

THE MAN WHO MURDERED WOMEN CORAL WATTS STALKED THEM IN MICHIGAN AND TEXAS. HIS TOLL: AT LEAST 13

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, August 22, 1982

Author: BILLY BOWLES and BRIAN FLANIGAN Free Press Staff Writers

HOUSTON, Tex. -- **Coral Eugene Watts** flew in to Houston aboard a Delta Airlines jet in mid-March 1981 carrying only a knapsack, a sleeping bag and a small trunk. Wayne Silcox, who had worked with **Watts** as a diesel mechanic in Michigan, met him at the airport.

A day or two later, Houston homicide detective Doug Bostock received a telephone call from Michigan. The caller, Ann Arbor homicide Sgt. Paul Bunton, had learned from an informant that **Watts**, 28, had left Michigan for Houston and there was something Bostock should know: Although they had been unable to prove it, Michigan police considered **Watts** a pathological killer of young women.

Bunton promised to mail a packet of materials that Michigan investigators had accumulated on **Watts**, including photographs of him and descriptions of how he cruised city streets and the countryside in his car night after night, presumably looking for women. Bunton suggested that Bostock immediately warn police in surrounding Texas communities about **Watts**

HOUSTON POLICE began tailing **Watts**. For a while, they attached a homing device to his car, as Ann Arbor police had done when he was in Michigan. A Houston investigator said officers made spot checks on **Watts**, but that since he was not charged with any crime, hounding him full time would have been harassment.

Meanwhile, Silcox, who had agreed to let **Watts** receive mail at his house, started noticing unmarked cars driving slowly through his subdivision west of the Houston city limits. Silcox was new to the neighborhood. He arrived in Houston only a month before **Watts**. At first, Silcox thought it was private security guards watching for prowlers.

Later, Silcox would recall that some of his new neighbors seemed to be treating him coolly. He found out why when a neighbor, Marge Guggenheim, told him there was a rumor he was hiding out "a black murderer."

" **Coral** was the only black man I knew," Silcox said later in an interview.

WHEN SILCOX told **Watts** what had happened, **Watts** shrugged it off, saying he had once had a misunderstanding with Ann Arbor police but thought he had cleared it up.

Silcox said that since he lived outside the city it did not occur to him that Houston police were conducting the surveillance. So he went to the Harris County sheriff's office and called the FBI in Houston and Detroit. Each denied knowledge of **Coral Watts**.

Silcox would not learn the truth until **Watts** ' arrest by Houston police on May 23 of this year. They accused **Watts** of abducting a young Houston woman, Lori Ann Lister, outside her apartment, choking her into unconsciousness and trying to drown her in her bathtub before officers stopped him.

THAT SHOCKED Silcox and others who knew **Watts** in Texas and Michigan. What followed 2 1/2 months later stunned them almost beyond belief. **Watts** began describing murders and assaults against women in detail that police said only the killer or someone acquainted with the killer could know.

More convincing, he cleared up the mystery of two missing women and a missing 14-year-old girl by directing authorities to two shallow graves and a culvert where he said he had buried them.

Watts confessed that in his 14 months in Texas before his arrest, he had killed nine women in Houston, and three more in Galveston, Austin and Brookshire.

Before coming to Texas, he said, he killed former Detroit News food writer Jeanne Clyne on a Grosse Pointe Farms street on Halloween in 1979.

One murder to which he confessed had been ruled an accidental drowning, another a possible suicide. **Watts** also claimed responsibility for an assault in Galveston that had sent another man to prison on a life sentence. After **Watts** ' confession, authorities cleared the man, Howard Ware Mosely, of that crime.

Six of **Watts** ' intended victims in Texas survived . He told detectives he slashed the throat of a woman whose tire blew out on a Houston freeway but that she jerked free and escaped in the car of a motorist who saw what was happening and stopped for her. He reported that incident to police as one of his murders, but police said the woman recovered.

