PULASKI COUNTY
03 08 2010	9:04AM	HAIL KNOB RD

NUMBER	VIOLATION CODE	ASCF	STATUTE/ORD.	CHAR.
1 of 3	09150	0	507.020	1
2 of 3	12002	0	515.020	1
3 of 3	22060	0	511.020	1

POST-ARREST COMPLAINT

Charge 1: MURDER

Charge 2: ROBBERY, 1ST DEGREE

Charge 3: BURGLARY, 1ST DEGREE

Pulaski Circuit Court Indictment 10-CR-00066 Bond \$1,000,000 Cash

>> 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.

"I was a drinker back then and I smoked some pot," Abner said. "I thought I'd go steal me something to get me some beer and stuff. That house looked vacant.

"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 banging like that, I could sneak in and get what I wanted. I found guns and put them out by the door so I could grab them if I had to run."

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."

Afraid he might have left evidence in the home, Abner decided to set fire to the house.

"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 put it in there against the bed and plugged it up. I lit it, got the guns and I left."

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, 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

AUTOPSY:

In the autopsy performed by Dr. Cristen Rolf with the Medical Examiner's Office, the cause of death was found to be "Hemopericardium and Hemothoraces with Exsanguination... Due to Sharp Force Injuries of Head, Trunk, and Arms"

The manner of death was classified as a homicide.

The autopsy outlines several injuries attributed to blunt force.

The autopsy also outlines several puncture wounds attributed to "sharp force" stab wounds. There are more than 30 individual wounds on the victims head, neck, chest, back, arms and hands. Significant wounds were noted to the lung, pericardial sac, and heart.



CASE FILE PHOTO

▲ MURDER VICTIM JACK ROERINK WAS ABNER'S THIRD AND LAST VICTIM.

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 wavering 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.

"Over Tamara or money or both?" Whitaker asked.

"Over just the way he's treated me and all the (expletive deleted) that was on my mind," Abner said.

Abner also told Whitaker he intended to rob Roerink and leave town.

"What kind of stuff did you get?" Whitaker asked.

"All kinds of stuff," Abner said. "Machines, tools — anything I thought along the way I could sell to get gas, cigarettes and food."

"Does he take pain killers?" Whitaker asked.

"No, that was the first thing I asked before I killed him. He said, 'Man, they don't give me no narcotics.' But I didn't believe him. So, when I killed him, I looked and I couldn't find none."

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."

"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 ... like I said, dude, just the signs just piled up on me."

"It's getting overwhelming, isn't it?" Whitaker asked.

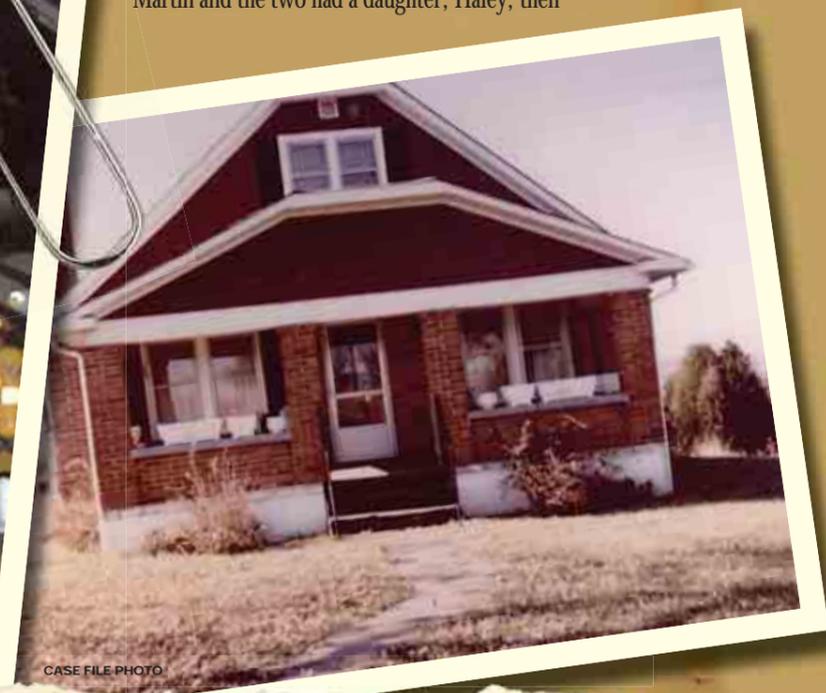
"Yeah," Abner said. "I'm ready to go, dude. When I tell you what I'm going to tell you, they're going to put me down."

