

Rumors surround 1980 killings

2 found brutally murdered 29 years ago



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Tammy Burkman visits her friend Rose Burkert's grave Saturday afternoon. Ms. Burkman has pushed hard in the years since Ms. Burkert's death to solve the case.

The crickets chirp among themselves, while wind whispers through the trees down this rural Andrew County road.

The gravel gave way to pavement awhile back. A few years ago, someone demolished that one-story, white house to make way for the Oakmont Hills subdivision and its pastoral homes and painted wood fences.

With each passing year, life sweeps away a little more of the scene 22-year-old Rose Burkert left for a romantic getaway in a hotel in Amana, Iowa, 29 years ago. In its place remains only the murmur of rumors.

Kathy Roarke's phone still rings every so often with another bit of gossip masquerading as hope. She has waited nearly three decades for an explanation of what happened to her sister. Or, more accurately, who happened to Rose.

The what was appallingly apparent to the maid unfortunate enough to check on Rose and Roger Atkison at 1 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 13, 1980. It was splattered across the wall, headboard and carpet of Room 260 at the

Amana Holiday Inn.

“It was pretty gruesome,” said Howard Judd, a captain for the Buchanan County Sheriff’s Department who worked the case for the St. Joseph Police Department. “It was overkill.”

Rose and Roger, 32, were laying face down on the bed, their heads severed open from multiple blows from an ax or hatchet. While a few of Roger’s fingers were severed from trying to protect himself, the room showed no signs of forced entry or struggle. Two chairs actually sat next to the bed, indicating the killer(s) had a conversation with Rose and Roger before the murder.

It appears the killer, most likely a male, even put his feet up on the desk at some point. He carved a piece of soap, writing a partial message on the bathroom mirror that read “This” before leaving the room, the television still on.

Twenty-nine years later, who happened to Rose and Roger remains unsolved.

In the immediate aftermath of the double murder, Ms. Roarke believed she knew who killed her sister. But as the list of suspects lengthened, so did the doubt.

“There are just too many angles,” she said. “I cannot dwell on it constantly. I don’t set myself up for disappointment.”



“Rumors are rampant here,” Iowa County Coroner Stacey Howell told the News-Press in a Sept. 15, 1980, article as information (real and other) about the murders filtered into the public. Two days later, the News-Press reported that secrecy by Iowa authorities resulted in “swarms of rumors.”

There was the rumor about the ex-boyfriend. Rose supposedly kicked him out of her house because of his drug use some time earlier. In the weeks preceding the murder, he stalked her, sitting outside her house in his van, according to Ms. Roarke. Rose filed a complaint with the Andrew County Sheriff’s Department, telling them if she ended up dead it would be

because of her ex.

She got a dog for protection, but someone butchered it and hung it up in front of her house as a warning. Then there were the threatening notes left on her car while she worked at the LaVerna Village Nursing Home. Rose made plans to move and switch jobs to escape the harassment.

But the ex-boyfriend came up with a solid alibi the night of the murder and eventually passed a polygraph. He still lives in St. Joseph.

Then there was the rumor about Roger's uncle-in-law — serial killer Charles Hatcher. Officials reported Mr. Hatcher, who was convicted of killing two St. Joseph children, escaped a Nebraska mental health center four days after the ax murders. But some people suspect he walked away from the facility earlier than that.

Roger was a telephone installer known to improperly install lines in homes of certain women so he could return to the house later, according to one Iowa newspaper's account of the murders. That's how he met Rose, who was a single mother of a 2-year-old daughter. A 1993 article in the News-Press states the affair between Roger and Rose was not a well-kept secret.

Mr. Hatcher was the uncle of Roger's wife, Marcella, but officers who worked the case told the News-Press that reports place Mr. Hatcher in southwestern Iowa the night of the murder, on the opposite side of the state.

And on it goes.

There were reports that Rose and a bartender at the hotel had a confrontation the night of the murder. The bartender left town the day after the killings, never picked up his final paycheck and abandoned his pickup in Iowa City. By the time authorities found him, the potential suspect had enlisted in the military and was in Germany.

But the crime scene indicated the killer knew his victims. Officers found Roger in just undershorts, while Rose lay fully clothed. So authorities believe Roger felt comfortable enough with the murderer to lay in bed in just shorts and have a conversation.

That logic also sheds doubt on Raymundo Esparza's status as the killer. A Los Angeles native with a violent criminal history and a drug problem, Mr. Esparza was suspected of murdering a man with an ax in an Illinois motel two and a half months prior to the Amana killings. Both killings took place at hotels situated on interstates without forced entry. A do not disturb sign hung on both doors, money was taken and toothpaste splattered at both crime scenes. And Mr. Esparza was in Iowa City on Sept. 12, about 30 miles from the Amana hotel.

But the Illinois murder had homosexual overtones, according to an Iowa newspaper, and didn't include a soap message on the bathroom mirror.

