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Who Killed Atlanta's Children?

Forty years ago, a serial killer terrorized the city. Families have been searching for answers ever since.

By [Audra D. S. Burch](#)

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ATLANTA — On the fifth floor of the Atlanta Police Department headquarters, more than a dozen investigative files of dead children are neatly spread across three tables. A handwritten list, scribbled in red ink, provides the names of some of the children who were killed. The years of each killing — 1979, 1980 and 1981 — are taped on three walls, along with grainy photos of the children, almost all of them smiling.

Old homicide logs are stacked on another table. Inside the pages, among the details is the story of the Atlanta child murders, one of the most vexing cases in the city's history.

Forty years ago, Atlanta was terrorized by a serial killer who snatched and killed two dozen children, aged 7 to 17. They vanished with spine-chilling regularity, only to have their bodies discovered weeks or months later. In rivers. Under a bridge. Behind dumpsters.

The menacing drumbeat of child abductions, mostly of young African-American boys, shook a city that was emerging at the time as a progressive black mecca. Gripped by fear, anxiety and helplessness, parents refused to let their children play outside. Some took their children out of school. Psychics arrived to help. The city imposed a curfew.

In 1982, Wayne Williams was convicted of killing two adults. Police suspected that he was also responsible for most of the child murders, as well as the killings of four young adults. Even though prosecutors introduced evidence to potentially link him to some of the other murders, Mr. Williams, who is serving two life sentences, was never tried or convicted of killing any of the children — no one was.

But after Mr. Williams was sent to prison, 22 of the unsolved child murder cases were closed, raising an enduring question: Who killed Atlanta's children?

In the summer of 1979, the remains of two teenage boys were found in the woods in southwest Atlanta. They had been missing for several days. One reportedly vanished from a skating rink. The other while returning from a movie.

“Nobody had any idea of what this was going to morph into that Saturday afternoon, that these were the first two victims of a serial killer who would murder over a span of two years,” said Danny Agan, a retired Atlanta homicide detective who investigated three of the cases on the list.

Over the next 22 months, 22 more children — including two girls — were kidnapped and strangled, shot, stabbed or bludgeoned, along with four young adults. One boy, Darron Glass, last seen in September 1980 when he was 10, is still missing.

“Every day, every night, it seemed like they were finding bodies. The city was turned upside down. There was this big dark cloud over us,” said Sheila Baltazar, 61, whose stepson, Patrick Baltazar, 12, was killed in 1981. “And we were just trying to hold on to our babies.”

Police scrambled to find any connection among the bodies that were being discovered almost routinely. At the height of the killing, more than 100 agents were assigned to the investigation as part of a law enforcement task force.

Nineteen children were already missing or killed by the time that Curtis Walker, a seventh grader, walked into his home one afternoon in the winter of 1981. His mother, Catherine Leach, was cooking when she turned to Curtis and forbade him from going outside. “Stay inside,” she said. “They’re snatching children.”

Curtis, 13, left anyway, headed to make extra money by carrying groceries for seniors. He never returned home. For two weeks, Ms. Leach, now 70, waited for news about Curtis, the second oldest of her four boys, the one who had promised to score big in Hollywood, maybe as an illustrator because he drew animals so well.

Then came a call from a neighbor: Turn on the news.

“My God. My God,” Ms. Leach cried, reliving that moment 38 years ago. “I looked at him being pulled out the water on television. I just knew that was him.”

Though her son’s killing was one of 10 considered a “pattern case” that authorities directly connected to Mr. Williams, Ms. Leach does not believe he is the killer. She is not alone. Several parents or relatives have said they believe the Ku Klux Klan was responsible.

“We want to know who killed our children,” Ms. Leach said, adding that it felt like her son and the other children had been forgotten. “That’s the answer we didn’t get.”

Lynsey Weatherspoon for The New York Times

“A lot of folks want to hinge his guilt on the carpet fiber alone. There was other evidence, more fibers and dog hairs brought into court, along with witness testimony. And there is the inescapable fact that Wayne Williams was on that bridge, and two bodies washed up days later,” Mr. Agan said. “Wayne Williams is a serial killer, a predator, and he did the bulk of these murders.”

In 2010, DNA testing was performed on human hairs found on the body of Patrick Baltazar, the 16th victim. The results did not exclude Mr. Williams as the source of the hairs, and the investigation didn't produce any new results.

A Pair of Gold Trunks and \$2

Anthony Terrell, 48, has spent the last four decades replaying the day his big brother Earl went missing after leaving a community pool. He still searches his mind for the slightest detail that might lead to answers.

Mr. Terrell tearfully shared his story on a rainy Saturday at the Ellenwood, Ga., cemetery where his brother is buried in the Garden of Faith.

On a July afternoon in 1980, Mr. Terrell's relatives invited the boys to go swimming, but he stayed behind to care for his two younger brothers. He gave Earl his gold trunks and \$2 to enter the pool.

A short time later, Earl, 10, got into trouble at the pool and was asked to leave. Everyone assumed he went home, but by the time night fell, the family was racing through the neighborhood, searching for him.

Months later, Earl's skeletal remains were discovered in a wooded area. Mr. Terrell helped his mother identify his brother by the gold trunks. “I just keep thinking, what if I had went swimming instead,” he said.

Mr. Terrell described his brother as his protector. “He taught me how to do everything. We walked to school together. He wanted to be a firefighter, and every time he saw a fire truck, he would run outside,” he said.

“He was a fighter, which is why I don't understand how anyone could have snatched him.”

‘We Opened It Up.’

Alain Delaqueriere contributed research.

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