

'Night Stalker' Theory Connecting Eight Southland Slayings Disputed.

By John Hurst

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SANTA BARBARA- Is a psychopathic "Night Stalker" murdering Southern California couples in their beds?

Or has the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department been overeager—as two other police agencies claim—in linking eight southern California murders and a knife attack to one killer still on the loose?

The controversy and confusion began last week when the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department said it believed there is a link between the murder of a couple found bludgeoned to death in a Goleta home Monday and the shooting death of another couple in a home a few blocks away 19 months ago.

Psychologist Draws Profile

Authorities also said they believe the same killer committed a nonfatal knife attack on another couple in the same neighborhood 22 months ago and went on to say they suspect a link to the bludgeon murders of a Ventura couple in March, 1980, and an Orange County couple in August, 1980.

Santa Barbara County sheriff's spokesman Russ Birchim said deputies have dubbed the killer the "Night Stalker," and authorities said a "profile" developed by a local psychologist had indicated "a high probability" that the murderer would strike again even before the latest homicide.

"There is a person out there killing people," said Sgt. William Baker, head of the sheriff's major crime division. "We believe there is a strong possibility that the three (Santa Barbara cases) are connected."

Regarding the Orange County and Ventura murders, Baker said:

"I would say there is a strong suspicion (That they are linked to the Santa Barbara cases) but to a lesser degree because I'm not as familiar with those jurisdictions' cases."

But authorities in Ventura and Orange County are skeptical that the murders in those jurisdictions are linked to the Santa Barbara cases.

"We see no connection between the killings," said Ventura Police Sgt. Larry White, in charge of the Ventura homicide investigation. "We don't know what if any link there might be."

He contended that Santa Barbara County authorities "jumped the gun" with their announcement of a suspected link and said there had been no communication between the two departments immediately prior to that statement that a link is suspected.

Similarly, Orange County authorities are unconvinced.

"I think they (Santa Barbara County authorities) are very premature at this point," said Darryl Coder, Orange County sheriff's investigator. "They're still coordinating their investigation. . .

"We had a double homicide in August of last year, he continued, "and we put out a bulletin (to other law enforcement agencies) that anybody with a double homicide contact us. . . We were contacted by just about everybody in the state. . . The fact that you have a male and a female killed on a bed does not make the cases the same. . .

"Shortly after our homicide," Coder continued, "San Diego had a homicide, male and female in bed together. We ran down there and it turned out it was a dope ripoff."

"It is not uncommon," he went on, "to have a male and female (killed) in their house. Most people do go to bed at night, and because they are killed in bed does not make those cases that similar."

The Santa Barbara crimes aside, Coder was similarly skeptical of any connection between the Orange County and Ventura murders. "We don't feel that (there is a connection)," he said. "We never felt that."

The eight homicides and the knife attack, committed between Oct. 1, 1979 and July 27, 1981, share several striking similarities, but there are notable differences.

In every crime the victims were a man and a woman in their bedroom, probably in bed. In each case, the scene of the crime was a comfortable to fashionable home.

In most cases the weapon was a bludgeon. But in another it was a gun. In one it was a knife with the threat of a gun. In the latest, it was a gun and a bludgeon.

No Sexual Molestation.

In none of the cases has sexual molestation of the victims been reported.

In at least one case, the victims were tied up, but in some cases authorities deny that binds were used and in others they refuse to say.

In four cases, nothing is believed to have been stolen from the victims' homes. But in one case, a small amount of cash was taken, according to police.

In the Santa Barbara County murders, the male victims were found on the floor and the females in bed, according to police. But in the Ventura and Orange County cases, all the victims were reportedly found in bed.

In all the Santa Barbara cases, the victims were unmarried couples, leading to speculation that the killer might be a demented moralist.

But in the Ventura and Orange County murders, the couples were married.

In Santa Barbara County, all three crimes occurred within a square mile. All were near a creek bed that meanders through Goleta, an area adjacent to Santa Barbara that is made up largely of newish tract homes.

In two of the Santa Barbara crimes, the same caliber gun was used, according to police, but ballistics tests on recovered bullets have not yet determined whether or not the same weapon was used in the two cases.

These are the crimes under investigation:

—Early on Oct 1, 1979, a Goleta couple, who asked not to be identified, were accosted in their bed by a man armed with a kitchen knife. According to a source, the intruder shined a flashlight on them and, threatening to “blow your head off,” forced the woman to tie up the man with cord. If the intruder had a gun, according to sources, the couple never saw it in the darkness.

The intruder put a pair of shorts over the head of the woman, according to a source, and forced her into another room and tied her up, continually threatening murder.

In the meantime, the man, still bound, was able to get out of the house and yell for help. The intruder ran from the home, jumped on a bicycle and, with a neighbor chasing him, made his getaway, according to sources.

Police recovered the bicycle, which was stolen, and the kitchen knife, but refused to say whether they obtained fingerprints. Police say a small amount of cash was taken from the couples’ home, the only known robbery in the cases.

Because of the darkness, the couple were able to give only the sketchiest description of their assailant: A man, probably white, medium height, medium to slender build, late teens or early twenties, wearing dark clothing.

—During the early morning of Dec. 30, 1979, a few blocks from the home of the unidentified Goleta couple, Dr. Robert Offerman, 44, an orthopedist, and Debra Manning, 35, a psychologist, were shot to death in the bedroom of Offerman’s condominium.

Offerman was found on the floor and Manning on the bed. Police won’t say whether either victim had been tied up.

—On March 16, 1980, attorney Lyman Smith, 43, and his wife Charlene Smith, 33, were found bludgeoned to death in a bedroom of their expensive home in a quiet residential neighborhood of Ventura, about 35 miles from Goleta.

Police said at the time of the murder that both bodies were found in bed and early reports indicated that a fireplace log found on the bed was believed to be the murder weapon.

Police now are tighter-lipped and won’t comment on the weapon or whether the victims were tied up.

—On Aug 21, 1980, Keith Harrington, 24, a medical student, and his wife of four months, Anne Harrington, 27, a nurse, were found bludgeoned to death in the bedroom of their home in fashionable Miguel Shores in south orange County, more than 100 miles from Ventura where the previous victims were killed.

Both victims were found in bed. They reportedly were not tied up.

—Last Monday, 11 months after the Harringtons were murdered, Cheri Domingo, 35, and her boyfriend, Greg Sanchez, 28, were found bludgeoned to death in a bedroom of the spacious Goleta home that Domingo had been housesitting while it was up for sale.

The house is probably 150 miles from the Harrington home, but it is only a few blocks from the condominium in which Offerman and Manning were killed.

As in the Offerman-Manning killing, Sanchez was found on the floor and Domingo on the bed, according to authorities.

And, in addition to being bludgeoned, Sanchez was shot once with a bullet of the same caliber that killed Offerman and Manning, police say.

“You’ve got people being shot to death,” said Santa Barbara county sheriff’s Sgt. Baker. “You’ve got people being bludgeoned to death. So now you’ve got something that brings them together. Because now you’ve got some elements you have bludgeoning and shooting.

But Santa Barbara County sheriff’s officers refused to give details of why they suspect a link to murders in Ventura and Orange County.