

## ATKID: The Atlanta Child Murders Case

*By Susan E. Lloyd (1979-2004)*

When the first murder associated with the Atlanta Child Murders case occurred in July 1979, it made little impact on the news cycle of the bustling city known as the Hub of the South. By the time the body of the last victim was found in late May 1981, news about the case dominated not only local headlines but international headlines as well. Someone was killing Atlanta's African American youth.

Fourteen-year-old Edward Hope Smith had been missing for one week when his body was found on July 28, 1979 in a vacant lot in southeast Atlanta. He had been shot. On that same day, the body of a 13-year-old, Alfred James Evans, was found near Smith's body. He had last been seen three days before, and had been strangled.

Milton Harvey, age fourteen, was last seen riding a yellow bicycle on September 4, 1979. His body was found on November 16, 1979. An autopsy report concluded his was an undetermined cause of death (UCD). The next victim was Yusef Ali Bell, age nine, who was last seen on October 21, 1979. His body was found later that same day in a vacant school; the cause of death was strangulation.

Following a more than four-month lull without a suspicious death of any of Atlanta's children, the murders began again with the killing of Angel Lanier, age 12, the first female victim. She was last seen at school on March 4, 1980. Her remains were found March 10, 1980, and strangulation was once again the cause of death.

Angel's murder was followed by the murders of:

Jeffrey L. Mathis, age 10, was last seen March 11, 1980, and was found on February 13, 1981; UCD. Eric Middlebrooks, age 14, was last seen on May 18, 1980, and was found on May 19, 1980; head injury. Christopher Richardson, age 12, last seen on June 9, 1980 was found on January 9, 1981; UCD. Latonya Wilson, age 7, taken from her bedroom June 22, 1980, was found on October 18, 1980; UCD. Aaron D. Wyche, age 10, was last seen on June 23, 1980, and was



*Murdered and missing children in Atlanta prompts educating young kids to be watchful, 1981; photo by Joe Benton AJCP165-014a.tif, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library*



*Jurors on the Wayne Williams trail see the bridge location on the suspended body dumping site, 1982; contributor Dwight Ross, Jr. AJCP165-014c.tif, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library*

found on June 24, 1980; Asphyxiation. Anthony Bernard Carter, age 9, was last seen on July 7, 1980, and his body was found on July 7, 1980; he had been stabbed. Earl Lee Terrell, age 10, was last seen on July 31, 1980, and was found on January 9, 1981; UCD.

By the end of July 1980, at least 12 of Atlanta's children had been murdered, with their cases unresolved. Most of the bodies had been found outdoors, either in vacant lots, the woods, or behind houses and buildings. One theory was that the murders had been committed by the same person or persons. Another theory was that many of the victims were runaways or young hustlers who risked their lives every day by roaming the streets of the city.

The growing number of unsolved child murders



*Crowds of people waiting to see the Wayne B. Williams trial, Atlanta, GA, February 24, 1982; contributor W. A. Bridges AJCP544-090b.tif, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library*

10, 1980, and Aaron Jackson, age 9, who was last seen on November 1, 1980. Aaron's remains were found on the banks of Atlanta's Chattahoochee River on November 2, 1980, the first victim to be found in or near a body of water. Charles had been strangled and Aaron had been asphyxiated.

Several pieces of evidence from the crime scenes were common denominators. Green nylon carpet fibers and dog hairs were found on many of the bodies that had been found on dry land. At some point, presumably in October 1980, information about the carpet fibers and dog hairs was "leaked" to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* which wasted no time in publishing it. Soon the pattern of disposal changed, and bodies were instead dumped unceremoniously near or into either the Chattahoochee River or the South River.

On November 6, 1980, two days after the presidential election which Georgia native Jimmy Carter lost, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti directed the FBI to open a preliminary investigation. At that point, four African American children were still missing. On November 17, the major case investigation known as "ATKID" was officially opened.

The Bureau mandate was to conduct an independent investigation, while simultaneously assisting the local task force with manpower, guidance and technical assistance. First Office Special Agents in Atlanta were given an option to delay transfer to their second office assignment, and veteran Agents from eastern field offices, particularly those with homicide investigative backgrounds, were brought in on temporary duty to assist in the investigation.

The first round of temporary duty (TDY) Agents reported to Atlanta on November 17, 1980, just one week after 16-year-old Patrick Rogers was last seen on November 10, 1980. His remains were found on December 7, 1980 on the banks of the Chattahoochee River. The cause of death was blunt force trauma.

