TO CATCH A KILLER

By Andrew Wolfson

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Three women were dead. A murderer was on the loose in Louisville. Could police find him before he killed again. It took the biggest homicide investigation in the area's history – and then a bit of luck – to piece together the bizarre puzzle of a serial killer.

When Detective Pat Conkling reported to the scene of Jefferson County's seventh murder of 1981, he had no good reason to get excited. In seven years on the county's Homicide-Robbery Unit, he had investigated at least 75 murders.

When Detective George Barrett responded to Louisville's twelfth slaying the following year, it was a different story. Though he'd been on the force for five years, he'd just joined the homicide squad and this was a special occasion the first murder case he could call his own.

Conkling and Barrett had never met before the two deaths eventually brought them together. But before their efforts culminated last month in the conviction of Beoria Abraham Simmons II for the kidnapping, rape and murder of three women, they would lead the most extensive homicide investigation ever in Louisville or Jefferson County. The two detectives concede now that the apprehension of the killer came about largely through luck and the courage of a 5-foot-4, 105-pound teenage girl.

But the arrest was preceded by a probe of almost incomprehensible scope, variety and detail that enabled police to recognize and link the lucky break to the case. Before it concluded, Barrett, Conkling and as many as 26 other detectives would:

Search six months for a bullet that proved they were after a multiple killer and find it only by X-raying a section of a tree. Troop to 100 gun shops from Elizabethtown to Louisville and contact 6,000 gun owners all the while looking for the wrong gun. Canvass 50 restaurants in a hunt for a hamburger served with diced onions, to retrace the steps of a victim who had eaten one just hours before her death. Consult a psychic, at least in part to be able to answer critics who inevitably would ask,

"Why didn't you consult a psychic?" Predict (with uncanny accuracy) that the killer they were hunting would prove to be a gainfully employed, apparently upstanding citizen. And withhold from the public the horrifying fact that one man had killed two, then three women and was still on the loose.

Detectives eventually arrested the killer, but not before police learned that even the most exhaustive efforts of law enforcement may not be equal to the task of tracking down a serial killer who strikes randomly at strangers.

The first victim

When a fisherman found the fully clothed body of Robin L. Barnes, IS, on May 18, 1981, in a marshy area of southwest Jefferson County near the Louisville Gas & Electric Co'.s Mill Creek power plant, detectives had no reason to believe it would prove to be a special murder. As in most cases in which there is no obvious suspect, police first turned the spotlight on Robin's friends and family.

County detectives interviewed as many as 75 relatives, schoolmates, boyfriends and acquaintances, but quickly cleared them. "I told her parents not to give up hope, because I never give up hope," said Conkling, who joined the county force in 1970 and was assigned as lead detective on the case. But investigators had little to go on. They knew that Robin, a former middle-school cheerleader who lived with her father in West Point, Ky., liked to hitchhike. They knew she had run away from home before and that she had left her father's house, six miles south of where her body was found, in the middle of the night. A pubic hair found on her coat suggested she had been raped and shot by a black man, but a week before the slaying she had been seen at a restaurant on Dixie Highway with a white man, a stranger to the person who reported having seen her.

More promising clues were the three bullets detectives dug from the ground beneath her body. They were shipped off to the Kentucky State Police Regional Crime Laboratory in Louisville, which reported that they probably had been fired from one of three makes of .380-caliber pistols. Conkling visited three gun shops near the crime scene, including Little Biffs Gun Room, at 13303 Dixie Highway. But customers who had purchased any of the three types of pistols checked out clean.

Meanwhile, county police presented details of the murder on "Crimestoppers," the television anti-crime feature. This yielded dozens of tips but no suspects. After several months Conkling began to move on to other homicides, though Robin's

case remained his top priority because it was unsolved. Though her murderer would later be described as gripped by a compulsion to kill, Conkling recalls that at the time, "There was no reason to think he would strike again."

