

Briery Knob

A true story of lust and murder in Appalachia

By Jerry Nelson

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Thanks for picking up a copy of my short story "Briery Knob." This copy is kind of a draft, so you may find some typos and grammatical errors. Feel free to email me and point out what you find.

I owe a special thanks to:

Karen Hill who first turned me to the story. I grew up in Bath County Virginia, about 40 miles from where these events happened, and never heard the tale until Karen pointed it out.

Ned Doyle for helping me catch some typos and other mistakes such as holes in the plot. Ned's a busy guy and the fact he took his time out to help is acknowledged and appreciated.

My wife, Alejandra, or 'Ale'. She put up with me working late at night and early in the morning and she never complained. I'm lucky to have found her so late in my life.

Igor, a friend in Moscow that has been supportive in multiple ways over the years and reached into the depths of his soul to produce a novella, "Decade." Watching him work on his, gave me the motivation to work on mine.

In a few weeks, this book will be available on Amazon, be ready for a producer and a screenwriter to prepare it for the movies.

Well, the Amazon part is true – the movie deal is a hopeful fantasy still lurking in the mist.

My editor hasn't set a price-point yet for the finished story when it comes out on Amazon, but I'll make a deal with you.

Drop a dollar or so into the 'tip jar' and i'll personally see you get a finished copy when it comes out – at no cost. My small way of saying a huge 'thank you' for being a reader, a fan and a supporter.

Be sure to follow me on Twitter @ Journey\_America. I don't know why, but I've collected a million or so followers. I guess I'm living proof that too many people have too much time on their hands.

Email me with questions, concerns, comments and anything else that's on your mind, I'd love to hear from you. If you're ever in Buenos Aires, look me up. I'd like to hang out with you.

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## Synopsis

“Briery Knob” is the story of a double murder in the backwaters of West Virginia, a town which closed ranks around the slayer and a serial killer who hatched a plan to get the real perpetrator freed and pocket \$2 million of West Virginia’s money.

Nineteen-year old Nancy Santomero and twenty-six-year old Vicki Durian were two “hippie chicks” who hitchhiked to West Virginia’s Monongahela National Park in southeast West Virginia for a gathering of the “Rainbow Family.”

Picked up by strangers in a white van, the two were given marijuana and alcohol. When they found out they were expected to ‘pay for’ the moonshine and pot with sex, they refused and were killed.

White supremacist and serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin was executed in 2013. In the months before he died, Franklin carried out a scheme which would see the exoneration of the killer and a payoff of \$2 million of the state’s money.

This story will bring to mind, for most readers, noted author, John Gresham.

There is a significant difference between “Briery Knob” and almost all of Gresham’s work.

“Briery Knob” is true.

## Introduction

Two women died on Briery Knob It was 1980.

The year the Rainbow Family came to Monongahela National Forest in Pocahontas County, a small backwater county on a doorstep to West Virginia.

Just a few miles outside of town, on Route 219 known as Seneca Trail by the locals, a van stopped and asked the female hitchhikers, "Where ya' goin'?" The mountains can alter viewpoints. The ladies smiled at the two men in flannel shirts and jeans and transportation to save some time. The men grinned at two young women, ready to party and have some fun. Both were wrong. The females edged into the van through the sliding side door and sat on a collapsing air mattress.

To carry moonshine, marijuana bales and the occasional girlfriend, the back of the van sat empty -- except for the mattress. Chatting as they followed the twisting mountain highway, the girls mentioned their boyfriends, both black, wanted to make the trip but his work called. While locals remained in denial, outsiders found racism alive and well in Pocahontas County and the rest of Appalachia.

The news these two pretty ladies found romance with black boyfriends didn't set well with either of the men. Things haven't changed in the "hills and hollers." Racism is still around.

A few days later, a hunter found the women. It would be thirteen years before the District Attorney indicted anyone.

Even then, everyone wondered if they indicted the right man. Especially one law enforcement officer who doggedly pursued the truth.

In 1977, as porn publisher Larry Flynt and his local attorney, Gene Reeves, Jr., walked to the Lawrenceville Court House where Flynt stood trial for obscenity, Joseph Paul Franklin watched through the scope of his rifle..

Firing one shot, Flynt went down when the bullet sliced his spinal column. Another shot felled Reeves and he would recover.

Joseph Paul Franklin, a drifter, a confessed serial killer and a racist targeted Flynt because of a photo spread in Hustler. Franklin found the images of a mixed-race couple engaged in simulated sex too much and Flynt's attorney found himself to be collateral damage.

Despite Franklin confessing to the shooting, city law enforcement never indicted, let alone put him on trial. The cops who interrogated him believed Franklin's confession was genuine. It is said Franklin killed at least 22 persons between 1977 and 1980. Every murder targeted minorities and most law enforcement authorities took Franklin at his word.

Some years later, Franklin admitted using a .44 caliber Ruger pistol to kill hitchhikers Nancy Santomero, 19, of New York, and Vicki Durian, 26, of Iowa as they headed to a gathering of a back-to-nature group, the Rainbow Family, in the Monongahela Forest in Pocahontas County.

