

13-year vigil of fear eases in Illinois town

Drifter in Texas says he killed family of 4

By Flynn McRoberts

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

INA, Ill.—On a chilly autumn night 13 years ago, Elaine Dardeen was bound, gagged and beaten to death inside her family's mobile home, which sat by itself on a wedge of land between farm fields and the Union Pacific railroad tracks that run through this tiny southern Illinois town.

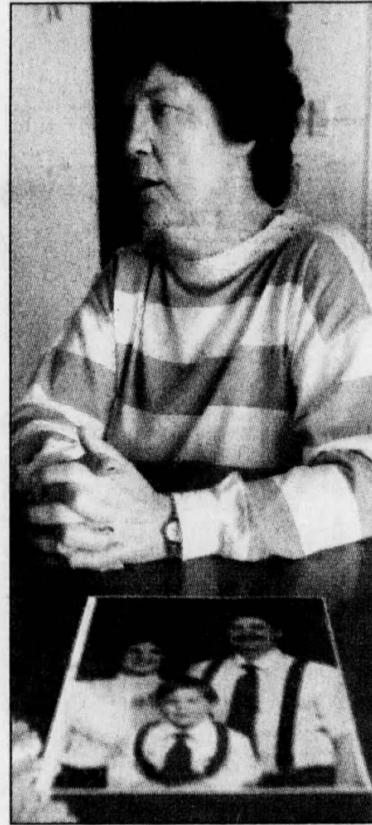
The trauma of the beating forced Dardeen, who was seven months pregnant, to give birth, and her killer then clubbed to death the newborn girl and Dardeen's 3-year-old son, Pete.

The attacker cleaned up the bloody mess, tucking Elaine and her children in bed. Two days later, hunters in a nearby field found the body of Elaine's husband, Keith, shot in the head and his genitals mutilated.

The horrific details of the crime have haunted Ina ever since, as family members and the town's 500 residents lived with the possibility that the killer might still be among them. Police exhausted a puzzling array of theories—marital infidelity, drugs, gambling, even devil worship—and came up empty-handed.

Then a former carnival worker and drifter named Tommy Lynn Sells started talking.

As it turned out, it wasn't years of police work that stopped Sells. It was a 10-year-old girl who survived a throat-slashing attack near the Rio Grande town of Del Rio, Texas, on New Year's Eve. The child gave a description that two days later led authorities to Sells, who had roamed the country since he was a teen before moving to Del Rio in



Tribune photo by Phil Greer

Joeann Dardeen talks about the 1987 slaying of her son Keith, his wife, Elaine, their son, Pete, and a newborn.

1998 and getting married.

Among a litany of at least 10 killings, Sells, a self-proclaimed penitent, recently confessed to slaying the Dardeens.

Dozens of law enforcement agencies nationwide have contacted authorities in Texas where Sells is jailed in attempts to clear long-cold homicide cases, as residents in towns scattered from Idaho to Tennessee wait to hear whether local

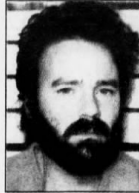
SEE CONFESSION, BACK PAGE

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FROM PAGE ONE

Slaying suspect appears after years of mystery

Since the Dardeen family died brutally in 1987, the town of Ina, Ill., has lived in the killer's shadow. Now suspect Tommy Lynn Sells (right) is talking.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Nightmares can be explained by Sells.

"It's like a hole in people's psyche that has to be closed," said Tom Vinger, spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety. "It's really touched a nerve nationwide."

In Ina and surrounding communities, hopes that a butcher has been caught compete with suspicions that Sells' confession might be the sick braggadocio of a criminal.

Mindful of previous cases of false confessions, Jefferson County authorities say it will be "at least 60 days" before they decide whether to charge Sells in the Dardeen case.

But Texas authorities say they are nearly certain.

"There definitely seems to be a sincere desire on his part to try to right some of the wrongs, as much as he can," Vinger said. "He gave such specific details there. . . . Our guys are convinced that he's a prime suspect in that case."

So is Keith Dardeen's mother. "I'm just sure that he is," said Joann Dardeen, who called police almost every day throughout the years of fruitless leads. Now she desperately needs an explanation. "I have always wanted to know every detail," she said. "Some people may think that's gory. But when someone does something to [my family], I want to know why."

Yet her daughter, Anita Knapp, still can't rest.

"I have no comfort with this guy," she said of Sells through teary eyes. "I am absolutely terrified. My husband says, 'Why are you afraid? He's in jail.' Well, then why am I so nervous?"

It could be because local investigators had never heard of Sells before his confession. They had even warned family members not to be surprised if one of their own was responsible.

Instead, the prime suspect for authorities is now a man born in Oakland, Calif., whose family later moved to St. Louis. He reportedly left home at 13 and for the next two decades wandered the country working as a day laborer, carry and mechanic while—to believe his confessions—killing occasionally as he went.

Despite his admission in the Dardeen case, some details don't make sense to those who knew the family. Sells reportedly told investigators that Keith Dardeen met him at a truck stop and took him home to meet the family.

But according to Bill Reed, a longtime friend of Keith, it is hard to believe that the Dardeens were so open to a stranger. The family had only lived in Ina about a year before the murders and were thinking of moving out because they were worried about violence.

