

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | DOUBLE MURDER
EP53 Transcript

FRIEND VIA 911: Yes, uh, I have an emergency. I think I have somebody dead.

DISPATCH: Okay, and who is it?

FRIEND VIA 911: Uh, the Dermonds.

DISPATCH: Okay, and you're a neighbor or something?

FRIEND VIA 911: Yes, yes. I just came to check on them. They've been missing for about four days. Oh my god. Oh my god.

DISPATCH: They're both dead, Ms. Williams?

FRIEND VIA 911: Did you find both of them?

MAN'S VOICE: No.

FRIEND VIA 911: No. No, it's just one.

DISPATCH: Okay.

FRIEND VIA 911: I don't know where the other one is.

NARRATION:

LOCATED ON THE SHORE OF LAKE OCONEE, 90 MINUTES EAST OF ATLANTA IN RURAL PUTNAM COUNTY GEORGIA, IS THE AFFLUENT GATED COMMUNITY OF GREAT WATERS. KNOWN FOR ITS WORLD CLASS GOLF COURSES, LUXURY RESORT-STYLE AMENITIES, AND MILLION-DOLLAR LAKEFRONT HOMES, IT'S A POPULAR DESTINATION FOR WELL-TO-DO RETIREES LOOKING TO LIVE OUT THEIR GOLDEN YEARS IN COMFORT AND SURROUNDED BY NATURE. IT'S A NEIGHBORLY COMMUNITY WHERE CRIME IS RARE AND VIOLENT CRIME IS ALMOST UNHEARD OF. BUT ON THE MORNING OF TUESDAY, MAY 6TH, 2014, A FRANTIC 911 CALL COMES INTO DISPATCHERS FROM A GREAT WATERS RESIDENT. SHE AND HER HUSBAND HAVE JUST GONE TO CHECK IN ON THEIR FRIENDS AND HAVE DISCOVERED A CRIME SO HORRIFIC, IT'S HAUNTED THE COMMUNITY EVER SINCE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "DOUBLE MURDER."

SHERIFF SILLS: I was the second car on the scene. Of course, I drove as fast as I could drive from here out there, about 13 miles, I guess.

NARRATION:

HOWARD SILLS IS THE SHERIFF IN PUTNAM COUNTY, GEORGIA — A POSITION HE'S HELD FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES. AT 10:15AM ON MAY 6TH, 2014, HE ARRIVES AT THE LAKEFRONT HOME OF 88-YEAR-OLD RUSSELL DERMOND AND HIS 87-YEAR-OLD WIFE, SHIRLEY. SHERIFF SILLS HAS HEARD THE 911 CALL AND KNOWS HE'S LIKELY WALKING INTO A MURDER SCENE, BUT WHAT HE FINDS IN THE GARAGE IS A GRUESOME CRIME UNLIKE ANYTHING HE'S EVER INVESTIGATED.

SHERIFF SILLS: I knew something was terribly odd about this case when I realized Mr. Dermond's head wasn't there. That's just a very odd set of circumstances. His body was laying supine. He was wearing boxer shorts, a t-shirt, and a bathrobe. There's no blood present anywhere else, just the floor of the garage area where the body was.

NARRATION:

RUSSELL DERMOND HAS BEEN DECAPITATED — HIS BODY LEFT ON THE FLOOR OF HIS GARAGE, HIS HEAD, NOWHERE TO BE FOUND. UNSURE IF THE ASSAILANT MAY STILL BE IN THE HOUSE, INVESTIGATORS CAREFULLY SEARCH THE TWO-STORY HOME FOR ANY SIGNS OF THE PERPETRATOR, OR OF RUSSELL'S WIFE, SHIRLEY.

SHERIFF SILLS: It wasn't a huge home, but it took us a few minutes to clear it, both levels of it. When I say clear it, going from room to room, checking closets, and under beds, and, you know, the totality of the home to clear it, to make sure no one was there.

NARRATION:

THE SEARCH TURNS UP NO SIGN OF EITHER RUSSELL'S KILLER OR SHIRLEY DERMOND. THERE'S ALSO NO INDICATION OF FORCED ENTRY OR A STRUGGLE. IN FACT, IF NOT FOR RUSSELL DERMOND'S HEADLESS BODY IN THE GARAGE, THERE'S NOTHING TO INDICATE A CRIME HAS EVEN TAKEN PLACE HERE.

