

When Santa Cruz County was the murder capital

Police recall investigations 25 years after killings began

By J.D. HILLARD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Trick-or-treaters in Santa Cruz County in 1970 ventured out with the knowledge that mass murder had occurred in their midst.

Less than two weeks earlier, on Oct. 19, firefighters attempting to douse a fire in a large house on Rodeo Gulch Road in Soquel discovered five bodies floating in a swimming pool on the property. They were prominent ophthalmologist Victor Ohta, his wife, two sons and a secretary. Each had been shot.

As an investigator for District Attorney Peter Chang, Ray Belgard, who has since served as a county supervisor and Watsonville's police chief, was one of the law enforcement officers who examined the scene. The killer had bound each of the victims and shot them at the edge of the swimming pool. Then he made a poor attempt at setting the house on fire, blocked the driveway with some of Ohta's cars and fled in another, Belgard said.

"Those were scary times. People were running out buying guns," Belgard said.

National newspapers picked up the story immediately. Donald Wilson of Soquel, a Register-Pajaronian reporter at the time, learned of the massacre while traveling in Greece, where it was on the front page of the New York Herald. For four days, county residents lived with the knowledge that a killer was loose.

The stolen car, a 1968 Chevrolet station wagon, was found torched in the Rincon train tunnel in Henry Cowell State Park, said Chief Terry Medina of the Watsonville Police Department, who was a sheriff's deputy at the time. The park would continue to host murders for years to come.

When the car was discovered, a massive manhunt began with sheriff's deputies ringing the wild area between Graham Hill Road and Highway 9, Medina said.

MURDERS

From page 1

Suspicion eventually fell on John Linley Frazier, a young man who lived in a shack down the road from Ohta. Deputies caught Frazier after staking out the shack.

A friend of Frazier's had been killed in a car accident a few months earlier, and that had somehow affected Frazier, Belgard said. The young man had expressed extreme ideas about ecology. Frazier had confronted Ohta prior to the murder, asking him to tear down his house, Belgard said.

In a trial that was moved to San Mateo County, Frazier was convicted of murder and sentenced to death just more than a year after the murders. His sentence was commuted to life when the state overturned its death penalty, Belgard said. What peace Frazier's conviction brought to the county wouldn't last more than a few

months.

Two young women went hitchhiking from Fresno in May 1972 and disappeared. Then women studying at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Cabrillo College also disappeared. Body parts began turning up near state highways, said Chief Mickey Aluffi of the UCSC Police Department. Aluffi investigated the new murders as a detective for the Sheriff's Office along with Medina.

"Body parts started showing up between here and Carmel," Aluffi said.

Edmund Emil Kemper III had killed his grandparents when he was a teenager. He served a sentence in the California Youth Authority. At the completion of the sentence, he was declared psychologically stable, and he moved into his mother's house in the Seacliff area of Aptos.

Kemper stood 6-foot-9 and was affable and very smart, Medina said. While neither Medina nor Aluffi remember him there, Kemper liked to hang out in the

Jury Room, a bar where many police officers would go for drinks.

When Kemper would go out hunting, he'd look for a certain kind of woman, Medina said. Kemper liked women who hitchhiked alone. He would stop for the ones who weren't paying attention to the people around them. Then he would turn on the charm.

"He could talk them into the car. He could make them feel comfortable," Medina said.

If he decided he had the right woman, he would tell her he thought her door was still open. He'd reach across her to pull the door shut and as he did so, he would drop a stick of lip balm into the handle of the latch, preventing his victim from opening the door, Medina said. Then he could stab her to death at his leisure.

Kemper stabbed his first victims. Later, he would adopt a handgun. As a sort of joke, he buried the head of one of his first victims in his mother's garden, Medina said.

After police began to understand that another killer was work-

ing the county with a distinctive pattern, killing and dismembering young women hitchhikers, a new pattern emerged.

In late 1972 and early 1973, police discovered new grizzly murder scenes. The wife and two children of a marijuana dealer were found shot in their home off Branciforte Drive near the Mystery Spot, Medina said. In Santa Cruz, two more people were found shot in their home off Western Drive.

"There didn't seem to be any pattern to it, which made it more frightening to the general populous," said Donald Wilson, who covered the murders for the San Jose Mercury News. In an eight-month period, police investigated at least 20 murders in the county, Aluffi said.

Santa Cruz police caught Herbert Mullin with a lucky break, Aluffi said. Mullin had just shot an elderly man to death on West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz. Witnesses described a car they had seen in the area. Officers pulled over a matching car near Highway 9 and River Street. They found Mullin's rifle in his trunk.

Mullin eventually admitted to 13 murders. His attorney argued that Mullin was insane, that his dead father's voice had told him to shoot people to stave off a devastating earthquake. A jury convicted him of murder, however. Medina suggested the jurors were too afraid of what would happen if Mullin were instead treated for insanity.

Still, another killer was on the loose. Again luck stepped in. Kemper had bought a gun.

In the Sheriff's Office, a smart clerk managed to read through the black marker on Kemper's record that he had a murder conviction, Aluffi said. Unaware they had found their suspect, Aluffi and another deputy went to Kemper's home to take the gun.

"In retrospect, he seemed a little nervous but cooperative," Aluffi said.

The deputies took the gun and left, but Kemper thought they were on to him, Aluffi said. "He thought we were playing cat and mouse with him."

Kemper killed his mother and her best friend and drove across the country, assuming police were hot on his tail. Perhaps a mix of paranoia and lack of sleep caused him to call the Santa Cruz Police Department from a phone both in Pueblo, Colo., asking for Aluffi. A confused police officer put the serial murderer on hold, Medina said. It took more than one phone call for Kemper to turn himself in. He was so tall that when Pueblo police told him to put his hands on the phone booth, he put them on top of the booth, Medina said.

Aluffi and Chang escorted Kemper back to Santa Cruz, taking highly specific confessions from him during the drive back, Aluffi said. In all, he admitted to eight murders. Kemper was convicted and sentenced in November 1973 to eight concurrent life sentences with the possibility for parole, though he has yet to ask for a release, Belgard said. Along with Frazier and Mullin, Kemper continues to serve time in state prison.

Serial killers and mass murderers left Santa Cruz County alone for a few years after that.