

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | WHY KILL BETTY JANE?

S1E34 Transcript

SHELLY JAMES: A young guy had come to the door and said that his car had broken down. The guy pushed his way in. Then, he grabbed my mother and was pulling her to the back bedroom, screaming at her saying, "Where's the guns? Where's the money?" I think one of the first things out of my mouth was, "I knew something like this was going to happen."

NARRATION: WHEN 62-YEAR-OLD BETTY JANE AMOS SAYS "YES" TO MARRYING LOCAL JUNK DEALER JAKE MCCLELLAN, HER CHILDREN ARE LESS THAN THRILLED. THEY KNOW SHE'S BEEN LONELY FOR MANY YEARS SINCE THE DIVORCE FROM THEIR FATHER, BUT THE ECCENTRIC JAKE IS AN UNUSUAL CHOICE FOR THE GENEROUS, WELL-LOVED BETTY AND THEY DON'T HAVE A GOOD FEELING ABOUT THE MATCH. UNFORTUNATELY, A FEW YEARS AFTER THE WEDDING, THEIR INSTINCTS PROVE VALID WHEN A VIOLENT AND DEADLY ATTACK OCCURS AT THE MCCLELLAN HOME.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "WHY KILL BETTY JANE?"

IT'S LATE ONE NIGHT IN MARCH OF 2009, WHEN A SLEW OF 911 CALLS COME INTO DISPATCH FROM A RURAL PART OF PENNSYLVANIA. THERE'S BEEN A SHOOTING AT THE HOME OF JAKE AND BETTY MCCLELLAN, AND A POSSIBLE HOMICIDE. TROOPER FIRST CLASS JAMES PETROSKY, A VETERAN PENNSYLVANIA STATE POLICE OFFICER, IS ASSIGNED TO THE CASE.

JAMES PETROSKY: I worked patrol in, in the county for five years. I do know the area quite well. I was surprised to hear that there was a homicide out there. The McClellan property was located in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania. It's a few miles north of Graceville, Pennsylvania. The area where the McClellan's property was located was on the back side of a farm. Directly behind their residence was a pasture field. Across the road is another pasture field, and then just to the north is a large, wooded area. Predominantly it's, it's farmland in that area. Homicides are very rare in that portion of the county.

NARRATION: WHEN EMERGENCY PERSONNEL ARRIVE ON SCENE, THEY FIND JAKE MCCLELLAN OUTSIDE HIS HOME. HE'S BEEN SHOT TWICE BUT IS STILL ALIVE. IN A BACK ROOM OF THE COUPLE'S MOBILE HOME, THEY DISCOVER JAKE'S WIFE BETTY, DEAD FROM A GUNSHOT WOUND. JAKE IS AIRLIFTED TO A NEARBY HOSPITAL AND SURVIVES HIS INJURIES. HE'S NOW THE LONE WITNESS TO THE HOME INVASION AND DESCRIBES TO POLICE WHAT HAPPENED THAT DEADLY NIGHT.

JAMES PETROSKY: On March 22 of 2009, approximately, uh, 9:40 to 9:50pm, Jake and Betty were in their residence. Jake hears a knock at the door, and he gets up out of his chair and walks over to the door and opens it. There's a white male standing at the door who's wearing camouflage pants and a jacket. He described him as being in his early to mid 40s, about five foot eight inches tall, somewhere in the 150–160-pound range. He said, in his opinion, the guy may have been on drugs because he was very jittery. Uh, he said that he had, like, a lighter complexion with almost a yellowish tinge to his skin. The offender told him that he had a flat tire and he wanted to borrow a jack from Mr. McClellan. So, Mr. McClellan told him to wait outside and then he would get his coat and help him. So, Jake McClellan

