

'Have you ever murdered anyone?' A link to the Oakland County child killings

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Part Four

This is the fourth in a five-part series on the unsolved murder of Gail Webster of Troy, a 48-year-old divorced mother of three, in her apartment in Troy. A beloved hostess at a popular Woodward Avenue diner, Webster was bludgeoned on Oct. 28, 1978. Yesterday, Part 3: [Police zero in on ex-boyfriend, ATF agent as suspect in Gail Webster killing.](#)

“What the hell is he doing here?” Terry Webster said to Troy Police Detective Dane Slater while standing at her mother’s gravesite.



Robert Van Hengel and Gail Webster are shown superimposed over Webster's grave. DETROIT NEWS

Robert Van Hengel stood leaning against his car in Oakview Cemetery, arms folded, watching.

It was August 1995. After much prodding, nudging, phone calls and letters, Gail Webster's daughters had convinced Troy police to petition Oakland County Medical Examiner L.J. Dragovic to approve exhuming their mother's body.

The daughters had discovered the former medical examiner who performed the autopsy never scraped their mother's fingernails for blood or skin from her assailant when she defended herself.

And, thus, it was the daughters who "reignited the homicide investigation," as Troy Police Detective Don Tullock wrote in a search warrant affidavit on April 3, 2006.

It was always the daughters.

"Can you do something?" Terry asked Slater, as the crane hoisted the casket above ground, her eyes burning from the sight of Van Hengel standing there, as if he had a right, this man their mother feared. For whatever reason, Slater ignored her request.

Sadly, nothing was gained from the exhumation. LabCorp, a molecular biology and pathology lab in North Carolina, found the sample was too degraded to make a DNA determination. (Gail Webster had a common blood type, type O, as did Van Hengel.)

Even so, Tullock took another look at Van Hengel, identifying him in case files "as a prime suspect."

He re-interviewed employees at the Susie-Q restaurant who described Van Hengel as "secretive and spooky." One said in the weeks before Webster's death, Van Hengel would sit for hours in a vehicle in the rear of the restaurant parking lot "stalking" Webster. Another employee said Van Hengel "scared the hell out of me" and that Webster had been trying to distance herself from Van Hengel. More than one found it "unusual" that in the months following Webster's death, Van Hengel was not seen in the restaurant.





Gail Webster, center, poses for a photo with others at a Susie-Q Restaurant function in 1976. The Susie-Q was a popular restaurant on Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FAMILY

Van Hengel told Tullock he was aware the downstairs entrance door at Webster's apartment building had a latch that sometimes didn't catch. He said he "would be halfway up the stairs sometimes before he would be buzzed in."

Curiously, this was the first mention of the entrance doors at the Somerset Park apartment building not working properly. And yet, it contradicts the witness report of Gail Webster's neighbor, who said he heard someone being buzzed into the apartment at approximately 3:30 a.m., which is close to the time she died. "He then heard someone running up the stairs," the police report reads. "Heavy sound like a man. Approx 5 min later, again he is guessing on time, did not look at a clock, he heard what sounded like the same footsteps running down the stairs. The subj exited the rear door."

Webster's daughters, who both lived in the second-floor apartment with their mom, don't remember any faulty door lock.





Gail Webster, 48, was bludgeoned to death in her second-floor Somerset apartment near I-75 in Troy. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FAMILY

“It’s odd,” Wendy Webster Razlog said. “I do not recall a door latch sticking or door not closing all the way.”

The sisters wondered: Was Van Hengel trying to make it look like anyone could get in?

When Tullock asked Van Hengel to take a polygraph and submit a DNA sample, Van Hengel was cagey. He said he’d heard pros and cons about polygraphs and was “a nervous-type person.” But he said he “would have no problem” submitting blood and hair samples for DNA. Then, he suggested, “you might not need a polygraph.”

A month later, when arrangements for a DNA swab had been made, Van Hengel questioned Tullock’s experience with DNA; he asked several questions about the chain of custody for his samples, growing angrier with each response. Finally, Van Hengel ended the conversation in a huff, saying: “Contact my attorney.”

Yet another attempt at polygraphing Van Hengel was pursued in 1997 by a detective from the Oakland County Child Killer Task Force. Perhaps, it was thought, they could kill two birds with one stone.

A sergeant at the Oakland County Sheriff's Department was instructed to specifically include the question: "Have you ever murdered anyone?"

"While the polygraph examination would serve to address the child killings," Tullock wrote in the police report, "it would also serve to address our murder case (Gail Webster)."

Once again, Van Hengel balked. "Call my attorney," he said.



It was in the closet

At some point during Tullock's investigation, most likely in 1995, the detective retrieved some notebooks from Van Hengel's home and also a pipe. A 13.5-inch lead pipe, to be exact, 1 inch in diameter with "one end slightly flattened/oval."