The sheriff in Hillsboro never charged Franklin for the "Rainbow Murders". Fate stepped in and another man, found himself arrested, tried and sentenced to life in prison for the murders. A jury sent Franklin death row for 15 years where he waited his execution in the state of Missouri for the 1977 murder of Gerald Gordon. Franklin died by ethal injection on November 20, 2013. Joseph Paul Franklin still owned some twisted good. In the years before his execution, he planned, and carried out, a scheme, to get the real killer freed with a \$2 million settlement for false imprisonment.

Appalachia is Ronald Regan country. The region wasn't always Republican. In 1960, Jack Kennedy

carried the nation after convincing the poor and the coal miners Catholics don't have horns, eat small animals and children or bow to Papal pressure.

Life would remain backward for years. In 1983, citizens swooned and went orgasmic over Reagan and believed when the Gipper said, "When Fascism comes to America, it will come in the form of liberals."

Appalachia's self-image as a benign hegemon is deeply rooted like the trees growing on the ridges.

Years later, without a Muslim around for miles, the homegrown would fear Mexicans and Muslims. The nearest Mexican was 139 miles away in Charleston, and none of the villagers had ever seen a Muslim in person.

Fueling their fears with too much alcohol, the citizens remained happy in their ignorance, as they met their friends at Fiddlehead's Bar and Grill to drink beer, talk dirty and burp.

Otherwise, they gather at the high school baseball field to listen to Rush Run Philharmonic Viney Mountain Bluegrass Boys, pat themselves on the back and proclaim how "good 'Muricans" they are. Many would gather at the summer home of William Luther Pierce, the white supremacist who took over the National Youth Alliance in 1967 when George Lincoln Rockwell was assassinated. Splitting with the National Youth Alliance in 1974, Pierce started looking for a headquarters for his group, The National Alliance.

He found a home in Hillsbror and drew white supremacists from across the county. In 1978, Pierce wrote *The Turner Diaries*, a novel about violent revolution in America that ended with the extermination of non-white races.

It was in Pierce's compound where two racists would meet and form a bond of friendship over their mutual racism, bigotry and mutual love of guns.

But we get ahead of the story.

1980's Pocahontas County didn't differ much -- socio-economically -- than 1880's Pocahontas County. Life didn't change much in one-hundred years. People without indoor plumbing could still be found, and it was still against the law to marry your first cousin.

Fucking is called "having relations," in Appalachia. It's fine involving between 2nd cousins. A couple will find themselves bound for hell if they diddle someone closer on the family tree. A horny redneck needs to ask Preacher Johnson down at First Baptist to sanction the opportunity to "know" someone in the Biblical sense. If you catch the preacher when he and the Widow Brown weren't "fornicating".

Other than catting around, Preacher Johnson was a sufficient pastor. He always made sure to end his sermons at ten minutes before noon so the Baptists may beat the Methodists to the all-you-could-eat buffet at Golden Corral in Lewisburg.

Besides hunger pangs, Baptists and Methodists enjoyed two differences. The Methodists would speak to people in the liquor store, and Baptists never made love standing up. They didn't want people to think they were dancing.

Work in Pocahontas County tended to be as cockeyed as religion. Grafton, the owner of the feed and seed, is known to slide a customer a Mason jar of shine to load his truck, giving Grafton the time to sit and smoke a cigarette.

More than one wife has caught Mavis, the waitress with the giving heart at Kuntry Kafe, rubbing up against a good old boy, letting him cop a cheap thrill in hopes of a bigger tip.

The barber Granite gives great haircuts in the morning, but a person arrive by noon before Granite enjoys too many nips of gin and the hairstyles become long and irregular.

That summer, American Greeting Card ran an ad in the Pocahontas Times for a merchandizer in Marlinton, the county seat, 23 people from Hillsboro applied. Each was hopeful for the position which paid minimum wage, \$3.10 an hour, for three-hours of work a week. Commute time not included.

Come Sunday morning, Grafton, Mavis, Granite and the other 'God-fearing' folk of Hillsboro could be seen in church singing "Nearer My God To Thee." Grafton, as usual, was off-key while Mavis and Granite played grab-ass under the choir robes.

The gears of religion, sex, and work, lubricated with plenty of illegal moonshine and lawful beer, kept Appalachia humming in 1980, and it was this environment into which two young ladies hitchhiked -- and would never leave.

Again, we get ahead of the story.

*Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'  
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive  
Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive  
Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive*

*The Bee Gees 1977*

Hippies streamed in for the Rainbow Gathering in Pocahontas County in 1980. The annual event, first held in 1972, in Estacada, Oregon attracted late-comers to the counterculture aura of the 60s and aged hippies who had been in the vanguard during Haight-Ashbury.

It also drew two girls. Nancy Santomero, 19 and Vicki Durian, 26, from the concrete canyons of New York City and the corn fields of Iowa.

