

Ohio Authorities Link Man to 1978 Murder and Say He May Have Killed 3 Others

Prosecutors said that Ralph Howell, who died in 1985, raped and murdered a Cincinnati college student, and are convinced he was a serial killer.

By Michael Levenson

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From October 1976 to April 1978, at least four young women, three of them teenagers, were found raped and murdered in the Cincinnati area. One of them was Cheryl Thompson, a freshman at the University of Cincinnati, who left home to meet her boyfriend at a disco one night and was found strangled to death on a riverbank two weeks later.

The crimes terrorized the region, and were never solved.

Now, prosecutors said that DNA evidence has identified the man who raped and killed Ms. Thompson, and they believe he might have also been responsible for raping and murdering three other young women in the 1970s.

The man, Ralph Howell, a long-haul truck driver and newspaper delivery man for The Cincinnati Enquirer, died in his mid-30s in a car accident in 1985, prosecutors said. But prosecutors said on Thursday that they had taken the symbolic step of presenting evidence to a grand jury, resulting in a posthumous indictment on charges that he raped and murdered Ms. Thompson, 19.

“There’s no doubt in our mind that Ralph Howell was a serial killer,” Joseph T. Deters, the Hamilton County prosecutor, said at a news conference on Thursday.

Ms. Thompson’s older brother, Bill, a retired police officer, said he thought that the case was never going to be solved.

“It was all a surprise,” Mr. Thompson, 68, said in an interview on Friday. “Everyone goes down the path of making their own ideas about what happened, and it was a complete surprise to me that it was a complete unknown person with no previous history to Cheryl, apparently.”

Mr. Deters said that Ms. Thompson’s case had been solved with genetic genealogy, which relies on genetic evidence to identify the relatives of suspects, who can then be traced to the suspects themselves. The same technique was used to identify the Golden State Killer, among many other cold cases, many of them decades old.

In Ms. Thompson’s case, the coroner’s office had kept a rape kit that was collected as evidence after a state wildlife official discovered her body on the bank of the Little Miami River in Loveland, Ohio, on April 8, 1978.

This year, investigators sent semen from that kit to a private genealogy company in hopes of identifying a suspect, prosecutors said. The results pointed to a specific family tree, which included Mr. Howell, prosecutors said.

Further investigation revealed that Mr. Howell had been arrested in 1983 after he picked up a woman up on the side of a road and offered a ride home in his newspaper delivery vehicle, prosecutors said. He told her he wanted to have sex with her and began to strangle her, but she managed to fight him off and escape, Mr. Deters said.

When investigators discovered the case, they contacted Mr. Howell’s family members, who submitted DNA samples, which indicated that the semen found on Ms. Thompson’s body was from their close relative, Mr. Deters said.

This summer, investigators exhumed Mr. Howell’s body and extracted a DNA sample from his jawbone, which matched the DNA from the semen on Ms. Thompson’s body Mr. Deters said.

Mr. Deters said that investigators met with Ms. Thompson’s family and told them that the man who had killed her was dead but that they would present the evidence to a grand jury, if the family wanted “further closure.”

The family accepted the offer, and a Hamilton County grand jury indicted Mr. Howell on charges of rape and aggravated murder. There will not be a trial, prosecutors said. Mr. Thompson said he supported the decision to charge Mr. Howell.

“For me, it helped finalizing it, knowing that a person had been charged with the murder of my sister,” Mr. Thompson said. “Whether he was dead or not, it really didn’t matter to me.”

Joshua Dressler, a professor emeritus of law at Ohio State University's Michael E. Moritz College of Law, said on Friday that the indictment of a person known to be dead "is exceptionally rare in the United States" as a trial of a dead person is not possible.

"There are a number of reasons why this might be done," he said in an email. "First, it demonstrates to the family of victims that the prosecutor treated the matter with seriousness. It is, at a minimum, a sense of justice for the family."

He said such an action can also provide some help if a victim's family wishes to sue the deceased's estate.

"Finally," Professor Dressler said, "in a case of this sort where they have reason to believe that the deceased might have committed other crimes, they may hope that publicity of the indictment — and the fact that they did not drop their investigation — will inspire persons to come forward who might be able to provide evidence of other crimes committed by the defendant."