Somehow, that pipe — seemingly very similar to the murder weapon described in the preliminary exam as a "heavy blunt instrument with a tapered edge, or rounded point" — was not properly recorded in evidence storage.

MICHIGAN STATE POLICE FILES

Officially, Troy Lt. Nate Gobler would only say: "The origin of the pipe was not noted in the case file."

Asked to elaborate, Capt. Josh Jones said: "This is not an official police opinion, but my guess is Detective Tullock, when he was working with Van Hengel, found that somewhere because I know he also took some notebooks and stuff from him.

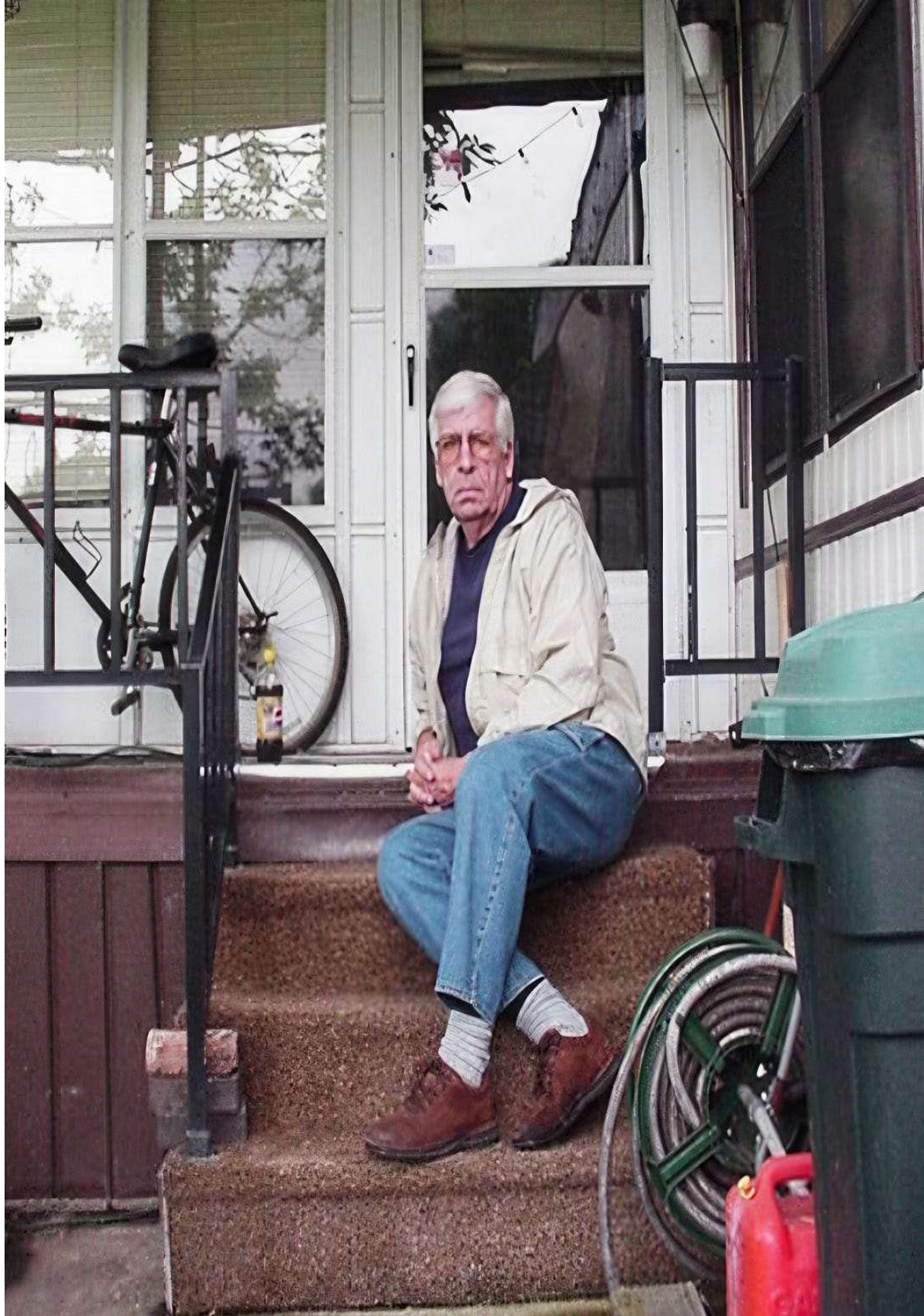
"It was in an odd spot. It was in a closet."

Recently, investigators followed up with Tullock — the detective retired from the Troy Police Department in October 2011 — to ask him more about when and where he found the pipe. But, Jones said, "he simply just doesn't remember."

