

Lisa Peak homicide remains unsolved today
Wartburg student's murder still a mystery 30 years later; new
leads emerge

December 5, 2006

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Lisa Peak was the kind of girl everybody wanted to know. She had a zest and passion for life that was contagious.

She loved to travel and spent her senior year of high school in Brazil.

She was the kind of student everybody noticed around campus. She wore vibrant colors and trendy apparel.

Sept. 6, 1976 was the last day anyone saw Lisa Peak alive. She was wearing a pink blouse.

Before classes convened for her sophomore year, Lisa decided to pick up a few last minute school supplies – a wastebasket and some Scotch tape were among the odds and ends on her list, Mary Peak, her mother, said.

After not returning to her room in Hebron for a prearranged date that evening, Lisa's roommates and friends became worried and contacted authorities the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 7.

According to the Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier archives, Lisa's

body was found late the morning of Sept. 7 underneath a cottonwood tree just north of Waverly city limits. An autopsy later revealed the nature of Lisa's murder. Her neck was broken, and results showed she had been raped.

Prior to her homicide, Lisa played a "key" role in the arrest and conviction of a Mason City sex extortionist.

The Aug. 30, 1977 edition of the Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier reported that John Carmody lured a number of young females to his apartment and photographed them "in compromising positions and [used] those photos as tools to extort money and favors from the women." Mary recalls that Lisa was "pretty shaken up after her kidnapping."

Lisa was introduced to Carmody by a friend at Wartburg. Carmody said he wanted his life story in writing, and Lisa, a journalism major, agreed to interview him.

When Lisa arrived at his apartment, Carmody had guns on his kitchen table; Lisa knew this was more than an interview.

"He told Lisa awful, untrue things and would not let her leave the apartment," Mary said. "(He said) her father was involved with another woman, and he would tell me of this affair if she didn't do what he told her. He said he would kill her sister, too."

With the help of Lisa, Mason City police were able to crack the case. Carmody pleaded guilty to two charges of rape and two charges of extortion, according to Courier archives. He was

sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Did Carmody have sources on the outside who could have played a role in Lisa's homicide as an act of revenge?

Former Sheriff Bill Westendorf said he didn't "hold to that theory," according to Courier sources. The possibility was not initially ruled out, but other leads have since surged to the forefront of the continuing investigation.

Strangely enough, two other homicide cases involving young women occurred before Lisa's untimely murder. All three females were strangled.

The body of Julia Benning, then 19, was found near Shell Rock. According to the Courier, she was missing for five months before her body was found near a gravel road.

Five years prior to both killings was the murder of Valerie Klossowsky, then 14, whose body was found partially-clothed three miles west of Denver in 1971.

Was there a link between all three murders?

At the time, investigators researched the possibility of a serial murder trail. Accused cross-country mass slayer Allen Anderson was linked to murders around the Midwest. Officials speculated he murdered an Iowa Falls' church organist. Arlene Gehrke was shot two days before Lisa's disappearance, according to Courier sources.

Though these seeming ties could have led to a potential lead and end to a string of mysterious deaths, 30 years have passed without an arrest.

Waverly Police Chief Richard Pursell said the investigation of Lisa Peak is still underway. He said that during the past 30 years, new evidence and leads have come and gone in “spurts.” The most recent discussion of the case took place at meeting Wednesday.

“I wish I could tell you more. It would be very interesting,” Pursell said. He would not comment further on the discussion or recent leads.

Thirty years later, Lisa’s family is still hoping for an arrest.

“We would be very satisfied to know for sure,” Mary said. “We think we know who did it, but it’s so hard to get him prosecuted. We want to really get him.”

Mary would not reveal the supposed killer’s identity.

Still, Mary says she and her husband, Frank, were never angry with the situation surrounding their daughter’s death.

“I was too sad to place blame,” she said. “Though, for awhile, I did resent Waverly residents. It was a bright, sunny Labor Day when my daughter disappeared. Surely, some people could have seen Lisa. Why didn’t they say anything?”

Mary says her feelings of resentment toward the community have subsided. Two months after Lisa's death, Mary's other daughter, Carmen, was thrown from a horse and died. Shortly after the death of their second daughter, the Peak's home caught on fire.

"Through everything, we've learned to accept and move on. For a while, we expected it might go on forever. Eventually, you learn that there was nothing we could have done to prevent these things from happening," Mary said.

A plaque in honor of Lisa was placed in the former Danforth Chapel.

The cottonwood tree where her body was found has been cut down. Rumors and tales of the "ghost of Lisa Peak" still live on, but the lesson learned will remain.

"As college students, be wary of strangers," Mary said.

"Sometimes it's easy to think that nothing will happen. Tell your friends where you're going. We have to look after one another."