

ROLLING'S LIFE HOLDS CLUES TO KILLINGS; REVENGE AGAINST HIS FATHER AND EX-WIFE MAY HAVE SENT HIM ON A MISSION TO MURDER.

Feb. 20, 1994 | The Orlando Sentinel

By Jim Leusner

GAINESVILLE - Louisiana drifter Danny Rolling takes his place among the likes of Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy, serial killers who terrorized America.

Committing five murders over three days, Rolling becomes the latest in a string of mysterious killers who reveled in the power or sexual satisfaction they derived from killing.

"We used to say they got the thrill of inflicting pain on the victims," said Bill Hagerty, a retired FBI agent from Jacksonville who interviewed and studied 15 serial killers for the agency, including Bundy and Gerald Stano. "But in a majority of them, it's the reaction of the victims - the fear in their eyes."

In a chilling account of the crimes released Tuesday after Rolling pleaded guilty to five student murders, Alachua State Attorney Rod Smith portrayed the 39-year-old Louisiana career criminal as a stealth-like intruder. He dominated, terrorized and finally stabbed his victims, then posed their bodies before leaving their apartments.

Smith said Rolling confessed to investigators and cellmates at various times during the past 13 months. He admits that he bound his four female victims' mouths and hands with duct tape, cut off their clothes and raped three of them. He also stabbed to death a male student. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

Alachua Public Defender Rick Parker contends Rolling is mentally ill and was at the time of the August 1990 slayings. He is expected to present extensive testimony about his client's mental health, his dysfunctional family life and abuse as a child. He will try to convince a jury and Judge Stan Morris, who are considering punishment for Rolling, that the killer deserves a life sentence.

Abuse colored his youth

Much about Rolling's early life remains sealed in court records. In records made public on the case, Rolling's acquaintances and cellmates paint a conflicting, sometimes pathetic picture of a high-school dropout, underachiever and loner who never could satisfy a strict father, a retired Shreveport, La., police lieutenant.

They also show a man devastated by a divorce, isolated from his daughter for 16 years, repeatedly rejected by other women and who fell in love with the outlaw lifestyle. At times, he found solace in religion and singing country music to friends. Other times, it was alcohol and drugs.

He could be a daring burglar or a brash armed robber who foraged for money and cars to continue his flight, only to confess when apprehended.

One friend, who asked not to be identified for privacy reasons, said Rolling grew up an unwanted child, abused by his father, James. Rolling's mother wrote to a judge in an Ocala robbery case that Rolling was abused by his father, whom she said was mentally ill.

The friend said that Rolling, around age 16, once threw a band instrument in school. When he returned home, he got into a fight with James. Rolling was handcuffed by the father, who called police and had his son taken to a juvenile detention center. He did not see his family for two weeks, the friend said.

"Danny used to sit and cry about it all the time," the friend said. "He said his whole life was ruined by it. He said that was the beginning of his whole life going down."

There was another traumatic event yet to come. Rolling married at age 20 but was divorced three years later. The friend said Rolling was pained because he claimed his wife was unfaithful and that she would not let him see his daughter after the divorce.

Rolling's immediate family has declined to discuss the case.

His aunt, Jeanette Caughey, told investigators he was a good child until he "went off the deep end" after his divorce.

In fact some investigators say the women killed in Gainesville were chosen because they resembled Rolling's ex-wife, a petite brunette.

Convicted murderer Bobby Lewis, a Rolling cellmate who has acted as an intermediary between Gainesville investigators and Rolling, said in an interview with the Independent Florida Alligator newspaper that Rolling was like a "werewolf" who watched the apartments of his victims for hours or days. Lewis relayed a detailed account of the crime scenes, remarkably similar to the one Smith read in court.

Rolling decided years ago while in prison that he wanted to kill eight people, Lewis said, and seek revenge against his ex-wife and father. Lewis said Rolling wants to cooperate with the FBI in studying serial killers.

Several of the Gainesville women had their nipples removed or slashed. Hagerty said such attacks on the breast typically show hatred of women and resentment of the nurturing and loving the attacker never received.

One victim, Christa Hoyt, was decapitated and her head placed on a bookshelf. Her body and those of three others were posed, which investigators said was to shock or convey messages to investigators.

In the weeks before the killings, according to task force reports made public last year, Rolling dated two women in Sarasota, but both broke off relationships. Experts say that killings by serial killers often are triggered by a "precipitating event" that can bring deep-seated anger to the surface.

