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RULED DEAD, MISSING MOGUL STILL A MYSTERY

BY DANIEL de VISE

The death certificate states that John Anthony Porcaro expired on Oct. 18, 2000. Location of death? Unknown. Cause? Undetermined.

Porcaro was a Hollywood moving magnate with mob ties and playboy ways who vanished one summer day in 1998 at age 39. What became of him is one of the great mysteries in South Florida criminal justice.

A Broward County judge declared Porcaro dead 16 months ago. But there is no body. Police consider him a missing person who could well be alive. Federal investigators suspect mob violence. His wife is battling insurers over millions of dollars.

His story, investigators say, is the stuff of Mafia mythos - right up to the Jimmy Hoffa-like disappearance that brought the curtain down.

"John was into having the Rolls-Royce or the Bentley or the 600 Mercedes, the Playboy Bunny girlfriend," said one official close to the investigation, speaking on condition of anonymity. "He attracted a lot of attention to himself."

Porcaro earned a fortune running a string of moving companies with such folksy names as Father & Son and A Nice Jewish Boy, with telemarketing boiler rooms on the side. He had a wife and daughter in Hollywood and glamorous girlfriends, including Playboy Playmate Julianna Young and South Beach model Bree Stoyanovich.

FRIGHTENING IMAGE

The same five-foot-seven, 200-pound Porcaro greeted the world with a glass eye and a horseshoe-shaped scar on a face one officer described as the scariest he had ever seen.

Federal investigators say Porcaro did business with the powerful Gambino crime family, paying regular tribute to Gambino soldier Anthony "Tony Pep" Trentacosta and working alongside mob henchman Freddy Massaro. Those men, prosecuted by assistant U.S. attorneys Jeffrey Sloman and Lawrence LaVecchio, were convicted in December on racketeering charges in connection with the murder of a stripper.

Did Porcaro himself meet a violent end? Investigators say they are no closer to an answer now than they were on the day he disappeared.

MISSING PERSON

"This is not a murder case. It's a missing persons case," said Detective Walter Schatzel of the Hollywood police. "In my business, you need to have a body."

On the morning of Saturday, June 13, 1998, John Porcaro left his wife, Filemena, this note: "Fil, went fishing, got call, swordfish are biting. Love, J. I'll call later."

Massaro found Porcaro's Mercedes-Benz convertible at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. His cellphone and house keys were inside.

Porcaro had gone on "fishing trips" before. Investigators say the outings had little to do with fish.

This time, his cronies drew their own conclusions. Massaro, reputed head of the Gambino family's South Florida crew, marched into one of Porcaro's companies a few days after his disappearance and announced he was stepping in, according to court papers.

Some investigators believe Porcaro was murdered, a mafioso outsider grown too big for his britches. They point to the cars, the women, the prosperity and the all-too-public persona.

DREW ATTENTION

"He was too flashy, too flamboyant," one law enforcement official said. "Didn't know when to keep his mouth shut."

Another theory: Bad blood over a blown investment. Investigators say Porcaro had persuaded several buddies to invest in an online gaming concern called World Wide Web Casinos Inc. It failed in 1998, taking investors down with it. Porcaro, Massaro and several others reportedly lost thousands.

Or, Porcaro may not be dead at all.

"Who's to say this guy didn't take a chunk of this money and he's living on an island somewhere?" said Schatzel, the Hollywood detective. "If he was 'taken care of' by one of these [organized crime] individuals, we would know something by now. And to this day, I have not received one phone call."

Porcaro, who was born in the Bronx, apparently came to Broward in the early 1980s. Investigators say he hoped to capitalize on the open prairie of organized crime in South Florida.

Porcaro always denied the reports that he had mob connections, which followed him almost from the beginning.

A 1990 California court document stated, "The Los Angeles Police Department Organized Crime Intelligence Unit has been conducting an in-depth investigation into allegations that both Father & Son and Nice Jewish Boy have ties to organized crime on the East Coast."

Porcaro would come to symbolize moving-industry malfeasance. The alleged racket: Movers would low-ball an estimate, load the furniture on the truck, tack on hundreds in extra fees and hold the furnishings hostage until the bill was paid.

Florida's attorney general pursued Porcaro on 150 complaints against Father & Son and its kindred companies. The case prompted reforms to moving-industry rules across South Florida. But a Broward judge in 1997 found Porcaro liable on only one count and fined him \$5,000.

Later that year, investigators say, Porcaro fell for the 21-year-old wife of a pro football kicker. She was Maree Pontorno, better known on South Beach as model Bree Stoyanovich, the wife of former Miami Dolphin Pete Stoyanovich.

CROOKED OPERATION

Reportedly at Bree's urging, Porcaro invited members of her family to start a boiler-room operation with him. Trump Financial Group - no relation to Donald Trump - persuaded investors to pony up \$5.7 million, according to court

documents. Much of the cash wound up in the pockets of Porcaro and his partners, investigators say.

Bree's mother, Roseann Pontorno, and brother Michael pleaded guilty last week to their role in the scam.

Porcaro left three insurance policies worth at least \$3 million, investigators say.

By 2000, Filemena Porcaro was running out of money. That August, Broward Probate Judge Mel Grossman permitted her to sell the Lauderhill moving-company warehouse. Two months later, for insurance purposes, Grossman signed an order declaring John Porcaro dead.

Grossman declined comment on the order; attempts to reach Filemena Porcaro by telephone last week were unsuccessful.

The evidence, according to police and court documents: Porcaro had missed Father's Day, his daughter's birthday and the holidays. His known assets hadn't been touched. His valuables remained inside his home.

"All of the above circumstances point to the likelihood that [Porcaro] was murdered," Filemena Porcaro claimed in a court document.

JUDGE'S MOTIVATION

Grossman acted partly out of concern for teenage daughter Dominique Porcaro, who, according to court papers, needed a sense of "closure."

Insurers did not necessarily agree that Porcaro was dead. Federal court records indicate one firm settled with Filemena Porcaro out of court. Grossman rejected a challenge by a second firm, the Great Southern Life Insurance Company. Florida's Fourth District Court of Appeal affirmed his ruling without comment last week.

At issue was a Florida law that allows courts to declare a missing person dead after five years. Filemena Porcaro's contended that a court can rule a missing person dead sooner, if there's circumstantial evidence of death. She cited a 1996 court decision.

The 1996 ruling includes a caveat. Courts shouldn't skirt the five-year rule if there's an "equally reasonable" chance the person is still alive.

Could John Porcaro be such a case?

"We can assume that [he's dead]," said Schatzel, the Hollywood detective. "We can also assume that he's sitting on an island somewhere, sipping on a cocktail and laughing all the way to the bank."

Herald staff writer Larry Lebowitz contributed to this report.