In their world both were restless. World events conspired to nudge them closer to the edge of their comfort zones. John Wayne Gacy in Chicago, rioting in Miami, and though they wouldn't live to see it, John Lennon would be shot to death by a fan outside his apartment building.

Nancy left New York because disco left her cold. Nancy always felt disco to be the sustained thump of a moron knocking in an endless nail. At least that's the way she thought of it.

Vickie's mom, with dreams of being an author, flew into a diminutive airport enclosed by corn fields and pastures, eager to carry out the two rules her father gave the night before she left: "Waste two years studying creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, then return home and get married."

The day her future husband appeared, she forgot about writing or ever going home.

City people made the most fuss about the charms of country life Vickie believed.

Once she nurtured the dream of joining Bike Ride Across Iowa and never stopping. Yearnings, like corn, die if they're not cultivated.

The morning they left Vickie's mother kissed them goodbye and waved until they vanished around the corner.

Now would be a predictable place to say she felt an ominous feeling descend, but an omen would be too obvious. Besides, it would be a lie.

The girls rode their thumbs to Moline where a trucker provided a ride to Indianapolis where he would rest for two days and see his family.

Outside Chillicothe, Conrad, a seasonal pot smuggler, stopped. Out of work and disabled, Conrad's idea of patriotism centered around a redneck, white socks, and Blue Ribbon beer.

Conrad figured he could get lucky with at least one of the girls, so he shared the pot with abandon. They stopped at a diner where Conrad bought each a meal and slipped them both a \$100 bill.

The closest he got to a little loving disappointed him. A kiss on the cheek and a promise to stay in touch.

Destiny's next link came in the form of 69-year old Elroy and his wife, Martha. A Mormon couple and freelance missionaries from Levan, Utah., they offered a ride all the way to the West Virginia state line. But after 5 miles and 20 minutes of sermonizing about waywardness of youth, too much sex and not enough religion, Nancy feigned sickness. They were put out on the shoulder. Neither wanted to ask why the couple's hometown was navel -- spelled backward.



Near Jackson, another trucker carrying a Ferris wheel and a cotton candy machine pulled over and gave them a ride all the way to the State Fair Grounds in Fairlea, near Lewisburg, 45-minutes from Hillsboro, the closest town to the Rainbow Gathering.

About the time the rain started, a white van pulled over. The rider nodded out the window and asked, "Jeet?" Shaking, Nancy and Vickie stared at each other.

"Huh? What?" asked Nancy wiping the rain from her eyes.

"Jeet?" repeated the traveler. The girls stood quiet, staring. They overheard the driver say something, but couldn't understand.

The passenger, wearing a blue-plaid flannel shirt, leaned further and asked slow and forceful like talking to a developmentally challenged third-grader, "I-SAID-DID-YOU-EAT?"

The rain came harder, and the girls shrugged as they climbed into the back of the van.

Turning on the windshield wipers, the driver, wearing a red-plaid flannel shirt and mullet, peered in the mirror and said, "Gaw-damn. It's pouring like a cow pissing on a flat rock."

Grinding the transmission, Blue-Plaid and Red-Plaid opened some beer, handed two to the girls and lit a joint as they drove into the night.

### Briery Knob Chapter 3

A hunter found the bodies a few hours later, minutes before 9 pm. Lying next to each other in a remote clearing, both had been shot numerous times and at close range. The coroner wrote in his report "no sign of sexual assault." The murders became headline news across the nation.

Deer hunting is always easier after rain. The ground is soft, and a country boy can spot tracks easy. That's how Ned came to find the bodies of two girls heading to the Rainbow Family Gathering in West Virginia's Monongahela Forest.

A local boy, he drove around the gate of the Droop Mountain National Battlefield, skirted the margin on an abandoned logging trail and steered toward Briery Knob. Walking along the edges, he noticed something.

Going closer, he spotted two piles of clothes.

Nudging one he found a body still dressed. Dropping his gun, he scampered back to his jeep. The tires kicked up rocks and dirt as he flew down the mountain.

Stopping at The Tippy Cow Bar & Grill, he called the sheriff's department.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Bob Alkire, a friend from school and now local deputy, rolled up. He struggled as he got out of his squad car. A star linebacker at Little Levels High, the six-foot, three-inch pigskin hopeful gave up the chance to go to college when he got his cheerleader girlfriend, Beulah, pregnant on the back of the church bus. They were second-cousins.

White-faced and panicked, Ned found it hard to breathe as he told the fat lawman about the discovery and offered to ride with him to show him the way.

Pulling up beside the bodies, Bob didn't recognize them and knew they weren't locals.

"No need to bother anyone else," Bob said as he rearranged the healthy helping of Red Man in his left cheek. "They're dead. They ain't going nowhere. Besides, they ain't from around here."

Instead of calling for someone with more experienced, the deputy called Thomas at Lantz Funeral Home which sat behind the Sparrow's Nest Bar in Beard Heights. Proudly boasting in their Yellow Page ad, "We offer a wide array of services for your family's needs during times of sorrow," the mortuary and crematorium lived by their motto, "Our Family Serving Your Family."

