

B'ham Eccentric

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Thursday, April 28, 1977

Boy reports abduction attempt

Bloomfield Township police are investigating an apparent abduction attempt Friday of a seven-year-old boy.

Police said the youth, Gary Harris, was walking home from a friend's house at about 6:15 p.m., when the incident occurred.

The boy told his parents and police that a stranger, driving a light blue station wagon, offered him money if he would go for a ride.

The driver, described as a man about 30 years of age with either white hair or bald, reportedly honked the horn of the station wagon to attract the boy's attention.

Harris ran away from the station wagon immediately and reported the

incident to his parents, who alerted police.

Lt. Curtis Grennier said the parents are very concerned because the alleged murderer of Timothy King of Birmingham was also seen driving a blue car. That car was reported to be a Gremlin.

Grennier said a township officer assigned to the Oakland County Homicide Task Force investigating the murder of King and three other Oakland County youths in the last 16 months, has relayed the information on Friday's incident.

Grennier praised the boy's reaction, saying, "At least we know someone has been listening to what they've been told."

Kids respond to Oakland task force appeal

600 abduction attempts reported

By **MICHAEL F. WENDLAND**
News Staff Writer

On Saturday, April 2, a 13-year-old Oakland County boy was crossing the parking lot of a North Woodward Avenue carpeting store near Square Lake Road when he was approached by a man carrying two gallon containers.

The man was well-dressed and middle aged. He smiled and asked the boy for help. His car had overheated, he explained, and he was carrying water. Would the boy give him a hand and come with him?

The boy shook his head and ran off.

The next week, in Royal Oak, a few blocks off Woodward, a 10-year-old boy was riding his bicycle. A dark-colored car slowly turned a corner and passed ex-

tremely close. It stopped and a middle-aged driver got out.

The man seemed worried. "Are you OK, are you hurt?"

The boy was puzzled.

"We've just had an accident," said the man. "Your bike hit my car. You better come with me. We'll go to the police station. We have to report this accident to the police."

This boy, too, ran off.

Those are two of some 600 reports that, were it not for the massive police hunt now under way for a child killer in Oakland County, would have gone undetected — and uninvestigated.

And that is what frightens the police more than anything else.

For there already is one psychopath out

there. In the last 15 months, he has killed four Oakland County children, aged 10 to 12. He has been dubbed "the Babysitter" because of the almost compulsive way he feeds, cleans and cares for his victims, who have been kept alive for as long as 18 days after their abductions.

And authorities, who have investigated and cleared 4,800 suspects, still haven't the foggiest idea who he is. Yet, in trying to find him, they are finding others who also must be taken off the streets.

They are coming across the previously unknown incidents as part of "Operation Lure," an effort aimed at finding youngsters who, somehow, managed to elude the killer.

Because logic tells them that the child killer has surely tried but failed to lure

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other children, police have attempted to find those "almost cases."

More than 600 youngsters recalled such incidents.

A month ago, they completed a detailed "vacuum cleaning" of the child molesting cases reported to metropolitan police departments. Those 1,200 cases are meticulously being checked out by the 31 street detectives on the federally financed, multi-jurisdictional strike force investigating the murders.

But what of the unreported cases?

"This guy we're looking for is slick," said Lt. Robert H. Robertson, the 43-year-old Michigan State Police officer who heads the task force. "It's our feeling that the killer has made a number of unsuccessful attempts to pick up children. And one of the things we know about him is that he is able to snatch kids off the street without attracting attention.

"He smooth-talks them. These kids he killed would never go with a stranger unless they were convinced he was trustworthy. So the question is, how did he do it. By asking directions? Posing as a cop, a priest? How did he lure those kids away with him?"

From that question, "Operation Lure" was born, a detailed questionnaire of children in grades four through eight — the prime target ages of child molesters — conducted with the cooperation of the six school districts and the parochial schools along the North Woodward corridor, the killer's prime stalking ground.

"Boys and girls," said teachers, "sometimes you may be approached by a person who asks directions, a question, takes a picture, offers you a ride, talks of a job, or suggests that you show him a particular place. He or she may be really nice to talk with. So nice that it would appear natural and you paid no attention to it and forgot about it. If anything like this has ever happened to you, we would like to know about it."

