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Miseries and mysteries of murder

PARKER

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riages of justice, including the Parker case.

And there were Cohen and fellow lawyer Toney Redman who interviewed Peery.

Cohen recalled Peery telling how he once knocked a prison guard unconscious to rob him, then decided to kill him when he found a knife in the guard's pocket. Peery slit the guard's throat.

Why the leap from robbery to murder? Redman asked.

"Wes looks at Toney with these really cold blue eyes and says, 'Toney, you don't have to have a reason to kill somebody,'" Cohen recalled.

The tragic story began at Iowa State where Darrell Parker met Nancy Ellen Morrison of Windsor Heights, a home economics major. They were married in 1954 and had no children.

Professor McNabb helped Parker land his first job as city forester in Lincoln, Neb.

Parker had been trimming Christmas trees at the Nebraska Capitol in Lincoln before coming home for lunch on Dec. 14, 1959, in nearby Antelope Park.

Brutal Death

He told police he found his wife's body in their bedroom when he got there.

She had been beaten and strangled. Pieces of twine and clothesline were wound around her neck. Her sweatshirt was torn, her blue jeans were on the floor and her underclothes lay on the bed. Two handkerchiefs, each bearing the initial "D," were stuffed into her mouth.

Bruckner and Cohen said evidence showed she had been raped.

Parker was arrested a few days after his wife's funeral in Des Moines and confessed during a grueling 12-hour interrogation session.

At his trial and in later appeals, Parker maintained the confession had been coerced.

The interrogator was John Reid, a noted Chicago criminologist, lie-detector specialist, hypnotist and coauthor of books on criminal interrogations and confessions.

His books and tactics were among those criticized by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren in the Miranda decision, which was issued 19 years after Parker's conviction.

“The worst thing he ever did was send the wrong flowers to the warden's wife's tea party.”

—Richard Bruckner
Darrell Parker's lawyer

tion. That landmark ruling said a defendant must be advised of his constitutional rights before he can be questioned.

At his trial, Parker said Reid beat him, threatened him and pulled his hair in an effort to get a confession, according to news accounts at the time.

"I was scared of him," Parker testified. "He kept telling me I was going to fry and said he was going to obtain a confession from me if it took three days or a week."

The questioning took place in a small windowless room with only Reid and Parker present. Parker testified it continued until he was groggy and near exhaustion.

"I don't remember anything clearly after that," Parker said.

Reid testified that Parker made his confession without any threats, promises or abuse. He said Parker confessed that he killed his wife after she refused his sexual advances.

A jury found Parker guilty of first-degree murder and he was sentenced to life in prison.

Model Prisoner

Bruckner said Parker's prison record was spotless and that he lived outside the walls of the penitentiary after the first year, tending a prison nursery and traveling to take care of plants and trees at other state institutions.

"The worst thing he ever did was send the wrong flowers to the warden's wife's tea party," Bruckner said.

Parker was unsuccessful in a series of appeals, but in July 1969 a federal appeals court in St. Louis upheld Parker's contention that the confession was involuntary and ordered Nebraska to give him a new trial or free him. He was freed on bond in December, 1969 after serving more than 13 years in prison.

Legal battles continued, however, until Parker won parole in 1970 after dropping his final appeal of the conviction.

Parker moved to Bettendorf and worked there and in Davenport. He later moved to Moline, where he has been supervisor of parks since 1979. He has married again.

Peery Connection

Peery, meanwhile, was continuing his life of crime, winding up in prison, usually for crimes such as burglary and rape.

Peery's name actually had entered the Parker case early. Indeed, in Parker's trial, a defense lawyer maintained that Peery was the killer.

Peery had been employed by the city of Lincoln and worked under Parker. He had been doing some work around the Parker home shortly before the slaying.

In the early 1960s, Peery purportedly confessed to the murder in a letter, but he later denied that he'd written it. A Nebraska judge refused to admit the letter as evidence in one of Parker's appeals.

By the late 1970s, Peery, who had spent most of his adult life in prison, was on Nebraska's death row for killing a store owner's wife during a robbery.

Said Bruckner: "Wesley had a very bad heart and thought he had cancer and knew he wasn't going to come out of the penitentiary alive."

That's when Peery came up with the book idea.

Between about 1978 and 1980, Peery gave taped and written confessions to Cohen and Redman. Cohen contacted Bruckner with the information after Peery died last July at age 56.

Bruckner and Cohen are convinced that Peery's confession of the Parker murder is genuine.

Peery was able to draw a detailed floor plan of the Parker home, placing pieces of furniture in the proper place some 25 years after the crime. And he recounted other details such as birthmarks on the victim's body, Bruckner said.

Long List of Murders

Peery's string of confessed murders dated back to the 1940s. They included an elderly landlady and two young hitchhikers. The murders were spread across the country — Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Oregon and Washington.

Nikki Reisen, administrative assistant to the Nebraska Board of Pardons, said if Parker files an application for a pardon before Nov. 18, his case could be reviewed by the board in December.

Parker wants to say little about the case until after his pardon hearing, except to say that he's pleased for the chance to clear his name even though it dredges up some sad memories.

"I knew sometime along the way what really happened would come out," Parker told Bruckner.

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