Together the three bagged the female victims, put them in the back of Thomas' pickup and rode down the mountain barely able to see through the fog which was rolling in.

Jack Frost, yes, his real name, was West Virginia's State Medical Examiner in 1980. When skinny man who favored Bill Nyefirst moved to Morgantown in 1977, he was responsible for 14 counties. The workload would increase to 25 jurisdictions by his retirement, 23-years later.

After Frost retired, authorities discovered hundreds of unfinished investigations. Some of the incomplete autopsies stretched as far back as the early 1980s, and prosecuting attorneys in 21 counties returned 59 questionable cases.

Claiming to be overworked and understaffed, Frost made plenty of errors. The Rainbow Killings would become part of the inefficiency. Frost initially estimated the time of death as 7pm based on the victims' bodies. Rigor mortis had not set in, and Frost would later testify the murders could have been committed as early as 4 pm.

Regardless, several days would pass before the corpses' identity was known.

Kathy, Nancy's sibling, was driving to Pocahontas. She had been busy at school ready for a break. Nancy made a week in the forest with hippies sound inviting. With nothing else happening in her life, Kathy agreed to join her sibling in the woods.

After spending a few days hanging out and waiting for her sister, Kathy decided Nancy had changed her mind, Kathy pulled down her tent, loaded the Pinto and made the trip back to New York.

When she got home, a friend shared a newspaper report with the victim's photographers. One resembled Nancy and Kathy on her way, again, to West Virginia.

On July 8, Kathy identified her sister's body and helped police contact the Durian family.

The killings went unsolved for two years.

Briery Knob -- Chapter 4 -- The Corn Chopper

Rumors about the "Rainbow Murders" flowed in the mountains like streams. One story said the dead girls and the Rainbow group angered locals for choosing their area for a gathering. Other rumors said the girls died murdered in a hippie-ritual or decapitated or dumped by the Mafia.

If anyone feared the rumors would wind down, they squandered energy. With every round of the backroads, someone would add another detail and give the rumor new wings.

"Just a gathering of drug-crazed hippies," said more than one Hillsboro citizen. Tight-lipped attitudes from residents hampered the investigation. In a region where everyone knew everyone -- and related to most -- no one wanted to support an investigation of one of their own.

One July morning, two years after the murders, sunlight filtered through the clouds and sparkled on the green, yellow and black mix of paint which gave John Deere its unique and distinctive shade of green on each of the riding mowers parked in front of Greenbriar Tractor Sales.

Jacob Beard smoothly maneuvered the John Deere around the pickups blocking the service interest as a lavender-scented breeze whispered among the spits of chewing tobacco. He drew a deep breath and smiled just before noticing the sheriff's deputy pulling into the gravel lot.

"Jacob, I need to talk to you," said Bob pulling his gun belt higher on his bloated stomach.

Beard, larger than life and physically imposing, weighed in at more than 250 pounds. Well known by the mountain dwellers for being mean, he faced animal cruelty charges for killing his former girlfriend's cat and leaving it on her bed.

The deputy guided the lawn mower mechanic to the corner of the oversize metal building, "Jacob. We've got a problem. But if you'll cooperate with can make the cruelty charges go away."

Jacob followed the cream-and-brown cruiser to the Sheriff's Department where they went inside, got two Styrofoam cups of coffee, left over from last night. Sitting in the gray government issue chairs, they set their coffee on the faux-marble table top and leaned into each other.

"Jacob, we hear you been making phone calls to Miss Durian's parents."

"No. Not me."

"Well, Jacob. You've called them twice. After your first call, we put a tap on their phone and identified you as the caller when you called again."

"No. No, you're mistaken. It wasn't me."

"The Durians told us you said the cops weren't doing their job and that you weren't the killer."

Jacob's hand shook. Coffee covered his hand.

"Now here's what we're going to do Jacob. We're going to grant you immunity for any after-the-fact involvement you may have had. We won't give you immunity for any involvement as a principal or accessory."

Beard thought quick.

"Well, I worked until one -- you can check the time cards."

"We will."

"Then I had to go and work on a customer's tractor."

"And...?"

"About 5:15 I went to the grocery store and before Linda and me went to a school board meeting at seven."

"And then what Jacob?"

"Me and Linda got home about nine."

"Don't you live close to Droop Mountain?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah. On the way home I saw Christine Cooks's car. She was parked near the entrance to the park. She was that boyfriend of hers, Palmer Atkison, and William McCoy."

"Did you see anyone else there?"

"Well, there were two women who could have been the Rainbow women."

The deputies looked at each other and asked Jacob if he wanted another cup of coffee. Nodding, he held the cup out. Bob noticed his hand was still shaking.

"You know, there was another Rainbow hippie-woman killed in September that year," Jacob said when Bob returned to the interrogation room.

Handing Jacob his coffee, Bob's eyes widened slightly and asked, "What woman Jacob?"

"Adkison and Arnold Cutlip killed one of those hippie-women and brought the body over to my place. We put it in my corn chopper and got rid of it."