Watts said another woman, in Galveston, slipped from his grasp and got away because his hands were wet with another victim's blood and he lost his grip on her.

Watts ' confessions grew out of a plea-bargaining agreement approved by Judge Doug Shaver of Harris County District Court. Shaver said lawyers representing **Watts** and the district attorney's office told him **Watts** had admitted killing 22 people in Texas, Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, Detroit and Windsor and wanted to confess to those in Harris County in exchange for reducing the charges against him. Both sides were agreeable if the judge was.

Shaver agreed to let **Watts** plead guilty to one charge, burglary with intent to murder, and said he would give him the maximum 60-year prison sentence. In exchange, **Watts** must cooperate to solve the murders and lead investigators to bodies he had buried.

Police think **Watts** ' toll may be higher than the 22 mentioned by the judge. In Detroit alone, police consider **Watts** a possible suspect in the slayings of 18 to 20 women, according to Dominick Carnovale, assistant Wayne County prosecuting attorney. **Watts** has long been the prime suspect in the murder of three young women in Ann Arbor in 1980 and one in Kalamazoo in 1974.

No Windsor homicide has been attached to **Watts** since he started talking to Houston detectives, but police suspect him in three assaults. In one, a woman's throat was slashed but she survived. In another, a woman recovered from knife cuts on the face and a stab wound to the back. Authorities said **Watts** may have thought he killed one of the women.

In the hours following each attack, authorities said, a car with the license plate number MNC790 crossed from Canada into Detroit, according to computer records kept at the border. That plate was registered to **Watts** ' burgundy-colored 1979 Pontiac Grand Prix.

THE TOTAL of **Watts** ' assaults may never be known. **Watts** is making admissions only to authorities willing to guarantee his statements will not be used against him in court. Houston, Austin, Galveston, Brookshire and Grosse Pointe Farms gave him such guarantees. Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, Detroit and Windsor have not.

"All we have to gain is giving away our chance of ever convicting a killer," said prosecuting attorney James Gregart of Kalamazoo County , where for eight years **Watts** has been the prime suspect in the slaying of a Western Michigan University sophomore, 19-year-old Glenda Steele. "In other words, what we'd be doing is giving a free murder .

The attacks **Watts** has admitted have occurred without a motive that any rational person could discern or accept.

"He didn't rape them; he didn't steal from them," said John Holmes, the Harris County district attorney in Houston. " . . . It is not people he knew. It is just cold, calculated killing."

A clinical psychologist hired by the defense diagnosed **Watts** as a paranoid schizophrenic who views women as "evil." He said **Watts** has "little capacity" to conform to social forms or legal standards.

But a state psychiatrist who examined **Watts** said he is without psychosis -- that is, without serious mental disease.

Watts scored 68 on one I.Q. test, 75 on another, but Ira Jones, Harris County assistant D.A., cautioned not to underestimate him: "He could evade arrest. He was sensitive to whether he was being watched. He could pick our guys off blocks away."

JUDGE SHAVER started receiving angry letters from citizens after he reduced the charges against **Watts** . He will sentence **Watts** Friday.

In a telephone interview, Shaver explained that in terms of eligibility for parole, a 60-year sentence is equivalent to a life sentence in Texas. Inmates become eligible for parole after serving one-third of their sentences or 20 years, whichever is less.

This is true even for prisoners given multiple life sentences to be served consecutively. With "good time," given to reduce the sentences of well-behaved prisoners, parole from a life sentence is possible after 10 years, Shaver said.

"The public down here doesn't understand that at all," he said.

But police and the prosecutor believe a plea-bargain agreement was the best they could do under the circumstances.

"We didn't have a stitch of evidence to go on in the killings," Holmes, the D.A., told reporters.

The judge said he was influenced by two main considerations: The need to find the missing victims **Watts** had buried, and the need to get the murder confessions on **Watts** ' permanent record, which will influence his chances for parole.

