

Mass murders remembered

Ohta Family

DOCTOR'S FAMILY, SECRETARY SLAIN AT SOQUEL HOME IN '70;
CONVICTED KILLER'S NINTH PAROLE HEARING THURSDAY

By David L. Beck

Mercury News

The rock garden, with its koi pond and Japanese maple tree, is a glimpse of serenity for those who visit the doctors at 550 Water St. in Santa Cruz. But it's also a reminder of the evil that men do.

"A lot of people look at it," said Callie Christ, a medical receptionist there since 1986. "And then they read the sign, and they say, 'Who's that?' And I tell them the story."

The sign bears the names of Dr. Victor Ohta, his wife, Virginia, his sons, Derrick and Taggart, and his secretary, Dorothy Cadwallader,

along with the date Oct. 19, 1970.

The story is about how John Linley Frazier shot them, one by one, on that Monday 33 years ago.

Frazier, now 57, has been behind bars since Oct. 23, 1970. Once sentenced to death for those five murders, he was given a sentence of seven years to life after the state Supreme Court invalidated the California death penalty law in 1972. Since "life without parole" was not on the books in 1972, he has had eight parole hearings over the years.

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Santa Cruz Dr. Victor Ohta, wife, Virginia, sons Taggart, left, and Derrick, were murder victims.

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His ninth is Thursday. At each hearing since 1982, the Lifer Parole Board has put off his next parole hearing for the longest period the law allows — three years back then, five now. He is not expected to be released this time, either.

"Cold-blooded crime"

"John Linley Frazier committed one of the most horrific and cold-blooded crimes this community has ever suffered," wrote Assistant District Attorney Ariadne Symons in her letter to the board opposing parole. "It is not an exaggeration to say that this community still remembers and suffers from it."

Dr. Daniel Seftel and his wife, Lucienne, certainly do. "That's one thing we have tried very hard to forget," she said.

But they can't.

Daniel Seftel is a retired ear, nose and throat specialist. Victor Ohta was an eye surgeon. They owned the building at 550 Water, and their families were friends who vacationed together and visited each other often. "Actually," said Daniel Seftel, "the day of the murders his wife was up visiting my wife."

Then she went home to be killed.

Their home in Soquel was a serene and open hilltop estate designed by Aaron Green, the Frank Lloyd Wright disciple who also designed the Water Street medical complex.

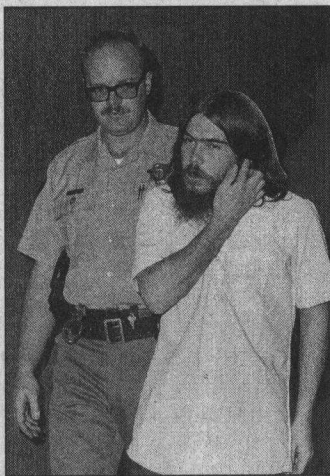
There Frazier waited for them. Separated from his wife, whom he later accused of introducing him to drugs, Frazier was living in a sort of shack in the Santa Cruz Mountains not far from the Ohtas. He was later reported to have been ranting about how the rich abuse the "ecology."

According to Frazier's version of what happened, if Dr. Ohta had agreed to join Frazier in burning down the Ohta house, Frazier need not have killed him and his family. On the other hand, a court document summarizing Frazier's 1971 trial notes that he stole the guns he used on the Ohtas during another burglary, telling friends he waited all day to "snuff" the owner of that house.

Smoke detected

In the evening of Oct. 19, 1970, a neighbor of the Ohtas noticed smoke coming from their house, and called a mutual friend, who called the Seftels.

"We went out right away," said Daniel Seftel. "We got to



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John Frazier, later convicted of the murders, walks with a guard into court in Redwood City Oct. 18, 1971.

the bottom of the driveway, and I remember the photographer for the Sentinel was at the bottom of the driveway, and he stopped us. We wanted to drive up, and he said, no, you don't want to go up there.

"I asked him why not. And he said, 'Because the bodies are floating in the pool.'"

Frazier bound each of them as they arrived home, beginning with Virginia Ohta, who was tied up with her driving gloves still on. Dorothy Cadwallader brought Taggart, 11, home from school, and Victor Ohta brought Derrick, 13, arriving about 6:10 p.m. after visiting the boy's grandmother. The Ohtas' daughters, Lark, 15, and Taura, 18, were away at boarding school.

Brought to pool

Frazier pushed Ohta into the pool after the doctor refused to help his captor burn down the house. When Ohta climbed out, Frazier shot him. Then one by one he brought the others out to the pool and, "after asking whether or not they believed in God," according to a prison document, "he murdered them."

He blocked the roads up to the house with the doctor's car and the secretary's, leaving a note on the windshield of Ohta's Rolls-Royce. Typed on the Ohtas' typewriter, it read in part, "Today World War III has begun as brought to you by the people of the Free Universe." It was signed by the four "knights" of the tarot deck.

Then Frazier fled in Virginia Ohta's station wagon, which he later abandoned in a railroad tunnel. He was arrested four days later, indicted by a grand jury, tried in San Mateo County on a change of venue, convicted of the offenses, found sane and sentenced to death.

Victor Ohta's mother committed suicide two years later. Taura Ohta took the same path seven years after the murders.

The drugs — Frazier is listed as having used mescaline and LSD — and the kill-the-pigs-and-save-the-planet mentality were common symptoms of those Charles Manson times, which in Santa Cruz were the days of mass murderers Herbert Mullin and Edmund Kemper.

"At the time, we all suspected that maybe it was some vendetta against doctors," said Daniel Seftel, who for years after the Ohta murders carried a gun.

Mullin heard voices in his head telling him to kill in order to prevent a catastrophic earthquake; his 13 murders were committed at random. Kemper's eight victims included his mother. (In those small-town days, Seftel recalls, "Kemper was a patient of mine. He tried to date one of my receptionists.")

Mullin was denied parole in 2001, and Kemper withdrew his application for parole in 2002.

Daughter survives

Lark Ohta, the only survivor, is the mother of four grown children and the marketing director for a new sports arena in Fresno. At 48, she is several years older than her parents were on the day of their deaths.

She has been to Santa Cruz now and then — "I go to the beach. I go to the cemetery" — and has driven by the house in the hills, but has never been inside it.

She doesn't mind that Frazier was saved from the gas chamber — "I didn't really need him to be killed," she said — but she has no desire to see him released, either. "I don't think he can live in society after living in jail for 33 years."

Frazier is in California State Prison, Sacramento. His prison time has been troubled by infractions of discipline, including a stabbing and several refusals to work or participate in counseling.

In 1990 and again in 1998 he wrote long, rambling objections to his pre-parole-hearing evaluations.

In 1990 he requested "not parole but emigration" to an unnamed region where there are neither criminals nor state functionaries.

Lucienne Seftel has another idea: "Tell him he can go rot in hell."

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