The police investigated and determined Beard was lying about the corn chopper murder. Despite that, they arrested Cutlip and held him for two months before releasing him.

It would be a day or so before law enforcement got around to interviewing Atkison and McCoy. They stopped by McCoy's home and finding his sister asked to talk with her.

"Yeah, Billy came home late that night. He was covered in blood and told me to burn his clothes."

"Did he say how he got bloody?"

"Yeah. He killed a deer."

Glancing at each other, the detectives asked, "What did he do with the deer? Is it in the freezer?"

"Yah know? He didn't have no deer when he came home."

The next morning the detectives interviewed Christine, and she denied being near the park that day.

Briery Knob -- Chapter 5 -- Two Confessions

No one ever accused Lee Morrison of being the sharpest tool in the woodshed in West Virginia. In Hillsboro, people would say "the cheese done slid off his cracker."

When it came to most of the men in Pocahontas County though, Morrison was a straight-out Einstein.

Like many guys in Pocahontas County, Morrison had a toolbox a NASCAR mechanic drool after. He collected hand tools like a black dress collects lint.

In 1983 Morrison went to neighboring Greenbrier County to talk with the sheriff and confess to his part in the three-year-old slayings.

Morrison told the sheriff he and Gerald Brown had picked up Santomero and Durian. Morrison claimed he was drinking while they rode around and he passed out. When he woke, he was in the van on Briery Knob watching Brown kill both women.

"You what??" asked the deputy setting upright.

"Yes, sir. I seen Brown kill those two hippie-chicks. I helped move them bodies to the edge of the field."

"Why-in-the-hell-did-you-do-that?"

"Gerald ordered me," Morrison said as he bowed his head and began to sob.

The deputy arrested Morrison without pause. A couple of months later, at his preliminary hearing, Morrison recanted.

"Judge, Jacob Beard told me something would happen to my family if I didn't say I done it."

The judge dismissed the charges against Morrison, and the emotionally-broken Mountaineer went home.

The case sat in a government issue gray-metal filing cabinet, and in 1985 a Pocahontas County deputy noted Alice Roberts, a local, should be interviewed. The note was stuck in the Rainbow Murder file and forgotten.

For several years the investigation went into deep hibernation. By 1991, the local law enforcement was seeing a change in personnel as senior officers retired and new ones took their place. A deputy who was just a kid when the murders took place got curious and started digging in the files. He found the note about Alice Roberts and followed up.

Alice told investigators they needed to talk with Pam Wilson, her daughter. Pam said on the day of the killings she had seen two "hippie-type" girls climb in a van with Richard Fowler, a friend, at the wheel. She also told the officers she saw McCoy with Winters Walton and Fowler as the sun started down behind the ridge.

In November 1991, investigators got a call from Keith Cohenour, a man serving ten-years in Pruntytown Correctional Center for forgery and auto theft.

"I got information on those hippie girls," said the voice.

"Oh?" asked Bob. On duty after enjoying a short vacation, he wasn't sure he was ready for this.

"What do you know?"

"I learned who killed them."

"How do you know?"

"The day them girls were killed I was in the tavern parking lot there in Hillsboro. I walked right past a van that Richard Fowler owned," Cohenour paused.

"Go on."

"I overheard Fowler in the van yelling at McCoy. They were having a verbal knock-down they was."

"And....?"

"I listened as McCoy told Fowler he refused to spend the rest of his life behind bars for Jacob Beard or no one else."

"Go on...and?"

"Well, Fowler told McCoy that if Beard heard him say that he'd end up in the same place those gals are."

Cohenour continued his narrative telling Bob he met up with Fowler and McCoy several hours later at a double wide owned by Gerald Brown. Brown and Jacob Beard argued, and Beard told Brown to keep his mouth shut, or he would "end up on Briery Knob also."

Cohenour wasn't done. He told the deputy that later the same night, he gave McCoy a ride home and McCoy said he watched Beard shoot the women.

And he wanted help in getting his incarceration reduced.

Briery Knob -- Chapter 6 -- Another Confession

"I can be mean as fuck or sweet as candy. Cold as ice and evil as hell, or loyal like a trooper. It depends on you."

Born James Clayton Vaughn in Mobile to a poor family, Franklin became fascinated with two things, but not simultaneously. First came evangelical Christianity. Then came Nazism. Later in life, Franklin would be a card carrying member of both the National Socialist White People's Party and the KKK.

"Men Kampf," Franklin said, inspired him to start a race war.

"I never felt that way about any other book I read," Franklin would reflect years later. "It was something weird about the book."

Much of his life he drifted up and down the East Coast looking for chances to rid the world of people he considered inferior -- especially blacks and Jews.

An evil man, Joseph Paul Franklin admitted to 20 murders. Some investigators and detectives believed he minimized the number.

Franklin took pride in being a neo-Nazi and white supremacist. He was convinced interracial marriages were a sin and he saw himself to be God's instrument in handing out punishment.

Franklin's preferred sniper attacks as he hunted humans for sport. Sometimes he chose other methods, but not always.

