



Mid-Iowa unsolved murders

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Published: Saturday, June 4, 2011 11:29 PM CDT

Aaron Marr, 37

Lived in a house at 210 S. Second St., in Ames

Died en route to Mary Greeley Medical Center on Sept. 22, 2007

At 9:53 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 22, 2007, the Ames Police Department took a call for an ambulance assist at 210 S. Second St., about a man who had a neck laceration. When officers got there, they found Aaron Marr suffering from several stab wounds to his neck and back. He had enough time to tell the first responders that he knew who had attacked him, but he wasn't going to tell. He was transported to Mary Greeley Medical Center but died on the way, his chance to name his murderer gone forever.

Marr's murder quickly started shaping up as a drug-related killing. Officers on the scene found small baggies of marijuana in a bedroom and a white powdery substance believed to be cocaine with a straw on the back of the toilet.

Investigators were given a small bit of information from Steven Cross, Marr's roommate. Cross was home asleep when he said he heard someone enter the apartment that night. He said he heard a scuffle, and when he entered the room, he saw that Marr had been beaten up. But other than that, he reportedly saw and heard nothing of the assailant.

Cross told police he and Marr had used a cell phone earlier that day to arrange to buy some crack cocaine. Cross overheard part of the conversation, in which someone named "P.J." was supposed to come over at around 9 p.m. to make the delivery. "P.J.," Cross said, had been at the house earlier in the day about the buy.

It was a good lead to follow, and it only got better. Cross was able to identify Ralph W. Ellis as "P.J." based on a photo. Marr's cell phone was searched, and the call Cross told officers about was there, dialed out to a number saved under the name "P-Rock." There were also calls to a woman named Christine Cornwell, who told investigators Marr had been on the phone with her at around 9:30 p.m. but then said he had to get off because someone had just arrived.

Cornwell identified Ellis as "P-Rock" based on a photo. A neighbor of Marr's also told police that he knew Ellis under the names "P.J." and "P-Rock," and identified him by the photo.

The next step was to talk to Ellis himself. Ellis, at the time living at 715 Wilson Ave. with his family, said the day after the murder that the phone number listed in Marr's phone under "P-Rock" belonged to his

girlfriend, Shirina Hayes, who had been out of town. He said he had the phone for about a week, but denied having any contact with Marr either by phone or in person over the previous week.

Ellis said that the day of the murder he had been with Terrance Jenkins most of the day. He said that over the course of the day, he and Jenkins had gone to the Lincoln Center Hy-Vee and had also ridden a CyRide bus. Investigators got the surveillance tapes and confirmed the two were together at Hy-Vee at around 7:40 p.m., and rode on the bus together at 10:08 p.m.

Search warrants were filed in the case, and police confiscated clothes and shoes from both, as well as Ellis' cell phone. But there, the case stalled out.

Cmdr. Jim Robinson, of the Ames Police Department, said the case remains open and is reviewed periodically, usually with a new set of eyes and ears to see if previous investigators may have overlooked something. But he also said they don't have any new information to relay on the case.

"A case of this nature is never closed," he said.

Both Ellis and Jenkins are currently in Iowa prisons after being sentenced for an Ames carjacking that happened in October 2007. Both received 10-year sentences in 2009 after striking a plea bargain with prosecutors. Ellis is scheduled to be released Sept. 21, 2012.

Henry Chavis, 55

Lived in a four-bedroom farm house on a 300-acre farm near current-day South Duff Avenue and Airport Road

Found dead outside his home on Nov. 8, 1948

On Nov. 8, 1948, Henry Chavis, the owner and operator of Ames Canning Company, was shot to death near the rear door steps of his farm home. His body was found at around 7 a.m. by Nellie Alber, his maid, and "Red" Dinamore, a cab driver who had taken her to the Chavis home. Physicians estimated Chavis had been dead between three and four hours before he was found.

Press reports say Chavis was shot three times. One wound was positioned in such a way on his arm that it seemed as though he had thrown it up to protect himself from his assailant. A theory was put forward that the shot to his arm spun him around, allowing a second shot to slam into his back. The third shot was thought to have been fired while Chavis was on the ground, entering through his neck and coming out through his head.

Immediately, investigators began pursuing two main possible motivations, including a robbery or a grudge against Chavis. The robbery motive had possibilities. Chavis was known to carry large sums of money around, and his wallet was gone when he was found. But investigators pointed publicly to Chavis' \$600 diamond ring, which was still on his finger as proof against it, and questioned why the third shot would have been necessary if all the killer was after was Chavis' cash.

"One official said that the third bullet was fired by someone who had a 'vicious mad-on' for Mr. Chavis," one of the Tribune news articles of the time noted.

Public suspicion began to fall on Chavis' wife, Gertrude. She told investigators she had been in Marshalltown that day with two other women for a bowling tournament, but had been at home when her

husband was gunned down outside their house. She said she had been asleep and hadn't heard the shots from her room, which was the furthest point in the house from where the shooting occurred.

Further complicating matters was the fact a handgun owned by Chavis had been reported stolen from their home only a few weeks before the murder, and it was nowhere to be found. The handgun was a .32 caliber, the same as the bullets that killed Chavis.

“Officials admitted that they had checked into reports that Mrs. Chavis had lost a large sum of money gambling in Las Vegas, Nevada, but declined to further comment,” one of the new articles notes suggestively.

With Henry Chavis dead, all of his property passed on to Gertrude Chavis. Three weeks after the murder, she offered a \$2,500 reward for information on the murder of her husband. But it seemed she wasn't anxious to keep many reminders of him around, because on Jan. 18, 1949, it was announced she had sold the canning company to a Minnesota group for \$100,000. She was the majority stockholder of the company.

