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Ex-cop from Seattle found guilty in 1957 killing of girl

A 72-year-old former Western Washington police officer was convicted Friday of a 55-year-old kidnapping and murder of an Illinois girl. It was one of the oldest unsolved crimes in the U.S. to make it to trial.

By MICHAEL TARM

The Associated Press



SYCAMORE, Ill. — For most of five decades, it seemed no one would ever be held accountable for the murder of a 7-year-old Illinois girl snatched off a small-town street corner as she played.

Now someone has.

Fifty-five years after Maria Ridulph vanished, her friends and family let out a deafening cheer Friday as a judge pronounced a former neighborhood teen — now a 72-year-old former Western Washington police officer — guilty of the kidnapping and murder. It was one of the oldest unsolved crimes in the U.S. to make it to trial.

The roar of approval soon gave way to loud sobs from those who knew the little girl whose body was found after a five-month search that drew national media attention and haunted people across the country.

Jack McCullough, who was 17-year-old John Tessier at the time, showed no hint of emotion.

"A weight has been lifted off my shoulders," said Kathy Chapman, 63, who was playing with Maria in the snow on the night of Dec. 3, 1957, before she vanished. "Maria finally has the justice she deserves."

McCullough won Maria's trust by talking about dolls and giving her piggyback rides, Chapman testified. At some point, authorities say, he dragged her into an alley, choked her with a wire, then stabbed her in her throat and chest.

McCullough was briefly a suspect, like more than 100 others in the 1950s, but he had an alibi. He told investigators he had been traveling to Chicago to get a medical exam before joining the Air Force. He settled in Seattle, working as a police officer in Milton and Lacey, Thurston County.

As the months became years, many Sycamore residents assumed the killer must have been a transient — perhaps a truck driver passing through but not connected to the town.

A deathbed accusation by McCullough's mother in 1994 — passed on to police by his half-sister in 2008 — led to a chain of events that brought about his conviction.

His mother, Eileen Tessier, had lied to police canvassing the neighborhood in 1957 about her son's whereabouts, buttressing his alibi, prosecutor Julie Trevartchen said Friday.

"She knew what she did, and she didn't want to die with that on her conscience," she said.

McCullough's girlfriend in the 1950s also contacted police with evidence that called his alibi into question. She had found his unused train ticket from Rockford to Chicago for the day Maria disappeared.

The case seemed a longshot — at least at the beginning.

DeKalb County State's Attorney Clay Campbell was taken aback when investigators told him they had a suspect in a 1957 murder. "When they said 1957, I said, you mean 1977? 1997?" he said Friday.

McCullough was arrested on July 1, 2011, at the Four Freedoms House, a 300-unit retirement home in North Seattle, where he lived with his wife and worked as a security guard.

One reason authorities felt confident they had the right suspect was that Maria's friend, Chapman, picked out McCullough as the teen who identified himself as "Johnny" while the girls were playing. Chapman last saw Maria with that man before the girl vanished.

For decades, that day was never far from Chapman's mind, she said. She would scan faces everywhere to see if any of them looked like that man.

"I never stopped looking for Johnny's face," Chapman said Friday.

During closing arguments, public defender Tom McCulloch said no physical evidence tied his client to the crime, and he raised doubts about Chapman's memory.

But Trevartchen said it wasn't surprising she recalled that night with such clarity.

"Little kids remember the really good things that happen and the really bad things," she told the court.

"And they remember the face of the man who took their little friend."

Maria vanished at a time when child abductions, if not unheard of, rarely made headlines.

This one did.

President Eisenhower even asked to be kept apprised of the search for the girl, which ended when her decomposed body was found 120 miles from her hometown.

The otherwise sleepy town of Sycamore, 60 west of Chicago, would never be the same.

"I had nightmares — all Sycamore kids did," said Jeanne Taylor, 57, who grew up near the Ridulphs and attended each day of the trial. "From then on, I never trusted strangers."

To conceal the body, prosecutors said, McCullough dragged it through a window at his home, then later loaded it into a car and drove to a wooded area.

"He left her there for animals to feed on her body," prosecutor Victor Escarcida said in his closing.

Maria's brother, Charles Ridulph, took the stand to describe his sister as a sweet, smart, outgoing girl beloved by the entire family. He was relieved by the verdict, though he said the trial had been stressful.

"I feel totally spent, exhausted," he said. "I am not pleased with the new thoughts that I will have (about Maria's death). Some things I wish I did not know."

The half-dozen relatives of McCullough at the trial all said they wanted a guilty verdict.

Members of both families hugged each other after McCullough was led away in handcuffs. When sentenced later this year, he faces the possibility of life behind bars.

One of his half-sisters, Janet Tessier, who told police about her mother's deathbed comments, spoke with her eyes still red from tears.

"He is as evil as prosecutors painted — and some," she said minutes after the verdict.

At a news conference later where Maria's brother and sister spoke, Tessier asked if she could step up and say something to them — to apologize her brother wasn't caught decades earlier.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice cracking as she looked at the Ridulphs. "I'm so sorry it took so long."

Information from The Seattle Times archives is included in this report.