The murders would not be on **Watts** ' record had the state refused to bargain, then found itself without sufficient evidence to convict him in murder cases. Shaver said he will recommend to the state Board of Pardons and Paroles that **Watts** never be paroled.

"If they ever let him out, they'll have to live with it," Shaver said.

Shaver played a major role in another Texas mass murder case growing out of the torture slayings of 26 young Houston-area boys in the early 1970s. Then a Harris County assistant district attorney, Shaver helped prosecute Elmer Wayne Henley during his retrial in 1979. Henley was convicted, and a judge sentenced him to six concurrent life sentences.

"It's a frightening experience to find yourself involved in two of them ," Shaver said.

IF **WATTS** is telling his interrogators the whole story, he did not begin his string of Texas killings until September 1981, after he had been in Houston 5 1/2 months. Upon arrival , he quickly found a job, a girlfriend and a church which he regularly attended.

Three Michigan friends had preceded **Watts** to Houston by a few weeks and befriended him upon his arrival. They were Silcox and brothers Bill and Jerry Brock. The shaky Michigan economy, with frequent layoffs and recalls, had driven them all to Houston.

Watts knew Silcox and Jerry Brock from the E&L Transport Co. in Woodhaven, where he worked for 3 1/2 years. He started as a porter and rose to diesel mechanic.

Watts ' stepfather, Norman Ceaser, still works at E&L. He and Silcox were close friends and fishing buddies, and when **Watts** decided to go to Houston, Ceaser called Silcox and asked if he would look out for the young man.

Before **Watts** left Detroit, he called Silcox and asked if he would meet him at the airport. Silcox was waiting when the plane arrived. Silcox offered to put **Watts** up until he could get on his feet, but **Watts** declined the offer. Instead, he asked Silcox to drop him off at the motel where Bill Brock was staying. The Brocks are closer to **Watts** ' age than Silcox, 41. The young men at E&L used to wrestle and kid around a lot, Jerry Brock said.

He well remembers **Watts** ' arrival in Houston: "He had a knapsack, a sleeping bag and a chest. He didn't have much at all . . . I guess the bare necessities to get by. He didn't sleep in the motels or anything. He slept in the back of my truck, and he slept in my brother's car."

One morning before they had found an apartment, Bill Brock and his wife, Kim, came out of their room in the Greenspoint Inn on Interstate 45 and there lay **Coral Watts** , asleep in the middle of the motel parking lot.

When **Watts** got in town, Bill Brock was already working for a Houston trucking firm, Coastal Transport Co. Bill suggested to **Watts** that he apply there for a job.

For reasons that are not clear, **Watts** lied on his job application. Instead of listing E&L as his immediate past employer, he listed Brock's Sunoco, a gas station owned at that time by the Brocks' father on Five Mile in Livonia. He had never worked at the station.

Mrs. William Brock Sr. said her husband did not tell Coastal officials of the deception. **Watts** got the job, as a diesel mechanic.

The pay, \$6 an hour, was far less than the \$11.44 an hour **Watts** had been making at E&L Transport, but the work promised to be steadier.

POLICE SURVEILLANCE of **Watts** already had begun. James Coats, Coastal's acting terminal manager, said that soon after **Watts** started to work a man walked up to him and said, "Mr. Coats, can I have a word with you?" and flashed a badge . It was a Houston detective.

Coats declined to tell a reporter what information the detective gave him about **Watts** . But Coats said that later, when he wanted to fire **Watts** , he couldn't because he wanted to cooperate with police and they had asked him to keep **Watts** on the job.

Watts ' problem at Coastal, Coats said, was that he refused to give an address or telephone number. Coats needed the information for the bonding company.

Before long, **Watts** solved Coats' problem by quitting.

"When I began to push him for a correct address and a phone number where he could be reached, he packed up his tools and left," Coats said. " . . . I came in here one morning and he was gone."

That was about mid-May of last year, Coats said. **Watts** had been working there two months.