The case of Shannon House

On March 25, 1982, almost 10 months after Robin Barnes' death, a 28-year-old roofer, on his day off, found the body of Shannon House in a wooded area near the riding stables of Iroquois Park in southern Louisville. City Detective George Barrett, who was assigned to investigate, remembers that at the time he didn't know "the first thing" about Ms. Barnes' murder. There was no reason he should. The county department alone had investigated the Barnes death, and Barrett had started working homicides only six months earlier.

But even if he had known of the earlier murder, there was no obvious reason to connect them. The bodies were found 12 miles apart. Ms. House, 29, was twice Ms. Barnes' age. Robin Barnes had been shot three times; Ms. House had been shot once. As murder scenes go, Barrett didn't find the House site gruesome. She apparently had been raped, but there were no signs of mutilation, and the body was fully clothed.

That the killer had allowed her to re-dress suggested to police that he might have known or even once loved her. Detectives focused their investiga tion on her acquaintances and boyfriends, but a dozen possible suspects passed polygraph tests or offered airtight alibis. Investigators searched for her last known whereabouts. They learned that Ms. House had lived in an apartment on Fourth Street near the University of Louisville but hadn't been there in the hours before her death.

The question was: Where had she been? An autopsy revealed lettuce, pickles and diced onions in her stomach, suggesting she'd eaten a dressed hamburger two or three hours before her murder. Detectives visited 50 restaurants in the Old Louisville, downtown and Highlands areas, searching for one thing: A late-night spot that diced its onions. They found what they were looking for at 1574 Bardstown Road, the Hideaway Lounge, now defunct.

Someone there remembered having seen a woman resembling Ms. House. Then Arthur Kopple, a City Hall radio dispatcher, reported he had given a ride to a woman of her description on Bardstown Road a few hours before Ms. House's death. Kopple told police he dropped her off at Fourth Street and Broadway, where

she got into another car. He couldn't describe the other car or the man who drove it. Police were at another dead end.

Three months after Ms. House's murder, a woman reported that a man tried to abduct her from Fourth and Broadway. Because the woman wrongly identified her assailant and because of other errors, a man named Paul D. Thomas was arrested, convicted of wanton endangerment and unlawful imprisonment and sentenced to two years in prison. Homicide detectives were unaware of Thomas' arrest or conviction, and he was never one of their suspects. But their work later cleared him. Detectives knew that to find who had murdered Ms. House, they would have to find the bullet that killed her. They had searched for it futilely for hours on the day her body was found. During the next six months, Barrett and other detectives returned to Iroquois Park as often as three times a week, laying a grid of rope on the ground, getting down on their hands and knees and searching a half-mile-square area foot by foot. Spring passed, and then the summer. Still they found nothing.

Eventually detectives had to turn their attention to the 32 other homicides that followed the death of Ms. House in 1982. And George Barrett began to lose hope of clearing his first murder case. "I felt it would be a real long shot that we would solve it. We had checked everything and checked everything again."

On Oct. 23, 1 982, six months after the murder, detectives returned to the death scene, as they had countless times before. They prepared to begin their bullet search anew. But Detective Gary Mason saw something different this time sap running from an elm tree just a few feet from where Ms. House had been killed.

Detectives returned with an axe, chopped out a section of the tree and took it to Humana Hospital University's emergency room for an X-ray. After a six-month search, they had what they were looking for. And that night they had a party. Three days later the regional crime lab reported back some somber news. The bullet, a 100-gram, .380 caliber Frontier, was the same type and came from the same gun that had killed Robin Barnes. Police now knew they had a multiple killer on the loose. With that frightening knowledge, city and county homicide units geared for coordinated action. Detectives got a computer terminal of their own. Barrett was assigned full time to the case. At one point, all 16 of Louisville's homicide investigators were on the case.

Mindful of the serial murders of children in Atlanta, police feared the worst. "Everything we asked for, we got," Barrett said. City detectives expanded the

search for the murder weapon that the county had begun after the Barnes death. Again, the crime lab said they should be looking for one of three weapons a Beretta, a Star or a Webley & Scott. Investigators canvassed 100 gun shops, spending three days reviewing the records at one shop alone. They contacted 6,000 customers who had purchased pistols or ammunition of the type that the crime lab said was used in the murders. They tested a dozen handguns that customers surrendered.

