

1970-1989

When we became 'the murder capital'

By MARJ VON B

During the past decade three men, John Linley Frazier, Herbert Mullin and Ed Kemper, left a brutal imprint upon the history of Santa Cruz County.

They killed a total of 27 persons during the span of two and a half years.

It was a time of shock, fear and revulsion for the people who lived here, and it focused world-wide attention on what had been before an obscure locality.

To this day a murder in Santa Cruz County still attracts special coverage from the outside press, simply because it happened in Santa Cruz, called the "Murder Capital of the World" during the time of the mass murders.

The killings began with Frazier when he murdered a prominent eye surgeon, Dr. Victor Ohta, his wife, their two small sons and the doctor's secretary.

One by one he took them captive at the Ohta's hilltop mansion in Soquel. Then he shot them and set fire to the house.

Firemen arriving that night of Oct. 19, 1970, found the bodies of the murder victims in the swimming pool.

Frazier had left behind him on the windshield of the Ohta's Rolls Royce, a note proclaiming his self-styled revolution:

"Halloween 1970. Today World War III has begun as brought to you by the people of the Free Universe. From this day forward anyone or company who misuses the environment or destroys same will suffer the penalty of death. I and my comrades will fight until death or freedom. Materialism must die or mankind will."

The murders sent a wave of terror through the community, but those particularly affected were other doctors and their families who feared they were being singled out for extinction by a band of revolutionaries.

Frazier, though he had acted alone, had tried to recruit others in his crusade. This ultimately led to his apprehension. Afraid that Frazier also might kill them, a group of persons who knew him told authorities they suspected him of killing the Ohtas.

Frazier was captured four days after the killings by two sheriff's deputies, as he lay sleeping in a cabin less than a mile from the Ohta's home.

His arrest came during the same hour funeral services were being held for the Ohta family in a Santa Cruz church.

Frazier pleaded not guilty and not guilty by reason of insanity, but a year later he was convicted and sentenced to death. The death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, however, after the death penalty law in California was struck down by a U.S. Supreme Court decision.

Mullin was the next killer to emerge from the shadows, but some of his killing rampage paralleled Kemper's, and for a time Mullin was believed to have been responsible for some murders actually committed by Kemper.

Late in the fall of 1972, Mullin killed three persons. He bashed in the head of an indigent alcoholic, stabbed a hitchhiking Cabrillo College Coed and stabbed a Catholic priest in his Los Gatos church.

In a 20-day period between Jan. 24 and Feb. 13 in 1973, he killed 10 others, including a high school friend, whom Mullin accused of "ruining my life by turning me onto drugs."

Mullin shot him and then turned the gun on the young man's wife, killing her too in the couple's west-side Santa Cruz home.

Then he journeyed back across town to a cabin off Branciforte Drive and stabbed and shot a 29-year-old mother and her two small sons.

He had been at the cabin earlier in the day seeking the whereabouts of his high school classmate, and returned to kill witnesses who might tie him to the double homicide.

In most of the murders Mullin committed, though, he declared he was acting on the command of his father's voice, which "ordered me to kill."

Mullin also gunned down four youths who were strangers to him, after he surprised them in a makeshift tent in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.

Mullin was arrested on Feb. 13, 1973, minutes after he killed his last victim, a retired Santa Cruz fisherman. Mullin's car was seen leaving a Lighthouse Point residential area, after the fatal shot was

fired at the old man as he worked in the yard of his home.

When police apprehended Mullin they found guns and other evidence in his car which linked him to the previous murders.

Defense psychiatrists said Mullin believed the killings were "sacrifices" which prevented a cataclysmic earthquake in California and also assured him of a "higher place in the hierarchy of the after life."

"In his delusions he believes himself to be a very important person," testified one doctor, "with great cosmic insights and powers."

"He equates himself with Einstein, Jesus Christ and Jonah."

Despite an admission of guilt in the opening statements at Mullin's trial, the prosecution still had to prove his guilt and convince the jury he was not criminally insane. He was found guilty of two counts of first degree murder and of second degree murder in eight others, and sentenced to life in prison.

Kemper became a killer at the age of 15 when he murdered his grandparents (with whom he lived) out of hatred for the stern restriction his grandmother placed upon him.

But after his parole from the California Youth Authority, he began to kill for a new reason, to satisfy sexual fantasies with the bodies of his victims.

Starting in May of 1972 while Kemper was living in Alameda, he picked up three hitchhiking coeds and brought them to Santa Cruz County where he killed and dismembered them.

Later he moved here to live with his mother, and the killing and butchering continued until three more coeds had died.