SHERIFF SILLS: There's nothing at all disturbed in that house. There was no ransacking or, or anything like that. Nothing's disturbed. No sign of struggle. There's absolutely nothing that we know of that was taken from the house at all. Nothing. And there were certainly valuable things there to take. There were Rolex watches, you know, in the dresser. Her purse was there. The keys were there. The cars were there.

NARRATION:

AS THEY PHOTOGRAPH THE SCENE, INVESTIGATORS NOTE A NEWSPAPER CROSSWORD PUZZLE SITTING COMPLETED ON THE KITCHEN TABLE. AN UNOPENED NEWSPAPER IS FOUND LYING IN THE DRIVEWAY. THEY INTERVIEW THE NEIGHBORS THAT FOUND RUSSELL'S BODY. VISIBLY SHAKEN, THE COUPLE EXPLAIN THAT THREE DAYS EARLIER, ON SATURDAY, THE DERMONDS WERE NOTICEABLY ABSENT FROM A NEIGHBORHOOD EVENT.

SHERIFF SILLS: There was a Kentucky Derby party there in the Great Waters community that they had been invited to and said they were going to go to, and they didn't show up. One couple, contemporaries of theirs who did go to the party, who called to check on them, about the time Tuesday came around they thought, well, we better go over and check on them to make sure they're

okay. They went in the house when nobody came to the door, opened the door, walked all through the house, looking for them. And finally, the man went into the garage, and in between the two cars, you could see Mr. Dermond's body, and then you had to walk all the way back there, into the back of the cars, to realize that he'd been decapitated.

NARRATION:

GIVEN THE BIZARRE NATURE OF THE CRIME, SHERIFF SILLS QUICKLY CONTACTS THE FBI TO AID LOCAL AUTHORITIES WITH THE INVESTIGATION. AT THE SAME TIME, HE BEGINS THE GRIM TASK OF CONTACTING THE DERMOND'S CHILDREN, WHO ARE SPREAD OUT ACROSS SEVERAL NEARBY STATES. THEIR YOUNGEST SON, 59-YEAR-OLD BRAD DERMOND, PICKS UP THE PHONE THAT AFTERNOON AND RECEIVES THE SHOCKING NEWS.

BRAD DERMOND: We were at our son's baseball game and I received a call from the deputy sheriff describing what was taking place and obviously, at that stage in life, you expect to get that call, right? They were in their late eighties, had a great life, and you always have that anticipation, but it was, it was something that you would never expect. That dad was deceased and then my mother was missing.

NARRATION:

BRAD IMMEDIATELY DRIVES FROM HIS HOME IN SANTA ROSA BEACH, FLORIDA, SIX HOURS TO HIS PARENTS HOUSE ON LAKE OCONEE. HIS SISTER, LESLIE, AND HIS BROTHER, KEITH, BOTH MEET HIM THERE, HOPING TO HELP AUTHORITIES LOCATE THEIR MOTHER AND TO GET ANSWERS ABOUT THEIR FATHER'S DEATH.

BRAD DERMOND: All three of us went into the house and then just, the crime scene was in their garage and so I was the only one that went into the garage. By the time we got there, they, you know, they had removed dad's torso. But right by the garage door itself, it was really obvious, just plain as day from the bloodstains that you could see, you know, what, what was taking place.

NARRATION:

BRAD IS STUNNED BY WHAT HE SEES. THE BRUTALITY OF HIS FATHER'S MURDER MAKES NO SENSE. HE CAN'T IMAGINE WHY WOULD ANYONE WOULD WANT TO HURT HIS PARENTS WHO HAD ALWAYS LED RELATIVELY SIMPLE LIVES.

BRAD DERMOND: Mom was a housewife. Very religious, enjoyed playing cards, played bridge, crossword puzzles. Very analytical, had a great circle of friends. Dad was in the military, in the Navy, and before he went into service, he met mom right before. They were in college and they met at that time, and just dated just the two of them, and never dated outside of that relationship. They probably would be celebrating around 60 plus years of, of their wedding anniversary at this time. Dad was in the corporate world, primarily worked in data communications. We moved around, I guess, about four times during my childhood, as a result of his career, but just the typical family.