None proved to be the murder weapon. They even visited Little Biffs Gun Room, as county officers had, but, like their colleagues on the county force, they took no notice of a receipt showing that a man named Beoria Simmons II had purchased a .380-caliber Tanfolgia-Giuseppe pistol in April 1981.

Detectives later learned that the Tanfolgia, a relatively rare weapon manufactured in Italy, produces virtually the same ballistics markings as the three pistols identified by the crime lab. But the crime lab didn't include the gun as one of the possible murder weapons because it was not listed in the FBI manual on which ballistics experts depend, firearms examiner Bill McBrayer later explained. (The Tanfolgia is now included in the FBI's manual along with the three other weapons, an FBI spokesman said.)

With the search for the murder weapon going nowhere and practical avenues exhausted, police turned to the exotic: They hired a psychic. "We try to keep an open mind, contrary to what people think about police," Barrett later said. At least, detectives would have an answer for anyone who might ask, "Why didn't you consult a psychic?" The psychic told police to look for a "devil worshiper," but offered no useful information.

Barrett and his colleagues didn't know much about what sort of person might have committed the crimes, but they believed one thing: Because the killer seemed to have no motive for his attacks other than sexual, he would strike again.

The case of Nancy Bettman

On March 12, 1983, a year after the House killing, the detectives' fears were confirmed. Three 12-year-old boys playing on the edge of Iroquois Park's Golf Course found the body of a woman in a creek, in a foot and a half of water. Nancy Bettman, 39, had been shot once in the back of the head, possibly as she tried to escape. Unlike the two prior victims, the body was partially nude.

Despite the differences, police immediately suspected the death was linked to the two previous murders. Two days later ballistics tests proved them right. Detectives continued their canvass of gun shops, still searching for the wrong gun. They reviewed five years of unsolved sex crimes, rein-terviewing the victims, hoping to find a woman who had encountered but escaped from the killer. They interviewed people who lived near Iroquois Park. Had any- one heard gunshots on the night of the House or Bettman murders? "Sure, we heard gunshots," replied many residents, jaded by crime the park. "We hear them every night."

The search continued. Maj. Jim Hogan, Louisville's chief of detectives, assigned still more people to the case, including Gene Sherrard as lead detective for the Bettman investigation. "We knew we had one guy who had killed three women," Barrett said. "We were afraid we'd have a fourth." Drawing a profile No one described the murderer as a "serial killer," Barrett recalls.

Detectives and police officials wanted to avoid labels that had created a circus atmosphere in other cities. But Barrett and Conkling read everything they could find about serial killers, searching for the slightest clue that might help identify their man. Most of the research seemed to draw the same conclusion: Serial killers have seemed to be extraordinarily ordinary. They are not glassy-eyed lunatics. They generally are not insane, in the legal sense. They do not stand out in a crowd.

Theodore Bundy, for example, before he was convicted of three murders in Florida and linked to 36 others, had helped design a rape-prevention program in Seattle. Kenneth Bianchi, who confessed to five of the 10 "Hillside Strangler" murders in Los Angeles, had been hired as a security guard, and police in Bellingham, Wash., had regarded him as a good prospect for law-enforcement work.

Psychologists that police consulted predicted the Louisville killer would come from a religious family and have an authoritarian father. (In fact, his mother turned out to be a fundamentalist Christian; his father, a retired Army sergeant.) Their research led Louisville detectives to suspect that the killer would be employed and even enjoy a good reputation on the job and in the community. "We expected nobody would believe us when we told them what this person had done," Barrett said.

If the experts were right, one thing was certain: the killer wasn't likely to give himself away. The paltry physical evidence suggested police were hunting for a black man. Pubic hair from an African American had been found on Ms. House's body and on Ms. Barnes'.

But detectives knew hairs can be transferred through casual contact or even mutual use of a towel. And because they believed the killer probably lived near where the bodies were found in predominantly white south Louisville or southwestern Jefferson County they believed even more strongly he could be white. They also knew that all three women were murdered between midnight and 3 a.m. and that they may have entered the killer's car without a struggle.

