

New interest in Connecticut River Valley serial killings

A missing woman. A murderous husband. A man with a long-kept secret. A St. Petersburg investigator is still on the trail.

By Ben Montgomery, Times Staff Writer
Published January 27, 2008

Lynn-Marie Carty has spent years researching Michael Nicholaou's life and possible connection with the serial killings.



[Daniel Wallace | Times (2006)]

The detectives found the woman near an apple tree when Vermont began to thaw. She wore ski bibs and a lift ticket. The snow was black with blood.

They called Anna Agnew at 2:30 a.m. as the pieces came together.

Can you describe her jewelry? a detective asked.

Anna's sister had been missing since January. A snow-plow driver had found her green BMW at a rest stop off Interstate 91 in Vermont, door cracked, blood on the steering wheel.

Now it was March, and detectives had finally found the woman's body. Anna helped them identify her by her ring.

Anna Agnew's sister, Barbara, was likely the victim of a serial killer who stalked the Connecticut River Valley in the 1980s, slaughtering six young women, maybe more, and dumping their bodies in the bucolic borderlands between Vermont and New Hampshire.

The man was never caught.

For 21 years, Anna Agnew has lived with this reality. The Maryland social worker has symptoms she associates with post-traumatic stress disorder. She has sought peace on a month-long hike through the Grand Canyon and a journey through China.

A fire rages inside, and she can only blame a faceless man.

Call it closure. Call it finality.

She needs to give him a face.

- - -

"I'm going to hell, Cindy. I'm going to hell."

Gary Westover was pale and sweating. Maybe he was on drugs. Maybe the nightmares that robbed him of sleep, that caused him to wake up screaming and soaking wet, were now robbing his mind.

Westover was full of hell and fire. He had been paralyzed in a diving accident, leaving him with partial use of one arm. He lived his adult life in a wheelchair, collecting disability checks and peddling drugs on the side.

The leaves outside were changing that fall of 1997, and Westover felt as if he wasn't going to make it to winter. The 46-year-old was dying. He called his uncle, the person he trusted most.

He needed to confess.

His cousin and uncle sat down. His cousin took his hand.

"I'm going to hell," Westover said.

"Don't say that, Gary," said his cousin, Cindy Fysh.

"I've got something to tell you, Uncle Howard," he said.

Uncle Howard was Howard Minnon, a retired sheriff's deputy in Grafton County, N.H. Before Westover could continue, Uncle Howard told Cindy to leave the room.

The two men spoke while the women waited in the kitchen. When Uncle Howard emerged, his face was cold and stiff.

In the following days, he shared the details of the conversation with his wife and daughter.

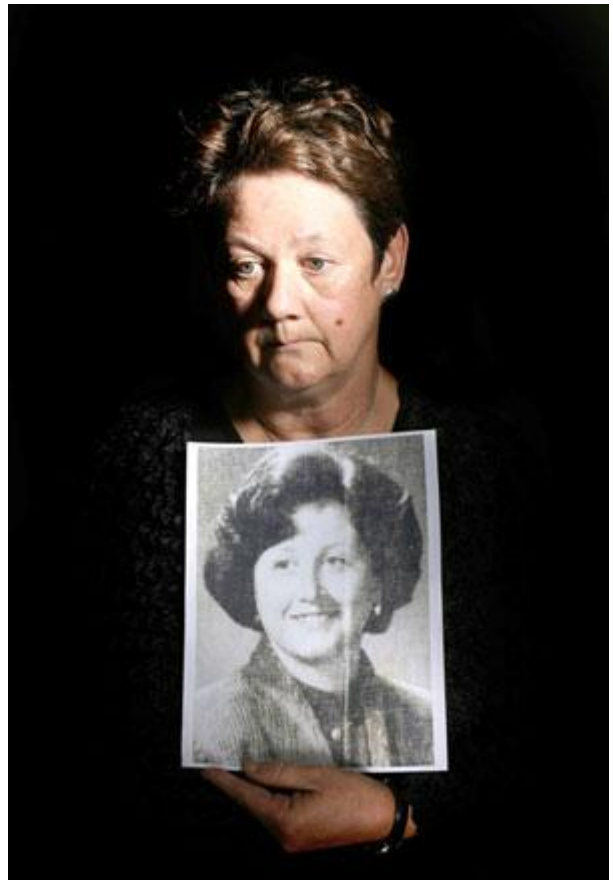
Westover told his uncle that three of his buddies picked him up for a night of partying. They loaded his wheelchair into a van.

They insisted that he go with them, so that he was culpable, recalled his aunt, Lois Minnon, 78, who still lives in the area. "He had no choice, but they took him over in the van with his wheelchair. They made him be there."

Westover told his uncle that he and the three men abducted a woman, butchered her and dumped her body off a back road.

His uncle wrote the names of the three men on a scrap of paper, then called the authorities.

"Dad was giving them this information, but they weren't listening," said Westover's cousin, Cindy Fysh, in an interview with the *St. Petersburg Times*. "He just thought it was laziness, that they didn't want to admit that it was an unsolved murder. They didn't want it brought up."



[John Pendygraft | Times]
Anna Agnew, 58, holds a picture of her sister Barbara, who was murdered in 1987. Two decades later, she's still haunted by unanswered questions.