shuts the door, walks over to the coat rack and grabs a, uh, jacket off of there, which was only a few feet away from the door. And when he comes back, the door is open, and the offender is coming into their mobile home. Mr. McClellan sees that the offender has a gun on him, and Jake reaches for his hand with a gun and pushes him out of the mobile home. As that happens, the offender fires two shots and strikes Jake, both in his neck and in his cheek. At that point, Jake collapses to the ground and, uh, he hears his wife Betty scream, and the offender goes running into the house after Betty. While Jake's laying there bleeding, he hears a gunshot and Jake gets himself up and runs up through the front yard and hides between some parked vehicles on his property. He's hoping that somebody will drive down the road and then he can flag somebody down to get help for him. So, Mr. McClellan flags down a car and tells that vehicle to, uh, go call 911 to get help. He needed help. He's bleeding pretty profusely from his neck and his face. That vehicle subsequently does go up and, uh, calls 911, which in turn gets the ball rolling for, uh, notifying the state police to, uh, respond to the scene. Mr. McClellan then goes back inside to their residence. At first he's unable to find his wife. But he walks to the end of their mobile home, and he finds her in the back bedroom. He believes she had a slight pulse. But, she ultimately dies right there of a gunshot wound.

SHELLY JAMES: She was mom. She, everybody knew her as Mom.

NARRATION: SHELLY JAMES IS BETTY'S DAUGHTER, WHO WAS 50 YEARS OLD AT THE TIME OF THE MURDER.

SHELLY JAMES: Mom was 72, about five foot two, with salt and pepper hair. She wore glasses. Huge dimples. She loved doing family events. She always helped out with family reunions, and whatever anybody wanted her to do, if she could do it, she would do it.

NARRATION: BETTY WAS MARRIED IN 1957 AND HAD FOUR CHILDREN — A SON, DAVID, A DAUGHTER, LISA, AND TWINS, SHELLY AND SHERRY.

SHELLY JAMES: She was always there for us, no matter what event was going on in our lives. Whether it was a band concert, or chorus concert, or a play, any kind of event that was going on, football games, she was always there, you know, with the band boosters. She was, she was just part of it, you know. She always loved whenever we had, you know, big pajama parties or something, and had friends over and she loved, you know, fixing a big breakfast for everybody. And she just, she was just, she was a sweet lady. She, everybody loved her.

NARRATION: SHELLY REMEMBERS THE NIGHT THE POLICE CAME TO THE DOOR TO DELIVER THE DEVASTATING NEWS THAT HER MOTHER HAD BEEN MURDERED.

SHELLY JAMES: So they, they had an ambulance there, whenever the detective came, because they were afraid that I would go into shock when I found out what had happened. And so, they wanted to make sure that I was okay. It was very surreal. It was hard to comprehend. The first thought in my head was that it just wasn't real. That it wasn't true. Nobody could have done that to her. Nobody could be that mean. That she didn't deserve it. That I was never gonna see her again.

NARRATION: THE NEWS OF BETTY'S DEATH SPREADS QUICKLY THROUGH THE SMALL, TIGHT KNIT COMMUNITY.

TERRA KINSELL: My name is Terra Kinsell and at the time that Betty was murdered, I was actually a full-time reporter for the local newspaper. I knew the family. I actually am friends with her daughters and her son, and, you know, I've known them since we were little kids. So, when it happened, it struck close for me. We got a call at the paper saying that this had happened, that there was a body out in western Greene County, that it had been a shooting, that the husband had also been shot. My instincts, I just felt that it was very suspicious, to be honest with you. It didn't make sense to me. My feeling was that this was targeted. This was not a random, somebody driving by. It made no sense for somebody to be driving out there in the middle of nowhere and knocking on somebody's door that has a property that looks like they don't have anything and thinking that they're going to have, you know, money or whatever to give to them.

SHELLY JAMES: When Mom was killed, everybody in the community was questioning whether Jake had part of it, whether he had paid somebody to do it or had some dealings with it.

NARRATION: LIKE BETTY, JAKE IS A WELL-KNOWN FIGURE IN THE AREA, THOUGH NOT AS WELL LOVED.

