

Admission in 1981 Waterloo killings reflection of human need to confess, experts say

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Why now?

That's the question raised by the unusual case of Jack W. Pursel, the 66-year-old California man who last week confessed to the 1981 killings of Robert and Goldie Huntbach of Waterloo.

Pursel was interviewed by police more than 31 years ago but was never charged. He moved out West and for all practical purposes got away with killing the elderly couple, shooting each of them twice in the head.

Yet something motivated Pursel to return to Waterloo and face what he says are his crimes. He told police he was inspired by his conversion to Christianity.

That's possible, said Derek Grimmell, a forensic psychologist who performs mental health evaluations in Iowa, Illinois and Nebraska.

"Something reset his moral compass," Grimmell said. "It could

have been a serious life event. It could have been a cumulative set of experiences. I believe it is possible to have a religious conversion that leads a person to believe the way that he has lived his life is not acceptable.”

Dale Yeager, a criminal behavior analyst from Philadelphia, suggests the desire to confess is built into the human psyche.

“It’s almost a part of our DNA,” he said. “It’s like being a little kid getting caught doing something bad. Your first reaction is denial. Your second is to beg forgiveness. Your third is to stomp off in anger” — but the yearning to confess remains.

Little has been revealed about Pursel’s life. Police said he may have dated someone close to the Huntbach family before the January 1981 killings. Police then believed the motivation for the crime was robbery.

Officials have described him as one of several persons of interest in the case, but they apparently never had enough evidence to act upon their suspicions.

In 1981, gossip and theories abounded, but facts were scarce, said Jack Hovelson, a retired Register reporter who covered the case from the newspaper’s Waterloo bureau.

“I had a detective friend who was sure it was a particular person,” Hovelson recalled last week. “He swore up and down it was a Hispanic guy with ties to the neighborhood. There were all kinds of theories, but I think they were mostly rumors. They didn’t have it solved. Otherwise, somebody would have been in prison.”

Within a year of leaving Waterloo, Pursel was charged with sex acts with minors in Los Angeles County. He served 11 years of a

21-year sentence. He was fully discharged from parole in 1995.

A history of sex crimes fits with someone suspected of burglary, Yeager said.

“There is a lot of case evidence that shows burglary is a sex-related crime,” Yeager said. “It is a sense of invading the house and invading the person.”

Pursel remained out of sight until a few weeks ago, when he called his brother after years of silence, the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier reported Friday.

Pursel, the newspaper reported, confessed the crimes to his brother and told of his plans to return to Waterloo to give himself up.

The brother, who spoke to the Courier under condition of anonymity, helped him return to Iowa and get to the police station, where he made his confession.

“We all have a moral compass,” Yeager said. “It can be screwed up, but it can ultimately lead to a need to confess. We aren’t good at keeping secrets as a species. We’re going to let these things out.”