"That's what scares the hell out of us," said Dr. Jerry L. Tobias, chief of the Beverly Hills Public Safety Department and a task force member who also holds a Ph.D. in child guidance counseling. "Here are hundreds of cases that we never even knew about."

He picked up a pile of the school reports. "Look at them. A man asks a 9-year-old kid to get in the car with him and direct him to a certain place. Here's one from another yo-yo who wants a 12-year-old boy to help him look for his lost dog.

"This guy stops an 11-year-old and says he's a baseball coach and wants to drive the kid to a ballpark to try out for his team. Good Lord, here's one from a guy who offers candy.

"Every one of those were lures. Who knows what would have happened if the kids got in the car with these weirdos."

In truth, police have a pretty good idea what would have happened. The computer kicks out a graph, showing what crimes were committed in the earlier batch of

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molestation reports gathered from police departments.

Most common was indecent exposure, the so-called "flasher" who receives sexual gratification from displaying himself in front of a youngster. Next was indecent liberties, the sexual fondling of children. Rape and sodomy were next most common.

Not all of the 600 previously unreported cases now being entered in the task force computer are abduction attempts. Many are simply the results of overactive young imaginations or legitimate and innocent contacts, suddenly made frightening in the paranoia that has gripped the normally secure suburbs of Oakland County.

"But anytime a stranger asks a kid to get in the car with him, we've got a very suspicious situation," said Tobias.

Police are unsure whether the child killer they are seeking is in the pile of new reports collected from the schools.

But they are sure there are a lot more sick people out there than they ever believed before.

"If the people knew how many frightening, warped sickies are out there, they'd be petrified," said Lt. Robertson, whose investigators have, among other things, found a suburban father who "rents" his 9-year-old son to sexual deviates; a homosexual Boy Scout leader who has molested several boys in his troop; and a 15-year-old male prostitute whose clients include suburban businessmen.

A month ago, an 11-year-old girl was walking home on Opdyke near Plumbrook in Bloomfield Township. A blue Mustang pulled alongside her. The driver leaned over and rolled down the passenger window, asking directions to a nearby street.

The girl told him but he didn't seem to understand. She repeated the directions.

"Look, I'm not from around here," he said. "Why don't you just get in the car with me and show me."

She ran away.

All of those cases have been turned over to local law enforcers for criminal prosecution. The new school reports have also given them leads to other cases — there are four separate reports about the man in the blue Mustang and three about the man who tried to lure kids by asking for help in carrying water.

But the singular goal of the task force is to find the child killer.

So far, despite more than 11,000 tips,

they have only a composite drawing of what he may look like. Two independent witnesses described seeing a dark-haired white male between the ages of 20 and 30 in a Birmingham supermarket shopping lot at about the time the latest victim, 11-year-old Timothy King, disappeared.

The man, who one witness said was talking to a boy who looked like the King child, was standing next to a late-model blue Gremlin.

On the wall of the task force's main tip room are 13 pages of computer printout, listing the ownership of metropolitan Detroit's 17,000 Gremlins — of all colors. So far, 1,300 blue Gremlins have been checked and cleared by task force officers. Another 1,257 remain to be checked.

There were no witnesses to the abductions of the other victims — Kristine Mihelich, 10, of Berkley; Jill Robinson, 12, of Royal Oak; and Mark Stebbins, 12, of Ferndale.

Based on the time of the abductions, the killer's means of hiding them for extended periods of time without raising neighbors' suspicions, the condition of the bodies, the way they were disposed of, and the way they were killed, police and six psychologists have come up with a general profile of their suspect.

They believe he is homosexual, has a compulsion for cleanliness, holds a white collar job that gives him some freedom and lives in a single dwelling, most likely with an attached garage so he can take his victim inside unnoticed.

But all that, concedes Lt. Robertson, is conjecture.

"We believe it to be reasonably accurate," he said, "but we certainly are not closing our eyes to other possibilities."

The task force, made up of six civilian workers, eight inside officers and 31 detectives from 18 local police agencies and the state police, is paid for from a \$341,000 grant from the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

It is believed to be the largest and most intense police investigation ever conducted in this country.