SHELLY JAMES: Jake's one of those people that everybody knew him, and most people tried to stay clear of him. My husband always used to say he was greasy. He kind of gave you the heebie-jeebies. He was backwoods hillbilly. He, you know, had his beliefs and things of politics, and religion, and stuff and you just kind of shook your head and went, "What?" He did tow jobs for people. So, he would, you know, somebody's broken down or what have you, he would go and tow them to a garage, or their house, or whatever they needed. He would pick up junk, and if somebody had a car that they wanted to get rid of, he would fill it up even more with junk because the heavier the car, the more money he got. And he would take stuff to the junkyard.

TERRA KINSELL: People called him a shady character, and um, you know, that they didn't quite understand how he and Betty ended up together because Betty was a very religious woman. Very, you know, just one of those people in your community that, if somebody had something going on, Betty was the first one to knock on their door. You know, she's gonna bring you a pie.

NARRATION: IT WAS IN 2009 WHEN JAKE'S ROMANTIC PURSUIT OF BETTY FIRST BEGAN. BETTY HAD DIVORCED HER HUSBAND IN 1976, AND THE LONELINESS WAS TAKING A TOLL.

SHELLY JAMES: He started checking in on her and stuff and he started going to church with her. He probably, you know, pursued her for about three years before she finally said, "Okay." We begged her to stay clear of him. She would always complain about him and, and say, you know, "He just won't leave me alone." And for her to come to us a week before they got married and tell us that they were getting married was very troubling, but there was no talking her out of it. And I even called the pastor of the church and begged him not to do it. And he said, "Well, if I don't do it, somebody else is going to," and I said, "Well, then don't let it be you." But he still did it. I think she saw him as a companion,

and that was it. She straight out said she was lonely. So, she was just looking for somebody to be there with her.

NARRATION: AS YEARS PASS, THE MARRIAGE APPEARS EVEN MORE TROUBLED THAN BETTY'S FAMILY HAD FEARED.

SHELLY JAMES: I remember one time, she came over to my house and she's got this black eye. And I'm like, "What the heck happened?" And she's like, "Oh, it's okay. It's okay. Jake didn't mean to do it." And I'm like, "What? What did he do?" And she said that, um, she was helping him with something on a car and a piece of it snapped back and hit her in the face. She didn't want us to say anything to him, and you know, he promised that nothing like that would ever happen again, and she didn't want to talk about things. She wasn't as happy go lucky as she always was. One time, Jake walks in ahead of Mom and is all smiley and, you know, chatty Cathy, like he always was and, and um, Mom came- comes in behind him with her head hanging down. My mother never walked into a place with her head hanging down. She always walked in with a smile on, and you know, she was always on top of the world. And it was like, wait a minute, what's going on? Sorry. I said I wasn't gonna cry but it's hard talking about him because he just made things worse and worse as the time went on.

NARRATION: IS IT POSSIBLE JAKE IS SOMEHOW BEHIND THE MURDER OF HIS WIFE? IT SEEMS UNLIKELY, SINCE HE HIMSELF WAS SHOT TWICE DURING THE ATTACK.

JAMES PETROSKY: Mr. McClellan was in a lot of pain. Uh, he received one gunshot wound to the neck, which deflected down into his chest. Uh, the second gunshot wound lodged into his jaw. So, he's quite lucky that he's alive. Uh, he did lose a significant amount of blood. One of the bullets was removed during surgery. The other bullet remains in him because it is too risky. They would cause more damage removing the bullet than if they just leave it in the body, which, we run into that quite often in shootings where there's a surviving victim.

SHELLY JAMES: The police felt that Jake had no involvement in it whatsoever because he was shot, because they had him do a lie detector test and said that he had passed it with flying colors. But my whole thing was, a compulsive liar can pass a lie detector test, and it's not admissible in court. So, stop bringing it up as an excuse.

NARRATION: AS HE RECOVERS FROM HIS INJURIES, JAKE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BETTY'S FAMILY TO BE ACTING LIKE A TYPICAL GRIEVING HUSBAND.

