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THEORY IN WALSH MURDER GROWS FAINTER WITH YEARS

BY DANIEL de VISE

Twenty years ago today, serial killer Ottis Toole abducted 6-year-old Adam Walsh from the Hollywood Mall, choked the life out of him, cut off his head with a bayonet and discarded the remains in marshland along Florida's Turnpike.

That is the theory. But there is no hard evidence to support it.

After two decades of investigation, the most famous child-abduction case in South Florida history remains unsolved.

The prospect that it will ever be solved has never looked so dim. The prime suspect is dead. The key evidence is lost. The 10,000-page police file raises more questions than it answers.

But father John Walsh thinks he knows the truth.

"I believe Ottis Toole killed Adam," Walsh told The Herald in an interview Thursday. "I believe that Toole is in hell right now, and I believe that he died a horrible death in prison."

The July 27, 1981, abduction and murder of Adam Walsh fueled an epic manhunt. The case netted hundreds of leads and dozens of suspects but not one arrest. Over two decades of investigation, the recurring character is Toole, a dim-witted Jacksonville drifter who confessed to the murder, then recanted, then died.

Here is an account of the Adam Walsh case, based on fresh interviews with many of the principal characters, two decades of news reports and investigative documents:

Reve Walsh said she left her Hollywood home with Adam the morning of July 27 to run some errands. Mother and son arrived at Sears around noon.

She left Adam at a video game and walked to the lamp department. She said she was gone five to 10 minutes. When she returned, Adam was gone.

Reve searched the aisles for Adam. She had him paged. Someone called the police. Officers told Reve the boy had probably wandered off.

A teenage security guard would later report she had thrown Adam out of the store along with several other children who were bickering.

FOCUS ON FAMILY, FRIENDS

Police clear those closest

to Adam, and case goes cold

The Walshes launched an unprecedented search.

Police first focused on those closest to Adam.

John and Reve Walsh passed lie-detector tests. John had an alibi: He was at work. Police cleared them.

Jim Campbell, a landscaper and family friend who had lived with the Walshes for two years, seemed a more likely culprit.

Campbell had a motive: He had just ended a secret affair with Reve. He had moved out two weeks before the boy disappeared. Police thought Campbell might have killed Adam to get even.

Campbell, contacted through his sister last week, didn't respond to an interview request.

On Aug. 10, two fishermen found Adam's head in a canal near Vero Beach.

The same day, Campbell passed a lie-detector test.

Investigators cleared Campbell. Although he had no solid alibi for the hour of Adam's abduction, he was in town a couple of hours later and for several days after. He probably wouldn't have had time to dispose of the boy's remains in Vero Beach.

"He had motive, but there was no other evidence," said George Terwilliger, a longtime Walsh family friend and sometime family attorney.

John Walsh and others would criticize the Hollywood police for hammering on Campbell while neglecting other leads. Other complaints: Detectives didn't invite the FBI to help out. They allowed Campbell, a suspect, to volunteer to answer phones at police headquarters.

Richard Witt, former chief of the Hollywood police, acknowledged the problems in an interview last week.

"Within the first few months of this case, it is really screwed up to the point where obtaining a conviction has been compromised," Witt said.

Witness reports from the mall produced one solid lead: Several people said a tall, muscular man had followed Adam out of the Sears store, pulled him into a blue van and sped off. Police searched hundreds of blue vans, to no avail.

The case went cold.

ANOTHER FALSE LEAD

Drifter points to ex-cellmate,
who says story was fabricated

It sparked back to life in November 1981, when a Broward County drifter told Hollywood police his former cellmate had confessed to the Adam Walsh murder.

John Terry said cellmate Edward James, arrested in an unrelated child abduction, bragged that he had abducted Adam and headed up the turnpike. The boy threatened to tell his parents and demanded money. James pulled over, cut off the boy's head with a knife and kicked it into a canal.

In an interview this week, James, now 70 and living in Avon Park, said he never met Terry. The story, he said, is pure bunk.

"They made a case out of something that wasn't even a case," James said. "And I'm still paying for it."

A neighbor told police James was missing from his home at the time Walsh disappeared and for weeks afterward. When James resurfaced, the neighbor said, he had reupholstered the front seat of his Plymouth Fury.

But a former employer said James was at work the day Walsh disappeared. Forensic tests in the car turned up nothing. Years later, James passed a voice-stress analysis test.

The case languished for two more years.

Then, on Oct. 21, 1983, news media around the country announced that police had found the murderer.

A CONFUSING CONFESSION

Suspect gives details of killing,
but lack of evidence blows case

On Oct. 10, a mass-murder suspect in Jacksonville told a detective he had killed a boy he found at a mall near Fort Lauderdale.

Hollywood police rushed to Duval County Jail to interview Ottis Elwood Toole.

Police said Toole told them he had killed Adam Walsh with help from his sometime partner, Henry Lee Lucas. The men abducted Adam in a white Cadillac, drove about an hour to an isolated dirt road and decapitated the boy, Toole said.

Police challenged Toole: Lucas was in jail at the time of the abduction. Toole revised his story: he had worked alone.

Toole led police to the Hollywood Mall, where he correctly identified the spot Adam had been ejected from the store; to a dirt access road near mile marker 126 on the turnpike, where he said he had buried the body; and to a canal near mile marker 130, where he correctly pointed out the place Adam's head had been discovered.

The medical examiner's report matched key elements of Toole's account: Adam had been face down when decapitated. His head was sheared off with three to five knife strokes.