CONNECTING THE CRIMES TO THE CONFESSION

"I believed him, but I wanted proof of what he was saying before I really believed him," Whitaker said of his reaction as Abner retold his crimes. "With the descriptions he was giving me of these crimes I felt >>



CASE FILE PHOTO



CASE FILE PHOTO

▲ WHAT ONCE WAS A QUIET, FAMILY HOME IN PULASKI COUNTY WAS RIPPED APART AFTER MICHAEL ABNER MURDERED THE HOMEOWNER, MAE STRINGER, AND LIT HER HOUSE ON FIRE TO DISPOSE OF THE EVIDENCE IN 1988.

Serial Killer Case

>> like he was being honest about them. He was giving me particulars of the crimes that only the killer would know.”

Beginning the process of working the old murders was reversed from that of a normal case — Whitaker first had to determine if there were actual victims. Through a little bit of digging, he learned the Pulaski County Sheriff’s Office had investigated Stringer’s murder in 1988, and the case file still was available.

“For the other case, I had to go back to death records because the sheriff’s office didn’t have that case,” he said. “We found out that the Kentucky State Police actually investigated that one and we were able to find that file and verify his information.”

Whitaker contacted Pulaski County Dep. Coroner Jim McWhorter 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.

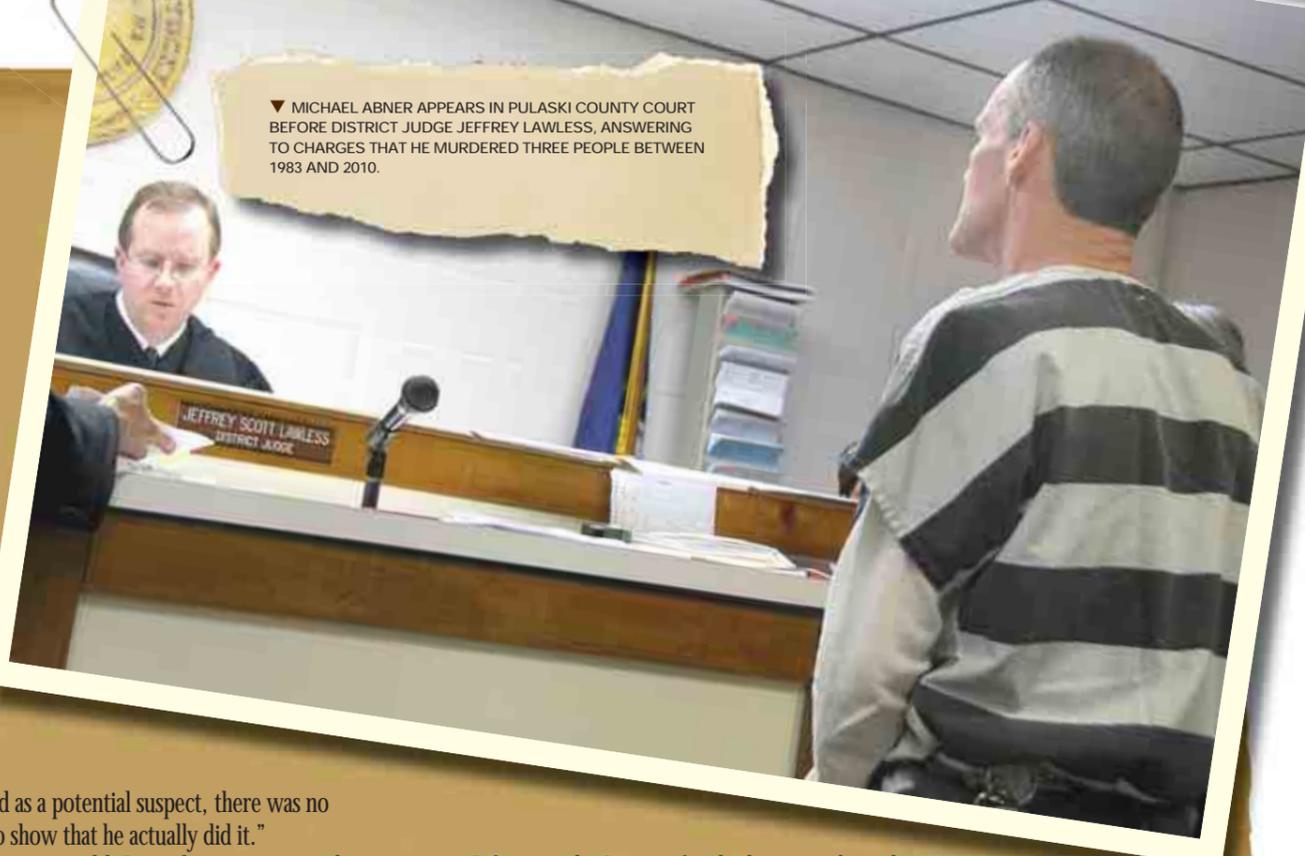
“When I talked to Jim McWhorter, he remembered the case very well,” Whitaker said. “I don’t know if he was surprised [about Abner’s confession]. Obviously, any time you uncover evidence in a 20-year-old case, it’s something you don’t expect. But he knew this guy because he had questioned him in the original investigation. ... Although he was