SHELLY JAMES: His behavior was just, it just didn't fit somebody that just had a spouse that was killed. He never acted remorseful. He never acted, you know, like the grieving husband. We found out that he had girlfriends, not just one, that he had a few. And one of them is the woman that he is living with now. When you have somebody that's at the funeral, and, and he's got this woman sitting on his lap, and he's laughing and having a grand old time, and his wife's up there in a casket, it's like, wait a minute. What are you doing? And I mean, his behavior was just so off, and he never seemed to grieve. He never seemed to have emotion about it. And it was very strange to us, because here's the rest of us that are just totally devastated by it. And, they'd been married for, I think, seven years. For you not to

have any emotion about the person that you had married and been with for seven years? It just didn't seem right.

NARRATION: AFTER BETTY'S DEATH, LOCAL NEWSPAPER REPORTER, TERRA KINSELL, UNCOVERS A POSSIBLE FINANCIAL MOTIVE FOR THE MURDER.

TERRA KINSELL: There had, at one point, been a gentleman who came into my newspaper office and approached me. He said that he had been in an insurance office where Betty's husband Jake had been. He claimed there was an insurance policy that he felt that the police needed to look into.

JAMES PETROSKY: Jake McClellan did have an insurance policy on Betty. He did collect from that policy. I know there's talk of Jake flashing money and, and what have you around after he received the money after the homicide. Unfortunately, because somebody has an insurance policy on their spouse, doesn't make them guilty of a homicide. We were never there with Jake and Betty McClellan. We don't know what their relationship was like behind closed doors. We can only go on the information that the family has given us. People react to death differently. If he was flashing money around, if he's going out buying things, or even going and getting remarried a short time later, it's not the most loving or caring behavior, but that doesn't make somebody guilty of homicide.

NARRATION: JAKE IS ABLE TO GIVE A DESCRIPTION OF THE GUNMAN — A WHITE MALE, UNSHAVEN, WHO APPEARS TO BE IN HIS 40S, WITH BROWN, SHOULDER LENGTH HAIR PULLED BACK INTO A PONYTAIL.

JAMES PETROSKY: Jake said that he did not know who this individual was, never saw him before. Jake was shown several photo lineups. However, he was not able to identify anybody in the photo lineups, and basically those were persons of interest who came up during the course of the investigation, and then lineups were composed with those persons, and then, Jake was afforded the opportunity to look through those to see if he could pick out the suspect from the lineup, which he was unable to do.

NARRATION: JAKE DOES PROVIDE ONE OTHER SIGNIFICANT CLUE. HE RECALLS A WHITE VAN ON THE ROAD IN FRONT OF HIS PROPERTY WHEN HE WAS TRYING TO FLAG DOWN HELP.

JAMES PETROSKY: He said that he had a gut instinct not to stop that van. The van drives by his house very slow, at about four or five miles an hour, and continues up the hill, going south, turns around, and comes back down the hill, very slow. It then stops in front of his trailer and it's sitting there for a moment, and about a minute later, the offender comes running out of his mobile home and he has what Mr. McClellan perceived to be possibly a pillowcase, or a small bag. The offender goes to the driver side of the van and converses with the driver briefly, for maybe 10 seconds. He can hear them talking but he doesn't understand what they're saying because he's, uh, some distance away. The offender then goes around the van, climbs in the passenger side, and the van takes off down the road.

NARRATION: A SECOND WITNESS SEES THE SAME VAN AS IT'S LEAVING THE AREA.

JAMES PETROSKY: Our witness was on his way to work, and he was basically run off the road by a white van right there prior to being stopped by Mr. McClellan, literally within 30 seconds. So, we can confirm that there definitely was a white van in the area.