NARRATION:

SHERIFF SILLS SPEAKS WITH BRAD AND HIS SIBLINGS, HOPING TO FIND ANY INFORMATION THAT MIGHT HELP IDENTIFY THEIR FATHER'S KILLER AND FIND THEIR MISSING MOTHER. BOTH CARS ARE

STILL IN THE GARAGE, SO IT'S CLEAR THAT SHIRLEY DERMOND DIDN'T DRIVE AWAY FROM THE SCENE. BRAD INFORMS SHERIFF SILLS THAT HIS MOTHER IS SCHEDULED TO HAVE CATARACT SURGERY THE FOLLOWING WEEK. SHE ALSO HAS DIFFICULTY WALKING UP AND DOWN STAIRS, MAKING IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER TO GET FAR ON FOOT.

SHERIFF SILLS: Given her age, and what infirmities she had, my thought, obviously, was that she had been abducted. We got her picture up on electronic billboards and things all over the state of Georgia and elsewhere. I also had to consider that there was a possibility that she had killed her husband and left. Although, given her age and all those things, that was unlikely.

NEWS CLIP: 87-year-old Shirley Dermond was last heard from on May 1st. She's described as five feet two inches tall and weighs 148 pounds. She has gray hair and blue eyes.

NARRATION:

THE PUTNAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE BEGINS A MASSIVE SEARCH EFFORT TO LOCATE SHIRLEY DERMOND. DEPUTIES AND CADAVER DOGS SCOUR THE WOODED LOTS SURROUNDING THE HOME. BOATS AND DIVERS FAN OUT FROM THE PRIVATE DOCK, PROBING THE SECLUDED COVE THAT LEADS TO THE VAST WATERS OF LAKE OCONEE.

SHERIFF SILLS: We immediately set up probably one of the biggest mass interviews ever. It was myself and my people, along with about 20 FBI agents, and we set up a huge tent, invited everyone in the entire neighborhood to come. Everybody was interviewed over a period of several hours. I think we interviewed, I don't know, 215 people. Obviously, we ran backgrounds on everybody we knew lived there.

NARRATION:

WHILE AUTHORITIES BELIEVE SHIRLEY DERMOND WAS LIKELY ABDUCTED, THEY DOUBT MONEY WAS THE MOTIVE SINCE THEY HAVEN'T RECEIVED A DEMAND FOR RANSOM. THEY MONITOR THE DERMOND'S BANK ACCOUNTS, HOPING A CHARGE MIGHT SHOW UP THAT THEY CAN TRACE TO FIND HER LOCATION. A \$20,000 REWARD IS QUICKLY OFFERED FOR INFORMATION IN THE CASE AND BRAD AND HIS SIBLINGS WAIT ANXIOUSLY FOR UPDATES.

BRAD DERMOND: You know, our hope is that Mom was still alive, obviously, but based on what took place with our dad, we knew that she was not in a good place either. We thought maybe she was just abducted, and that was kind of our hope, that we'd hear from her again.

NARRATION:

GIVEN THE EXTREME VIOLENCE OF RUSSELL DERMOND'S MURDER, THE CASE ATTRACTS NATIONAL MEDIA ATTENTION TO THIS TYPICALLY SLEEPY COMMUNITY. WITH EACH PASSING DAY, THE PRESSURE MOUNTS ON SHERIFF SILLS TO FIND SHIRLEY DERMOND. DEPUTIES TIRELESSLY SEARCH THE 20 MILE LENGTH OF LAKE OCONEE ON LAND AND WATER, HOPING TO FIND A CLUE TO HER WHEREABOUTS.

SHERIFF SILLS: I had my patrol boats on that lake, looking for anything, and eventually, some fishermen spotted a body and called in. They did not get close enough to tell whether it was a man or a woman or

whatever. But they got close enough to tell they thought it was a body, and then obviously we responded immediately.

NARRATION:

IT IS A BODY — THE BODY OF SHIRLEY DERMOND. IT'S BEEN 13 DAYS SINCE SHE DISAPPEARED AND SHE'S BEEN FOUND FLOATING IN LAKE OCONEE, NEARLY SIX MILES FROM HER HOME IN GREAT WATERS.

