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Searching for answers

Area unsolved murders continue to haunt law enforcement officials, families

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OTTUMWA — John Robert Hill's death remains a mystery after 30 years.

Hill owned the Ottumwa Launderette, a small business on East Main Street. Authorities found him laying face down in a small room at 5:06 a.m., Nov. 22, 1976. He was stabbed to death. A photo from the Courier's front page showed Hill's right foot on a folding chair that had been knocked over, his torso partially hidden.

Police think Hill died fighting. They found a .25 caliber pistol near his right hand and five bullet holes near the front door. Someone wrote two words in Hill's blood. One was either "black" or "lack." The other was "older."

Hill's death was part of a cluster of homicides in Wapello County from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s:

- In 1974, the body of Mary Jayne Jones was found on a farm west of Ottumwa. Police released the contents of a letter she finished and sent on the day she died, hoping someone might notice a detail that could lead to the killer. No one was ever tied to the crime.
- Billy Lee Clark was shot to death in August 1975. Police never closed that case, though they later said they think Clark's killer died shortly after the murder.
- John and Michelle Franklin were killed in 1978 in Eddyville. A jury acquitted John Franklin Jr., a win for an up-and-coming Des Moines attorney named Alfredo Parrish. Some in local law enforcement believe Parrish got a guilty man off the hook.
- Helen Morrow was killed in 1980 in Eldon. Police arrested a suspect, but a grand jury didn't indict him.

Then came April 1984. Justin Hook Jr., Tina Lade and Sara Link were killed within the space of a few days. Link was Hook's mother and Lade was his girlfriend. No charges were ever filed.

"It was really very difficult for a very long time," said Cynthia Moyes, Link's daughter and Hook's brother.

Her family was shattered. Moyes doesn't know who the killer was. But she thinks it was probably someone who knew the family. Time has put distance between her and the events that now seem unreal.

"It has become a book I've read instead of my life. My mom was my best friend, so I lost a lot more than just my mom," she said. "It's very hard to put into words."

Longtime residents and officials say the period that covers these killings was unusual. Ottumwa was dubbed the unsolved murder capital after the sequence; radio personality Paul Harvey is widely credited with making the designation.

The impact of an unsolved murder hits more than family. It haunts the people who worked to solve it.

A case authorities suspect was a homicide illustrates the impact. Wapello County Sheriff Don Kirkendall's entire demeanor shifts when he talks about Dennison Stookesberry.

Stookesberry disappeared from his home in Blakesburg on Feb. 23, 1999. Authorities believe Stookesberry is dead. They base that view on several facts. One of the main concerns is that Stookesberry had several serious medical conditions but did not take his medication with him when he left his home.

Kirkendall said law enforcement was never quite able to put all the pieces together in order to bring charges.

"That does have an effect on you. I am frustrated that you just can't get over the hump," he said. "I still think about that case. I talk to people all the time."

Kirkendall's voice drops and his eyes take on an almost predatory look when asked if he believes he knows what happened.

"Oh yes. Yes. We just can't get over the hill, so to speak," he said.

Lt. Mike McDonough of the Ottumwa Police Department remembers the Hill murder. He was new to the department at the time.

"It was, I hesitate to say gruesome, but it was a bloody murder. There had obviously been a lengthy struggle," McDonough said.

Two suspects emerged soon after Hill's murder. But police never made an arrest. The evidence never came together well enough to make a case that would stand up in court. Professionalism demands the case be as airtight as possible before making an arrest.

"They were a couple of pretty solid suspects," McDonough said. "There were a lot of circumstances present that made us believe at least one of these individuals was involved."

Homicides create tremendous public pressure. People want assurances that there is not a killer on the loose. Victims' families bring pressure, too. They want and deserve answers.

So do police.

"You never give up. You never forget about an investigation," said McDonough. "Every officer wants every homicide solved. You're always kind of attuned to things that might be clues."

Murders are unlike any other crime. Time ties prosecutors' hands on most charges. Hide long enough, and you can get away. But a killer can never assume he is safe.

"Burglary, assault, all of that has a statute of limitations. Murder has no statute of limitations," said Kirkendall.

Technology has transformed homicide investigations. Investigators now routinely test for evidence like DNA that simply was not available in prior years.

That doesn't always mean a break in the case. Kirkendall said the sheriff's department sent evidence back for additional tests on some cases, but has not closed a case based on new test results.

Authorities everywhere acknowledge the need for cooperation in murder investigations, partially because of technology. Few departments have the means to process DNA evidence that can break a case. There are not enough homicides to justify most departments having such a lab.

That means local law enforcement works with state or federal officials to collect those pieces of evidence. Outside involvement also brings in more people, more investigators to track down leads quickly. That's important because investigations always depend on good fundamentals.

Kirkendall said the early days of an investigation are crucial because so much information comes in so fast. Cooperation means investigators have the manpower to track down information and follow where it points.

"That gives you many more investigators to develop leads," he said.

The public can have a hard time understanding the Byzantine details of most murder cases. Few people ever come into direct contact with a murder investigation. The only experience people have with murders is what they see on television, where the crime is solved within an hour and people can see the end by flipping a few pages in the script.

Such stories have only the faintest resemblance to real crimes. Many in law enforcement feel the proliferation of police dramas impact the public's perception of how things should happen.

The differences between televised murders and real life are basic. Evidence takes weeks or months to process, not minutes. Trials last longer than any scripted drama would ever take.

Even quick arrests don't guarantee immediate solutions. The October murders of the Bentler family in Bonaparte led to an arrest within days. But Shawn Bentler, the only suspect in the killings, is still more than a month away from his trial.

What separates an unsolved crime from one that ends in conviction can be simple luck. Authorities will tell you hard work and good technique helps generate luck. But they know things don't always work out, no matter how good they are.

"No question about it, sometimes police work is 80 percent luck and 20 percent knowing what to do when you get lucky," McDonough said. "I'm convinced that luck exists. I'm not convinced that luck has any loyalty.

"Sometimes the bad guys get lucky."

The cases don't go away. McDonough said a young officer developed some new leads in the case of Mary Jayne Jones just a few years ago. They didn't pan out, but new information is always helpful. There's always the hope that a minor detail will break the case.

Someone out there knows what happened in each case, officers believe. And they want to talk to that person.

Moyes wants to know, too.

“I turned it over to God soon after it happened. It didn’t make sense. We have no idea why it happened and we have no idea who did it. I can’t imagine that I don’t know this person,” she said. “I would love to have closure, but I don’t know that I’ll ever have closure until I see them at the resurrection.”

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