1991: A look at when the county was 'Murder Capital of the World'

murder

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following story, titled "*When the county was the 'Murder Capital,' *" was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on* May 13, 1991.

By MARK BERGSTROM
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SANTA CRUZ — Americans are flocking to bookstores and movie theaters to be entertained by the current hit thriller The Silence of the Lambs, a story about an FBI trainee's hunt for a serial killer.

In the movie, actress Jodie Foster matches wits and trades secrets with Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter so she can track down another serial killer named Buffalo Bill who is making a coat out of his victims' skin.

A Santa Cruz audience recently hooted and cheered at the final scene when Hannibal the Cannibal, a madman who ate his victims, called the agent to tell her he was having an old friend for dinner.

But what may be so grotesquely humorous in movie theaters today was terror in the 1970s and '80s when three of the men on the FBI's list of America's 21 most infamous serial killers struck in Santa Cruz County.

Among them were Edmund Kemper and Herbert Mullin, whose side-by-side 1972-73 murder sprees left Santa Cruz branded the "Murder Capital of the World."

Less than a decade later Santa Cruz was again caught up with a serial killer as David Carpenter, who became known as the Trailside Killer, struck first in Marin County and then Santa Cruz.

Bodies and parts of mutilated bodies turned up seemingly weekly in the summer and fall of 1972 and into 1973. Those killings, along with other murders in the county, left investigators with 29 unsolved murders.

The grisly discoveries came just a year after mass-murderer John Lindley Frazier executed well-known eye doctor Dr. Victor Ohta, his wife, two children and secretary and dumped their bodies in the family pool in the hills above Aptos.

Out-of-town newspapers referred almost daily to the terror that was sweeping the "once sleepy seaside resort."

Then-District Attorney Peter Chang tried to reassure the public that there was no need to panic.

Today, however, Chang and some of his investigators admit to having some real fears back then.

"There were months of terror," Chang said recently. "Bodies kept popping up every week. The murders were so bizarre.

"There were lots of people missing. I kept thinking that they'd show up dead, too, and most of them did," Chang said. "We still haven't found a lot of those missing people."

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Going to a theater and being scared is one thing, Chang said. "You walk out and it's over. But this went on for 16 months."

Chief Inspector Dick Verbrugge today admits he would look in the back seat of his car before he would get in.

"Those were very scary times," he said.

Mullin, who testified at trial that he killed to prevent a catastrophic earthquake from occurring on the San Andreas Fault, ultimately would be convicted of 10 random murders in Santa Cruz County and the stabbing death of a priest in the confessional of a Los Gatos Catholic church.

Kemper was convicted of six mutilation murders of hitchhiking college students, plus the beheading of his mother and the bludgeoning of her best friend.

Both are serving life sentences in prison: Mullin at the California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo and Kemper at Vacaville.

Both serial killers have been the subjects of several books.

Nearly 10 years later, when Trailside Killer David Carpenter brought his rape and murder spree to Santa Cruz, many people would ask why so much violence would come to such a beautiful and tranquil area.

Carpenter is the subject of one of the latest books on serial killers, "Sleeping Lady," by Robert Graysmith. Carpenter is currently on death row for two Santa Cruz County murders. Five murder convictions in Marin County were overturned and a new trial is pending.

Three of America's most notorious serial killers striking in one small area had never happened before. "It will never happen again, either," said Chang.

"There is no reason, except perhaps for some cosmic reasons," Chang said.

District Attorney's Inspector Stoney Brook, who worked on the Carpenter case, believes everyone has their dark side, a tiny bit of anti-social behavior they keep under wraps.

"I would venture to say that only one-tenth of one percent of all Americans are truly evil in that they have an anti-social personality disorder that they can't control," said Brook.

"I don't think people should walk around in fear of being a victim of a serial killer.

"There's a better likelihood of being hit by lightning and winning the Lotto on the same day," Brook said.