The case went nowhere for two years until April 1950 when two 10-year-old children found a rusty handgun embedded in a bank along Squaw Creek. It was determined to be the one reported stolen from the Chavis house, identified by its serial number, and Iowa Bureau of Criminal Investigation chief R.W. Nebergall said the gun would undergo ballistics tests to determine if it was the weapon that killed Chavis. However, he said, the results of these tests would not be made public.

Representatives with the Iowa DCI said the details of the Chavis case are on microfilm, and they could not comment on where the case sits today.

James Morris, 58

Lived in an apartment at 203 E. Lincoln Way, in Ames

Found dead in his home on Oct. 27, 1991

Mark Wheeler is one of two people at the Ames Police Department who worked the James Morris case and is still around today.

“We've chased it down about as far as we can go, witness-wise and evidence-wise, unless something else comes up,” he said.

Wheeler says the call came in on a Sunday. Morris' friend, a person who lived near him, went to check on Morris in his apartment because a group of friends hadn't seen him for several days. The neighbor found Morris laying in bed, deceased. The cause of death was a blunt object that fractured Morris' skull.

Wheeler said the case was declared a homicide, and everyone, all the investigators with the department, were called in to work it.

Morris was described by a neighbor at the time as somewhat of a loner and “kind of weird.” He had previously been arrested on a terrorism charge after he had a standoff with police while armed with a shotgun. He was a retired refrigeration and air conditioning technician, and Wheeler said he earned money by doing refrigeration repair work and selling things flea-market style out of his home, which was next to the Tip Top Lounge.

The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation was requested for assistance, and agents came to Ames and processed the scene. It was obvious from the blood spatter that the attack took place in the bedroom, and some items in the house had been gone through, including a jewelry box.

“Other than that, it didn’t look like the house had been gone through a whole lot,” Wheeler said. “Of course, we didn’t know what it looked like before.”

The search began for Morris’ killer in earnest, as leads were tracked down and witnesses were interviewed. But the case soon stalled, and now it sits cold with the Ames Police Department.

The police did, at least, have something to work with, including some blood that was recovered at the scene that is not believed to be Morris’. But it wasn’t of good enough quality for a DNA profile.

Wheeler said several strong suspects were considered, but there was never enough evidence to charge them.

Now retired but working part-time as an evidence technician for the department, Wheeler says he’s accepted that the case may remain open for some time.

“You can’t solve all of them,” he said. “You want to, especially homicides, but ... you do as much as you can do.”

Arnold Sansgaard, 58

Lived on a farm in northeast Boone County

Found dead in his home on July 21, 1984

At least one man has admitted to killing Arnold Sansgaard.

On July 21, 1984, Sansgaard’s nude body was found laying on the living room floor of his farm home in northeast Boone County. He’d suffered multiple stab wounds that investigators said had probably occurred on July 14, a week before his body was found.

Investigators released little information about the killing to the public, and it’s possible they had very little to work with themselves. Boone County Sheriff Henry “Hank” Wallace is quoted as saying, “At this point, we have the two principle people, Mr. Sansgaard and his attacker. Beyond that, we have no idea at this point if anyone else was involved in the murder.”

The case might have been solved on July 16, when a Chisago County, Minn., sheriff’s deputy made a traffic stop and met a man who claimed he was Arnold Sansgaard. He was driving Sansgaard’s blue 1977 Datsun 210 about 50 miles north of Minneapolis. The car had been stolen from Sansgaard’s farm in Iowa.

At the time, the car wasn’t listed as having been stolen, as Sansgaard’s body hadn’t yet been discovered, and the deputy let the man go. The officer did, however, take careful note of the driver’s characteristics and shortly thereafter a description of the man went out to the public.

The man was described as 37 years old, about 6 feet, 2 inches tall, and weighing 170 pounds, with dark brown, medium-length hair. He was described as being clean-shaven and possibly wearing glasses.

More notable, however, was the deputy's description of the man as having had extensive burn scars on his right forearm, upper arm and neck. He may also have had some scarring on his left arm.

The suspect told the deputy he'd been in Vietnam and had gotten the burns from a flamethrower. He said he was a VA outpatient and on medication for his nervous condition.

The description went out, but nothing public happened until October, when a man named Christopher Paul Nitsick was arrested for the theft of Sansgaard's car.

The story was carried in The Ames Daily Tribune, which said Nitsick had been arrested in Omaha on a Nebraska warrant for auto theft, but had waived extradition to Iowa where he was facing second-degree theft charges for stealing Sansgaard's Datsun. A spokesperson for the Boone County Attorney's Office said Nitsick would be questioned about his connection to Sansgaard's murder.

And here, the public record falls silent on both Nitsick and Sansgaard. Current Boone County Sheriff Ron Fehr confirmed Sansgaard's case remains open, but Fehr said he could barely remember Nitsick, a minor footnote in the investigation.

"This man turned himself over to Nebraska authorities claiming to have killed Sansgaard," said Fehr, who was a road deputy at the time. "After he was interviewed, it was determined that he was not telling the truth; he was just looking for attention."

Special Agent Michael Motsinger, of the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, said there have been no new leads in the Sansgaard case.

"Items of evidentiary value were resubmitted to the lab in 2009, and nothing new was developed," he said. "There were some partial DNA profiles developed but were too weak to identify."

This means, of course, the person who killed Arnold Sansgaard in his home remains unknown, and could possibly still be at large, having so narrowly escaped a brush with the law before the murder was even known.