NARRATION: JAKE'S TESTIMONY SUGGESTS THE KILLER HAD AN ACCOMPLICE AND SUPPORTS THE IDEA THAT THIS WAS A PREMEDITATED ROBBERY THAT WENT HORRIBLY WRONG. THE THEORY SUGGESTS THE KILLER WAS DROPPED OFF BY THE DRIVER OF THE WHITE VAN, KNOCKED ON THE MCCLELLAN'S DOOR AND ASKED FOR HELP. WHEN JAKE SAW THE GUN IN THE MAN'S HAND, HE FOUGHT BACK, AND THAT'S WHEN THE KILLER OPENED FIRE.

JAMES PETROSKY: I believe that he thought that he killed Jake. He just shot him, what he perceived to be, twice in the head and leaves him in the doorway. Jake collapses in the doorway of the residence. So, I would believe that the offender would think that Jake's been eliminated as a threat. And now, he's gonna go after Betty, who's screaming, running to the back of the mobile home, not knowing that Jake's still able to get up and run. We don't know if Betty was resisting. We assume that she was, and that's why he shot her. Or it's possible that it could be a case of the offender thinking, "Okay, I've already killed one person, might as well get the second one, and then get what I need and get out of here, and not leave any witnesses." Maybe that's the only reason he killed her, just so there wouldn't be any witnesses.

NARRATION: AS INVESTIGATORS DIG DEEPER INTO THE MURDER OF BETTY MCCLELLAN, THEY REALIZE THERE MAY BE A CONNECTION TO ANOTHER MURDER IN THE AREA. MONTHS EARLIER, AN ELDERLY MAN NAMED NOBLE WINE WAS SHOT AND KILLED ABOUT 15 MILES EAST OF WHERE JAKE AND BETTY LIVED.

JAMES PETROSKY: The Noble Wine homicide occurred November 21st of 2008. So, it occurs about three months before the homicide of Betty McClellan. Noble Wine was a self-employed junkyard owner, had a tow truck. He was 81 years old and he lived on a dead end, uh, just a few miles north of Waynesburg. At about 4:51 in the morning, the neighbor who lives across from Mr. Wine sees that his house is burning and calls 911 to report the house fire. Uh, the fire department responds. They get the fire extinguished, and they find Mr. Wine within the residence in his bedroom. As a standard procedure, his body was transported to the, uh, coroner's office, and subsequently, an autopsy was completed on Mr. Wine. There are two gunshot wounds observed, and there was no evidence that he was alive at the time of the fire. So, he was dead before the fire was set. There was no evidence within his trachea or his lungs that he had ingested any smoke whatsoever. He died as a result of the gunshot wounds that he received. Mr. Wine's residence is about 14 and a half to 15 miles east of where Jake and Betty McClellan live. We can't say that these two homicides are connected. We have no physical evidence to connect them, but there are a lot of similarities for us not to take that avenue of approach that they are possibly connected. We have two elderly people who are engaged in the scrapyards business, towing, etc., in a small rural area. It's hard to fathom that they're not connected somehow.

NARRATION: LIKE BETTY'S MURDER, THE NOBLE WINE HOMICIDE REMAINS UNSOLVED, AND AFTER INTERVIEWING NEARLY 100 PEOPLE, DETECTIVES HAVE NO VIABLE SUSPECTS. BETTY'S DAUGHTER

SHELLY IS CONVINCED THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN HER MOTHER'S MURDER AND THE DEATH OF NOBLE WINE.

SHELLY JAMES: We know that he was also dealing with junk related stuff. We know that the fire department was brought to his house for a house fire. And when they did the autopsy, they found a gunshot to the back of his head. And they kinda say that, you know, there's a potential that it was linked together because they both did junk dealings or tow jobs. They both, I believe, were done with a small caliber pistol.

NARRATOR: TWO JUNK DEALERS, WHO LIVE NOT FAR FROM EACH OTHER, TARGETED IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. IF THIS WAS A ROBBERY, WHAT WOULD THEY BE LOOKING FOR?