The next few weeks of the holiday season were quiet with no children reported missing. However, at the beginning of the new year, 14-year-old Lubie Geter disappeared, having last been seen January 3, 1981. He was found on February 5, 1981; the cause of death was strangulation. Terry Pue, age 15, disappeared on January 22, 1981 and was found the next day, strangled to death in nearby Rockdale County.

FBI profiler Roy Hazelwood from the Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico flew to Atlanta in mid-1980 to consult on the murders to date. He was followed some months later by FBI profiler John Douglas who arrived in Atlanta in early January 1981 to develop a formal profile of the person or persons responsible for the child murders.

Douglas walked the woods in south Atlanta, where five of the children's bodies had been found, and reviewed the case files. He also relied on assessments from interviews previously conducted by his unit with 25 serial and mass murderers. One key element of Douglas' profile was that the killer was most likely an African American, under the presumption that a white person could not easily travel in black neighborhoods without creating a great deal of suspicion. This element was part of the profile despite the fact that a serial killer who was African American would be unusual.

Douglas characterized the individual as being of average or above average intelligence, articulate, and probably presenting himself publicly as a figure of authority. The person would be closely following the media coverage of the murders, and had probably had frequent

prompted the Atlanta Police Department (APD) to form a task force in early summer 1980 with Agents from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and detectives from other area police departments. In response to requests from city officials, Atlanta SAC John D. Glover offered whatever assistance the Bureau could provide, but stopped short of opening a federal case without a strong indication of a federal violation. Two FBI Special Agents were appointed to serve as liaison between the task force and the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, the FBI Laboratory and for out-of-state investigative leads.

On August 20, 1980, Clifford Jones, age 13, disappeared. His body was found the next day; he had been strangled. The next victim was Darren Glass, age 11, who was last seen on September 14, 1980. His body was never found but his disappearance would subsequently provide part of a federal nexus for the FBI to open a kidnapping case under the presumption Darren could have been transported across state lines after the first 24 hours had passed.

The next victims were Charles Stephens, age 12, who was last seen on October 9, 1980, and whose body was found on October



*Police Captain at the missing persons offices with images of missing people behind him, 1981; contributor Dwight Ross, Jr. AJCP165-016g.tif, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library*

changes in employment or was self-employed.

Other resources dedicated to the case included hypnosis experts, search dogs, polygraphers, and fingerprint examiners. Larry Peterson from the Georgia State Crime Lab and expert examiners from the FBI Laboratory's Microscopic Analysis Unit, led by Harold "Hal" Deadman, spent countless hours working on the fibers and dog hairs collected in the case.

Meanwhile, the murders continued. Patrick Baltazar, age 12, was last seen near a phone booth with a friend on February 6, 1981. His body was found on February 13, 1981; he had been strangled. Curtis Walker, age 13, was last seen on February 19, 1981, and was found strangled on March 6, 1981 in the Chattahoochee River. Joseph "JoJo" Bell, age 15, was last seen on March 2, 1981. His body was found on April 19, 1981 in the South River in Rockdale County. Thirteen-year-old Timothy Hill was last seen March 11, 1981 and his remains were found on March 30, 1981 in the Chattahoochee; the cause of death was asphyxiation.

On February 11, 1981, one young boy was kidnapped from Atlanta's streets and thrown in the back of a car. He managed to escape when the vehicle stopped for a red light, and would later provide identifying information which matched much of that of the suspect who was eventually charged with two of the murders.

An article appeared in an Atlanta newspaper in February 1981 regarding fibers being found on the bodies retrieved from the rivers. Soon thereafter, the bodies that were recovered from the water were either nude or semi-nude.

In March 1981, African American boys enrolled in grades four through ten in Atlanta area schools received an FBI questionnaire



*Main suspect in missing children investigation, Wayne Williams, after giving impromptu talk with the press, 1981; contributor Kenneth Walker AJCP544-092b.tif, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library*

asking about any suspicious encounters with strangers they might have had in the recent past. Sixteen hundred questionnaires were returned with 977 containing sufficient information to warrant a follow-up interview.

With the entire metropolitan Atlanta area on edge, city officials established a curfew of 7:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m., seven nights a week, in an effort to get youngsters off the streets after sundown. The curfew did not apply to youths aged 17 and older and soon young black adult men of small stature became unsuspecting victims.

Thus, the next murder victims were:

Eddie Duncan, age 20, was last seen on March 20, 1981, and was found in the Chattahoochee River on March 31, 1981, UCD. Larry Rogers, age 20, last seen March 30, 1981, was found in an apartment on April 9, 1981; he was strangled. Michael McIntosh, age 23, last seen on April 1, 1981, was found in the South River on April 20, 1981, asphyxiation.

