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Cold Case of Sarah Ottens

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By Anna Cardamon

IOWA CITY, Iowa- On March 13, 1973 Brenda Simpson went into room 429 of Rienow Hall at the University of Iowa to discover Sarah Ottens' body. Ottens was severely beaten and suffocated to death.

The murder of Sarah Ottens is one of many cases that is yet to be closed in Iowa. According to the Iowa Cold Cases website, a site dedicated to sharing information on unsolved cases throughout Iowa, a cold case is "cold" once all leads hit a dead end or have been "run out."

Sarah Ottens' case went cold once the man, James Hall, convicted of her murder was released because of a legal technicality.

Marlin Ingalls wrote an article on Cold Cases in Iowa City, "IC History: Reexamining the Cold Case Files", which includes Ottens' case. According to the article, Hall was charged after fingerprints and DNA evidence was found at the crime scene.

Hall was found guilty of second-degree murder and sentenced to serve 50 years in the Fort Madison prison.

In 1983, ten years after Ottens' murder, the conviction of Hall was overturned based on a technicality.

"It was tampered with because the crime scene was so unusual that all the local police had to stop by and see it. The crime scene was left open, had been visited by numerous outside people, and therefore the evidence was corrupted. As a result of this terrible and irresponsible mistake by the police the known killer still went free after having been convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated. There may have been other reasons for overturning his conviction but I am unaware of any." Says Ingalls.

Hall was released and the conviction was overturned. Without a killer and no new leads, the case of Ottens went cold and remains open.

“The case will never be closed because of how the legal system works. If her killer’s conviction had stood the case would be closed.” Says Ingalls.

According to Ingalls, in 1992 Hall was convicted of strangling Susan Hajek.

“Hall was a U of I football player and did not have a significant criminal record at the time of the killing, so many of his supporters in the Iowa City community gave credit to his claim of innocence.” Says Dean Hines.

Perceptions of Hall and his innocence varied, according to Dean N. William Hines. During the time of case, some believed Hall to be a victim of racism. The words “Free James Hall” were even spray-painted on a concrete wall under the law school.

Dean N. William Hines, former Dean of the University of Iowa’s Law School and current professor, lived in Iowa City at the time of Ottens’ murder and is familiar with the case.

“The fact he was not retried once his conviction was reversed suggests that the prosecutor did not believe there was enough evidence against him to successfully try him again.” Said Dean Hines.

Whether or not Hall committed the crime, despite the technicality that released him, is still debated among those who have looked at the case.

The room where Ottens was killed is still used by students.

Hannah Petterson was assigned to room 429 her freshman year. It was unknown upon moving in to Petterson of what had taken place in her dorm room 40 years ago.

“The forty year anniversary of her death happened when I was living there.” Said Petterson.

Petterson found out about the events that took place in her room when a floor mate told her and her roommate. Her Residential Advisor had knowledge of the murder, but didn’t tell the girls in an effort not to scare them.

“The only difference I ever noticed about our room was we had a different sink.” Said Petterson.

When Ottens was found, the sink was full of bloody water, which had been used to clean the scene according to The Iowa Cold Cases website.

Sam Jacobs, the Rienow Hall coordinator says he is unsure of any renovations that have been done to the room.

“All know about it are the rumors.” Said Jacobs.

The room remains a constant topic among students living in the dorms and the case goes unsolved to this day.

If anyone has further information about the case, or any other cold case they are encouraged to contact the police.

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