

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## 53 COLD CASES



Yvonne Weber    Maureen Sterling    Kim Allen    Jeannette Kamahale    Lori Kursa    Carolyn Davis    Theresa Walsh

## Was famous killer loose in Sonoma?



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Larry Kursa visits the grave of his sister, Lori Kursa, one of the seven victims in what were known as the Santa Rosa Hitchhiker Murders of 1972-73.

## Ted Bundy being investigated in '70s slayings

By Kevin Fagan

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Larry Kursa still says a prayer every time he passes by the lonely Sonoma County road where his older sister Lori was found dumped in the weeds 39 years ago, raped, nude and murdered. Only when he sleeps does the pain ever lessen, he says.

Kursa would like nothing better than

to have an answer to the question that has haunted him all these years: Who killed 13-year-old Lori, and six other girls and young women, in what came to be known as the "Santa Rosa Hitchhiker Murders" of 1972-73?

"I think about her all the time," said Kursa, 47 and living in Clearlake. "After all these years, I just need to know."

He may soon have his answer.

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FROM THE COVER

# Detectives eye serial killer in 1970s slayings

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Investigators think there is a chance the murderer was serial killer Ted Bundy, and they are devoting new efforts to try to prove it. Bundy was executed in 1989 after being convicted of murdering two women and a 12-year-old girl in Florida. Before he died, he confessed to raping and killing at least 27 other women throughout the West, including at least one unidentified victim in California.

Investigators are hoping to compare his DNA to the Santa Rosa-area crime scenes, and if they find a match, they will add a new chapter to Bundy's horrific legend.

The killer told investigators before being electrocuted in Florida that his victims actually numbered more than 100, and that he began raping and strangling women in 1969 — although the first slaying to which he confessed happened in 1974.

"Bundy is definitely a good suspect," said Robert Keppel, the retired Seattle police detective who helped snare the murderer and interviewed him repeatedly. "The killings in Santa Rosa would fit his methods, he spent time in the area, and I'm sure he started killing well before 1974."

"It was an open market for Bundy."

## DNA testing

Sonoma County sheriff's Lt. Steve Brown, who has investigated the killings over the years, said the department doesn't know who killed Lori and the six others, and that any details of the department's active murder probe are confidential.

"The feeling was that one person committed the killings, and Bundy was looked at," Brown said. "But I always thought it must have been a utility worker or a postal worker, someone familiar with the area."

However, sources familiar with the investigation say detectives are hopeful that with modern technology not available decades ago, there may be ways to see whether Bundy's DNA can link him to the local killings. DNA from Bundy can be had from blood on file with investigators.

The Sheriff's Department reportedly began looking into the killings again more than a year ago.

"This has been a terrible case, one of the worst ever, and trying to reconstruct it is going to be very hard," said Carole Moore, a former police detec-



**Ted Bundy was convicted of three Florida murders and was executed in that state in 1989.**

tive, author of a book on finding missing people and a friend of one of the seven victims, Jeannette Kamahale, whose body was never found. "But they have tools today they didn't have then."

"I know they're trying to put Jeannette's DNA into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System data base, and that may help," Moore said. "Even if these killings were done by someone no longer with us, like Bundy, it could put our minds at ease if we knew who it was."

Kursa's family members have felt so tortured that they couldn't summon the will to put a headstone on Lori's grave in Santa Rosa until five years ago.

"Lori took care of me, a great sister," Kursa said. "I cried for two years after she died."

## Terrible times

The Santa Rosa Hitchhiker Murders began Feb. 4, 1972, when Yvonne Weber and Maureen Sterling, both 13 and from Santa Rosa, were seen thumbing a lift on Guerneville Road northwest of the town. They vanished, and their bodies were found 10 months later near the edge of twisty Franz Valley Road about 6 miles into the hills north of Santa Rosa.