Then there was a hired hand who worked on a farm near Rose's house, whom she claimed broke into her house and stood over her bed while she was sleeping at least once. He reportedly was in the Amana area at the time of the murders.

There also was the telephone crew on which Roger worked in northeast Missouri prior to the weekend getaway. Members of those crews usually carried a machete to clear away tall grass where they worked, and his co-workers likely would've known his weekend plans.

And other stories and rumors surrounding the murders range from chilling to downright bizarre.

A farm convention apparently took place in Iowa that same weekend, drawing a number of St. Joseph residents and, consequently, potential suspects, to the area. Rose and Roger booked the last room in the hotel, which was at capacity because of a morticians' convention. The maid who discovered the crime scene reportedly has been a recluse ever since because of the horrid images she saw. And finally, there had been reports of cattle mutilations in Iowa attributed to cultist groups. Authorities told the News-Press at the time that the ultimate goal of these groups was human sacrifice.



Rose was there for the start of Tammy Burkman's marriage, and in a way, she was present at the end, as well. Rose was the maid of honor at Ms. Burkman's wedding. After the murders, solving the case became Tammy's

obsession. It led her to a divorce.

She compiled stacks of articles, stories, tips and files. It's all Ms. Burkman thought about. She called detectives, dissected forensics shows on TV, calling officers afterward to suggest a new technique that could break the case. When she received threats, Ms. Burkman pushed harder, hoping to force the culprit out of hiding. When a fire destroyed Ms. Burkman's files five years ago, she didn't concede. She merely started over.

Today, she has detectives' numbers programmed into her cell phone. She visits Rose's grave regularly. Solving the case still consumes her existence.

"I just know someone out there knows something," said Ms. Burkman, who is convinced she knows who is behind the murders. "It feels like everybody has just forgotten about it."

Not quite.

Captain Judd and Deputy Ron Fisher worked the case in St. Joseph 29 years ago, chasing leads for the Iowa County Sheriff's Department. The case came up again in conversation just two weeks ago.

When asked about it last week, both became quiet and retreated into their thoughts, staring through a wall in the Buchanan County Courthouse and 29 years into the past.

"It's awful tough," Mr. Fisher said softly, the weight of the unsolved murders still a burden.

Officers had a few factors working against them. With a crime scene in one state and many of the suspects in another, at least five different law enforcement agencies worked on the case. A lack of consistent communication plagued the immediate days following the murders.

Without cell phones, St. Joseph officers wouldn't be able to contact Iowa officers for hours or even days while they worked the crime scene. Mr. Judd admits police here might have released too much information to the public, not knowing what was crucial to keep quiet and what wasn't.

The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI) also had to deal with two

additional murders in the area during the 10 days following the Amana slayings.

Plus, with the killings likely personal in nature, the number of potential suspects was staggering and included immediate family members, friends and co-workers of both victims. Officials interviewed more than 400 people in the first week after the killings alone, and Iowa officers came down to St. Joseph to chase leads more than a decade after the murders.

Mr. Judd and Mr. Fisher never did settle on a hunch about who was behind the gruesome killings. But they suspected because Roger was in his undershorts but Rose was fully clothed, the killer was someone whom Roger knew well.

On Sept. 24, 1980, DCI chief Gerald Shanahan told the News-Press, “We are very definitely still working on the case. We are still examining evidence. We are not going to give up.”

And they didn’t. DCI assigned the case to its newly created cold case unit this year. The unit, which adopted about 100 unresolved cases dating back to 1960, hasn’t reviewed the Amana killings yet. Kevin Winker, the DCI’s assistant director of field operations, told the News-Press he considered the investigation active and wouldn’t speculate on theories.

But when Mr. Winker was a field agent in Cedar Rapids, he conducted an initial review of the case and noticed a few loose ends he believed warranted further inquiry. With a full caseload at the time and no cold case officers, Mr. Winker never found a chance to follow up on those leads but hopes Iowa’s new unit will.

The cold case unit owes its existence to federal grant money and has only secured funding through May 2011 thus far. After that, its status is uncertain, and, meanwhile, life continues to sweep away what evidence and memory remain of the Amana murders.

The two St. Joseph police detectives who spent the most time on the case — Jim Wright and Mike Hirter — both died. The Iowa County sheriff who chased tips to St. Joseph into the ’90s retired. And even last April, the Holiday Inn closed.

“It was a tough crime scene and a tough case,” Mr. Judd said with a sigh of resignation. “We tried.”



Rose Burkert’s grave sits in the northeast corner of the Memorial Park Cemetery in St. Joseph, on a patch of grass dotted with flat headstones. A bouquet of flowers and a single red rose adorned Rose’s grave on a recent evening.

The couple buried to the left of Rose lived for 80 and 93 years, respectively. The headstone to the right displays just a birth date — Aug. 14, 1925 — its future occupant presumably still living out her life.

Rose’s stone reads 1958-1980.

Nearby, a sundial sculpture keeps watch over this part of the grounds but doesn’t betray the time on this overcast evening. Those passing by are left to speculate.

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