SHERIFF SILLS: I'm the person that actually removed Ms. Dermond's body out of the lake. I did it personally. And she was fully dressed. She had been hit in the head multiple times, at least two times, maybe three times, according to the pathologist, with some sort of blunt object like a hammer, and whatever it was penetrated her skull, and that's a pretty violent attack on an 87-year-old woman.

NARRATION:

THE SEVERITY OF SHIRLEY DERMOND'S WOUNDS ISN'T THE ONLY THING SHERIFF SILLS FINDS SHOCKING. AS HE PULLS HER BODY FROM THE LAKE, HE DISCOVERS SHE'S BEEN TIED TO A MESH BAG THAT CONTAINS TWO, THIRTY-POUND CEMENT BLOCKS. THE BAG HAS BEEN ATTACHED TO SHIRLEY'S LEGS USING A PARACHUTE CORD.

SHERIFF SILLS: Whoever killed her didn't want her body to be found, and never thought it would be. Yet, whoever killed her was not experienced enough to know that the 60 pounds wasn't gonna keep that body beneath the surface, that it was still gonna rise after decomposition. So that's not an indication of some very sophisticated killer here.

NARRATION:

THE DISCOVERY OF SHIRLEY'S BODY IS BOTH HEARTBREAKING AND PERPLEXING FOR THE DERMOND CHILDREN. BUT IT SOLVES ONE OF THE MYSTERIES OF THIS CASE—CONFIRMING THAT BOTH RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY MET WITH FOUL PLAY. NOW INVESTIGATORS MUST FIND THEIR KILLERS, AND THEY START BY CONSTRUCTING A TIMELINE OF THE EVENTS THAT LED UP TO THE MURDERS.

SHERIFF SILLS: The last time anyone saw Shirley Dermond would have been the Wednesday before they were murdered. She went to the local bridge club, and we know that Mr. Dermond went to the grocery store and the drugstore on the Thursday before. We watched him shop on video and he got some prescriptions filled for his wife. They were still present there in the kitchen, but that was the last time anyone saw him.

BRAD DERMOND: I spoke to them on a Thursday afternoon. It was just a typical conversation, sorting through our daily activities. But if there was a concern or a threat of any kind, it definitely would have been brought up in the conversation, and that, that did not happen.

NARRATION:

WITH BRAD'S PHONE CALL AND THE GROCERY STORE SURVEILLANCE VIDEO, INVESTIGATORS KNOW THE DERMOND'S WERE STILL ALIVE ON THURSDAY AFTERNOON. BUT WHEN EXACTLY DID THE MURDERS OCCUR? THE COMPLETED CROSSWORD PUZZLE INVESTIGATORS FOUND ON THE KITCHEN

TABLE WAS FROM FRIDAY'S NEWSPAPER, INDICATING THEY WERE STILL ALIVE ON FRIDAY MORNING. INVESTIGATORS FOUND SATURDAY'S PAPER LAYING UNOPENED ON THE DRIVEWAY, AND THE DERMOND'S NEVER SHOWED UP TO THE KENTUCKY DERBY PARTY THAT DAY AND DIDN'T RESPOND TO CALLS ON SUNDAY OR MONDAY. SO, SHERIFF SILLS SPECULATES THE MURDERS MUST HAVE TAKEN PLACE SOMETIME ON EITHER FRIDAY OR EARLY SATURDAY. BRAD DERMOND, KNOWING HIS PARENTS AS WELL AS HE DOES, HELPS INVESTIGATORS NARROW DOWN THE DAY TO FRIDAY.

BRAD DERMOND: Dad was still in his PJs, but he would not necessarily be in his street clothes, you know, could be lunchtime before he would begin his day outside of the house. So, the fact that he was still in his pajamas didn't really zero in on a timeframe. But Mom, she most always did crossword puzzles from the newspaper and she had completed that. They make their bed up on a pretty regular basis, as soon as they get up, so that was already done as well. So, the best we could tell would be, like, late morning.

NARRATION:

REGARDLESS OF EXACTLY WHEN THE DERMOND'S WERE KILLED, INVESTIGATORS BELIEVE THAT THE COUPLE MAY HAVE KNOWN THEIR KILLER. THERE WERE NO SIGNS OF A BREAK-IN, THE DERMOND'S ALARM SYSTEM DIDN'T INDICATE THERE WAS AN INTRUSION, AND THE SCREEN DOOR ON THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE WAS FOUND UNLOCKED. BRAD THINKS A STRANGER COULD HAVE EASILY ENTERED THE HOUSE, SINCE HIS PARENTS DIDN'T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT SECURITY.