At 3:17 in the morning on July 25, 1977, Franklin loaded his pick-up truck with dynamite and parked in front of pro-Israel lobbyist Morris Amitay's home. The explosion damaged the house, but everyone in the residence escaped -- except the family's six-year-old beagle.

Four days later, Franklin firebombed Beth Sholom synagogue in Chattanooga.

In October, the same year, Franklin cradled his hunting rifle as he hid in the tall grass behind a pole near Brith Shalom. When the worshipers inside the house of worship in Richmond Heights, Missouri left, Franklin fired into the group and killed Gerald Gordon.

In March 1978, Franklin grabbed his .44 caliber rifle and waited in the alley next to La Cazuela Mexican Restaurant on West Crogan Street, in Lawrenceville and waited for Hustler publisher Larry Flynt to return to court after lunch. Franklin later told authorities the shooting was retaliation for an interracial photo spread in the magazine.

The next year, 1979, from 150 yards, Franklin shot Harold McIver, a Taco Bell manager in Doraville, When Franklin confessed, he said McIver had been in "close contact" with white women.

The murderous rampage continued with civil rights activist Vernon Jordan in Fort Wayne, Indiana and cousins Darrell Lane and Dante Brown in Cincinnati.

Convicted and sentenced to two life sentences for killing Lane and Brown, Franklin also confessed to killing an interracial couple in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Each of Franklin's victims offended his sense of decency "between the races."

Franklin also confessed, in 1997, to using a .44 Ruger to kill Santomero and Durian.

Melissa Powers, an Ohio assistant prosecutor, interviewed Franklin while he lived on death row for



the Gordon killing.

Powers, an attractive and petite lawyer, was busy working the Cincinnati shootings when her boss sent her to Missouri's death house to interview Franklin.

"Melissa!" called the burly prosecutor as the petite attorney passed his office.

"Yes?"

"Pack your bags. You're going to Missouri."

Tossing a two-inch thick folder on the chair, the balding barrister said, "Read this and, after lunch, let's talk."

Picking the folder up, Melissa looked at the label. Franklin, Joseph Paul.

"Why do killers always have two first names?" she scrunched her face.

"Killers and Southern Boys. Read it and let's talk."

Briery Knob -- Chapter 7 -- A Malevolent Meeting

When she left the prison after the interview, she wanted to leave Missouri as fast as possible. She had two more tasks. Find somewhere to type up the interview and take it back for Franklin to sign before she left town.

About three miles from the prison, she found Brad Van Zee's law firm on North Mine Street stuck in between a laundromat and "Elmer's Buffet." The sign said Elmer offered an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet for \$9.95. Melissa didn't stop to wonder about a Chinese restaurant called Elmer's.

"Hi, I'm Melissa Powers," she said to the gum-snapping receptionist as she stepped across the threshold.

"Can I help ya?" inquired the apparent refugee from the Redneck Diaspora.

Pulling her notes from her briefcase, she glanced at the name plate on the front of the desk.

"Yes, Ms. Cauley. I just...."

"Linda, dear. Linda Lee."

"Yes, ma'am...Linda. I wonder where in town I can have my notes typed up. Is there a stenographer near?"

"Heavens no missy. This here's Potosi. You'd have to go to St. Louis for a stenographer."

Melissa rubbed her temples; suddenly she had a headache.

"But if yan'to, I can type 'em up here and now."

"Huh?" Melissa questioned quizzically. "What did you say?"

"I said if yan'to, I can type up your notes."

"Would you? I'll be glad to pay you. How much."

"Ah, no charge honey." She winked and added in a conspiratorial tone, "Us workin' girls hafta stick together."

"I can't thank you enough. I'm going to..." Melissa paused and pointed, "Elmer's...?"

Seeing the furrowed forehead of a perplexed woman, Linda Lee volunteered, "A long story, honey. But a good one. I'll tell you some day."

An hour later Melissa walked in just as Linda Lee pulled the last sheet from the IBM Selectric.

"Wow. Honey. That's something right interesting. You know. I remember when that Jew got kilt. But I hadn't heard about the others."

"A long story," offered Melissa. "But a good one. I'll tell you some day."

Laying a \$10.00 bill on the desk, she took the documents, slid them into her briefcase, shook hands, walked outside and headed to Potosi Correctional Center and Joseph Paul Franklin.

"How did it go?" Melissa's boss asked the morning she returned to the office.

"I was terrified," stressed Melissa. "I was holding my breath and trying not to act like I was afraid."

Whatever Melissa did, it worked. She got Franklin's confession. For seventeen years Franklin refused to talk about the murders. Sending Powers to speak with Franklin, a "ladies man", worked too well.

Getting a confession in the Cincinnati case Powers' primary goal remained Melissa's primary goal. . What she got was a slew of revelations about homicides stretching across ten states.

"Something fascinated me about Franklin," Powers told her boss while they poured coffee. "He was flat and didn't feel bad. He felt justified in killing those victims. He claimed he had a purpose and reason for murder."

Melissa's hands began to shake as the memory of the meeting with pure evil rose in her throat.