Several requests to interview Tullock, including phone calls, a mailed letter to his home and an emailed request sent by Troy police went unanswered.

Having ditched investigators for the last few years of his life, Van Hengel was found unresponsive in his home on March 23, 2006. He was 70 years old. A woman named

Brandy Watson, then 31, had found him sitting upright in his chair. After summoning police, she told officers that Van Hengel had been receiving treatment for lung cancer for the previous two years.



Robert Van Hengel is shown sitting on his porch. COURTESY OF RHONDA MCELROY

While Watson's personal relationship with Van Hengel is unclear, she did serve as executor of Van Hengel's will and was described as Van Hengel's "lifelong friend" in his obituary. Other than the mention of Dorothy Mulka, Van Hengel's "long-time friend and companion" who died two years earlier, Watson was listed as Van Hengel's sole survivor. Van Hengel's then-living sister, Margaret, and his nephew, John Dreystadt, were omitted.

Watson described Van Hengel as "very independent and lived alone," adding: "He was so giving. Anyone that he could help, he did, and he was grateful to do it."

Soon after Van Hengel died, Troy Police Sgt. Barry Whiteside, who was also an Oakland County Child Killer Task Force officer, called Watson requesting to inspect Van Hengel's home "in an effort to locate any evidence that might relate either to the (child killer) case or the death of Mrs. Webster." But Watson "was very reluctant," Whiteside wrote in a police report. "She only allowed detectives entry into the home after she had thoroughly removed the majority of the items."

Whatever legacy Watson wanted to preserve for Van Hengel — or when she first learned her lifelong friend had been implicated in not one, but two unsolved homicide cases — remains a mystery. When reached by phone, a man who identified himself as Watson's husband said that Van Hengel was her mother's boyfriend. Numerous attempts to reach Watson thereafter were unsuccessful.

In the end, Tullock did manage to get his suspect's DNA, even though Van Hengel's body was cremated. Tullock filed a search warrant to obtain blood and tissue samples from the hospital where Tullock received his cancer treatment.



A very private man

"I'm very torn, and I don't want to disparage his name," Rhonda McElroy said. "But knowing the Bob that I knew, and his size (6-foot-2, 210 pounds) I could see (Webster's murder) happening, as much as I hate to say that. Not in a premeditated way, but in a blind, drunk rage. The more I read about her, the more I thought it could very well be him."

By the time McElroy met Van Hengel in the mid-'90s, his mother had died (in 1986 at the age of 93), he'd retired from the ATF and he was living with his girlfriend, Mulka, and his beloved cat "Sister Grace" in a mobile home in Troy.

America Online chat rooms were all the rage back then; the online virtual gatherings brought together like-minded types to "chat" or text in real time about a shared topic of interest.

“Bob was much older than the median age of the group,” McElroy said. “But he was really into tech and gadgets, so that was what drew him in.” Having worked for almost 20 years as a police dispatcher for the city of Dearborn Heights, she said the two also felt a kinship over their law enforcement backgrounds.

Geocaching, an outdoor treasure combining hiking and GPS on cellphones to find a hidden cache, was also gaining popularity. “That was our thing to do together. Sometimes, my husband or a couple girlfriends would join in. But never did I feel unsafe or uncomfortable. It was just a friendship with this quirky old guy that we appreciated.”

They would often have lunch at Jimi’s Restaurant in Royal Oak. “Bob was a creature of habit,” McElroy said. “He ate at least one meal there every day.”



Robert Van Hengel was “a creature of habit,” said one former friend. He ate at least one meal a day in a restaurant every day. COURTESY OF RHONDA MCELROY

McElroy said “Bob” was always “very private”; he led a “compartmentalized” life. She knew he had dated a woman named Dorothy, “but I had no idea they had this long relationship.” He’d love to tell stories about what he called “large and spectacular” criminal cases, but said little about his personal life or history.

She said she never knew him to be violent, but he could be mean-spirited with people he didn't like. "He could be gruff; he didn't suffer fools. But if you earned his respect, he was the nicest, most giving, gentle guy."

By his own admission, Van Hengel had once been a heavy alcoholic. Sharing with McElroy a photo of him taken at work on Christmas Eve in the 1970s, he'd wrote in a caption: "Being half in the bag by 10 a.m. on that holiday eve ..."

In the last few years before his death, McElroy saw less and less of Van Hengel. She'd heard he was sick. At his funeral, McElroy was surprised when two women, both former waitresses, spoke of Van Hengel's generosity. "They said he sponsored them to go to college, one had gone to nursing school. They were single moms and he had paid for their tuition with the caveat that they had to keep it quiet, like a secret benefactor kind of thing," she said.

"Now, I wonder was this some benevolent old man with a lot of money or was he atoning for something?"