BRAD DERMOND: There was no forced entry, but they very often leave their door open from their kitchen into the screened patio, so somebody could've just approached and just walked right in without ringing a doorbell, or being let in or that, that kind of thing.

NARRATION:

WHOEVER THE KILLER WAS, GETTING INTO THE DERMOND'S HOUSE WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH LESS CHALLENGING THAN GETTING INTO THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD. GREAT WATERS IS A PRIVATE, GATED COMMUNITY, AND ONE OF THE MORE EXCLUSIVE NEIGHBORHOODS IN GEORGIA. SHERIFF SILLS HOPES THE NEIGHBORHOOD SECURITY CAMERAS MAY HAVE RECORDED SOMETHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

SHERIFF SILLS: There is a gate that you have to go in to get into the property if you're not a property owner, or the property owner hasn't authorized you to enter, then obviously you can't go in. It's not open to the public. There's a typical guard gatehouse, like you have in neighborhoods like that, and it is staffed with private security personnel.

NARRATION:

NONE OF THE GUARDS RECALL SEEING ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS, AND THE GATEHOUSE SECURITY CAMERAS PROVE TO BE OF NO HELP EITHER.

SHERIFF SILLS: We found out that there'd been a storm and the recorder had been knocked out. The video feed to the monitors was still there, so you could see, you know, people coming and going, but it hadn't recorded anything, I think, in 18 days.

NARRATION:

WHETHER OR NOT THEY KNEW THE SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM WAS DAMAGED, GAINING ACCESS TO GREAT WATERS THROUGH THE GUARDED MAIN GATE WOULD BE RISKY FOR ANY CRIMINAL. BUT THERE IS ANOTHER WAY THE KILLER COULD HAVE ACCESSED THE DERMOND'S PROPERTY WHILE AVOIDING NEIGHBORHOOD SECURITY ALTOGETHER — FROM THE WATERS OF LAKE OCONEE.

BRAD DERMOND: They lived on a deep-water lake, so they had a dock on the lake, accessible to really anywhere. Lake Oconee is a very large lake, so, all sorts of access points and, in the lake itself, there is some boat traffic but, like, they were in a, kind of a secluded cove, so probably four homes would be served by his cove. My thought is, either they initially accessed by boat or the total access and exit was by boat.

NARRATION:

AS BRAD DERMOND SURVEYS THE PROPERTY, LOOKING FOR CLUES, HE NOTICES A SMALL DETAIL THAT SUPPORTS HIS SUSPICION THAT THE KILLER ACCESSED THE HOUSE FROM THE DOCK.

BRAD DERMOND: They have a concrete sidewalk that serves the house all the way down to the dock. There was a pretty obvious scrape from the house when I was there. It certainly looked like it was fresh. So, it appeared that they used something, a wheelbarrow or whatever. Our folks were in their late 80s, so it's not like they would be doing yard work or, you know, doing something that would have given cause to that.

NARRATION:

ONLY THE ROOFLINE OF THE DERMOND'S HOME IS VISIBLE FROM THE STREET. NESTLED DOWN A SLOPE BETWEEN TWO UNDEVELOPED LOTS, THE PRIVACY AND STUNNING LAKE VIEW MADE IT AN IDEAL LOCATION FOR A PEACEFUL RETIREMENT. BUT SHERIFF SILLS SUSPECTS IT MAY HAVE ALSO PROVIDED THEIR KILLER WITH THE COVER NEEDED TO AVOID DETECTION.

SHERIFF SILLS: These are wooded lots. I'd guess the average lot is half an acre to an acre. We had a witness from another house that actually saw somebody walking in the yard the day that we think this happened. But, because of the foliage, the witness couldn't tell if it was a man simply because the stride he was taking but, "I never saw his face, I couldn't tell you what race the person was or the length of their hair or anything. I could just see somebody through the trees walking in the yard."

NARRATION:

THE LACK OF FORENSIC EVIDENCE FOUND IN THE DERMOND HOME MAKES INVESTIGATORS WONDER IF RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY WERE EVEN KILLED IN THEIR HOME. IF NOT, THEN WHERE IS THE CRIME SCENE?