"I was scared the entire time," she continued. "Once, he looked at me and told me he could kill me before the guards could unlock the door."

Her boss leaned back, flicking imaginary lint from his tie.

"I was ready to leave when Franklin said, 'I committed the Rainbow Murders, you know.'"

Melissa remembered the murders and the rumors which flew when the girls' bodies were found.

One story pinned the killings on a local. The gossips said the girls died because angry residents didn't want the Rainbow group choosing their area for the gathering.

Briery Knob -- Chapter 8 -- The Trial

Many residents in Hillsboro believed the gathering would be filled with drug-indulging hippies, sex-crazed teenagers and "those liberals" intent on destroying America.

The mountain dwellers tended to be good people who possessed the sophistication of a horny teenager about to lose his virginity to Mary-Jane-Rottencrotch in the backseat of his father's Buick.

Every home displayed a picture of Robert E. Lee, Elvis, and Jack Kennedy. Ripped from old copies of Life Magazine, the three images provided about the only hint of decoration other than a 1960s calendar from the Feed and Seed.

"The South Will Rise Again," was a familiar refrain and usually said by someone who didn't grasp the fact the South never rose the first time.

Most families re-purposed their indoor furniture to their porch and more than a few parked a fleet of non-working cars, on blocks, in the front yard.

It was an area of which J.D. Vance would say years later, the residents possessed absolutely nothing, and they would fight to the death to keep it. But if they found someone in need, the locals would gladly give it all away to help out.

Kevin Williamson, writing in *The Week*, summed the people up as the last hold outs of the Scots-Irish working class picked up where slave labor left off. Cropping and cutting raw materials for an otherwise modern American economy would soon forget the profitable uses for a class of people who five-centuries ago would be called peasants.

Thinking about the future and its bleak prospects is no fun. Instead, the hill people clung to pills and dope, morning beer, endless scratch-off lottery and healing meetings up on the hill while the federally funded ritual involving the trade of food-stamp Dr. Pepper for packs of Native American cigarettes and hard currency continued.

The few gas stations come with heaping piles of stale nachos, the blast of meth, Alcoholics Anonymous, petty crime, and death.

If the folks living in Appalachia weren't 99% white, it would be called a reservation.

But, back to the story.

The investigation stalled because of complications created by the tight-lipped attitudes of the hill people. It was a region where everyone knew everyone -- and many often related.

But we've already discussed that.

In July 1982, Jacob Beard fell under the glare of suspicion because of some phone calls he made to Durian's parents. After the first call, detectives tapped the Durian's phone and identified Beard as the caller when he phoned again.

"The cops aren't doing their job. I am not the killer," Beard whispered into the handset during both calls.

The investigation grew legs, and detectives found other witnesses. Steve Good reported he noticed Fowler's van at Brown's home around six on the evening of the killings. Good told the cops the van was backed in under the carport and was being hosed out.

William "Bill" Scott told state troopers he witnessed Beard moving along at high speed as he left Droop Mountain Park between 3:30 and 3:45 the afternoon of the killings. Another eyewitness presented himself to claim he recognized Beard's vehicle -- but not Beard -- at the park's entrance around 5:30 or six the night the two girls died.

Beard, McCoy, Fowler, Brown, Winters Walton, Arnold Cutlip, and Johnnie Lewis were all ultimately charged with murder, but at a pretrial hearing, Walton claimed the cops threatened him, Lewis recanted his identification of Beard, and the authorities dismissed the charges against the two.

Two-weeks into the New Year, 1993, Pocahontas County's legal system indicted Beard, McCoy, Fowler, Brown, and Cutlip. Walton and Lewis were not charged. Instead, they received immunity for their testimony pointing the finger at the others.

Law enforcement caught up with Beard four-months later in Crescent City, Florida. Beard got out of Pocahontas County when prosecutors dropped the charges and moved to Crescent City, Florida where he found work as a service manager at a car dealership when Florida's law enforcement pulled into the lot.

Beard went on trial alone. The trial was held in neighboring Greenbrier County since the judge moved the case there due to extensive pre-trial publicity.

Pamela Wilson testified that she had seen the two women, Durian and Santomero, walking along Seneca Trail, Route 219, and watched as Fowler, Walton, and McCoy stopped to give the women a ride.

Walton testified the three picked the girls up because they looked like hippies and probably would have sex with the men. After stopping to get beer and pot, they drove over to Droop Mountain and parked where other people were drinking and hanging out. Amongst themselves, the men started plotting how to get the women alone, and one suggested going on up to Briery Knob.

With the road turning to dirt, the area became more remote, and the women started arguing with the men over the destination.

While everyone was shouting at everyone else, Walton testified, Beard, Brown, Lewis, and Cutlip joined the group and decided to head to Cutlip's single-wide trailer which was near.

The women got more upset, and McCoy pulled out a pistol, according to Walton, Durian was shot first. When Santomero tried to run she was shot in the back.

"We loaded the bodies in the van," Walton testified. "...and we dumped them further up the hill, took their identification and destroyed it."

Lewis testified he witnessed Beard kill Santomero and Durian.

