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GUILTY PLEAS FROM SERIAL KILLER IN MERCED, STANISLAUS COUNTY CASES

A 42 year-old drifter already convicted of murders in Montana and Arkansas pled guilty Tuesday in Merced County Superior Court to murdering two women in Merced and Modesto, in December, 2000, the District Attorneys of Merced and Stanislaus counties announced during a press conference following the pleas on the steps of the old Merced County Courthouse.

Ronald James Ward, Jr. was arraigned, entered pleas and was given two life sentences during a hearing Tuesday afternoon for the December 7, 2000 murder of Jackie Travis, 49, of Merced and the December 30, 2000 murder of Shela Polly, age 33, of Modesto. Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager and Merced County District Attorney Larry Morse II, joined by family members of both slain women and police detectives who worked on their cases, met with reporters after the court proceedings to discuss the cases.

Travis, whose right leg had been partially amputated, was found by a roommate on Dec. 8, 2000. An autopsy showed that she had been beaten and stabbed before being strangled to death in her east Merced apartment. Polly was last seen with Ward early in the morning of December 30, in Modesto where both were applying for work with a temporary labor company. Her partially clothed body, covered by leaves, was found later in the day by a man walking his dog. An autopsy revealed the cause of death to be strangulation and two stab wounds. Saliva recovered from Polly's breast was later linked through DNA to Ward.

Ward had already been found guilty of murder in Montana in the death of Craig Petrich, of Hamilton, Montana. Petrich, 43, had last been seen with Ward on October 5, 2000. His body was found in an off-road area of the Sapphire Mountains in western Montana ten days later. He had been beaten with a rock and shot three times by a single shot rifle, according to Montana authorities.

A DNA match later tied Ward to a high profile murder case in Arkansas. Kristin Laurite, 25, of Scotch Plains, N.J. had been traveling west to a new job in California with her two dogs when she stopped at a rest area in Morrilton, Arkansas on Interstate 40 on August 26, 2000. Her nude body was found the next day near a dirty pond located about 300 yards behind the rest stop. She had been stabbed ten times in the neck and may have been sexually assaulted.

Her murder was front page news in Arkansas where billboards with her photo were posted on the interstate asking "Do You Know Who Killed Me?"

In July of 2005, criminalists with the California Department of Justice entered DNA evidence into a database and later learned that it matched DNA left in Jackie Travis's murder and Kristin Laurite's murder. Ward, who told authorities he was the son of a prostitute and the father of six, was already serving a life sentence for Petrich's murder when the DNA match was discovered. Ward later pled guilty to Kristin Laurite's murder and was given a life sentence to run consecutive to his Montana sentence. He was returned to Montana following his plea in Arkansas, Morse and Fladager said.

In October of last year, Fladager and Morse traveled to Montana to meet with Ward in an effort to convince him to plead guilty to the Travis and Polly murders. "We knew that Ward was responsible for both murders and hoped there might be some shred of conscience left in him that we could appeal to and spare the families of Jackie and Shela the heartache of long, protracted jury trials," Fladager said Tuesday. Fladager was a member of the trial team that convicted Scott Peterson for the murders of his pregnant wife, Laci, and unborn son, Conner, and "knew too well the emotional toll a trial would take on family members."

The prosecutors explained to Ward during a meeting in a maximum security, locked down section of the Montana State Prison located in Deer Lodge that DNA evidence had linked him to both homicides and asked if he would agree to waive extradition and return to California to enter pleas in both cases. At the end of a thirty minute meeting, Ward said he would enter pleas in the murders if prosecutors could guarantee that they would get him in and out of California as quickly as possible. They agreed.

Morse said it was "chilling to be in the same small room with a man we knew had committed four incredibly brutal murders, but both Birgit and I believed it was worth the gamble to resolve these cases and bring some closure to the families without the emotional pain of jury trials."

Ward was transported from Montana by Modesto police officers and booked into Merced County jail on September 10, 2008. He will be returned within the week, Fladager said.

Merced County Superior Court Judge Frank Dougherty handled the arraignment, plea and sentencing. Ward entered no contest pleas to both murders and was sentenced to life without parole. The sentences are to run concurrent to each other, but consecutive to both the Montana and Arkansas prison terms. "This ensures that this depraved individual will never see the light of day as a free man," Fladager said. "We hope that the families of his victims in Montana and Arkansas also will gain some small measure of comfort from today's plea and sentencing. Those victims have been on our minds throughout this process," she added.

Both prosecutors said they intend to contact law enforcement agencies throughout the country asking them to review unsolved homicides in their jurisdictions for possible connections to Ward. "We believe it highly unlikely that Ronald Ward started and stopped killing in 2000," Morse said. "We are afraid there might be more victims out there and are going to work with national DNA databases to see if Ward might be linked to other murders," he added.

FACT SHEET ON THE MURDERS OF JACKIE TRAVIS, SHELA POLLY, KRISTIN LAURITE AND CRAIG PETRICH

***KRISTIN LAURITE** – ON AUGUST 25TH, 2000 KRISTIN LAURITE, 25, OF SCOTCH PLAINS, N.J. WAS TRAVELING WEST ON INTERSTATE 40 THROUGH ARKANSAS TO A NEW JOB IN CALIFORNIA. SHE STOPPED AT A REST AREA NEAR MORRILTON TO EXERCISE HER TWO DOGS. IT WAS THE LAST TIME SHE WAS SEEN ALIVE. THE NEXT DAY HER NUDE BODY WAS FOUND NEAR A DIRTY POND ABOUT 300 YARDS BEHIND THE REST STOP. SHE HAD BEEN STABBED TEN TIMES IN THE NECK AND AUTHORITIES BELIEVE SHE HAD BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED. BILLBOARDS WERE POSTED ON HIGHWAYS THROUGHOUT ARKANSAS SEEKING INFORMATION INTO THE MURDER OF LAURITE. A CALIFORNIA CRIME LAB LINKED WARD'S DNA TO GENETIC MATERIAL LEFT AT THE SCENE OF KRISTIN LAURITE'S MURDER. ON JUNE 12, 2007 WARD PLED IN CONWAY COUNTY ARKANSAS TO MURDER AND RECEIVED A LIFE SENTENCE.

