

STATE

Sunday school teacher linked to murders

BY CHRIS NEWTON
Associated Press Writer

WICHITA FALLS, Texas — Every investigator's worst nightmare is that within the dusty, yellowed files of an unsolved murder is a pattern he wasn't keen enough to catch — a few simple clues that reveal the method, and the monster, behind the madness.

Sheriff's investigator John Little knows that nightmare.

He was the last investigator to attempt to solve some of the most brutal crimes in Wichita Falls' history: the rapes and murders of three women in separate incidents in late 1984 and 1985.

There was Toni Gibbs, a 23-year-old nurse who disappeared on Jan. 19. Ms. Gibbs was known for being friendly to needy strangers, often giving money to homeless people. Her body was found three weeks later in an Archer City field.

Terry Sims, a 20-year-old Midwestern State University student, missed a March 6 late-night study session at a local restaurant. Later that night, classmates found her tied up in friend's bathroom, stabbed numerous times. She was nude and had been sexually assaulted.

Ellen Blau, a 21-year old MSU student, disappeared after work at a shopping center restaurant on Sept. 20. Her badly decomposed body was found in a field three weeks later.

Despite the inclusion of five FBI profilers, the collaboration of several county law enforcement agencies — and even a trial — no killers were brought to justice.

The devil haunting Wichita Falls was almost certainly hiding in the details.

Today, sheriff's investigators acknowledge that their staunch belief in the guilt of Danny Wayne

Laughlin, who was seen near the scene of Ms. Gibbs' murder, and their suspicion of a handful of other suspects blinded them to the truth.

"In each case, we had suspects who knew the victims or had obvious links to the crime," said Wichita County Sheriff Tom Callahan, who has served since the mid-1980s. "It looked like separate, distinct incidents that had just happened within a 12-month time span. We had no indication that this was a serial-type event."

In 1986, Laughlin was tried for murder in Ms. Gibbs' death.

At the trial, Texas Ranger Ray Neil testified that Laughlin made several "guesses" about the crime scene under interrogation that happened to be true.

"Even today, I have trouble believing he wasn't involved," Neil said recently.

Jurors didn't. They acquitted Laughlin after a three-week trial.

John Little had worked as a Wichita County investigator for seven years before he was assigned to the unsolved cases in 1996 following a departmental shakeup.

Unlike his colleagues, Little refused to be distracted by the belief that Laughlin had gotten away with murder. And he was not convinced that the other supposed suspects had the opportunity to commit the crimes.

"I felt that this could all be the work of one person," Little said. "The multiple-suspect scenarios had failed, so you just have to go with what's left. If the puzzle piece doesn't fit, you can't jam it in."

But if Little's serial killer theory was right, why had the murders stopped? FBI profilers say most serial killers can't fight the urge to kill again. Where had the killer gone?

Little spent hundreds of hours examining old physical evidence, interviewing friends of the victims

who had long since put the ordeal behind them and talking to officers who had handled the grisly murders.

Little thought about the murders so much that he knew every detail by heart. But still the cases languished, until forensic science handed him another piece of the puzzle.

Laughlin had died in a car crash, so Little compared his tissue with the DNA from a sample removed from Ms. Sims' body believed to be from the killer.

They didn't match.

Little continued by cross-referencing the addresses of the victims' homes, where their bodies were found and the areas they were known to frequent. In February 1999, he discovered that many related addresses were clustered in the same section of town.

Little's next notion: What if the serial killer already had been through the criminal justice system?

When he mapped the area of town with the addresses of convicted killers, kidnappers and other felons, he finally put a name to his suspicion.

The trail led Little to a small church in Olney, 90 miles south of Wichita Falls.

Faryion Edward Wardrip had found redemption at Hamilton Street Church of Christ in Olney, Texas — pop. 3,347 — singing hymns and teaching Sunday school to the church's children.

He arrived in 1997, after serving 11 years of a 35-year murder sentence for killing Wichita Falls resident Tina Kimbrew in 1986. Wardrip's defense was that Ms. Kimbrew was a friend whom he accidentally strangled during an argument.

Wardrip could have moved farther away, but for some reason he chose Olney. At an emotional

prayer meeting one night, Wardrip told the congregation that he had just finished serving a manslaughter sentence for driving while intoxicated and killing his girlfriend.

The congregation assured him the truth would set him free. And in time, he became one of the church's most respected members.

"He was there every Sunday, dressed nicely," said Margaret Carter, who attends the church. "He was getting the second chance that a lot of us get through God's grace. He seemed to making the best of it. There wasn't any gossip. We accepted him."

Wardrip got a job as a fix-it man. Folks invited him for Sunday dinner.

He seemed to have succeeded in reinventing his life.

Until Little came calling.

From behind bushes, Little watched Wardrip for several hours, trailing him to the screen door company where he worked. Just before he walked inside, Wardrip discarded a drinking cup in the trash. Little wasted no time in retrieving it and speeding back to Wichita Falls.

From fleshy mouth tissue on the cup, forensic scientists determined that Wardrip's DNA matched that of the sample taken from Ms. Gibbs' body.

The arrest came days later, on Feb. 13.

When Wardrip was absent from church that Sunday morning, minister Scott Clark told the congregation, "We've got some business to conduct."

"If you haven't heard from the media, if you haven't read the newspaper yet, Faryion Edward Wardrip's been arrested for some old murders in Wichita Falls. We need to talk about this," Clark told parishioners.