

Swept under the rug

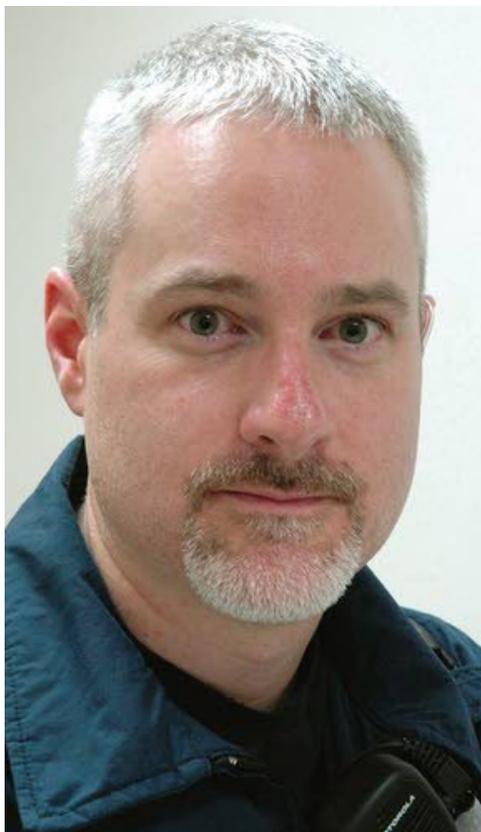
WSU student's remains found nine months after carpet reported missing from dorm

By David Johnson of the Tribune

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Joyce LePage



Jeff Olmstead is investigating the disappearance of WSU student Joyce LePage.



Carpet taken from Stevens Hall at Washington State University was found in a deep ravine south of Pullman in 1972, containing the skeletal remains of Joyce LePage, nine months after she disappeared.

PULLMAN - It started in a historic sorority house on the campus of Washington State University as a missing-carpet case.

Nine months later, in the spring of 1972, the chunk of green shag carpet was found in a deep ravine 10 miles south of here. Inside were the skeletal remains of 21-year-old Joyce LePage, a WSU student.

"There were things that were recovered there," retired WSU Police Sgt. Don Maupin recalls of LePage's remains being discovered in dense brush, "including remnants of the carpet, which came from Stevens Hall."

Touted as the oldest continuously operating women's college dormitory in the western United States, Stevens Hall looks much like it did in July of 1971 - when LePage was known to illegally frequent the empty innards of the old building.

"It was being renovated and she would go inside through an open window," Maupin recalls. "She would write letters. She would play the piano and she was staying in a couple of different rooms in there."

LePage also had an apartment a few blocks away from Stevens Hall. And in the late afternoon of July 22, 1971, according to police reports, friends dropped her off at the apartment. That was the last time she was seen alive.

"Some of her friends knew she was going into Stevens Hall," Maupin says. "In fact, the people who dropped her off said, 'You've got to quit doing that. It's dangerous, and besides that you're going to get in trouble.' "

An FBI forensic analysis of the skeleton confirmed how LePage died.

"There were three areas on her right ribs that had cuts that were interpreted as knife wounds," says current WSU Police Officer Jeff Olmstead, who took over the 37-year-old unsolved LePage murder case when Maupin retired last year. "It was theft of a carpet, the way it started out. Then it became a missing-person case and eventually a homicide."

LePage would be 59 years old now. Her killer, or killers, are assumed to be of the same general age.

"One person in particular we've kept track of," says Maupin, who now lives in Las Vegas. "We know who that person is and where they live and things of that nature. I don't think this was an incident where the person re-offended. I think it was an isolated incident, if that's the person."

Maupin also concedes the murderer may have died on Jan. 24, 1989. That's when serial killer Ted Bundy was executed.

"Profile-wise, she did fit the description (of Bundy's victims)," Maupin says. "She had auburn hair. She was beautiful. She was tall, athletic and college-age."

Bundy, who confessed before being electrocuted to killing at least 30 women, was known to have been in, among other states, Washington, Idaho and Utah. While his first documented killing happened in 1973, according to investigative reports, authorities suspect Bundy may have started his murderous rampage sometime in the 1960s.

"There were certain things that kind of leaned toward Ted Bundy," says Whitman County Sheriff Brett Myers, "and there were things that leaned away." There were reports, says Myers, of a person matching Bundy's description being in the area.

But Bundy, according to police reports and interviews he did with investigators, usually bludgeoned and strangled his victims. He also raped the women and, according to reports, sometimes returned to places where he disposed of the corpses.

Maupin, Olmstead and Myers say the LePage case, because it is so old, deserves new scrutiny, at least from the forensic level. DNA analysis, for example, wasn't used back in the early 1970s.

"There were some fantastic cops back then," says Myers, "but they were sort of ill-equipped to investigate cases like that."

As years passed, the case assumed aspects of urban legend on the WSU campus, with talk lingering even today about Stevens Hall being haunted by the young co-ed's ghost.

"I was there 15 years," says WSU custodian Rose Marie Lord, "and I only saw one thing that scared me. That was a maintenance man (who she didn't know was also in the building)."

Lord started working in Stevens Hall several years after LePage was killed and debunks the folklore aspect of the case.

"Most of them (residents at the hall) know about it because every Halloween there are stories." Such as the old piano playing by itself. "The only time that happened was when a student played a joke and put a tape recorder in the piano."

Maupin recalls that letters LePage wrote to her boyfriend overseas became part of the file. Investigators were able to confirm, through the letters, that LePage often frequented the building.

"Clearly she was entering the hall, going in and out of there," Maupin says. "And it wouldn't be hard for someone else to do the same thing, particularly if they're observing her."

There was some evidence, according to police records, that a number of people could have been in the building at any one time. There was also speculation that LePage may have invited one or two people to join her on the day she was killed.

"There's little doubt that that's where the stabbing took place because she was stabbed multiple times and she was removed from the hall later on," Maupin says. "And then, nine months later, literally her skeletal remains are found down off the Wawawai Grade." In addition to the carpet, LePage was found wrapped in two military blankets and bound with rope, according to records and crime-scene photos.

Lord no longer works in Stevens Hall. But she says the murder continues to serve as an object lesson for all students on campus. "Always let someone know where you're going."

Maupin admits he wrestles with frustration after working the LePage case for virtually his entire 26-year career at WSU. He tried to follow every lead, at one time making initial contacts to interview Bundy on death row. "I had calls all the way from Montana one time," he says. "I had a woman say her husband killed LePage. That was only a few years ago. She wished he did, but he didn't."

Dead ends are typical and seem to increase as a murder case gets colder, Maupin says. But he'd eagerly return to Pullman, if a new lead turns up, to help Olmstead with the case.

Olmstead says he's begun to pore through the case file, reorganize it and bring it up to contemporary record-keeping standards. If nothing else, the exercise will help familiarize him with the evidence, especially the nuances, he says. "Hopefully, through the process of doing that, we'll be able to see if there are any more workable leads or new information that we might be able to pursue."

Maupin suggests another go-around with the persons of interest in addition to a new forensic probe. "I will tell you that if I were still investigating it, I would be looking at a couple of people because they've never been cleared."

Stevens Hall, built in 1895, continues to operate as a women's residence hall and remains on the National Register of Historic Places.

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