Who could command a woman's trust at such hours? The killer, they concluded, could be a minister, a firefighter or even a policeman. Investigators checked the file of every area officer who had been the target of a sex-related complaint. Looking for night-owl drivers, they checked the background of every late-shift employee of every major Dixie Highway employer. They found nothing.

Because the murders had been committed at roughly one-year intervals, detectives thought the killer might be passing through, killing elsewhere between visits. They queried every major police department and crime lab in the country for information about similar crimes. None reported any.

Setting a trap

With virtually all leads exhausted, police commanders decided it was time to use what they call "pro-active" measures steps to trap the killer. They discussed, but discarded, the idea of setting up policewomen as decoys near Iroquois Park. The difficulty was obvious: How can you protect a policewoman, even if she is armed, once she gets into a car with an armed and dangerous man?

Next, they considered asking newspapers and television stations to report false information such as saying that the killer had decapitated a victim to try to lure the killer into contacting police or reporters to correct the false reports. That ploy had worked for other police departments, and the FBI had even recommended it as a last resort in some instances.

But in one of the most chilling moves in the case, police decided not to tell the public what investigators so clearly knew: that one man had killed three women and was still on the loose. For police commanders, it was not a difficult decision. For one thing, because the killer had struck only at one-year intervals, warning women of the danger might serve no purpose. Women weren't going to stay off the streets for a year.

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Detectives also feared that if the murderer learned that police had linked the three killings to one weapon, he would dispose of it, probably ensuring he never would be convicted. When a television reporter learned that the murders were linked, apparently because of a leak in the city police department, Barrett said police implored Louisville's major news executives not to release the information. Editors at The Courier-Journal say they do not remember agreeing to withhold information. In any event, the newspaper published only a b rief account of the Bettman death. It did not mention the prior murders.

With the misinformation campaign and policewoman-decoy schemes rejected, police commanders in May 1983 decided on a third option, setting up roadblocks in Iroquois Park. Past performance didn't suggest the killer would strike again so soon, but police knew that compulsive killers eventually begin to kill with greater frequency. Pretending they were working an anti-vandalism details, 22 offices and detectives posted themselves at two locations in the park, where they stopped every male driver for questioning. Several surrendered weapons to police. One driver even had a .380 caliber Tanfolgia-Giusseppe. It proved not to be the murder weapon, but the crime lab learned that fatal bullets could be fired from that brand of gun. Police added it to their list and prepared to recanvass gun shops in search of customers who'd bought such a weapon.
Because the recanvass required so many officers, police abandoned the roadblocks near the end of May. Still, Barrett recalls, "I felt we had a good chance of catching him. The question was how many more victims would there be before we did."

Barrett would have to wait only two weeks to find out. Sometime at 1 a.m. on June 11, 1983, along Fourth Street in Old Louisville, a heavy-set black male forced a 16-year-old girl into his 1975 Chrysler Cordoba at gunpoint, pushed her to the floor and drove her to Iroquois Park, toward precisely where one of the roadblocks had been.

"I asked him not to kill me," the girl later testified. She said the man told her he only wanted to have sex. At the park, he put down his gun before he opened the door and ordered her out of the car. As she climbed out, the girl, all 5-feet-4, 105 pounds of her, stabbed at the man with a pocketknife she had secretly drawn, inflicting seven wounds with the 2'2-inch blade. She struggled from his grasp and fled, seeking refuge in nearby homes. No one would open a door.

Finally she found safety at a convenience store. She was taken to Humana Hospital Audubon, where she told Louisville policeman James Wintergerst about her encounter. The assailant, meanwhile, drove to. his home in Pleasure Ridge Park. His family brought him to Humana Hospital Southwest for treatment of his knife wounds, and he was later transferred to Humana Hospital University. Louisville Detective Dene Ashcraft, at University on another matter, talked to the man, who claimed a girl, a hitchhiker he'd picked up, had stabbed him. The girl and three accomplices also had robbed him, he claimed. The man's wounds were superficial, and Ashcraft hadn't yet heard about the girl at Audubon, so he turned the case over to a uniformed officer and returned to his office.