Watts was so quiet and his stay so uneventful that, later, when his picture was on television every evening and on the front pages of the Houston Post and Chronicle, two-thirds of Coastal's workers did not even remember him, Coats said.

"The thing that bothered us was we'd had a psycho in our midst," Coats said.

BEFORE **WATTS** left Coastal, a co-worker there took him to St. Paul's Temple Church of God and Christ. Mrs. Ada White, the church's 92-year-old founder and "church mother," remembers him well and does not share the defensiveness of some of the church's members for having permitted him to join their church.

"Judas was right there along with Jesus, wasn't he?" she said. "And He never did drive him or make him leave. And that's something -- they go, 'Ooooo, he was in y'all's church?' I say, 'You ain't got no Bible?' Not take a person in church? You ain't supposed to refuse them."

Watts, quiet, always polite, seemed like an outstanding young man to Mrs. White.

"He's just such a nice -- has just a nice personality," she said. "All devils do. You know that? All devils know how to be nice . . . There ain't nothing in him that looks like he would do nothing like this. You know what I mean? You can always kind of size a bully up, or a mean person. I can. When you get 92 years old, you can. I just wouldn't have thought it. I just wouldn't."

On Easter Sunday of 1981, **Watts** met Sheila Williams, a member of the church choir, and soon he was regarded as "Sheila's young man," said Mrs. White.

Watts began spending a lot of his off-hours with Sheila at her parents' place, and after he took a one-bedroom apartment in northwest Houston, she spent a lot of time there. **Watts'** landlady, Barbara Johnson, thought the couple were married. **Watts** had presented Sheila as his wife when he rented the \$310-a-month apartment, Barbara Johnson said, and "she signed his name."

But when reporters descended on Sheila Williams after **Watts'** confessions became public, she bristled at suggestions they lived together. He lived at his place and she lived at hers, she said.

Watts' three-year-old daughter, Nakisha, arrived in Houston from Detroit for a visit, and Sheila kept the baby while **Watts** worked. Sundays, they took the baby with them to church.

Watts held two jobs after leaving Coastal Transport. From May to September of last year, he worked as a mechanic at Welltech, Inc., which maintains drilling equipment. Company officials said they fired him for sleeping on the job.

In October, he landed another mechanic's job with the Metropolitan Transit Authority, working in a downtown Houston bus barn.

Watts was still working there when he was arrested May 23.

After his arrest, Mrs. Dorothy Ceaser, **Watts** ' mother, came down and picked up Nakisha from Sheila.

Detectives and investigators from the district attorney's office went to the Willow Court Apartments to search **Watts** ' rooms the Sunday he was arrested but had no search warrant. They said Sheila Williams refused to admit them. The next day, they returned to find the room had been emptied.

Sheila Williams, accompanied by two lawyers, had moved everything out, said Barbara Johnson, the landlady.

WATTS ' arrest came too late for Michele Maday, the last of his slaying victims. After celebrating her 20th birthday at a restaurant with her father and then at a nightclub with a girl friend, she arrived home a little after 4 a.m.

Watts told police he surprised her as she got out of her car. Forcing her into her apartment, he said, he strangled her with his hands and dumped her nude in her bathtub, where her mother found her that afternoon.

In her bitterness after **Watts** ' confession, the mother, Florence Maday, told a Houston newspaper reporter: "I hate him. I hate his mother. I resent the fact he has a three-year-old daughter who is alive and I don't."

Michele Maday was **Watts** ' last slaying victim only because, two hours after her death, he was arrested before he could drown Lori Lister in her bathtub.

THE ARRESTING officers were not the homicide detectives who had been trying without success to keep tabs on **Watts** . They were two patrolmen, L. W. Domain and Donnie Schmidt , who thought they were being dispatched to a family quarrel.

The man who burst out of one of the apartments soon after their arrival was **Coral Watts** . He bolted for nearby woods, and Domain, 50, knew immediately he could not catch him. So Domain headed for his squad car, leaving the chase to the younger Schmidt.