Months before the Dardeens were killed, a 10-year-old girl had been raped and killed not far away. A suspect in that case was later caught, but Keith had become so nervous about crime that he once refused to let a young girl inside the trailer to make a phone call, Reed said.

"If he wouldn't let a young girl in to use the phone, he wouldn't let a 22-year-old man in," Reed said referring to Sells, now 35.

Whatever happened to the Dardeens, the memories of their deaths are as vivid as ever in Ina, particularly for their former landlords, Lloyd and JoAnn Settle.

Just days ago, the Settles were talking to their older daughter, Sheila, now a college student. For the first time, she told them how she had been so frightened for months after the murders that she would climb out of bed, turn the light on in the bathroom and read until all hours of the night.

"We didn't even know it," said JoAnn Settle, who for years was afraid to talk publicly about the case "for fear they'd kill us."

"I could kick myself in the rear," her husband said, for worrying about clues to the crime that he might have missed and not recognizing that his young daughter needed psychological help to cope with the trauma.

Like the Settles, many Ina residents want to believe the killer of the Dardeens is now behind bars, but they are not entirely convinced.

"I hope they've got the man who did it," said Bryce Heard, owner of Ina Antiques and Collectibles. "But my feeling is he just might be trying to sell his story."

Like others in the community, the Settles are somewhat torn over the news of Sells' confession.

"We're just overjoyed," JoAnn Settle said before her husband broke in.

"Not overjoyed. Glad," he insisted. "This had gone on for so long that I'd given up hope that there would ever be any resolution. . . . The past few years, we figured it was better forgotten about."

Over the years, the Dardeens' surviving family members have endured a gauntlet of police theories about the crime. First, it was that



Lloyd Settle, who was the landlord of the Dardeen family, says he and his family have had a hard time coping with the 1987 slaying and the fear that followed. But news of a suspect in custody has helped.

Keith had killed his wife and children, since his car was gone and initially he couldn't be found.

"Your brother has done this. Where is he?" Knapp remembers one investigator demanding.

Once his body was found by the hunters, Joann Dardeen recalled, detectives wanted to know if her son was gay because of suspicions that his severed genitals might suggest homosexual overtones to the crime.

"No," she insisted—the same response she gave to questions about whether she thought Keith or Elaine might have been cheating on their spouse.

Because the infant had been killed, investigators also brought in an expert on cuts. But that person found no convincing signs of such a motive.

A bit of marijuana found in the

mobile home contributed to speculation, later dismissed, that the killings might have been related to drug dealing.

Investigators even speculated that Keith might have gotten into trouble with gambling, after police found a stack of papers with sports scores on them.

"I said, 'Are you kidding?' He wouldn't let go of a 50-cent piece," Joann Dardeen recalled. "He took cheap pop [to the water treatment plant where he worked] and sold it for 50 cents a can, and saved it for Peter for his college fund."

Despite hundreds of leads, nothing shook loose over the years, even when the case was featured on a 1999 episode of "America's Most Wanted."

Then Sells was accused of attacking 13-year-old Kaylene Harris, the daughter of an acquaintance, and

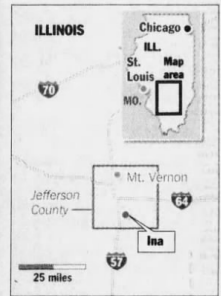
Kaylene's 10-year-old friend, Krystal Surlis. Both girls' throats were slashed in the attack and Kaylene died. But Krystal survived by playing dead in the Harris' mobile home and led authorities to Sells.

After his arrest, he told authorities he had found religion and wanted to ease the pain of the families of his victims. He began confessing to unsolved murders, including the 1985 slaying of a mother and child in Forsyth, Mo., the throat-slashing of a fellow drifter in Tucson in 1988 and the murder of a 14-year-old girl in Lexington, Ky., last May. To date, the only crimes he has been formally charged with are those in Texas and Kentucky.

For all the anguish in the Dardeen slayings, small acts of kindness have helped surviving family members cope. Shortly after



Keith Dardeen, his wife, Elaine, their son, Pete, and a newborn died in a brutal attack that a man in Texas has recently said he did while he was a drifter.



Sells confessed, Knapp found a manila envelope in her mailbox. Inside the envelope was the local newspaper and a note from the mail carrier: "I did not want you frightened when you opened the mailbox. There's a picture of that man who killed your brother."

Texas and other authorities are being methodical, in part to avoid a repeat of 1983 when a drifter named Henry Lee Lucas falsely confessed to hundreds of murders and later recanted.

Asked why Jefferson County authorities thought Sells' confession was legitimate, State's Atty. Gary Duncan replied: "That value judgment has not been made. We're all aware that people admit things for all sorts of reasons."

Even if Sells' confession checks out, there is no guarantee he will be tried in Illinois. If Texas sentences him to death, it might be redundant to charge him in Illinois, particularly since Illinois has a moratorium on the death penalty.

Still, Duncan holds out hope that Sells, if he is responsible for the Dardeens' slayings, will be tried in Illinois.

"The need for this community is to have the person who killed the Dardeens brought to justice and brought to justice here," he said.

"Hardly a week goes by when someone doesn't ask me, 'Are we getting anywhere with the Dardeen murders?' There's a tremendous need for people here to be able to say to themselves, 'We know what happened to them.'"

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