SHERIFF SILLS: I don't think that Mrs. Dermond was killed at the home, and the reason for that is because the trauma to her head that resulted in her dying. She was hit with something like a hammer that literally penetrated the skull. There should have been some cast off blood somewhere on the

ceiling or something like that in the garage or elsewhere in the house. And it wasn't there. So that's what makes me think that she potentially was killed somewhere else other than the home.

NARRATION:

SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER THE MURDERS, INVESTIGATORS FINALLY RECEIVE THE RESULTS OF THE DERMONDS' AUTOPSIES. THEY CONFIRM THAT THE DECAPITATED BODY IS DEFINITELY RUSSELL'S. HIS HEAD HAD BEEN REMOVED POST-MORTEM, SEVERED BY A VERY CLEAN CUT USING A SHARP KNIFE OR SIMILAR INSTRUMENT. RUSSELL'S BODY HAD NO FATAL WOUNDS OR OTHER INDICATIONS OF WHAT HAD KILLED HIM. BY PROCESS OF ELIMINATION, THE CAUSE OF DEATH IS LISTED AS "CRANIAL CEREBRAL TRAUMA" — OR, AN "AS-YET-UNKNOWN HEAD WOUND."

A SEVERE CUT IS DISCOVERED ON RUSSELL'S LEFT INDEX FINGER, EXTENDING DOWN TO THE PALM OF HIS HAND. IT'S BLOODY, AND TANGLED IN THE BLOOD ARE STRANDS OF SHIRLEY'S BLONDE HAIR — A POSSIBLE CLUE TO WHAT MAY HAVE HAPPENED DURING A STRUGGLE BETWEEN RUSSELL AND THE PERSON ATTACKING HIS WIFE.

SHERIFF SILLS: Mr. Dermond, of course we're not sure, we think he was shot to death simply because the lab found some gunshot residue on his shirt. I can't completely eliminate that, because Mr. Dermond had a squirrel problem. They were getting into his house from the side fence and things like that and, uh, occasionally he went outside and shot a squirrel. So, I guess it's possible that he had some gunshot residue on his t-shirt from that. But, the fact that his head's gone, and we've got gunshot residue, makes me think that the head was taken to conceal evidence, in my opinion. I'm fairly confident that he was decapitated in the garage, because there was blood and a spot of it that would have been consistent with the head, after being severed, they sat it down on the concrete floor. The blood and decomp fluid and things like that had flowed out from the rest of the body. There were some towels. Those were used to keep the decomp fluid or blood from flowing out of the garage to the street. So, whoever did this didn't want that blood to come out from under that garage and somebody see it.

NARRATION:

DESPITE THE BLOOD IN THE GARAGE, THE LACK OF ANY BLOOD SPATTER PATTERNS MAKES SHERIFF SILLS SUSPECT THAT RUSSELL DERMOND WAS KILLED SOMEWHERE ELSE. WHY HE WAS BROUGHT TO THE GARAGE TO BE DECAPITATED IS UNKNOWN, BUT A CLUE FOUND NEAR THE BODY SUGGESTS THE KILLER MAY NOT HAVE BEEN FAMILIAR WITH THE DERMOND'S HOME.

SHERIFF SILLS: There was a lamp that was moved from the den to the garage. I believe the lamp was used to illuminate the decapitation process, and the lamp was still on when we went into the garage. We had a little trouble ourselves locating the light switch for the interior of the garage. So, I presume that the perpetrator had the same trouble we did, and that's why they got that lamp.

NARRATION:

SHIRLEY DERMOND'S AUTOPSY CONFIRMS THAT SHE DIED FROM THE VIOLENT BLOWS TO HER HEAD. THE LEVEL OF DECOMPOSITION PLACES HER DEATH AT ROUGHLY THE SAME TIME AS HER HUSBAND'S,

AND IT'S CONFIRMED THAT SHE WAS ALREADY DEAD BEFORE THE 60 POUNDS OF CONCRETE ANCHORED HER TO THE BOTTOM OF LAKE OCONEE.

