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A murder confession 'completely out of nowhere'

A man tells Waterloo police he killed an elderly couple in 1981.

By DANIEL P. FINNEY

A neighbor found the bodies of Robert and Goldie Huntbach on Jan. 13, 1981, a Monday, in their modest home west of downtown Waterloo.

The elderly couple — he was 85, she was 77 — died sometime Sunday night or early that morning. Both were shot twice in the head. A witness reported seeing a suspicious person near the Huntbach home Saturday or Sunday. Waterloo police interviewed dozens of people, but the dragnet never produced charges.

Thirty-one years, four months and 27 days passed before a thin-faced, silver-haired, bespectacled man named Jack W. Pursel, age 66, walked into Waterloo police headquarters and said he wanted to talk to somebody about the Huntbach murders.

He confessed, police said, offering information that only the killer would have known. He also potentially closed a case so cold that the neighborhood where the crime was committed no longer exists. Only one officer on Waterloo's force, Capt. Tim Pillack, was working at the time of the murders.

"It's completely out of nowhere," said Pillack, Waterloo police spokesman, who was a patrolman at the time. "This just does not happen."

The case is not over just yet. Despite Pursel's confession, prosecutors still must provide corroborating evidence that he shot and killed the Huntbachs, said Rachel Bandy, Simpson College professor of sociology.

"There is a tremendous amount of work ahead," said Bandy, who teaches criminal justice courses. "The case still hinges on how well the evidence has been kept for 30 years, if the notes are still intact and what can be proven."

Couple lived in older neighborhood

The killings took place at 311 W. 10th St. It was a blue-collar neighborhood west of downtown, occupied by retirees and factory workers.

Robert Huntbach had retired from Rath Packing Co. He and his wife, Goldie, had two daughters and a son. Only one daughter, Barbara Beck, survives.

The neighborhood is gone now, bulldozed to create the Interstate Highway 380 link to Cedar Rapids.

"If the homes were still there, they would be about 100 years old by now," said Jack Hovelson, a retired Des Moines Register reporter who covered the case in 1981. "It wasn't a bad neighborhood and wasn't poor, but it was an older neighborhood with people who were older and worked at the packing plant or were retired."

The couple did not live lavishly. They had resided in the wood-frame house with imitation brick siding for at least 35 years. They had a backyard swing, where they often could be found during summer months. They visited with neighborhood children.

"About the most valuable thing they had was their plants," Barbara Daringer, a longtime friend of the Huntbachs, told the Register in 1981.

Still, their home had been robbed twice, neighbors told the Register at the time, and police suspected a robbery ultimately ended in the Huntbachs' deaths.

Police appealed to public for help

The homicides came at a violent time for Waterloo. Seniors in particular seemed to be the target in the months leading up to the slayings.

Thomas McNally, an 86-year-old former Waterloo postmaster, had been beaten to death in his home the previous July.

Neighbors reported hearing shots late Sunday night.

"I heard something like a car backfiring. My mother jumped out of bed and said, 'What the hell was that?'" Tawny Luck said in 1981. She lived in the apartment building across the street.

The next morning, Evelyn Potts, a former neighbor who visited the couple often, found their bodies. Police then appealed to the public.

"We'd like to have any help that we can get from the public," Waterloo Police Detective Capt. Donald Kehoe said in 1981. Kehoe, one of the lead investigators, has since died.

He cites conversion as his motivation

Police have not said what evidence Pursel offered that has led them to believe his confession.

He came to the police Tuesday. Police checked out his story before formally arresting him on two counts of first-degree murder Wednesday. He made his initial appearance in court Thursday, when a judge raised his bond to \$2 million, \$1 million for each count. He remains in the Black Hawk County Jail.

Waterloo Police Chief Dan Trelka said Pursel indicated he was motivated to surrender by a recent conversion to Christianity.

Police have described Pursel as one of several persons of interest in the case, but no charges were ever filed against him. He moved to California shortly after being interviewed by police. There, he got into a different kind of trouble.

He served time in a California prison for three counts of oral copulation with a minor, according to California Department of Corrections records. He served 11 years of a 12-year sentence, earning parole in 1992 and full discharge in 1995.

At his court appearance Thursday, Pursel gave the Black Hawk County Jail as his address and said he had no other home. A records search showed he previously had post office boxes in Pasadena and lived in a Las Vegas hotel for a time.

Ensuring 'they've got their man'

Pillack, the police spokesman, said detectives have found no reason to believe Pursel is lying.

However, much work remains to be done.

Even with a signed confession, prosecutors prefer to offer corroborating evidence so that if a suspect changes his mind, the case doesn't fall apart, said Bandy, the Simpson criminologist.

"If there is a trial, you want evidence beyond a reasonable doubt," she said.

There's also a mental disorder known as false confession syndrome, leading to rare cases in which people who are seeking attention confess to crimes they did not commit, she said.

And this case is so old it presents added complications. Nearly everyone who investigated the case is retired or dead, although police have been in touch with a former lieutenant who worked the case.

Waterloo police do not have a dedicated cold case squad — officers who investigate unsolved cases more than a few years old. The homicides took place before DNA evidence and electronic records.

"The work is going to be going through old boxes, reading case files and notes that have been sealed up for decades," Bandy said.

"Hopefully, Pursel will plead guilty, but they are going to want to check out everything. They want to be sure they've got their man, especially after all this time."