Cohenour was next on the stand, and he stuck by statements he made over ten-years earlier. Cohenour's testimony implicated Beard, Fowler, Brown, and McCoy.

Christine Cook, who years ago denied being at Droop Mountain Park, now said she had seen McCoy, Fowler, Cutlip, Lewis, and Brown at the park around five o'clock.

"Was Beard with them?" asked the prosecutor.

"Could have been. Could have been," Cook replied.

Jack Frost, the chief medical examiner, changed his estimated time of the murder and now said the girls could have been killed as early as four in the afternoon.

Beard, bringing his time card from work, testified in his own defense. Beard had penciled in the time he left work, a common practice in the hills, but he did concede that he failed to write in the time he left work until a week later.

Beard was convicted of both murders and sentenced to life in prison without parole. The prosecution dismissed the charges against the remaining defendants, and they walked free on June 4, 1993.

Briery Knob -- Chapter 9 -- An Unsatisfying Conclusion

With convictions come automatic appeals. Unless the convicted chooses not to fight. Beard didn't have many days in his life where he didn't fight back and he wasn't going to start now.

In 1995, West Virginia's Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed Beard's conviction. They sent the case to a hearing to find out if any of the prosecution's evidence had developed from leads and information Beard provided as he had been provided with a limited immunity.

A year later a judge determined that evidence had been properly obtained and all the rules were upheld in 1998 by the Court of Appeals.

Beard's lawyers next filed a state petition for a writ of habeas corpus. Using Melissa Powers' notarized notations from her meeting with Joseph Paul Franklin and testimony from Cutlip, they felt they had a chance at getting Beard freed.

They were right and the writ was granted in January 1999, Beard's conviction was set aside, a new trial ordered and Beard walked out of prison a free man.

The second trial, this time in Braxton County, began in May 2000.

Again, Beard testified and presented his alibi. Beard's statement, as before, concerned his whereabouts the day of the murders. This time, he added theatrics. Beard tearfully said the ordeal had been difficult.

"It's been very hard. It's destroyed my family," Beard mumbled between sobs.

Beard's lawyer, Stephen Farmer, pointed to Officer Alkire and claimed the cop had manipulated the case against Beard and forced several witnesses into changing their story.

The trial lasted nine-days before closing arguments began.

When Farmer gave his closing argument to the jury, he said, "If Jacob Beard goes to jail, then none of us are free. Our families aren't free, our children aren't free. Twenty years from now someone is going to make up a story about us."

Stephen Dolly gave the closing argument as Pocahontas County's prosecutor, Walt Weiford was in the hospital battling a lung infection.

Dolly told the jury the idea of a conspiracy against Beard just wasn't believable.

Dolly asked, "For all that finger pointing at Alkire, where's the evidence to support a conspiracy theory?"

"We wouldn't be here today if Beard hadn't made that phone call to Durian's daddy," Dolly added.

Two-and-a-half hours later Beard was acquitted on May 31, 2000.

Stephen Farmer said, "It's a great day. The system took some time to work and it's been years. But now Beard goes home to his wife."

On the court house steps, Beard told an impromptu press conference, "Truth wins in the end. I don't know if this will prove it. People who know me know I didn't do this. My conscience is clear."

The two girls' families were confused. Kathy Santomero-Meeham said, "I wish the evidence was

strong enough so the jury did not have any doubt. Someone killed her and it seems like Beard was the one.”

Vickie’s sister said, “My hope is we, the family, will be able to remember Vickie for the caring person she was.”

Three years later, Beard reached a \$2 million settlement with the state and he now lives in Florida and has maintained his innocence.



Epilogue

So who killed Kathy and Nancy that summer day on Briery Knob in Pocahontas County, West Virginia in the middle of Appalachia?

The killer may have died on November 20, 2013 in Missouri with a needle in his arm. Or he may be living in Florida

It's only late at night, when neighbors gather on sagging porches and the kids have gone to bed, that anyone talks about it.

Locals have come up with a theory over the years.

Hillsboro is a close-knit, and tight-lipped, community. In 1980 even the sheriff's deputies were locals. Slowly details leaked which led many to begin wondering if they had seen a killer walk free.

When Franklin confessed to Powers, he was so detailed a reasonable person would believe he had killed the girls. According to Powers, Franklin knew what the last meal was he shared with the girls. The coroner's report agreed as Franklin's statement matched the stomach contents. Franklin knew how the bodies were found, what position they were left in. He even knew where the girls' backpacks had been found — 60 miles away.

Beard and Franklin met at Pierce's Hillsboro compound and became fast friends. Years later when Beard was in prison and Franklin was on death row the two began a correspondence. Full of coded words to avoid detection by the Bureau of Prisons' eagle-eye mail screeners, Beard slowly fed Franklin the details of the murders.

Franklin hatched a scheme to get his buddy set free and even put a little cash in Beard's pocket so he could start a new life.

Franklin regurgitated the information to Powers, which was notarized and presented as evidence.

As for the question of who killed the girls?

The truth may never be known.

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