SHERIFF SILLS: Ms. Dermond's murder was a particularly violent murder, so there's some personal animosity there. That's usually indicative of somebody who's truly mad at a person, not just some random killer. So that motive means that somebody who knew her and did not like her, for whatever reason. If this is a home invasion, traditionally when that happens, the house is ransacked. There's evidence of it, there are things taken. If they came in while a burglary was going on, that would've been the same type of scenario. The motive of robbery doesn't seem to be there. If anything, this was some sort of abduction, where somebody was going to hold Mrs. Dermond or Mr. Dermond until the other party could pay them off. Maybe that's what happened. But that doesn't fit with the anger that I think was there toward Mrs. Dermond.

NARRATION:

GIVEN THE GRUESOME NATURE OF THE MURDERS AND THE LACK OF AN APPARENT MOTIVE, SPECULATION RUNS WILD ABOUT WHO COULD HAVE KILLED THE DERMONDS AND WHY. THEORIES FROM MOB HITS, TO HIDDEN TREASURE, TO SATANIC RITUAL KILLINGS CIRCULATE THROUGH THE COMMUNITY.

SHERIFF SILLS: This crime is so strange in so many different ways. One, you've got this extraordinarily exclusive neighborhood where we very seldom have any crime. And then, you've got a couple. One's 88, one's 87. They've been retired, at this time, for well over a decade. They never really did much other than to go to church and Mrs. Dermond to get her hair done and some things like that. They very seldom did anything outside of the gate, so to speak. I can find no connection to any kind of crime or anything with these people. They lived a pretty much sedentary life. We know where they were. We've got their cellphone records. We can't find an enemy of any kind.

NARRATION:

WITH LITTLE TO GO ON, INVESTIGATORS TURN THEIR ATTENTION TO THE DERMOND'S FAMILY HISTORY. THEY DISCOVER AN INCIDENT NEARLY 14 YEARS EARLIER THAT INVOLVED THEIR OLDEST SON, MARK.

BRAD DERMOND: Everything kind of pointed toward our oldest brother, Mark. He was a, had a tough go of it, drug and alcohol wise, and ultimately, he was murdered in a drug deal that was gone bad in Atlanta. So, there was some thought about, was that part of the equation? And that really just didn't make any sense. The person who murdered Mark was still in jail. Our family was not involved, like even during that trial. We didn't even attend the trial. So, it made no sense that the person who murdered Mark, him or his family or whatever, would have had some sort of vendetta against our family.

SHERIFF SILLS: It was just reported to us that the son was a drug kingpin, and maybe that there was some sort of retaliation for that, and he had been murdered and there was no validity to any of that. He's just a typical person that gets strung out on dope, you know. So, there's no nexus there to the Dermonds and anything associated with their son other than their son was murdered.

NARRATION:

WHILE ALL THREE OF RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY'S CHILDREN COOPERATE FULLY WITH THE MURDER INVESTIGATION, SHERIFF SILLS CAN'T RULE THEM OUT AS POTENTIAL SUSPECTS. DID THEY HAVE HAD ANYTHING TO GAIN FROM THEIR PARENTS' DEATHS?

SHERIFF SILLS: These were not phenomenally wealthy people. The house sold for, like, a million four, and they might have had about that much money in cash and other investments. They were each other's executor of their wills. So, if somebody in the family, named in the will, if Ms. Dermond's body had not been found, it would have been a long time before she would have been declared dead, and that estate would have been settled. And whoever killed her thought that we would never find her. So, they weren't going to get anything in a hurry.

NARRATION:

WHILE RARE, BURGLARIES ARE NOT UNHEARD OF IN PUTNAM COUNTY, AND LIVING IN A GATED COMMUNITY WITH EXPENSIVE HOUSES WOULD MAKE THE DERMOND'S AN OBVIOUS TARGET. THOUGH NOTHING APPEARED TO BE MISSING FROM THE HOUSE, INVESTIGATORS CAN'T RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT MONEY SOMEHOW PLAYED A ROLE IN RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY'S MURDERS.

BRAD DERMOND: They're you know, late 80s. Not active in any sort of business or investments. After it all happened, and just going through our records and phone records and, you know, there's just not, there was nothing out of the ordinary. We were looking for some item of value that we were unaware of that, uh, you know, a perpetrator would have been looking for or question them about or, you know, that kind of thing. It just didn't exist, as far as we know.