"I think, and I've always thought this, that the evidence linking Ottis Toole to the murder of Adam Walsh is extremely compelling," said Witt, the former Hollywood police chief.

Investigators lifted bloodstained carpet from Toole's car. But without the DNA testing available today, there was no telling if the blood was Adam's.

Toole later recanted and denied any role in the murder. He confessed again, then recanted again.

There was ample reason to doubt Toole had anything to do with Adam Walsh's murder.

Speculation suggested a Jacksonville detective had tainted Toole's confession to sweeten a potential book deal. But Hollywood investigators found no proof.

In his purported confession, Toole couldn't correctly describe Adam's hair or clothes. And police couldn't find Adam's body where Toole said he left it.

"He's as pure as the driven snow," said Ron Hickman, one of the original detectives on the Walsh case, interviewed this week. "I spent 100 hours with that individual. I'll tell you right now: He didn't do it."

James Redwine, a Jacksonville man, contends Toole wasn't anywhere near Broward County on the day Adam disappeared. According to Redwine, Toole spent July 27, 1981, at his family's rooming house, where Toole lived.

"He was up here that day," Redwine said in an interview last week. "Ain't no way he could have drove there or back . . . That's the truth. I ain't got a reason to lie."

Hollywood police say the Redwines cannot prove Toole was there.

New witnesses surfaced after Toole's picture appeared in the news media, claiming they had seen him and his white Cadillac at or near the scene of the crime. Police discarded their earlier "blue van" theory.

Heidi Mayer, a Hollywood girl, said the picture looked like the gap-toothed man who had approached her at a Kmart around the time of Adam's abduction, pushing a shopping cart and offering, "Let me take you for a ride in this basket."

"I do remember the space in his mouth, between his teeth," mother Arlene Mayer said in an interview last week. "He was standing there, just watching us."

At least two witnesses claimed they had seen Adam Walsh in a white Cadillac.

One, a Hollywood man named William Mistler, said he had seen Toole at the mall with Adam. Under hypnosis, Mistler recalled details about the car, including a dent on the bumper that hadn't been reported in the news media.

But without physical evidence, Broward County prosecutors felt they had no case.

In May 1995, a series of articles in an Alabama newspaper posited a new theory: A family friend named Michael Monahan could have murdered Adam as a favor for buddy Jim Campbell, the spurned lover of Reve Walsh.

There was no evidence tying Monahan to the crime, just an odd coincidence: Three days after the Adam Walsh abduction, Monahan had slashed through a door with a machete in Oakland Park in a dispute over a skateboard.

Monahan, speaking publicly about the incident for the first time, said the allegations are nonsense.

"If you really do your homework, if you're serious about finding out the truth, you'll realize I have nothing to do with this case," Monahan said.

Police, prompted by the news reports, tested the machete from the skateboard incident. Results were inconclusive.

They questioned Monahan, who was on probation after a federal conviction for the extortion of a stockbroker who was later found murdered.

Monahan passed a lie-detector test. His girlfriend, Chris Fehlhaber, provided an alibi: Monahan was with her at the time of the abduction.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Evidence vanishes, suspect dies

- but was there final revelation?

Sgt. Mark Smith, a Hollywood police detective assigned to the case in 1994, remained focused on Ottis Toole. He wanted to order DNA testing on the bloodstained carpeting from Toole's car.

But the evidence had vanished, signed out of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement lab years earlier by someone with the initial J.G.

Smith found the detective, who said he didn't remember signing out the evidence.

Toole's car, too, was gone.

The evidence debacle became public with the release of the Adam Walsh case file in 1996.

"They had made incredible mistakes," Walsh said this week. "It was beyond incompetence. It was almost malfeasance, because they were covering their asses. How do you lose an entire car?"

Smith and John Walsh held out one last hope: A deathbed confession from Toole, serving five life sentences at Union Correctional Institution in Raiford.

Smith asked to be alerted if Toole, suffering from cirrhosis and possibly AIDS, was near death.

But prison officials lost track of the request. Toole died on Sept. 15, 1996, before Smith could talk to him one last time.

A short while later, a niece of Ottis Toole contacted America's Most Wanted, the television program hosted by Walsh. She said Ottis had made a deathbed confession - to her.

"Uncle Ottis, are you the one that killed Adam Walsh?" she asked him, according to John Walsh.

"Yeah," he replied. "I killed the little boy. And I always felt kinda bad about it, too."

Who Killed Adam Walsh?

South Florida's most famous child-abduction case spawned dozens of suspects - family friends, accused mass murderers, even serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. The short list:

* Ottis Toole: The Jacksonville drifter confessed to the murder in 1983. Police said he knew details only the killer could know. But he later recanted. Many of his facts were wrong. No physical evidence linked him to the crime. Now dead, Toole remains a suspect.

* Jim Campbell: Adam Walsh's godfather had a motive: An affair with Adam's mother that ended just before the boy disappeared. But Campbell passed a lie-detector test. Detectives concluded he probably wouldn't have had time to carry out the crime. Police cleared him.

* Michael Monahan: The family friend slashed through a door with a machete in an unrelated incident a few days after the Walsh abduction. He had other problems with the law. But he had an alibi and passed a polygraph test. Police cleared him.

* Edward James: A cellmate told police the Pompano Beach man confessed to the murder while behind bars in an unrelated child abduction. Neighbors reported suspicious behavior. But James had an alibi and passed a voice-stress analysis. Police cleared him.

* John and Reve Walsh: Some witnesses contradicted Reve's account of the day Adam disappeared. But both parents passed lie-detector tests, and John had an alibi. Police cleared them.