About 45 minutes later, Wintergerst told him the story of the girl's abduction. "Something flashed in my head," Ashcraft remembers. The detective, who had worked on the unsolved murders, headed to Aububon, checking by radio for cars registered to Simmons. When he got to talk to the girl, "everything began to click into place." She described how her abductor had driven a 1975 Chrsyler Cordoba she knew the model because her mother drove the same one. Simmons owned one too, Ashcraft had learned.
She described how his gun was slightly bigger than her mother's .25 caliber pistol, just about the size of a .380, Ashcraft thought. Ashcraft drove the girl to Simmons' home in Pleasure Ridge Park. She identified his car "from a block away." On the front seat, Ashcraft saw something that made his heart skip a beat: 100-gram Frontier bullets for a .380-caliber pistol the same kind that had killed Barnes, House and Bettman.

Ashcraft guarded the car until it could be photographed, impounded and searched. At 5 a.m., he called Barrett at home and invited him to come and meet Beoria Abraham Simmons II, 29, the man he'd hunted for two years. "It was funny; I didn't think of him as a stranger," Barrett recalls. "It seemed like I already knew him." Declining an attorney, Simmons slowly, calmly confessed, but claimed the shootings were accidents or followed arguments or robberies in which he was the victim.

Detectives quickly discredited those stories. His own lawyer later admitted they were lies. Police had enough physical evidence to make the case without a confession, including the murder weapon: a .380-caliber Tanfolgia-Giuseppe, which they found loaded and cocked under the driver's seat of his car. Detectives arrested and booked Simmons, and the story of the three murders unfolded in the press.

It was the salvation of Paul D. Thomas, the man who had been convicted earlier of the attempted abduction at Fourth and Broadway. Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Joe Gutmann, who had prosecuted Thomas, read the story and saw Simmons' picture in The Courier-Journal. He realized Simmons looked frighteningly similar to Thomas. Eventually, Thomas' accuser changed her mind and identified Simmons as the man who had tried to abduct her. Simmons was never charged with that offense, but Thomas was released after five months in prison, understandably a bitter man.

Twenty months after his arrest, Simmons was tried in Jefferson Circuit Court. Faced with overwhelming evidence, he admitted committing the three murders and attempting a fourth. With no choice but to persuade a jury Simmons was mentally ill, flamboyant defense attorney Daniel Taylor III described his own client as a "pitiable monster" and portrayed his crimes as even more heinous than depicted by the commonwealth.

Simmons did not testify, but clergymen and counselors said he claimed that while raping Beoria A. Simmons II at his trial. and killing his victims, he envisioned the face of a girlfriend who had rejected him. The insanity defense fell short. While a state psychiatrist found Simmons to be mildly depressed, he seemed, even as portrayed by his family, to be the upstanding citizen detectives had predicted the killer would be:

A graduate of Louisville's Spalding College, with a bachelor's degree in social work; a halfway-house counselor during the six months before his arrest; a young man so "nice" that a supervisor fixed him up on a date with her sister-in-law. After just two hours of deliberation, a jury of nine men and three women on March 6 returned six death sentences against Simmons for the kidnappings and for the murders of Robin Barnes, Shannon House and Nancy Bettman. The jury had already said he should serve 1 10 years in prison for the rapes and for the kidnapping, attempted rape and attempted murder of the teen-ager. The case of Beoria Simmons II was closed.

Barrett concedes that, but for the courage of the girl who fended off Simmons, it could have taken years to identify and capture him. "We were extremely lucky. But I felt we made our own luck. We knew what we were looking for and saw it when it happened." Prosecutor William Duncan agrees. "These are the kinds of crimes that historically go unsolved isolated incidents committed under the cover of darkness. But police were ready; they were geared up, and they moved quickly "

Neither Barrett nor Conkling doubts the girl would have been murdered if she hadn't escaped. "She's one of the most courageous people I know .and that includes police officers," Barrett said. But if Simmons had killed her and evaded police, would he have killed again? The defendant's own expert witnesses said serial killers keep killing until caught. "All we can do is judge him by his past," Barrett said. Added Conkling: "We can only assume the worst."