John Harold Porter, age 28, was found stabbed to death in a vacant lot on April 12, 1981. (Although fibers were found on Porter's body, officials were hesitant to include his name on the list of victims.)

Jimmy Ray Payne, age 21, who was last seen on April 22, 1981, was found in the Chattahoochee River on April 27, 1981; UCD. William Barrett, age 17, was last seen on May 11, 1981; he was found on May 12, 1981; the cause of death was ligature strangulation.

As the result of a proposal by an Atlanta first office Agent, surveillance teams were established on April 27, 1981, to cover 12 bridges which crossed the Chattahoochee River and two which crossed the South River. Each team included Atlanta Police Department (APD) recruits, who were positioned on the river banks beneath their assigned bridge, and an FBI Agent and APD officer, who were stationed above on the road at either end of the bridge.

After almost four weeks of monitoring the bridges nightly from dusk until dawn with no suspicious activity, the bridge surveillance was coming to an end. In the early morning hours of May 22, 1981, several hours before the conclusion of the final shift for the surveillance teams, the men stationed at the James Jackson Parkway bridge in northwest Atlanta (Cobb County) heard a loud splash in the Chattahoochee waters below.

The APD recruits on the banks of the river radioed the FBI Agent and APD officer stationed above to report what they had heard. A check of the bridge revealed a light-colored station wagon in the middle of the bridge traveling slowly across the bridge span. The vehicle turned around in a parking lot at the south end of the bridge and drove back over it. The time was approximately 2:52 a.m.

As the vehicle crossed back over the bridge and approached an entrance to the interstate highway, the FBI Agent and APD officer, in separate cars, stopped it. The lone occupant was the driver who stepped out and identified himself as Wayne Bertram Williams. His first statement, in reference to being stopped, was "it must be about those boys."

Williams claimed he was a talent scout conducting a dry run to look for the residence of "Cheryl Johnson," with whom he had an

interview scheduled for early that same morning. Subsequent investigation revealed no person by that name at or near the non-existent address or phone number.

Williams talked to one of the roving FBI Agents who had arrived on the scene, and denied stopping on the bridge or dropping anything into the river below. Although he voluntarily consented to a search of the car, which was on loan from his uncle, nothing of substantive value was found. Items observed in the vehicle included a bedspread with a white, green and black pattern, a bag of men's clothing, a bag of a large woman's clothing, and a 2' length of white nylon cord. Two sections of blue plastic-coated electrical wire were also found on the ground near where Williams stood. Since there was no indication at the time of a crime or any justification to hold Williams, he left the area and drove off into the night.

Two days later on a Sunday morning, men fishing not far from the James Jackson Parkway bridge made a gruesome discovery. The body of Nathaniel Cater, a small bodied 27-year-old, had floated to the surface of the river more than a mile downstream from the bridge and approximately 100 yards from where Payne's body had been found. Cater's cause of death was subsequently determined to have been ligature strangulation.

With the recovery of Cater's body, a 24/7 surveillance of Williams' activities was initiated. On June 3, 1981, a search warrant for Williams' uncle's 1970 Chevrolet station wagon and the Williams' family residence was executed. Another warrant was served for the appearance of Williams' person at the Atlanta Field Office.

Among the items seized during the search of the home was a king-sized bedspread from Williams' bed, containing light violet acetate fibers consistent with those found on eighteen of the victims; white dog hairs with black tips from the family dog similar to those hairs found on nine victims; and coarse yellowish-green carpet fibers from the wall-to-wall carpeting which had the same characteristics as those found on thirteen of the victims.

Williams was arrested on June 21, 1981 by investigators from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office for the murder of Nathaniel Cater, and was jailed in the Fulton County Jail without bond. On July 17, 1981, he was indicted on two counts of murder for the deaths of Jimmy Ray Payne and Nathaniel Cater, the most recent victims for whom there was the best solid evidence.

Jury selection began on December 28, 1981, and the trial itself began on January 6, 1982. Eyewitness testimony placed Williams

“The post-test interview of Wayne Williams was the most interesting of any I have done over the past 35 years. I conducted the polygraph assessments of Wayne Williams, which identified him as the serial killer after we had gone two years without identifying the perpetrator. The first child victims were discovered while I was still in polygraph training at Ft McClellan, Alabama. We tested Williams on June 3, 1981 after he was observed by the “troll patrol,” police officers stationed under several bridges on the Chattahoochee River. The polygraph identified Williams as the person who had killed the last victim and thrown his body over the bridge into the Chattahoochee River.” *Richard Rackleff (1964-1990)*



Wayne Williams  
Courtesy of Fulton County Police

with several of the victims while they were alive. Key evidence introduced was a large number of fibers from the Williams' home and car including fibers from the trilobal yellowish-green carpet, a bedspread and yellow blanket from Williams' bedroom, and dog hairs from the family's mixed breed German shepherd. Nineteen different sources of fibers and hairs were matched to fibers on a number of victims. There were no fingerprints, no murder weapons, and no motive to be introduced.