It has its headquarters in Birmingham's vacant Valley Woods Elementary School near 14 Mile and Lahser. The task force telephone number is 644-0400.

A \$50,000 reward, provided jointly by the city of Birmingham and The Detroit News, is offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Timothy King's killer.

children

Killer still at large: Fear stalks

By MICHAEL F. WENDLAND
News Staff Writer

As the search for the killer of four Oakland County children continues, psychologists and social agencies are observing frightening effects of fear — which, experts say, may leave long-term scars. For example:

- Young preschool children wake up from their sleep at night and run terrified into their parents' rooms, afraid that "The Killer" is under their beds.
- Normally inquisitive, active 8-year-old boys are suddenly withdrawn and cling to their mothers, seldom leaving their front yards.
- More sophisticated 10-year-olds play-act games about what they would do to "The Killer" if they had him, their fantasies frighteningly violent and explicit.
- Adults who were molested as children

"When the killer is finally caught, our children are going to have to be debriefed. Under normal circumstances, the fear we've taught them would be unhealthy."

— Diane Vincent, director of Common Ground, a Birmingham social agency

now relive the anguish of their long-buried trauma, manifested this time in suicidal depression.

- Jobs are lost and neighborhood relationships shattered because hundreds of people are suspected of being the killer. Some churches are disoriented because parishioners suspect the minister or priest — 14 members of one congregation have, acting individually, reported their minister.

Detroit's normally secure northern suburbs, whose very names — Pleasant Ridge, Beverly Hills, Birmingham,

Bloomfield — conjure up images of tree-lined streets and the best of American affluence, have become communities of fear and suspicion.

"This has traumatized the community. There is no parent or child in Oakland County who has not been affected. The trauma will be with us for years to come," said Dr. Emanuel Tanay, a forensic psychiatrist who has worked with police in trying to find the killer.

"It's frightening to see what's happened," says Diane Vincent, director of Common Ground, a Birmingham social

agency geared to providing youth services. "When the killer is finally caught, our children are going to have to be debriefed. Under normal circumstances, the fear we've taught them would be unhealthy."

In the meantime, Ms. Vincent warns: "It's important that the fear we instill in these kids be a realistic fear. They have to know that the killer is not hiding under their beds or in their closets, that he won't snatch them from their yards. But they also have to know that, if they go off with the stranger — if they let him lure them

away — they'll never come back."

The man police are hunting is "not the average criminal. He's shrewd and convincing and he is able to lure his victims without causing the slightest amount of suspicion," said State Police Lt. Robert Robertson, head of the special 45-member multidepartment task force formed to investigate the killings.

The four young people police believe were killed by the same person were Mark Stebbins, 12, of Ferndale, abducted Feb. 15, 1976, found strangled four days later; Jill Robinson, 12, of Royal Oak, abducted Dec. 22, 1976, found shot to death four days later; Kristine Mihelich, 10, of Berkley, abducted Jan. 2, 1976, found smothered 18 days later; and Timothy King, 11, of Birmingham, abducted last March 16, found suffocated six days later.

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All the victims had been kept alive and, say police, almost tenderly fed, cleaned and cared for until shortly before their bodies were found.

"I think the guy we're looking for genuinely likes kids," said Dr. Jerry Tobias, a Southfield Township police officer who works on the strike force. Tobias holds a doctorate in child guidance counseling.

"I think he's better able to relate to kids than he is to adults. And while the kids are alive, I think they're well-treated. Then, for whatever perverted reasons, he turns vicious and kills them."

Paranoia resultant from the widespread publicity given the child killings has taken its psychological toll among Oakland County's youngsters.

For example, 11-year-old Jennifer, a fifth-grader in a Southfield school, woke up last Wednesday night about 3 a.m. "She's done this a dozen times before," said her mother. "She comes running to me in tears. She has dreams that the killer is chasing her. Before the killings, she used to love to go roller skating with her friends. She won't go anymore. She's not comfortable playing unless I'm nearby."

The fear has also caused other children to suddenly develop bed-wetting problems and school difficulties, report psychologists.



Children are not the only victims.

