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Devoted to justice, outgoing Cedar sheriff is hardly retiring

Dave Gosch Gazette staff writer

TIPTON - Court news reporters will be among those who will miss Cedar County Sheriff Keith Whitlatch. Despite its rural composition, Cedar County has been the scene of several high-profile criminal cases and Whitlatch has never shied from the media spotlight.

"Some people think I say too much," said Whitlatch, who officially retired Friday. "If we don't give you guys the basic facts, you guys are going to write something. I want it to be right."

Whitlatch took time out recently to reflect on his career and the cases he's worked on. Whitlatch, who is retiring after 23 years as sheriff, said the unsolved Tom Mather murder is the most frustrating case he's dealt with.

In that case, he employed the help of the news media in an attempt to solve the murder. KCRG-TV9 televised a re-enactment of the crime.

Tom Mather was shot in the head and slashed several times on Sept. 30, 1991, in his home on County Road X-40 about a mile north of the West Liberty exit off Interstate 80.

His wife, Dawn, said he was shot by an intruder. She escaped to a nearby farmhouse.

While the television re-enactment provided new leads, the case remains unsolved. "We've had quite a little evidence, but just not the right evidence," he said.

Perhaps Whitlatch's most gut-wrenching case involved the shooting deaths of Bill Isabel and Brett Wood. That case was personally difficult because he knew the men.

"That one hit me," he said. "I remembered thinking, 'My God, there are two people I know quite well.'"

The case began in September 1994 when Robert Barker, then 15, was hunting with two of his friends. Barker shot a deer, and the hunting party followed it onto property owned by Bill Isabel.

Isabel and his nephew, Brett Wood, confronted the youngsters "and lectured them about their presence on Isabel's land and their commission of various hunting infractions," court records said.

Barker claimed he heard a shot fired and saw Isabel and Woods pointing their guns at him. He fired his shotgun four times, hitting each man twice and killing both. Barker was charged with two counts of first-degree murder. A Scott County jury found him guilty of two counts of voluntary manslaughter.

Whitlatch disagreed with the verdict.

"I personally felt that was premeditated murder," he said.

The other murder cases Whitlatch has worked on involved people he didn't know very well. Some involved people who weren't even from Cedar County.

Such is the case with the Sandra Jo Pittman murder. Dean Ray Tumey's retrial for the 1980 murder of the 17-year-old Davenport woman has been postponed until Jan. 31. The first trial ended with a hung jury.

Tumey received outpatient treatment at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Knoxville. The heart of the case against him was a confession that prosecutors say he gave authorities in 1990.

Pittman was severely beaten and strangled in September 1980. Her body was left in a Highway 30 rest area near Clarence in Cedar County.

Although Whitlatch didn't want to talk about the case because the trial is pending, he did let his feelings show when Tumey was charged in May.

Whitlatch got misty-eyed for a moment after leading Tumey into court and then back to jail the day he made his initial court appearance.

"I remember vividly what she (the victim) looked like (the night she was found)," Whitlatch said at the time.

He's kept a picture of Pittman on his office wall ever since, he said, adding he'd always hoped to make an arrest in the case.

Whitlatch said Cedar County residents have made his job enjoyable over the years. Even residents who have had scrapes with the law have come to the aid of deputies in certain situations. "If you go into a tavern, there's enough people to back you up," he said.

Whitlatch rode off into the sunset with his team of Belgian horses after his retirement party Thursday. He plans to do a lot of work on the farm and with his horses in retirement.

He thought riding off into the sunset was a good way to end his career.

"I have a flair for the dramatic," he said.

Illustration: COLOR PHOTO

Kristophere' Owens

Cedar County Sheriff Keith Whitlatch retired Friday. A self-described "man of action," Whitlatch said he plans to spend more time with his family, his Belgian horses and the organizations in which he participates.

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