In the state of Georgia, the law permits the introduction of evidence in a criminal trial, where a pattern of criminality can be demonstrated by the prosecution that there are apparent similarities between the various criminal acts. In this case, the court allowed the prosecution to present evidence collected from other murder victims, which bore a similar appearance to that from victims Payne and Cater.

Many days of research and investigation resulted in the finding that the green carpet in the family home was from a limited run of “Luxaire” carpet in a color named “English Olive.” The unusual trilobal fibers were manufactured by the Wellman Corporation and the carpet itself was

manufactured by West Point Pepperell for a one-year period 1970-1971. In determining how much of the carpeting had been sold in the

Atlanta area, fiber experts testified the probability of randomly finding a housing unit with this carpet was 1 in 7,792. To an experienced fiber examiner, the fiber evidence linking Williams to the murder victims was overwhelming.

The Fulton County prosecutor requested that John Douglas be present during the trial to provide insight as to how best cross-examine Wayne Williams when he took the stand. Douglas advised the prosecution to keep the defendant on the stand as long as possible and to focus on the failures in his life. On the third day of his testimony, as the prosecutor asked question after question, Williams lost his composure. He became extremely hostile and combative and noticeably alienated the jury.

After twelve hours of jury deliberation, Williams was found guilty on February 27, 1982. He was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences in state prison at the Valdosta Correctional Facility.

Wayne Williams was born on May 27, 1958, and was the only child of Faye and Homer Williams, both of whom were college-educated school teachers. Williams lived with them in a single family house in Atlanta's Dixie Hills neighborhood. He was known to tyrannize his parents, and frequently quarreled with them.

Sometimes described as "the miracle child" and "terribly spoiled," Williams was known to roam the city at all hours of the night as he pursued his work as a talent recruiter of young blacks for bands and as singers, often affording them an audition in a small studio he rented. He had worked as a DJ, free-lanced as a photographer, and occasionally rode the overnight shift with local ambulance drivers, peppering them with a wide range of medical and physical questions.

Williams was arrested in May 1976 for the unauthorized use of police equipment in his car, specifically a blue flashing light. When his 1978 blue Plymouth Fury was repossessed in late December 1979, a variety of police equipment was found inside, including a police siren, three emergency lights, a police scanner, a CB radio and headlights with flashers.

Indications were that Williams began the murders when the stress in his life became too much to bear. His was a personality that craved control and success, both of which he had little as an adult. Beginning at the age of 21, he suffered one failure after another, even causing his parents to forfeit their savings after they secured a loan for a new business which failed. They later filed for bankruptcy.

By all accounts, Williams was an intelligent individual. He was only twelve years old when he interviewed Andrew Young on a radio program that he broadcast from a radio station in his basement. He attended Georgia State University, majoring in psychology, but never graduated.

Prosecution witnesses testified Williams often made derogatory remarks about poor black children, and stated he did not like them. He said statistics showed that killing one black child would prevent the reproduction of numerous others. These witnesses had also observed him demonstrate how to render someone unconscious by applying pressure to the neck and carotid artery.

Shortly after the verdict on March 1, 1982, Atlanta area law enforcement officials met to confer on other murders most likely committed by Williams. The conclusion was that as many as 23 of the killings could be attributed to him, the man who lured his victims by giving them hope for a bright future before he turned on them and took their lives.

The remaining seven murder cases were referred back to the appropriate local law enforcement departments for further investigation. Since then, no one has been charged or tried for any of these murders nor have there been any similar killings in the Atlanta area. Wayne Williams is now 60 years old, and continues to maintain his innocence from his prison cell.

**Note:** Retired SA Mike McComas was the first office SA who proposed the bridge surveillance. His partner in the ATKID case was Charles L. (Larry) Ellington who was also a first office SA. At the conclusion of ATKID, Larry was transferred to the Chicago Field Office. On December 16, 1982, Larry and three other SAs, a bank investigator, and the bank embezzler suspect were killed in a plane crash outside the Cincinnati, OH, airport. The FBIAA Memorial College Fund was founded in the name of these four Special Agents in 1985.

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