A month after the pair's disappearance, 19-year-old Santa Rosa Junior College student Kim Allen's naked, strangled corpse turned up in a creek 8 miles south of Santa Rosa. She had last been seen hitchhiking in Larkspur.

Four more women soon also disappeared: 20-year-old Kamahale in April, Lori Kursa in November, 15-year-old Carolyn Davis in July 1973 and 23-year-old Therese Walsh in December 1973.

Each had been hitchhiking, and all but Kamahale were found naked and pitched down embankments into weeds or creeks near roads. Kamahale was never located but is presumed dead.

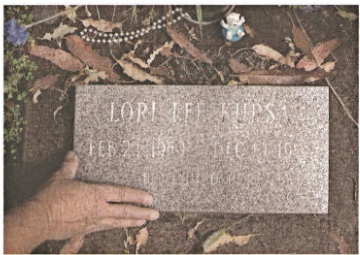
In all, three of the women were raped, and three were too decomposed to discern much. Two were strangled, one's neck was broken, one was poisoned, and one had been bludgeoned.

A grade teacher, a drug dealer and bikers emerged as



Photos by Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

**Deborah Silva has scrapbooks full of information on the Sonoma County killings, which she has been researching since moving to a home near where some of the victims were found.**



**Larry Kursa visits his sister's grave. Lori Kursa's body was found in Santa Rosa in 1972, and her killing remains unsolved.**

suspects, but no arrests were made. The never-caught Zodiac was also considered, but his confirmed five killings didn't involve rape, nudity or dumping victims off roadways.

"It was a different time back then," said sheriff's Lt. Brown. "People were hitchhiking and easy targets. Everybody trusted everybody."

## Bundy connection

That more innocent, hippie-flavored era is partly why it was so easy for Bundy to hunt women from Washington to Florida up until 1978, when he was finally caught.

He liked to rape, strip and strangle, and to dump the remains near roads, and he bashed many of his victims in the head.

Bundy also attended Stanford University in 1968, and is known to have visited a girlfriend in Palo Alto and San Francisco between then and 1974. That, plus the fact that Bundy told investigators that he killed somewhere unspecified in California, still has him in the mix for the Sonoma County killings — as well as an unsolved, similar slaying of a woman at Stanford in 1975.

Some investigators in the 1970s said credit card receipts

grossed in the case, however, doubts Bundy was responsible.

"I think it was someone from here, because you really have to know where you're going to get to the body sites," said Deborah Silva, 59, who has run a website on the Sonoma slayings since 2009. "These killings could have been a learning curve for Bundy, yes. But I would hate for everyone to just say, 'OK, it's him,' and stop looking for other suspects."

## 'It was creepy'

Silva became fascinated when she lived from 1990 to 2004 a few hundred feet from the spot on Franz Valley Road where Yvonne and Maureen, the two 13-year-old hitchhikers, and 15-year-old Carolyn were found — and 2 miles from where Walsh, the last victim, was tossed, hog-tied and strangled, into a creek. "I had dozens knock on my door looking for where the bodies were," Silva said. "It was creepy, but as I looked into it I came to really care for all these girls."

She now lives far north, in Point Arena (Mendocino County), but the other day she came back to Franz Valley Road to pay homage to the girls whose lives are forever capped in youth. "Look at that," she said, pointing to yellow flowers at the edge of a shadow meadow where the bones once lay.

## Book and documentary

The Bundy-Sonoma connection is also part of the focus of a documentary and book being assembled for the fall by Mike McCann, whose uncle dated a woman Bundy confessed to raping and strangling, and author Dennis Purdy, who has researched the killer since 1985.

"Bundy fits a lot of what's there," Purdy said of the Sonoma homicides. One amateur sleuth en-

gaged in the case, however, doubts Bundy was responsible.

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"Daffodils. They don't normally grow on this land, but I remember seeing them appear years ago."

Silva gazed for a long moment. "They must have been planted for those girls, because this spot is too far from anywhere someone would go," she said. "After all of these years, people remember. "It's so sad."

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