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### Sheriff battles unsolved mysteries

*Ann Scholl Boyer*

Keith Whitlatch

Address: Stanwood. Age: 57.

Occupation: Cedar County sheriff.

Hometown: Stanwood.

Education: 1955 graduate, Tipton High School; attended University of Iowa, Kirkwood Community College and Mount Mercy College.

Family: wife Lois; four children: Valerie Whitlatch, Iowa City; Cindy Arntzen, Baraboo, Wis.; Ron Hinrichs, Stanwood; and Lisa Crawford, Davenport; and three grandchildren.

Interests: Lions Club, history, antiques, books, music. The cowboy painting stands out, even on the crowded office walls of Cedar County Sheriff Keith Whitlatch.

Within the framed picture reads: "There were a helluva lot of things they didn't tell me when I hired on with this outfit."

Keith, a 6-foot-2 bear of a man, chuckles at the picture his sister gave him when he became sheriff Jan. 1, 1977.

"Finding out it's still true today," he says.

Indeed. Nearly 18 years ago, Keith didn't have to deal with murder again and again as he has in the past three years.

In September, William Isabel and Brett Wood were shot to death while hunting. A New Liberty youth is being held.

In November, Mark Gregory of West Liberty shot his girlfriend Kelly Asher before killing himself.

Two unsolved cases gnaw at Whitlatch: a young girl found dead at a Highway 30 rest area 14 years ago; the September 1991 murder of Tom Mather, who was found shot and slashed in his rural Springdale home.

"You do what you can about it," Keith says, his voice its trademark steady and calm.

"There are so many things going on you can't dwell on one particular case. Murder is a high priority. If you're a victim of domestic abuse, that's a high priority for you. If you're a trapper and someone steals your trap, that's important. So you have to take each case by itself."

Keith believes Cedar County residents should be cautious, use good common sense, but not worry.

"We've always had crime," Keith says. "I think the difference now is the mobility. With our road system ... you could commit a crime in Cedar County today and 3 hours later, you're in Chicago."

Even with the recent upswing in crime, Keith still calls Cedar County the "greatest place in the world to live." But, he adds, "I think we've passed the age of innocence where people can leave their houses unlocked and leave their keys in the car. Yet I still think we have people who do that."

Over the years, Keith says he has had offers to go elsewhere. He's declined, opting to continue serving his home county.

"I was born here. I hope to die here."

Keith lives on the 31 acres of his boyhood home in Stanwood. As a high school sophomore, he decided to join the Marines. It was the "luck of the draw" in the service that hooked Keith on law enforcement. He was given a military police assignment.

After the service, Keith returned to his home county. In May 1965, he was hired as a part-time police officer in Tipton. In January 1966, he was elected Tipton police chief.

Working in the county where he grew up is good, Keith believes.

"You know the area, you know the people. If a person gets into trouble, maybe you know the father or grandfather, somebody you can communicate with to help the person. I think it's important you do serve the county you're from."

Knowing the people is also a disadvantage, Keith admits. He knew well William Isabel and Brett Wood, the hunters who were shot in September. "When I saw the two people who were murdered, you instantly think, 'What a waste.' If you don't know the person, you still have the same thoughts."

Despite seeing such tragedies, Keith has no desire to get out of law enforcement.

"I still have the fire in my gut. I still look forward to putting the uniform on and coming in in the morning."

He was re-elected two years ago. He hopes it was because he has been "meeting the need of the electorate of Cedar County."

"I've always felt like an elected official is like a hired man. I'm still responsible to the people. I keep that in mind. I serve at the public's pleasure."

Outside of law enforcement, Keith is active in Lions Club work. He calls one office wall - loaded with Lions banners, plaques and awards - his "Lions wall." Lions, from stuffed to ceramic, adorn his office.

This year, he was elected to serve as council chairman over nine districts in Iowa - the organization's top elected position.

"My vacation time and spare time is taken up with Lions," says Keith.

Keith was one of the "prime movers" responsible for establishing an agricultural museum at the fair grounds. "It bothered me to go to the state fair and see things out there that came from Cedar County. We had no place to put them here. Now we've got a place."

Another hobby reflected in Keith's office is his love of burros. An extensive collection of burros, from inflatable to stone, decorate his office.

Keith has horses, which he hitches up for parades and town celebrations. He hopes by doing so people see "I'm not anything special. I'm just an ordinary person trying to do a job. I think it helps if people think I'm approachable, they can come up and talk to me at anytime."

**Illustration:** PHOTO

Ann Scholl Boyer

Cedar County Sheriff Keith Whitlatch does paperwork in his office at the Tipton Courthouse.

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