Their body parts were scattered and buried here and in surrounding counties. He buried the head of one girl in the backyard of his mother's Seacliff apartment underneath his bedroom window.

During this period the highly intelligent and manipulative Kemper managed to convince two court-appointed psychiatrists in Fresno to support his successful effort to have his Juvenile murder record sealed.

They wrote letters to the court, after interviews with him, saying in their estimation he was totally rehabilitated and "no longer a danger to society."

The head of one of his victims was in the trunk of his car when Kemper went to see one of the doctors for an interview, prior to the doctor's writing his letter to the court.

It was not known until after Kemper's arrest how many young women he had

killed, but for a time Mullin was suspected of having killed two of the victims.

Investigators had found among Mullin's personal possessions sketch books in which he had drawn pictures of dismembered female forms.

But there was not enough evidence to substantiate the charge, in the mind of Peter Chang, who was the District Attorney throughout the time of the mass murders.

Had it not been for a fluke incident which sparked Kemper's fear that he was a suspect in the coed murders and plunged him into flight, he might never have been detected.

Sheriff's officers, knowing he had a juvenile murder record, went to his home to investigate a report that he had bought a handgun. They didn't know at the time that his record had been expunged by the court and therefore it was legal for him to have purchased the weapon.

But Kemper was convinced it was a ruse, and that the deputies suspected him in the series of murders of young women hitchhikers.

Panicked, he killed his mother and her best friend, loaded a car with weapons and set out across the county, expecting to die in a blaze of glory in a shoot-out when law enforcement officers caught up with him.

Three days later, on April 24, 1973, an exhausted Kemper called Santa Cruz police from a public telephone booth in Pueblo, Colorado, and confessed his crimes.

Police kept him on the line and alerted authorities in Pueblo, and officers there took the six-foot, nine-inch Kemper into custody without resistance.

Investigators went to Kemper's mother's apartment and found her severed head on the shelf of her bedroom closet and the rest of the carnage Kemper had left behind him.

Chang and one of his investigators, Dick Verbrugge, flew back to Pueblo and for three days they listened to Kemper's incredible tale of murder.

"It was the worst and most horrible confession I have ever heard in my life," Chang said.



John Linley Frazier stands in shackles as jurors inspect the scene where he was arrested.

The former district attorney personally assisted in the investigation of all the mass murders, and he prosecuted Frazier's and Kemper's cases.

Chris Cottle, now a superior court judge, was Chang's assistant and co-prosecutor in Frazier's trial, and he prosecuted the sanity phase of Mullin's trial when Chang was hospitalized with a sudden illness.

Another of Chang's assistants, now District Attorney Art Danner, handled the guilt phase of Mullin's trial.

Jim Jackson, then the Chief Deputy Public Defender, was appointed to defend all three of the mass murderers.

"It was a thankless task for a man who was only doing his duty, especially in the Frazier case," Chang said.

Chang remembered the "absolute paranoia" of the community before and after Frazier was caught.

"Everyone was buying guns for their self protection . . . and then threats were made against Jackson's life and those of his family," Chang said.

"Even socially, Jackson was ostracized. He went to a dinner party one night, and a doctor there spat on him, in contempt for his legally defending Frazier."

Cottle said of Frazier, "He was more organized, obvious, cold and calculating than the others and was able to go through his trial with the knowledge that the murder weapons hidden by him were a significant missing link."

(The guns used in the murders were found after Frazier was found guilty on a mass of other physical and circumstantial evidence.)

Of Mullin Cottle commented, "He seemed to be more mentally ill, spacy, and he seemed to lack the appreciation of his conduct that Frazier had. Mullin had cut himself off from human conduct."

Verbrugge described Mullin as a "killing machine . . . I think he just got pleasure from killing people."

"With Kemper, I think it was a means of compensating for his sexual inadequacies," said Verbrugge.

But Cottle said, "It was undisputed that Mullin was mentally ill. The question was the degree. This was not true in Frazier's case, and with Kemper, it was no issue at all."

Chang said of Kemper, "He was intelligent and had a fantastic recall. He could remember every aspect of his crimes down to the last detail."

The mass murders have had a lasting effect upon law enforcement in the county, Cottle pointed out.

"Law enforcement here became more sophisticated in the investigation of violent crimes. Many things that are standard procedure now were never even thought of before the Ohta murders."

And in the ensuing years, law enforcement had needed this sophistication, because murders have continued to happen here. But nothing has equalled what Frazier, Mullin and Kemper did.

As Chang recalled, "It was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare."