



THE SEARCH OF A LIFETIME

In 1952, a vicious double murder at Crater Lake National Park stunned the nation. The FBI and the Oregon State Police came up empty-handed. Then, 26 years ago, the granddaughter of one of the victims picked up the case.

As a child growing up in Southern California in the 1950s and '60s, Alice Simms occasionally heard her mother mention a startling fact: her father, Albert Jones, Alice's grandfather, had been murdered in Crater Lake National Park, in southern Oregon, in 1952, when she was 28 and Alice was a year and a half old. The killers had never been caught.

"She never talked about it in great detail, how or why it happened," Simms says. "Maybe she didn't want to relive it. I always regretted not talking to her about it." Her mother passed away in 1993 still not knowing who had killed her father.

The next year, Simms woke up one morning with a sudden determination to figure out what had happened. "I don't know why," she says. "I just thought, I have to do something about it. I'm sure it was my mother contacting me." She asked her father if he knew anything about the murder. As a matter of fact, he said, he had recently found something among his wife's belongings that might help.

That afternoon, she drove to his house and he handed Simms a manila envelope. Inside were three old newspaper clippings about the crime. There were also two sealed envelopes addressed to newspapers who had published stories about the case. Each envelope contained a typewritten letter written by her mother, asking if they had any more information. They had never been mailed.

"My mother, God love her, but she was a procrastinator," Simms says. Raising seven children was consuming most of her attention and energy. "She probably thought she had mailed them and didn't hear back, and that was that."

The discovery of the unsent letters launched a quarter century of dogged research that would take Simms, now 69, deep into one of the biggest unsolved mysteries in the Pacific Northwest. The search introduced her to descendants of the original investigators and of the potential murderers, with their connections to other horrific crimes and, bizarrely, an Oscar-winning film.

"I'm doing this to say, No, Mom, you did not come to a dead end," Simms says. "I know you are here, and I hope I can find some answers."



ANNIE CREEK

On Saturday, July 19, 1952, the clear sky above Crater Lake National Park was almost as blue as the water. It was the height of the summer tourist season, and the park was full of thousands of people who had come to marvel at the views of the deepest and purest lake in the country.

Around two in the afternoon, two cars entered the park through its southern entrance. The drivers, Jack Vaughan and Frank Eberlein, ran an auto parts firm in Klamath Falls, 50 miles south of the park. Eberlein's 13-year-old son, Alan, rode with his father. Their plan was to meet up with Albert Jones and Charles Culhane, sales managers for United Motors Services, in Union Creek, just outside the park's east entrance, and spend the day sightseeing and fishing.

Three and a half miles past the entrance, Vaughan and Eberlein were surprised to see their friends' dark green 1951 Pontiac sedan parked at a viewpoint over a deep canyon carved by Annie Creek. The front doors were open, the keys were in the ignition, and luggage and suit coats were in the back seat. They pulled over and waited, assuming Jones and Culhane were nearby. Out of curiosity, Alan stuck his hand through the Pontiac's grill to touch the radiator. "It was hot enough so I yanked my hand off it," he later told a reporter. "The car hadn't been there too long."

When the men still hadn't returned after 45 minutes, Vaughan and Frank Eberlein drove back to the ranger station, leaving Alan in the Pontiac with a magazine in case their friends showed up. While he waited, the boy heard the crunch of gravel as a vehicle pulled in off the road from the north. He caught a glimpse of a dark-colored car as it raced back onto the highway.

The park rangers who arrived at the scene assumed the men had either gotten lost in the forest or somehow fallen into the canyon. Two rangers climbed down into the canyon to search. Twelve members of a trail crew were sent into the trees. The search lasted until sunset—food and bedrolls were lowered to the men in the canyon—and continued throughout the next day.

By Monday, the Oregon State Police and the FBI had joined the investigation. (National parks are under federal jurisdiction.) Around 1 p.m., in the forest half a mile south of the road, the trail crew found the bodies of Jones and Culhane, about 48 hours after they had last been seen.

The men lay five feet apart, both gagged and shoeless. Their watches were missing and their wallets were empty. Each man had been shot in the head at close range.

The missing watches, shoes, and cash—the men were believed to have been carrying about \$300, or about \$3,000 today—suggested a robbery gone wrong. But a number of strange details about the crime scene puzzled investigators from the start.

There was the car, parked in the open at a heavily trafficked spot and left as if its owners would be back in a minute. Park records showed that the Pontiac had passed through the southern entrance at 1 p.m. Saturday, but the coroner estimated that the time of death was around 4 p.m. What had happened during those three hours?

Both men were lying on their backs, gagged with their ties and what turned out to be parts of Culhane's undershirt, torn in half. But why did both men have their dress shirts on, and why were their dentures in their shirt pockets? Their socks were clean, so their shoes must have been taken off where they were killed. Jones's shoes were found nearby, but Culhane's size 9 ½ wingtips were missing.

Autopsies found that Jones's skull was fractured, and both men had been struck in the groin area hard enough to leave bruises. The men were solidly built, so the evidence of a struggle suggested that there had been more than one killer. Investigators found two brass cartridges on the ground, shot by a 7.65 mm automatic pistol of foreign manufacture. Why hadn't the killers bothered to pick them up?

News of the shocking double murder made papers as far away as New York and Chicago. The Klamath Falls *Herald and News* ran a picture of the bodies on its front page.

Soon the FBI, the Oregon State Police, the Klamath County Sheriff's Office, and the National Park Service were involved in the case. The FBI questioned over 200 suspects, examined 180 pistols, and tracked down hundreds of cars that had entered the park on Saturday through the license plate numbers recorded at the entrance.

There were numerous leads, at least at first. A couple camping nearby reported seeing two "dirty, unkempt men" in a late-model car near the crime scene. In the weeks after the bodies were found, someone tried to sell a pair of men's wingtips—size 9 ½—at a barber shop in La Grande, Oregon, about 400 miles from the park. On August 2, a person driving a Chrysler sedan with Oregon plates used Jones's credit card to buy gas in Colton, California. A reclusive prospector who had shot and killed a state police trooper the month before was an early suspect, but he was found to have been far away from the park at the time of the murders.

One of the most promising leads started with a phone call. An hour before the search party stumbled on the crime scene, a man called the only auto garage in Fort Klamath, Oregon. He gave a name and a local address and told the garage owner's wife that his friend Al Jones was in the hospital in Medford. He asked if they could pick up Jones's green 1951 Pontiac sedan where it was parked at Annie Creek, adding that the keys were in the ignition. If they could bring it back to the garage, he said, Jones would come pick it up when he got out of the hospital.

The woman recognized Jones's name and immediately called the local authorities. They identified the call as coming from the lobby of the railroad depot two blocks from police headquarters. But when they dashed over, the caller was gone. A baggage handler said he had seen a man wearing a gaudy red and yellow sport shirt on the phone. Two fingerprints were found on the phone, but no matches ever turned up. The name and address were both fake.

A former local sheriff told the *Herald and News* that, after inspecting the scene and examining the evidence, he was sure the killers were "young punks...all excited and probably hopped up on beer or marijuana." Whoever committed the murders, the paper wrote, "the case suggests this rather paradoxical conclusion: the killer is either very stupid or very clever."

Despite what became one of the largest dragnets in Oregon history, every lead hit a wall or fizzled out. Because it was murder, the case was never closed. But as the years passed, whoever had killed Jones and Culhane walked free.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Simms's first step was to talk to anyone she could find who was connected with the case. She didn't have a computer or access to the then-rudimentary internet, so she turned to directory assistance. Within days, she had contacted two local newspapers and the regional FBI office.

Simms also found Frank Eberlein, who was still living in southern Oregon, by dialing directory assistance. "His wife answered, and when I said who I was, she screamed, 'Frank, you'll never guess who's on the phone!'" Simms says. Eberlein, then 86, was happy to help. He had received many phone calls from people claiming to have information about the murders, he said, but none from anyone as close to the case as Simms.

"He was the kindest person," she says. Now deceased, Eberlein told her that her grandfather had touched his life deeply. He said that when he was being interviewed by the FBI, agents told him that members of a "subversive organization" implicated in a notorious crime had been placed in Medford at the time of the murders. In his opinion, the men had been killed while he, his son, and Vaughan had been



waiting for them at their car. ("But then how couldn't they have heard the shots?" Simms says.)

A few months into her investigation, Simms's husband was watching the CBS *Sunday Morning Show* and noticed the name Culhane in the credits, the same last name as the other victim. He alerted his wife and she called the network and left a voice message. Five minutes later, her phone rang. It was David Culhane, Charles Culhane's youngest son. He didn't know much about the case. His mother had been besieged by calls from investigators and others at the time of the murders, he said. Simms sent Culhane the information she had gathered but he wasn't interested in pursuing the case. It was a frustrating dead end. "I thought, If only I had the resources you have at your fingertips..." Simms says.

On her days off from work as a clerical supervisor for the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services, Simms rose at 5 a.m. and started working on the case. She called and wrote to anyone who might have information or who could help get the word out about her investigation: reporters, investigators, politicians.

"I am racing the clock here," she wrote to the producers of the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries*. Everyone she had contacted was of retirement age or older, and she was afraid that "anyone that can confirm my suspicions will be dead before I can find them." She filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for the FBI's case file and kept detailed notes on everything.

As she worked, Simms's thoughts kept returning to her mother and how the death of her father affected her. "I felt her loss growing up," Simms says. "I think it changed the whole trajectory of her life." Simms's mother was convinced that, had he lived, her father would have been a huge success, maybe a millionaire. "If that had been the case, he would have been able to help her a lot financially" as she raised a large family.

Shortly after Simms launched her solo investigation, David Bergmann, a retired IT procurer with the Oregon Department of Transportation in Salem, read a newspaper article about her efforts. Bergmann's father, Lawrence, had been an investigator on the case for the Oregon State Police. "It always bothered my dad that they never solved it," Bergmann says.

Bergmann contacted Simms and offered to help. She was thrilled. Bergmann quickly found out how serious she was. "She is one tenacious woman," he says. "She gets a lead and she's on it like a bloodhound. She's not afraid to talk to anyone."

Bergmann sent her crime scene photos his father had taken and followed up with contacts for her. "I can't give him enough credit," Simms says. "He's essential."

One day, Simms received a phone call from a journalist who had heard about her investigation. She said it had caught her eye because her family name was Sims. "Have you ever heard of the Mountain Murder Mob?" she asked.

AN ACADEMY AWARD

On the night of March 9, 1953, in Burbank, California, a wealthy 64-year-old widow named Mabel Monohan heard her doorbell ring. At the door was a woman named Barbara Graham. She said her car had broken down and begged to use Monohan's phone. But when Monohan opened the door, four men pushed in behind Graham. Two of them, Jack Santo and Emmet Perkins, were the ringleaders of a loosely knit gang nicknamed the Mountain Murder Mob for a series of violent crimes they'd committed throughout California. That night would be added to the list.

There was a rumor that Monohan had \$100,000 in a safe in her house, but the men couldn't find it. Monohan wouldn't stop screaming, so Graham smashed her in the face with the butt of a pistol until she was sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood. The group left empty-handed. The

gang's safecracker felt guilty enough that he called for an ambulance later that night, but he gave the wrong address, and Monohan died from her injuries. A few weeks later, the safecracker was caught by police and turned state's evidence. Shortly thereafter, he was kidnapped from his home at gunpoint by two men that his wife identified as Santo and Perkins.

Eventually, Santo, Perkins, and Graham were caught and convicted of the Monohan murder. Santo and Perkins were also indicted for an even more horrifying crime in California the previous October. A grocer named Guard Young was driving to get ice cream with his three daughters and a neighbor boy, ranging in age from three to seven, when he was carjacked and robbed. The attackers beat all five with a tire iron and stuffed them in the trunk. When the car was found 17 hours later, everyone was dead except the youngest girl, age three, barely alive at the bottom of the pile.

Santo, Perkins, and Graham were executed on June 3, 1955, in the gas chamber at San Quentin State Prison. Graham was only the third woman to be legally executed in California. A sympathetic version of her story—she was a former prostitute and mother of three—was made into the film *I Want to Live!*, which won Susan Hayward the Academy Award for best actress in 1958. (It was remade for TV in 1983 starring Lindsay Wagner of *Bionic Woman* fame.)

THE HIGH SCHOOL REUNION

The deeper Simms and Bergmann dug, the more convinced they were that Santo and Perkins were the killers of Jones and Culhane. "There was just so much circumstantial evidence," Simms says. "Their MOs are perfect. They had a history of robberies and murders, and they almost always gagged their victims and then shot them."

Santo also had connections to central Oregon. His brother lived in Medford, where he and his wife were socialites often mentioned in the local newspaper. Jack Santo was suspected in a number of burglary cases in the Medford area.

In June 1998, Bergmann called Simms and said, "You're not going to believe this." He had just bumped into a former high school classmate named Bill Santo, who lived in Idaho, at a motel in Klamath Falls. In passing, Bergmann told him about the research he had been doing and who their prime suspects were. He got a call later that evening in his motel room from Bill, asking Bergmann to come down and tell him more.

"He looked at me real funny and said, 'That was my uncle,'" Bergmann says. "I just about had a heart attack."

When Simms contacted Bill Santo, he told her his uncle had been the black sheep of the family, but his grisly crimes weren't discussed at home. Bill Santo was hesitant to share more.

"I think he wanted [Simms] to keep it quiet because of their kids," Bergmann says. He remembers seeing advertisements for Earnest Santo's "rock shop" in Medford's Mail Tribune. He noticed they became less and less frequent, then stopped altogether. "I think the family moved out of the area, they were so embarrassed."

Simms does her best not to put pressure on anybody who is hesitant to participate. "I've tried to be respectful," Simms says. "I decided early on I wasn't going to involve anyone who didn't want to be involved."

THE MAN MISSING A FINGER

In 2000, five years after Simms filed the FOIA request, the FBI report on the case arrived in the mail—all 1,400 pages. Much of it was redacted, since it was still an open case. But two names jumped off the page: Santo and Perkins. The FBI had considered them suspects for the same



reasons Simms and Bergmann did: “because of the viciousness of their crimes and their connections to the area.”

“All the members of this gang as well as known associates have been questioned and their movements during the pertinent period checked out in an effort to connect them with the Crater Lake case,” the report read. Simms found numerous examples where Santo had lied during interviews, including the date he’d attended his mother’s funeral and details about when he had visited the park at other times.

“That’s the most convincing to me,” she says, “the way he trips himself up with his own words.”

The FBI interviewed Santo and Perkins at San Quentin two days before their execution. But both men denied any involvement in the Crater Lake murders up to the end, and the agency didn’t dig any deeper.

“There is so much contradiction in the case records,” Simms says. There were discrepancies in dates and other details, as well as whether or not the agency actually interviewed everyone who’d entered the park that day, based on license plate numbers recorded at the gates. (“If you had a reentry permit, they would just wave you in,” she says.)

“Oh my goodness, they missed so much during the investigation,” Simms says. “Of course they gave up on it.”

Besides, she says, Santo and Perkins had already been convicted of a murder and sentenced to death. Trying to tie them to the Crater Lake murders would only complicate things. “The FBI didn’t want to muddy the waters,” she says.

Simms and Bergmann did agree with the FBI on two things: there was probably more than one killer, and the murders likely started as a spur-of-the-moment robbery.

“I’ve always believed it was random,” Simms says. She thinks Santo and Perkins entered the park through its western entrance, from Medford, and happened upon her grandfather and Culhane. “They were well-dressed, in a fancy new car. They took them to a remote area to rob them and ended up killing them so they couldn’t be identified.”

“Alice’s grandfather was a big, feisty guy,” Bergmann says. “I think when they went to tie him up, he fought against them, and they shot him. Then they had to shoot the other guy.” When the killers came back for the victims’ car, Frank Eberlein’s car was already there with Alan in the back seat, so they took off.

With Bergmann’s help, Simms managed to get a copy of the report his father had written for the Oregon State Police. The document had been redacted by hand instead of photocopied. “I could hold it up to the light and see what had been crossed out,” she says with a laugh. There were some new details about the case, but nothing definitive.

The report named Lincoln Linse, a Portland accountant who in 1952 had a summer job driving a delivery truck in the park. On the day of the murder, he said, he was heading to Crater Lake Lodge when he saw two men leading two others into the woods at the Annie Creek pull-off. As he drove past, one of the men being led off made a discreet hand signal in the shape of a gun. Around a bend in the road, Linse saw a black Pontiac coupe parked on the shoulder.

As he drove around the park that day and the next, Linse said, he kept crossing paths with two “scruffy-looking” men who glared at him repeatedly. Once, they briefly blocked his truck with their black Pontiac when he stopped for gas. One of them had a tattoo of a girl on his forearm and was missing a finger. A week later, Linse saw what he thought was the same car near Medford. He said he’d contacted the FBI several times, but nobody had returned his calls.

In 2002, a local college student named Cheryl Ousey was giving a presentation at the Klamath County Museum on a research paper she had written about the case. When she finished, a man in the audience walked up to the guest register and studied the names intently. One of Ousey’s friends later told her she’d noticed the man was missing a finger.

When Ousey told Linse about it two days later, he asked

which finger it was. He had never told anyone that particular detail. It was the same finger.

A RACE AGAINST TIME

Bergmann says that his father hinted he knew more than what ended up in the state police report: “He told me, ‘I’ve got a pretty good idea who those SOB’s were who did that, but I can’t prove it.’ He wouldn’t say who because he wasn’t sure.”

Of all the alternate theories—the caller in the colorful shirt, the nine-fingered man—Simms thinks the simplest explanation holds the truth: a pair of killers and a spontaneous robbery gone wrong. “I’m 99.9 percent sure it was Santo and Perkins,” she says. “If it wasn’t them, it was someone connected to the gang.”

She continues to try to track down relatives and descendants of the two men through websites like Ancestry and Genealogy.com. She’s encouraged by the 2018 arrest of the Golden State Killer, who was found using DNA evidence cross-referenced through an online database of genetic data from companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe. (One study found that this technique, using an anonymous DNA sample and basic information like a suspect’s rough age, could narrow an identity search to fewer than 20 people out of 1.3 million.)

Simms found one woman related to Santo who told her that there were dark rumors in her family for years.

Bergmann, who’s 78, says he’d like to hire a private investigator, ideally one with FBI connections. That could give them access to the unredacted files in the agency’s Portland office, as well as to the material items left from the investigation. “I know they have fingernail clippings, clothing, wallets, maybe bloodstains—enough that with today’s technology, they might be able to get some DNA,” he says. Bergmann has searched the internet for watches matching those taken from the victims. He also has a Walther pistol—7.65 mm, like the murder weapon—left by his father. He doesn’t know how his father came to own it. “Dad had that gun for a long time, but he never said anything about it,” he says. “I always wanted to have it looked at.”

Simms is confident that someone out there has the missing pieces of the puzzle that will identify **the killers of her grandfather** conclusively. It’s just a question of getting the word out. It helps that interest in true-crime stories is surging, whether through podcasts, Netflix series, or news of other cold cases solved by citizen sleuths. So many connections have already come through luck and serendipity, often from people reading about the case and reaching out to her directly. “If we get the word out there, somebody is going to come forward,” she says.

In the meantime, Simms continues to race against the clock in a more personal way. The longer she works on the case, the more she finds that people who were involved have died. Alan Eberlein, now 82, is the only central figure still alive. Simms knows that she and Bergmann don’t have many years left themselves.

Now retired, Simms spends most of her time caring for her grandchildren, an activity she loves and that has become even more consuming in the time of COVID-19. She never knew her grandfather in person, but she feels that her research has created a special connection to him.

“Maybe it’s too personal, maybe I’m too close,” she says. “But over these last 26 years, I feel I’ve had an opportunity to get to know what a kind and generous person he was. I think of all the other people who never knew how great he was. That trickles down like a waterfall.” ■

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