Killers follow patterns

Clues to the development of a serial killer can be traced as far back as the early months after birth, Hagerty said. Often, there is little bonding between child and mother, years of continuing abuse and fantasies that involve killing people.

Dr. Kathleen Heide, a nationally recognized homicide expert at the University of South Florida in Tampa, has studied 100 murderers, including a dozen serial killers. They often come from abusive homes, never

measure up to their parents' standards, do not have successful careers and have poor relationships with women, she said.

"They attempt relationships with women," said Heide, a psychotherapist and criminologist. "They don't work out . . . The rage is pushed down, and it is taken out on other people. It's not unusual for a person to displace it on a person who resembles (the focus of) their rage."

Heide says there are four types of serial killers:

Psychotics, such as the ones who kill because they hear voices;

Mission-oriented, who target victims from groups like prostitutes or gays because of differing moral views;

Hedonistic, who are thrill-seekers and derive pleasure from hurting others;

Power-control types, who enjoy torturing victims and having control of life and death. She said some killers actually have both hedonistic and power-control traits, and Rolling may fit into both categories.

But what made Rolling kill won't be understood, Heide said, until he talks at length to experts.

She noted that as children, many serial killers have three common traits that show developing anger and anxiety: bed-wetting, the setting of fires and the mutilation of animals. And if the problems are not identified and treated, they can progress into dangerous, violent fantasies about killing.

In two instances, Rolling broke into an apartment and quickly subdued and killed a victim while another slept nearby. That, Hagerty said, often indicates that the attacker is an experienced murderer.

In fact, Lewis said Rolling told him he also killed a woman, her father and nephew in a 1989 triple-murder in Shreveport after stalking the woman. Rolling has not been charged in those cases. Investigators say those killings were similar to the Gainesville crime scenes.

Is he a lesson for society?

Rolling went on the run after shooting his father in the head during an argument in May 1990. The two argued over putting the windows up in a car as it began to rain. Rolling's father fired shots in the air during the dispute.

Moments later, Rolling came in the house, yelled: "Old man, you want to shoot it out?" and fired. Rolling fled to a neighbor's home, cried, took some money and left after holding them at gunpoint, police said.

That then began Rolling's flight to Kansas City, Kan., and subsequent trek to Florida, where he lived under the name Michael Kennedy in Tallahassee, Sarasota, Gainesville and Tampa before his arrest in September 1990 for robbing an Ocala grocery store. He is serving four life sentences for a string of robberies and burglaries in Tampa and Ocala.

Rolling's fiancée, free-lance writer Sondra London, says she is collaborating with Rolling on a book to explain how he evolved into a serial killer. The book, assembled from hundreds of letters he has written London from Florida State Prison, is tentatively titled: The Making of an Outlaw.

London said information Rolling has relayed to her details abuse from his father, whom she claims had trauma stemming from the Korean War. She said the father's problems were "visited upon the son," whom she said was an unwanted child.

She also said that a vehicular-homicide Rolling was involved in - which killed a woman while he was married - troubled him greatly and started his "mental decline." She said his divorce and torture in a Mississippi prison worsened his problems.

Ultimately, Rolling decided he wanted to kill eight people, but she would not say why. "A lot of serial killers have a mission," she said.

She said Rolling fell in love with the "outlaw mystique," which became a controlling factor in his life. A tape-recording with Rolling singing songs, found at a Gainesville campsite where he lived during the time of killings, includes him singing about Jesse James, "life on the run" and a woman disappearing into a swamp.

Ironically, becoming a fugitive after shooting his father "tore him up," London said. A warrant charging Rolling with attempted murder was issued in the Louisiana case and is pending.

Ex-FBI agent Hagerty and criminologist Heide said it will take years until experts figure out all of the factors that influence serial killers. Heide said it still is not known why most of the world's serial killers are from the United States and most are white males in their 20s and 30s.

"Every one we interview, we learn something else," Hagerty said.

London said society should study such men so we can learn from their mistakes, instead of rushing to kill them in the electric chair. She thinks Rolling and other killers also have biological and chemical factors that are largely not understood.

"Let's stop being paranoid about having researchers come in and analyze them and the biology of violence," London said.

"Let's hook up some wires to them and taken pictures of their brains."

END