Michael Andrew Abner
19 Bullock Lane
Eubank, KY 42567

The Grand Jury charges that on or about the 11th day of January 2010 in Pulaski County, Kentucky, the above named defendant(s):

- Count 1 Committed the offense of Murder, by intentionally causing the death of Jack Roerink.
- Count 2 Committed the offense of Robbery, First Degree by causing physical injury to Jack Roerink while in the course of committing a theft.
- Count 3 Committed the offense of Burglary, First Degree by unlawfully entering or remaining unlawfully in a dwelling home of Jack Roerink with the intent to commit a crime and while effecting entry or while in the building or in the immediate flight therefrom was armed with a firearm and/or caused physical injury upon Jack Roerink.

◀ MICHAEL ABNER LISTENS AS A LIFE SENTENCE WITHOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF PAROLE IS HANDED DOWN. DESPITE CONFESSING HIS CRIMES IN EXCHANGE FOR THE DEATH PENALTY, ABNER ENTERED A GUILTY PLEA WITHIN THREE MONTHS OF KILLING ROERINK.



▼ MICHAEL ABNER APPEARS IN PULASKI COUNTY COURT BEFORE DISTRICT JUDGE JEFFREY LAWLESS, ANSWERING TO CHARGES THAT HE MURDERED THREE PEOPLE BETWEEN 1983 AND 2010.

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY COMMONWEALTH JOURNAL

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, McWhorter said, “[The conviction] just tickled me to death. We never feel good about an unsolved case. You always remember the ones you can’t solve.”

And McWhorter did remember details specific to the case that clearly matched Abner’s description of the crime, confirming his story for Whitaker. But, after verifying the victims’ identities came the difficult task of contacting their families.

“The Mercer family knew their loved one had been murdered, they just didn’t know by who,” he said. “They were very relieved to find out that this person was the guy who did it and nobody else was being looked at. Obviously, they were very relieved to know the truth had come out.”

Informing the Stringer family, however, brought no relief.

“The Stringer family was just taken aback, because Mrs. Stringer’s death was originally ruled an accident,” Whitaker said. “For all these years, they had been thinking she died a horrible death in a fire. When these new facts came out, they were just horrified to know that their loved one had been the victim of a homicide. In all those years, they never dreamed she had been murdered.”

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 >>

NOTE WRITTEN BY MICHAEL ABNER TO HIS WIFE, TAMARA, FROM THE PULASKI COUNTY JAIL AFTER BEING CHARGED WITH MURDER.

been wrong, you
I love my kids and you. Don't
ever forget that, yes I kill them
people but I love you and my
baby's, you know that, can't wait
to see you all so write me back
and send

