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Former neighbor guilty of killing girl, 7, in 1957

September 14, 2012 | By Clifford Ward | Special to the Tribune

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A 72-year-old Seattle man was found guilty today of the kidnapping and murder of a 7-year-old Sycamore girl, whose disappearance in 1957 captured the concern of Americans all the way up to President Dwight Eisenhower.

Judge James Hallock found Jack McCullough guilty of killing Maria Ridulph, whose body was found months after she vanished while playing near her home in December 1957.



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A friend of Maria's, Kathy Chapman, testified earlier this week that she and Maria were playing a game on a street corner when a walked up and introduced himself as Johnny. Moments later, the man gave Maria a piggyback ride.

After several minutes, Chapman went home briefly to retrieve her mittens, she said, but when she returned, Johnny and Maria were gone.

McCullough, who was 17 at the time of the crime, went by the name John Tessier at the time.

McCullough was among a group of initial suspects, according to police, but his parents vouched for his whereabouts. His stepfather, Ralph Tessier, told FBI agents that his son was in Rockford at an Air Force recruiting office when Maria was abducted. Shortly after her disappearance, McCullough left Sycamore to enter military service.

After his discharge in the early 1960s, he briefly returned to town before departing again, eventually settling in Washington state. He changed his name to Jack McCullough and worked as a police officer, though his law enforcement career ended in the 1980s when he was accused of sexually abusing a teenage runaway whom McCullough and his girlfriend had taken in. He eventually pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor in the case.

Back in Sycamore, the Ridulph case languished until 2010, when a former girlfriend of McCullough's came forward and cast doubt on his alibi. Police re-interviewed Chapman, who was shown a photo lineup and picked out an old picture of McCullough. The young man in the photo, she told police, was "Johnny."

In July 2011, police arrested McCullough.

As part of the re-opened investigation, police interviewed one of McCullough's sisters, who reported that McCullough and two other men sexually assaulted her in 1962 in Sycamore when she was 14. He was charged with that crime, too, in 2011, but was acquitted in April by Judge Robbin Stuckert.

Both sides rested their case Thursday in the trial shortly after a jail inmate testified that McCullough, a former Sycamore resident, incriminated himself in the 1957 slaying of a young girl.

The final major prosecution witness was Kirk Swaggerty, a convicted murderer who was in the DeKalb County Jail with McCullough in 2011. Swaggerty testified that McCullough spoke of accidentally suffocating Maria on Dec. 3, 1957.

"He said he was giving her a piggyback ride on his shoulders, and when she fell, she wouldn't stop screaming, and when she wouldn't keep quiet, he suffocated her," Swaggerty said.

Chapman had testified that the man named Johnny gave Maria a piggyback ride.

Swaggerty was the third jail inmate to testify against McCullough.

Under cross-examination, Swaggerty acknowledged that he has filed a motion seeking a reduced sentence. He was sentenced last year to 33 years in prison for planning a home invasion and robbery in which one person was killed.

Swaggerty, 42, said he did not contact authorities because he expected any reward.

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"I really wanted to do something right," he said. "I'm going to die in prison. I just felt like I should do it."

McCullough's sister Mary Hunt, the first defense witness, gave a less definitive account of a comment reportedly made by her mother, Eileen Tessier, as she lay dying of cancer in January 1994.

Another sister, Janet Tessier, testified earlier this week that their mother made an explicit reference to McCullough being involved in Maria's disappearance. Hunt, however, testified that she recalled her mother said only, "He did it," without providing other context.

Under cross-examination by prosecutors, though, Hunt said she knew what her mother meant.

Defense attorneys also called a doctor who had performed surgery on the mother shortly before she died.

In exam notes he made before a surgery to install a drug shunt, the surgeon, John Prabhakar, described Eileen Tessier as "pleasantly confused." The doctor, now retired, said he had no independent recollection of treating Tessier.

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