***CRAIG PETRICH** – PETRICH, 43, WAS LIVING IN A TRAILER PARK NEAR HAMILTON, MONTANA WHEN HE WAS LAST SEEN ALIVE ON OCTOBER 5, 2000 IN THE COMPANY OF WARD. WITNESSES SAID THE NEXT DAY WARD BORROWED A GUN. TEN DAYS LATER PETRICH'S BODY WAS DISCOVERED IN AN OFF-ROAD AREA IN THE SAPPHIRE MOUNTAINS OF WESTERN MONTANA. HE HAD BEEN BEATEN WITH A ROCK AND SHOT THREE TIMES WITH A SINGLE SHOT RIFLE, ACCORDING TO RAVALLI COUNTY ATTORNEY GEORGE CORN. WARD WAS CONVICTED OF MURDER IN 2001 , SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON AND IS CURRENTLY SERVING THAT SENTENCE AT DEER LODGE STATE PRISON.

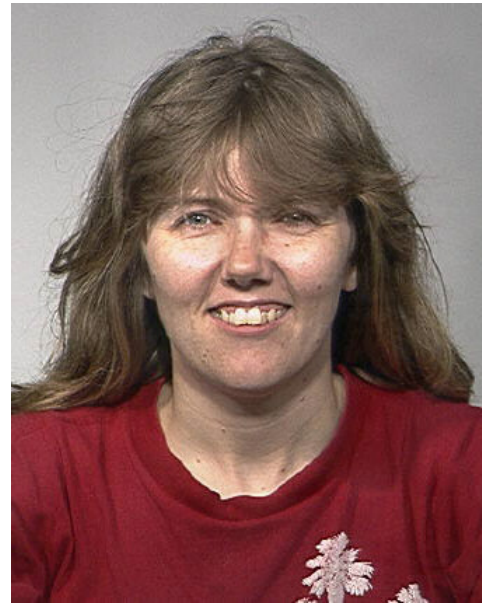
***JACKIE TRAVIS** – TRAVIS, 49, WAS LIVING WITH A ROOMMATE IN AN EAST MERCED APARTMENT IN DECEMBER OF 2000. ON DECEMBER 8, 2000 MERCED POLICE OFFICERS WERE DISPATCHED TO JACKIE'S APARTMENT AFTER HER ROOMMATE REPORTED FINDING HER BODY. INVESTIGATORS FOUND TRAVIS, WHOSE RIGHT LEG HAD BEEN AMPUTATED BELOW THE KNEE, LYING ON A MATTRESS ON THE BEDROOM FLOOR, HER BODY COVERED WITH A QUILT. SHE HAD BEEN BEATEN, STABBED AND STRANGLED. BLOOD WAS FOUND THROUGHOUT THE APARTMENT. AUTHORITIES BELIEVE SHE HAD BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED.

***SHELA POLLY** – IN LATE DECEMBER OF 2000, SHELA POLLY, 33, WAS STAYING AT THE MODESTO GOSPEL MISSION. SHE HAD AN APPOINTMENT EARLY IN THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 30TH TO APPLY FOR WORK AT LABOR READY, WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE OF THE MISSION. AT ABOUT 5:30 RONALD WARD LEFT THE MOTEL ROOM HE WAS SHARING WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND, HATTIE BAKER, AND WALKED TO LABOR READY TO APPLY FOR WORK. AN EMPLOYEE OF LABOR READY REPORTEDLY SAW SHELA

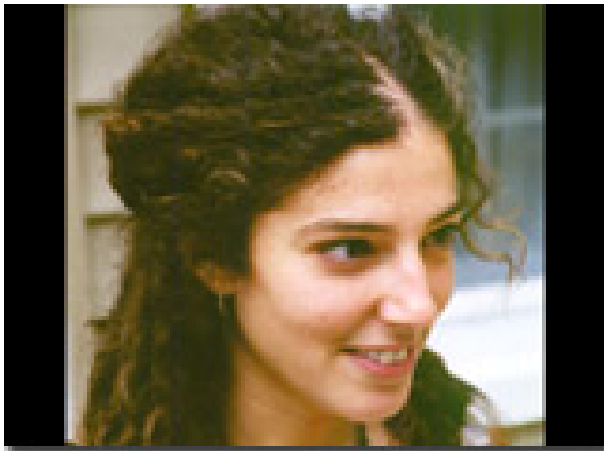
POLLY TALKING WITH WARD BETWEEN 7:30 AND 8:30 A.M. AT 11:30 A.M. A MAN WALKING HIS DOG FOUND SHELA POLLY'S BODY COVERED WITH LEAVES AT THE BASE OF AN OAK TREE ON THE BANK OF DRY CREEK. SHE WAS PARTIALLY UNCLOTHED. AN AUTOPSY REVEALED SHE HAD BEEN STABBED AND STRANGLER. IN MAY 2003, THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE REPORTED THAT SALIVA EVIDENCE RECOVERED FROM SHELA POLLY'S BREAST CONTAINED DNA MATCHING WARD'S. THE PROBABILITY OF A RANDOM MATCH IS 1 IN 43 BILLION FOR CAUCASIANS.



**JACQUELYN TRAVIS
MERCED**



**SHELA POLLY
MODESTO**



**KRISTIN LAURITE
ARKANSAS**



**CHRIS PETRICH
MONTANA**