JAMES PETROSKY: The offender said he wanted his guns and money. There's several "junk yards" in the area. We call them junk yards or scrap yards, where they will start collecting cars, you know, and then once they get so much of that, they would take it to a scrap yard to cash it in, or they would sell parts from those vehicles. That's kind of the norm in that area. Most of this is a cash business, so there's no record. It's their way of life. We don't know if, or how much, money was taken from the residence, uh, because Jake was running basically a cash business. And as far as the guns go, all of Jake's guns were accounted for.

NARRATION: VERY LITTLE WAS STOLEN FROM JAKE AND BETTY'S HOME, WHICH SHELLY BELIEVES IS PROOF THAT ROBBERY WASN'T THE PRIMARY MOTIVE.

SHELLY JAMES: There was a gun cabinet in the front bedroom that was unopened, still had guns in it. The nightstand beside where he shot and killed my mother, there was a handgun sitting on the bottom of the nightstand. Still there.

NARRATION: SHELLY REMEMBERS HER MOTHER AND JAKE KEPT A CASH BOX THAT MAY HAVE CONTAINED AS MUCH AS \$10,000, BUT THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THAT CASH BOX AFTER THE HOME INVASION.

JAMES PETROSKY: Betty McClellan's daughters believe that there was a metal strong box, like a small lock box, that contained the cash from Jake's towing business and his scrapyards. There should have been some, a fair amount of cash in there. We believe that possibly was stolen.

SHELLY JAMES: After the event happened, we didn't find the cash box, and we questioned Jake about it, and he swears he knows nothing about it.

NARRATION: WHILE THE MURDER OF BETTY MCCLELLAN REMAINS MIREN IN SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES, TROOPER JAMES PETROSKY IS CERTAIN ABOUT A FEW DETAILS IN THE CASE.

JAMES PETROSKY: There's at least two people involved. At least one of them knew the area, possibly the driver. At least one of them knew of, or had dealings with Mr. McClellan in the past and knew that he worked and did a cash business, knew where he lived. One, if not both of them, we would consider

organized offenders because they obviously planned this out methodically. They knew that almost 10 o'clock in the evening would be a good time to go out and commit this crime. They're gonna fall under the cloak of darkness. There's not much traffic out in that area. Whoever the offender is, is probably somewhat of a narcissist and a sociopath. Like I said, he's very organized, very brazen, very confident in himself, that he thinks that he eliminated Jake and now he's gonna go eliminate Betty.

NARRATION: BETTY'S FAMILY CONTINUES TO SEARCH FOR ANSWERS IN THE CASE, EVEN AS HOPE DIMS.

SHELLY JAMES: I think the only way that it's gonna get solved is for somebody to be honest and come clean.

NARRATION: SHELLY RECALLS WHAT SHE MISSES MOST ABOUT HER MOM.

SHELLY JAMES: I used to travel a lot with work, and, um, Thursdays was usually the day I traveled back, and so, I'd be able to give her a quick call and just say, "Hey, I'm on my way home. How was your day?" You know, what have you. And that first Thursday that I didn't get to call her, that was probably the hardest. Not getting to pick up the phone and say hi to her again. And it was weird because Jake had left her voice on the answering machine, and so, for the longest time, I could still call the number up and hear her voice.

NARRATION: IF YOU BELIEVE YOU HAVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE MURDERS OF BETTY MCCLELLAN OR NOBLE WINE IN SOUTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA, PLEASE SUBMIT A TIP TO [UNSOLVED.COM](https://www.unsigned.com).
NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES...

PATRICIA PIVER: I know there's somebody out there who's seen him. They may not have known who he was at the time, or they think, oh, he's different, he couldn't have been this awful murderer, but he is. He needs to be in jail.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13. It is executive produced by Terry Dunn Meurer and Chris Corcoran. Produced by Lloyd Lochridge, Christine Lenig, Courtney Ennis, Paige Hymson, and Paul Yates. The Story Producer for this episode was Caitlin Cutt, and it was edited by Paul Yates.

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THANKS FOR LISTENING TO EPISODE 34 OF UNSOLVED MYSTERIES.