Then **Watts** made a mistake. He turned into a courtyard with no exit. Schmidt, gun drawn, ordered **Watts** onto his stomach, and a man from the apartment building helped put the handcuffs on him.

Someone screamed that Miss Lister needed help, and Domain ran into the apartment and up the stairs to the bathroom. The officers later pieced together what had happened.

Watts had grabbed Lori Lister between her door and her car as she left to join a friend to go to church. Before **Watts** choked her into unconsciousness, however, she managed a brief scream that alerted a neighbor, who called police.

Dragging his victim into her apartment and up the stairs, **Watts** discovered she had a roommate, Melinda Aguilar. He bound Miss Aguilar's hands behind her back with a belt and coat hangers, left her in an upstairs bedroom, and took Miss Lister to the bathroom. Miss Aguilar heard him drawing water in the tub.

Although he returned frequently for a quick glance as the tub filled, Miss Aguilar managed to lock the bedroom door and get out onto the second-floor balcony, where she plunged headfirst over a railing and onto the ground, her hands still bound tightly behind her.

She suffered only scratches.

After losing consciousness on her lawn, Miss Lister remembers nothing until she revived in an ambulance. She was one of the lucky ones. These were not:

- * Jeanne Clyne, 44, former Detroit News reporter, oldest of the victims. On Halloween night three years ago, Mrs . Clyne had left her psychiatrist's office on Kercheval in Grosse Pointe Farms and was walking home when she met **Watts** , who stabbed her to death with a sharpened 14-inch screwdriver and left her on a sidewalk. A passerby found the body, at first mistaking it for a dummy left by Halloween pranksters.
- * Linda Katherine Tilley, 22, a University of Texas student from the Dallas suburb of Arlington, first of **Watts** ' Texas victims. Her body was found floating fully clothed in the swimming pool outside her Austin apartment Sept. 5. The death was believed accidental until **Watts** confessed last week that he drowned her. **Watts** intended to kill someone else he selected at random in Houston and followed on the highway for 160 miles to Austin. After losing sight of her car there, he apparently mistook Miss Tilley's car for the one he had been following. He grabbed her when she got out of her car at her apartment.
- * Elizabeth Ann Montgomery, 25, clothing store assistant manager, killed by a single stab wound to the chest as she was walking her dogs, Hubcap and Bubba, just after midnight Sept. 13. Fiance Bill Raigle heard her call, "Oh, God, Oh, Bill," and got to the door in time to catch her as she collapsed . She finished dying in his arms. Best friend Marta Ryals said people were surprised the attacker was not scared off by Hubcap, a breed of dog known as a domestic timber wolf. She recalled Elizabeth's going home to Boston in "her brand-new cowboy boots from Houston and a cowboy hat, and she borrowed her mother's full-length fur coat to go see a friend. She just thought that was the epitome of the Houston image, a fur coat and a cowboy hat."
- * Susan Marie Wolf, 21, left home to find her fortune in Houston and ended up clerking for Kroger's. Within six months she was dead. **Watts** said he spotted her about 2 a.m. Sept. 13, just two hours after the Montgomery stabbing. He stabbed her six times in the chest and arm. Her father, John, of Bay City, said, "I told her what kind of a place Houston was . . . But there was no way I could keep her here. I knew it would end up something like this."

- * Phyllis Ellen Tamm, 27, art director for a Houston advertising agency. **Watts** confessed he hanged her from a small tree by a tube top she was wearing to protect her face from the cold as she jogged her daily three miles last Jan. 4. A medical examiner said she may have committed suicide or even caught the garment on the limb accidentally as she ran beneath. A lawyer uncle traveled from Memphis, Tenn., to prove that his niece would never kill herself. **Watts** ' confession proved she didn't.