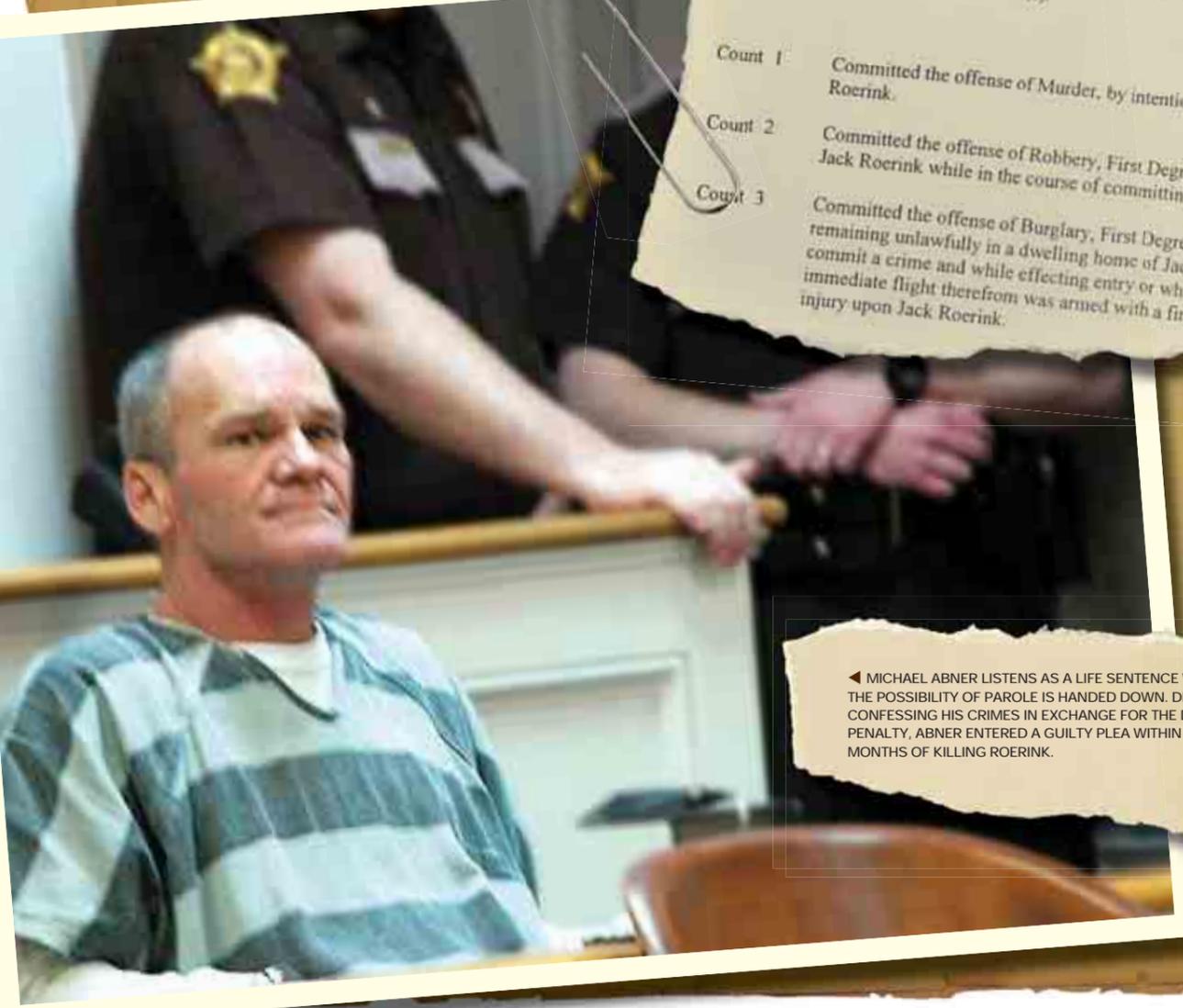


PHOTO SUBMITTED BY COMMONWEALTH JOURNAL

>> 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 charred remains, or of a widowed man's home sloshed 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, Mamie Mercer's grandson, told the Commonwealth 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.

"His acts are brutal and heinous, speaking to a complete lack of respect for human life," Montgomery said of Abner.

The serial-killer aspect of the case was a first for Whitaker — a seasoned officer with more than 25 years service to the Pulaski County Sheriff's Office — too.

The case took many bizarre twists and turns from start to end. Like on the night of Roerink's murder, when Abner's own wife called 911 operators to inform them something was amiss after finding Roerink's truck parked behind her home in the early morning hours. Or when Abner emerged from beneath his wife's trailer in the below-freezing January weather after officers had pegged him as a suspect in Roerink's death.

Perhaps most notable was the discovery of Abner's wife's vehicle at the Roerink crime scene when investigators arrived — a slip up not expected from a man who had evaded prosecution for more than two decades in his other killings.

Not to mention, it's pretty unusual for a murder suspect to confess not only to his crime, but to two other killings while he's at it.

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.

"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.' Which is what happened in this case. Things [Abner] described on Mrs. Stringer's case, we could go back and look at it and see it was factual. Document your cases just as if they are suspicious in nature."

After all, you never know when that long-time, petty criminal known well county-wide by local law enforcement will turn a case file upside down with a stranger-than-fiction story.

"To have a guy just stand up and say, 'I want the death penalty and here's what else I did so I get it,' — that is probably a once-in-a-career experience," Whitaker said. J

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◀ PULASKI COUNTY SHERIFF'S DETECTIVE LT. BRETT WHITAKER TALKS ABOUT THE DETAILS OF ABNER'S ARREST AND CONVICTION. ABNER'S SERIAL KILLER CASE WAS A FIRST FOR THE SEASONED INVESTIGATOR.

PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

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, categorical multiple-murderers such as spree killers or mass murderers has been a challenge since the time of Jack the Ripper.

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."

The purpose of this definition never was intended to be used as an across the board answer for defining serial killings. Instead, its application is limited to use by the FBI for when they can or should get involved with local-level serial murder investigations.

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." ■

