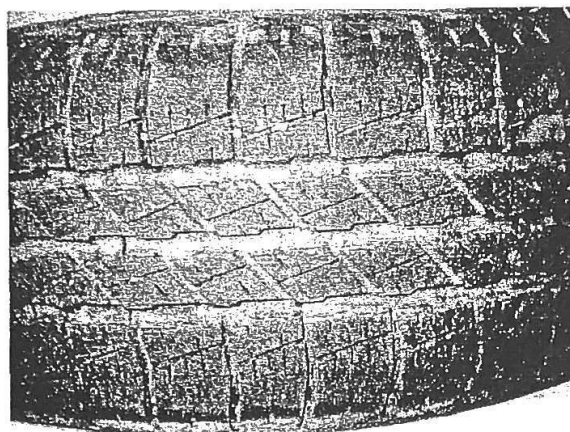


Left in the Woods to Die



Introduction

In November of 1978, the body of Mary Lou Arruda, a 15-year-old cheerleader from Raynham, Massachusetts was discovered in a secluded, heavily wooded area two months after she had been reported missing. Her badly decomposed body was found tied to a tree. It is believed that Arruda had been tied to the tree while she was still alive, but that she lost consciousness and the weight of her head pressing against the restraints around her neck resulted in death by strangulation.

The Abduction

Mary Lou Arruda, a high school student, went missing on the afternoon of September 8th, 1978. A young boy delivering newspapers found Mary Lou's bicycle sometime after 4 pm that day, lying on the ground near her home. He knew Mary Lou and tried calling for her, but received no answer so he returned the bicycle to Arruda's home.

Just prior to the discovery of the victim's bike, a neighbor named Helena McCoy had spoken to Mary Lou as they both happened to be heading in the same direction down a residential street. Helena reported nothing unusual about Mary Lou as she rode her bike, however she had noticed that a green car with a black or silver stripe being driven by a lone male had circling the area. Four other witnesses, including the victim's mother, reported seeing the same green car in the area around the time of Mary Lou's disappearance. One witness even reported seeing a large object on the front passenger seat of the vehicle. Police investigators speculate that this object may have been the body of the victim. Based on these eyewitness accounts, police were able to determine the model of the green car and develop a composite drawing of the male driver. The car was a 1976 *Opel* and the driver was thought to be a white male with dark curly hair and dark-rimmed glasses.

The Suspect

Eyewitness accounts, the vehicle model and criminal background checks on various suspects led police to question a person named James Kater. Kater's appearance matched the composite sketch, and he owned a lime green 1976 *Opel* with a black racing stripe. Most importantly, Kater had previously committed a crime that was strikingly similar to

the circumstances leading up to Mary Lou's disappearance. In 1969, he had pleaded guilty to the abduction and assault of a teenage girl. Kater had abducted the thirteen-year-old girl as she walked her bicycle along a secluded street. Kater drove the girl to a wooded area, hit her over the head and tried to force her face into a stream. Eventually he tied her hands, ankles, torso and neck against a tree and left her to die. The victim lost consciousness for some time, however managed to free herself and reported the crime to the police.

When questioned by police, James Kater denied any involvement in the disappearance of Mary Lou Arruda. However, his alibi for the afternoon of September 8th was contradicted by the testimony of various witnesses. Also, investigators found it suspicious that he had washed his car at 1 P.M. that day, but then washed it again later that same afternoon.

The Evidence

Investigators had found an unlit *Benson & Hedges* cigarette on the ground near Mary Lou's abandoned bike. Two cartons of the same *Benson & Hedges* cigarettes were found in James Kater's car. Police also found two newspaper articles about Mary Lou Arruda's disappearance in the trunk of his car.

Police figured that Kater had knocked Mary Lou down with his car while she was riding her bike. They found evidence to support this theory when they located a black mark, 31 inches from the ground, on the right front fender of Kater's car. The left handle bar of Mary Lou's bicycle was 30.5 inches from the ground.

One of the most important pieces of evidence that police found which linked James Kater to the Mary Lou Arruda murder was tire impression evidence. Near the victim's bike, a tire track print indicating acceleration had occurred and an abnormal tread wear pattern was found. The right front tire tread of Kater's car had a unusual wear pattern due to a defect in the front wheel bearing, thus creating a print that was consistent with the tire track prints found near the crime scene.

Conclusion

James Kater was convicted of the abduction and murder of Mary Lou Arruda in 1979. Although the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court overturned the verdict, Kater was convicted again after being tried again in 1986. This verdict once again was overturned and he was retried in 1992. This time the case ended up in a mistrial. Finally, James Kater was found guilty in 1996 and was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. This conviction was upheld upon appeal in 2000.

Left in the Woods to Die: Related Assignment

You will need to read the related crime case study to answer the following questions.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. How did Mary Lou Arruda die in the woods?
 - A. Stab wounds
 - B. Hypothermia
 - C. Strangulation
 - D. Internal bleeding

2. What did five different witnesses see in the area where Mary Lou Arruda disappeared?
 - A. Mary Lou talking to an unknown man.
 - B. A green car driven by an unknown man.
 - C. Mary Lou's bicycle in the trunk of a green car.
 - D. An unknown man on foot following Mary Lou .

3. What crime had James Kater been convicted of in 1969?
 - A. Sexual assault of a 15-year-old girl.
 - B. Theft of a 1976 *Opel* model green car.
 - C. Abduction and assault of a 13-year-old girl.
 - D. Second degree murder of a 18 year-old female.

4. What two pieces of physical evidence were found near Mary Lou's bicycle?
 - A. A cigarette and tire impressions.
 - B. A newspaper and shoe impression.
 - C. A fingerprint and green paint chips.
 - D. A hair strand and dark rimmed glasses.

5. Evidence that helped support the theory that James Kater hit Mary Lou with his car was
 - A. a black mark on the front fender of his car
 - B. blood spatter on the passenger door of his car
 - C. green paint on the back tire of Mary Lou's bicycle
 - D. a large dent on the front fender of Mary Lou's bicycle

Events that occurred in the Mary Lou Arruda Abduction & Murder

1. James Kater hit Mary Lou with his car.
 2. Mary Lou loses consciousness and dies.
 3. Mary Lou was seen riding her bicycle home.
 4. Mary Lou was tied to a tree in a wooded area.
6. The correct sequence of events that occurred in the Mary Lou Arruda abduction and murder as shown above, would be _____, _____, _____ and _____.
7. What was distinctive about the tire track prints found at the crime scene?
8. How were police able to link James Kater's car tires to the tire tracks found at the crime scene?

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*In July 1987, four members of the same family were all shot at close range with a handgun in their old farmhouse in rural Wisconsin. Just as the killer was leaving a fifth family member, Helen Kunz, drove up to the farmhouse. She was then abducted, murdered and her body was dumped elsewhere. A suspect named Chris Jacobs was charged with these murders. Jacobs was identified and charged after tire impressions left on the dirt road beside the victim's farmhouse were found to match the treads of the tires on his vehicle. Strangely, in Jacob's first trial he was acquitted of four counts of murder, while in a second trial he was found guilty of abducting Helen Kunz.*  
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