Mr. Deters said investigators believe that Mr. Howell might have murdered at least three other women: Charmaine Stolla, 17, who was found in Hamilton County on March 12, 1978; Nancy Ann Theobald, who was found in neighboring Butler County on Dec. 26, 1977; and Victoria Hinchey, 24, who was found on Oct. 31, 1976, also in Butler County. All three had been raped and strangled, he said.

Investigators do not have DNA evidence from those murders, but Mr. Deters said the circumstances point to Mr. Howell. "It's the same M.O. he was using," Mr. Deters said. "He's abducting, raping and strangling these girls."

He urged anyone with information about Mr. Howell or the unsolved killings of Ms. Stolla, Ms. Theobald and Ms. Hinchey to contact the authorities. There may be other victims linked to Mr. Howell, Mr. Deters said.

"I hope the other families get the kind of closure we got," Mr. Thompson said, "and I know that some of them will."

Alain Delaquerière contributed research.

Michael Levenson joined The Times in December 2019. He was previously a reporter at The Boston Globe, where he covered local, state and national politics and news.

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HAMILTON COUNTY PROSECUTING ATTORNEY

Hamilton County Prosecutor Joseph T. Deters announces Indictment in cold case Murder of Cheryl Thompson

Today, Hamilton County Prosecutor Joseph T. Deters announced the indictment of Ralph Howell (DOB 1/16/50) for the rape and murder of Cheryl Thompson in 1978.

Howell was killed in an automobile accident in 1985.

Howell was posthumously indicted for one count of Aggravated Murder (SF), and one count of Rape (F1).

On March 24, 1978, Cheryl Thompson went missing after leaving her home to meet her boyfriend at a bar in Oakley.

On April 8, 1978, Thompson's body was discovered along the bank of the Little Miami River by an Ohio Department of Natural Resources officer. Thompson's cause of death was asphyxia caused by strangulation. It was also determined Thompson had been raped.

Physical evidence was collected from Thompson's body and stored at the Hamilton County Coroner's Office. However, due to the forensic limitations of the time, the investigation quickly went cold. Loveland police officers and agents at the Bureau of Criminal Investigations never stopped investigating.

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Further investigation showed Howell was arrested in 1983 for abduction. In that incident, Howell picked a woman up on the side of the road and offered to drive her home. Once in the vehicle, Howell placed a rope around the victim's neck and began to strangle her. He told her he wanted to have sex with her. The victim was able to fight Howell off and escape from the vehicle.

When investigators discovered this case, they contacted family members of Howell, who submitted DNA samples. Those family members were excluded as suspects in Thompson's murder; however, test results indicated the suspect was a close family relative.

Based on this, Loveland Police, BCI, the Hamilton County Coroner's Office and the Hamilton County Prosecutor's Office exhumed the body of Ralph Howell to obtain a DNA sample. Further testing confirmed Howell's DNA matched the DNA found on Thompson's body.

Around the time of Thompsons' murder, there were several other cases with similar facts. Based on this new evidence and Howell's same and similar pattern of behavior, it is believed that Ralph Howell had more victims.

Anyone with information relating to Ralph Howell, or the following unsolved homicides, is asked to contact the Bureau of Criminal Investigations at (855)-224-6446.

Charmaine Stolla (F/W, 17 years old)

Ms. Stolla was last seen at 10:00am on February 24, 1978 at 1208 Dewey Avenue, Cincinnati. Her body was found at 3:00pm on March 12, 1978 off of Old Colerain Pike. She had been strangled and raped.

Nancy Ann Theobald (F/W, 18 years old)

Ms. Theobald was last seen at 10:30pm on November 16, 1977 leaving her place of employment, Arby's Restaurant, in Clifton. Her body was found at 2:00pm on December 26, 1977 on Becket Road in Butler County. She had been strangled and raped.

Victoria Hinchler (F/W, 24 years old)

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Howell was employed as a delivery driver for the Cincinnati Enquirer and an over-the-road truck driver. His possible victims are not necessarily limited to this geographic region.

Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters commented, "The tireless work of the Loveland Police Department and BCI should be commended. They never stopped searching for Cheryl Thompson's killer. **And now, over 40 years later, Cheryl's family has closure.**

I have prosecuted multiple serial killers in my time as Prosecutor. My office firmly believes he is another. If you have any information about Ralph Howell or a similar, unsolved homicide – please call BCI"

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