SHERIFF SILLS: Extortion? Well, I mean I guess it's possible that someone thought they could take them to the bank and get \$20,000, \$50,000 dollars or whatever, but if they did, they were woefully uneducated to know that you, you know, you're not gonna be able to do that on Saturday afternoon when all the banks are closed.

NARRATION:

NOTHING IN THE DERMOND'S RECENT HISTORY AS RETIREES SUGGESTS A CONNECTION TO SOMEONE WHO WOULD WANT THEM DEAD. BUT WHAT ABOUT DEEPER IN THEIR PAST? RUSSELL HAD SERVED IN THE NAVY DURING WORLD WAR II, AND HE AND SHIRLEY SETTLED IN HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY WHEN HE GOT OUT OF THE SERVICE. BASED ON HOW THEIR BODIES WERE FOUND, SOME SPECULATE THAT THE DERMOND'S MAY HAVE BEEN MIXED UP WITH THE MAFIA IN THE DECADES BEFORE THEY MOVED TO GEORGIA.

SHERIFF SILLS: The Dermonds were from New Jersey, so therefore, they have to be in organized crime. Well, there's no evidence of anything. Hell, just because you're from New Jersey, that doesn't mean you're involved in... But I mean, it's just, uh, ridiculous. If it was an organized-type crime assassination, you don't take somebody six miles down the lake. You walk in there, shoot them in the head with a 22 magnum, and walk out. You don't amateurishly tie blocks to their legs. Mistaken identity is certainly a possibility, although that doesn't seem very likely to me either. Obviously, we ran criminal background checks on the people who lived in their vicinity there, to see if maybe somebody went to the wrong

house. And there was nobody in the neighborhood that had any kind of criminal background that we could find. But even in going into the wrong house type scenario, the circumstances of Mr. Dermond being decapitated post-mortem and then being shot, at least that's what we think from the evidence, and then Mrs. Dermond being beaten to death and then discarded, and that makes that very unlikely, too. Every theory that we come up with, there's something within it that contradicts it.

NEWS CLIP: It's a crime that's robbed a community of its sense of safety for years. A couple murdered, their killer never caught.

NEWS CLIP: As the years pass, the number of questions continues to grow. Who committed this terrible crime?

BRAD DERMOND: Well, I've dealt with the FBI quite a bit through the years and the agents have always told us that they've dealt with cases similar to this and they've assured us that they almost always get solved. Somebody's gonna tell the story to someone else and it's gonna get out there. And so that was, you know, 2014. So, here we are eight years later. Every year that goes by, it just gets more and more frustrating. We've got two young men in our family, and both are studying criminal justice, actually, and looking to join the bureau. So, we're trying and take the whole event and try to make it as positive as possible, because that's, cause that's, I know, that's what, uh, mom and dad would want us to do.

SHERIFF SILLS: I think about the Dermond case every day, every night. These case file boxes are all around me. Their pictures are on the wall in my lobby. This is the only murder in my whole career that we've not been able to solve, and I never entered into my mind that seven years later I'd be still trying to find out who did it. It weighs upon me heavily, and I'd certainly like to do that before I retire. This case is gonna be solved by somebody calling us and telling us, because somebody knows. If they've been successful in anything, they've been successful in keeping a secret.

NARRATION:

THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE BIZARRE MURDERS OF RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY DERMOND REMAINS OPEN AND ACTIVE. THE REWARD FOR INFORMATION THAT LEADS TO THE KILLER OR KILLERS IS \$45,000. SHERIFF HOWARD SILLS CONTINUES TO WORK, WITH HELP FROM THE FBI, TO PURSUE NEW LEADS AND EXAMINE EXISTING EVIDENCE USING NEW TECHNOLOGY. IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION TO SHARE WITH INVESTIGATORS ABOUT THE MURDERS OF RUSSELL AND SHIRLEY DERMOND, PLEASE CONTACT THE PUTNAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE AT TIPS@PUTNAMCOUNTYSHERIFF.ORG OR 706-485-8557, OR LEAVE A TIP ON OUR WEBSITE AT UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES...

WALTER PADILLA: I saw my life flash before my eyes. I'm not afraid to admit it. I saw something that is not supposed to exist. I saw a beast of epic proportions and I have never been so scared in my life.

—

Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13, an Audacy company.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 53 of Unsolved Mysteries.