[AP photo (1995)]
Gary Westover entrusted a secret to his uncle, Howard Minnon, right, pictured here at home in Ellsworth, N.H., with his wife Lois.



Michael Nicholaou is thought to be the Connecticut River Valley killer.

"Howard was hurt more than anything," said Lois Minnon. "Then he got mad. He said, 'I'll never take anything to law enforcement again.' "

No arrests were made. If the police acted on the information, they never told.

Gary Westover died in 1998, leaving his sins with the living. Howard Minnon died in 2006. Now, thanks to renewed interest in the case, the deathbed confession could help solve the murder.

Anna Agnew opened the letter in August. She didn't recognize the name on the envelope.

"Dear Anne," it said.

"A nursing school classmate sent me a newspaper article from the *Valley News* about the sad death of your sister Barbara. She knew that I had information about her death and would want to share it with you."

The letter was from another of Gary Westover's aunts. She had also heard Westover's confession, as she detailed in the letter.

"This is an awful thing to write, so I know it is a much worse thing to read, but I want you to know why I believe he was telling the truth. He said he never got over that awful feeling. He had been afraid of the men who killed her because he was helpless to defend himself or his family. Now his conscience overrode his fear."

The newspaper article also mentioned a woman who is believed to be the last victim of the Connecticut River Valley killer. A man attacked the woman in August 1988 outside a market in New Hampshire, stabbing and slicing her 27 times.

The woman lived. She's the only surviving victim of the serial killer. Last year, after 20 years of silence, she said she knew who attacked her that night. Beyond a doubt.

- - -

Anna Agnew forwarded the letter to Lynn-Marie Carty, a private investigator in St. Petersburg.

Carty knew all about the Connecticut River Valley slayings. After two years of trying to solve them, and seven trips from Florida to the Connecticut River Valley, she could rattle off the smallest details of the crimes.

The investigator had been captivated with the killings since Dec. 31, 2005. That's when a haunted Vietnam veteran named Michael Nicholaou pronounced NICK-allow killed his wife and stepdaughter before shooting himself in the mouth inside a West Tampa home.

The investigator was hired to find Nicholaou's former wife. She disappeared from Holyoke, Mass., in December 1988 and hasn't been seen or heard from since. The woman's family suspected Nicholaou killed her and fled to Florida with their children.

The woman's disappearance in 1988 came just three months after the last attack attributed to the Connecticut River Valley killer. The St. Petersburg investigator learned that Nicholaou had driven all over the valley on trips to visit his wife's relatives. She showed pictures of Michael Nicholaou to the last surviving victim of the serial killer. The woman recognized Nicholaou as her attacker.

When the investigator read the letter from Anna Agnew, she got chills.

The information seemed valid, and it answered questions about Barbara Agnew's death.

One problem the police had in solving Barbara's murder was that they couldn't figure out why she would pull into a rest area during a snowstorm when she was just 10 miles from home.

If she had been trying to clear ice from her windshield, why would she park in a dark area, away from the street lamps? If she were going to use the restroom, why wouldn't she wait 10 more minutes? If she was forced off the road, why wasn't there evidence?

For the investigator, Gary Westover's confession helped answer those questions. Maybe Westover was bait.

One thing Barbara Agnew's friends and family agreed upon was that she had a heart for helping. That's why she was a nurse.

Could she have pulled over to help a paralyzed man who was stuck in the snow?

All the investigator needed was the names of the men who took Gary Westover hunting that night. She suspected Michael Nicholaou was one of the three men Westover told his family about. She could see the two meeting at a Veterans Affairs hospital in the area.

Westover's aunt thinks the name Nicholaou is familiar. And Nicholaou visited family near where Barbara Agnew was abducted.

Carty is sure the police have the names. She doesn't have access to the case files, so she passed the information to the Vermont State Police.

If there's an outside expert on the cases, it's John Philpin, a criminal profiler who lives in Vermont. Philpin worked with police at the time of the killings to generate a psychological sketch of the serial killer.

Philpin thinks Gary Westover's deathbed confession is credible.

"Given the point that this guy was at in his life, I can't see why he would be telling anything other than the truth," Philpin said. "What does he have to lose? What does he have to gain?"

But he wonders why the police haven't acted on the information.

"It's totally inadequate," he said of the investigation. "I'm very dismayed by it."

Detective John Hagen of the Vermont State Police said he's exploring whether Michael Nicholaou could be connected to the crimes.

"We're looking at that as a possibility," Hagen said by telephone. "We're investigating whether he has any connection to Barbara Agnew and some of the other killings in the area."

Hagen said he couldn't go into specifics since the case is open, but he's investing "as much time as we can" on the investigation.

- - -

Anna Agnew compares her sister's case to a McDonald's bag floating in

the wind. Litter.

She calls it objectification. Her sister is a case number. No name. No face. The case is so cold, no one feels responsible for solving it.

"There's a timelessness to this pain that no one really gets," she said. "It's amazing to me how when I actually reflect on it or think about it or feel it, it's not 20 years ago, it's in the moment.

"It's truly right there as if it's happening today, here and now."

She flew to Fort Myers last month as the 21st anniversary of her sister's death approached. She spent two weeks at a house on the Caloosahatchee River, seeking peace in the sunshine. The face of the man who haunts her is coming into focus.

Ben Montgomery can be reached at bmontgomery@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8650.