- *Margaret (Meg) Fossi, 25, fifth-year architecture student at Rice University who planned to settle in Houston permanently when her husband finished law school at Yale. **Watts** confessed that he killed her Jan. 18 with a blow to the throat that fractured her larynx. "The work she did was gorgeous," said husband Larry. "The last drawings she had done were incredible."

- * Elena Semander, 20, Houston University sophomore , strangled with her blouse and dropped into a dumpster. Garbageman Guillermo Shaw thought he saw a leg sticking out of the dumpster the next day and went to investigate. Angry that police didn't share with citizens the information that a killer was loose, her mother, Harriett, asked, "How can a man with an I.Q. of 68 outwit our police?" Houston Police Chief Lee P. Brown who headed Atlanta's police department during the city's child killings, said: "If we were prophets, there's a lot more we could have done. I'm sorry we're not prophetic."

- * Emily Elizabeth LaQua, 14, of Seattle, strangled and dumped in a culvert as she rushed to her new waitress job at a Union 76 truck stop restaurant in Brookshire, Tex. On **Watts** ' directions, searchers found the body in the culvert off Interstate 10 in Brookshire. She had run away from home, hitch- hiking to Texas to join her dad, a cook at the restaurant, so she could get to know him better. Their last words, during an argument, were shouted at one another, and he thought she had run away again. But she returned home while her father was asleep and arose again and left for work without waking him.

- * Edith Anna Ledet, 34, of Dallas, a fifth-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical School in Galveston. She was stabbed 17 times in the chest and upper body while on her daily pre-dawn run near the campus March 27. **Watts** confessed that after killing Ms. Ledet he tried to kill another woman a block and a half and just moments away. Galveston County D.A. James Hury interviewed **Watts** : "He said his grip slipped and he ran away . . . He said, 'I intended to kill her.'

- * Carrie Jefferson, 32, postal clerk, abducted about 2 a.m. April 16 at her front door in Houston as she returned from work. **Watts** said he put her in the trunk of her car and drove to the banks of White Oak Bayou, just off a downtown freeway, where he choked and stabbed her. On Aug. 10, **Watts** took detectives to the spot and showed where to dig, beneath a willow tree. Assistant D.A . Jones, impressed with the accuracy of **Watts** ' directions, commented, "He hits them bullseyes."

* Yolanda Gracia, 22, jewelry store bookkeeper, stabbed twice in the chest as she walked to her Houston home from the bus stop. **Watts** told police he drove past her, let her pass, and drove past again, a game he played with his victims. Burn marks on Mrs. Gracia's arm and hand indicate he may also have tortured her. A native of Neuva Rosita, Mexico, she was nearing completion of citizenship requirements, a long-time dream.

* Suzanne Searles, 25, who came to Houston from Des Moines and got a job with a printing company. **Watts** said he saw her on Interstate 10 as she headed home from a party. He followed her to her apartment, where he grabbed her as she got out of her car, strangled her and buried her in the weeds at the edge of a grassy lot a block away in west Houston. Hers was the first grave **Watts** pointed out to police . . . Assistant D.A. Jones said later, "We were sitting there digging up a woman , and it didn't seem to bother him. He wanted a hamburger. So when we were done we took him out and bought him a hamburger."

*Michele Maday. The last time Florence Maday saw her daughter alive, they were dressing together in front of a mirror as Michele prepared to join her dad for their birthday dinner. Mrs. Maday said, "She kind of turned and looked at me and said, 'You know, I don't mind being 20 , but I don't think I want to get too much older. I just can't imagine myself at 21.' And all of a sudden she didn't have to worry about it any more."

Caption: Pix; Pix Steven J. Ueckert, Houston Chronicle, via AP

Memo: SEE ALSO SIDEBAR BY BILLY BOWLES

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Section: NWS

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Index Terms: MURDER ; MULTIPLE ; NAME LIST ; BIOG- WATTS; CHRONOLOGY

Dateline: HOUSTON, Tex.

Record Number: 8301080833

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