A man named John, who asked that his last name not be used, has his comfortable home in Bloomfield Township for sale.

"Somebody turned me in," he said, deeply embarrassed. "One day, I'm out cutting my lawn and two cops come up. They start questioning me. I couldn't believe it. I was actually a suspect. All they'd say was that they had a tip. From one of my neighbors, I guess. Ever since then, it's like I really was the killer. Nobody will look at me. My neighbors call their kids in whenever I'm outside."

Recently divorced and living alone, John has no idea who reported him, or why.

Another suspect, a homosexual, was routinely investigated and then cleared by police, who believe the killer is also homosexual. Somehow, the man's employer found out he had been questioned, and he was fired.

"We've had to be extremely careful about those we've talked to," concedes Robertson. "We've poked around in a lot of dark closets and come across a lot of information on the personal lives of people. This is a very sensitive area and we are doing our best to keep it all confidential."

Of the 14 individual tips involving one suburban minister, Robertson said:

"They're from 14 members of his congregation. We've checked him out thoroughly. He's clean.

"In a normal case, this type of suspicion maybe isn't necessarily good for a community. But, if we're ever going to catch this guy, we need this community help. The guy we're looking for is not an obvious character. He's like a neighbor."

More than 11,000 tips have been phoned in to the strike force. All have been coded and entered into a computer for analysis from a wide variety of standpoints. Some 2,800 individuals, named as suspects by neighbors, friends, co-workers, parishioners and relatives, have been cleared. Another 500 or so persons are still being checked out.

The children of the northern suburbs, the experts say, suffer the most.

Common Ground, the Birmingham social agency, recently studied 1,000 children with the cooperation of the schools.

"They're frightened, really frightened," said Ms. Vincent. "The fear they are being taught conflicts with everything else they've learned. They're confused, too. We've found that what they have to be taught is that this crisis is special, it's very unique. The rules we're setting down for them will end just as soon as the killer is caught."

The instruction being given to the children boils down to this: When approached by a stranger, don't talk, run! But what's a stranger? Children have been taught that

some strangers, like a priest or a policeman, are "good strangers." Until the crisis ends, those lessons must be disregarded, police warn. All "strangers" — anyone who is not a regular visitor to the child's home — should be avoided.

Each of the four victims knew full well the dangers of going with strangers, police report. "Somehow, this guy smooth-talks the kids into his car with him," said Robertson. "We don't know how, but we do know that whatever line he uses works. He's probably a very pleasant, low-keyed individual, the kind that doesn't seem threatening at all."

Efforts to find the killer also have brought into sharper focus the seriousness of child molestation problems. A month ago, strike force detectives pulled 1,200 official suspicious-person and child-molestation cases from the files of Detroit area police departments. They thought they had them all.

Then, as an experiment, they went into schools in the northern suburbs and asked students if they had ever been approached by a stranger but not reported it to their parents. More than 600 said yes. Many of the incidents were obvious attempts to lure children into cars.

"From what we're finding out, child molestation is much more frequent and serious than we ever thought," said Rollin G. Tobin, police chief in Birmingham, a former Detroit vice officer who thought he knew a lot about child molestation.

"I think it's much more serious than the rape issue. We're finding out that a great many cases are never reported," Tobin said, "because (the child) is so young he doesn't really understand what happened or afraid that he'll somehow be punished. Or the parents don't report it because they don't want to humiliate and embarrass their child any more."

"Many, many cases go unreported," agreed Ms. Vincent of Common Ground. "With all the publicity over the killings, we've had a lot of adults coming in for crisis intervention. These were people who were molested as a child but never reported it. They kept it buried for years until now, in the wake of this crisis, it's come to the surface and caused them to relive the trauma."

Will the killer ever be caught?

"Maybe not," concedes Tobin. "As every month goes by, our chances of solving this diminish. But I think we've got a damned good chance. I think we'll get this guy. But we're also discovering that there is a tremendous problem in child molesting. This case has shown that we've done a pitiful job in the past in recognizing and trying to prevent the crime."

"Now, we're finding out how severe it is. We're developing plans and programs to educate youngsters and parents."

Meanwhile, the massive police hunt for the killer goes on.

And, until he is caught, so does the fear.

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