

56 Years ago, this week: Barbara Jean White, Class of 1954. Never forget, still no closure.



Murder at the Miss Memphis Pageant

On the night of March 26, 1965, the auditorium of White Station High School was jammed with more than 1,200 people attending the semifinal competitions of the Miss Memphis Pageant. Since 1947, this had been one of the city's biggest social events. The winner went on to the state

finals and from there to the Miss America Pageant, and that Friday evening the panel of celebrity judges included Memphian Linda Mead Shea, the 1960 Miss America.

One of those among the crowd was 29-year-old Barbara Jean Smith known to her friends as Jean who had brought her three young children along to see the show. She had a special reason for getting the kids involved. Her husband, Joe, had volunteered to serve as chairman of the annual pageant, sponsored by the Memphis Junior Chamber of Commerce, or Jaycees.

Despite all the excitement, the kids David, 10; LaBonne, 8; and Michelle, 5 grew restless, so Jean left the auditorium during the 9:30 p.m. intermission. Her home at 847 Angelina was just five

minutes away. She drove there, tucked the children into bed, and told the babysitter, 15-year-old cousin Elaine Boyuka, that she was returning to the school for the second half of the pageant. She would be back around midnight, she said.

No one except her killer ever saw her alive again.

The Next Morning

Joe M. Smith told police later that he wasn't too concerned when his wife didn't show up at the school after intermission. He knew she was tired and figured she had decided to stay home with the children. When the pageant ended shortly after 11 p.m., he had coffee with friends, then drove home in a Buick convertible loaned to him by the pageant.

Jean wasn't there, and Joe assumed she had gone out with friends after the show, and they had somehow missed each other.

"I told the babysitter, 'I'm going to lie down she'll be here in a half hour or so,'" he told reporters at the time. "The next thing I knew, I was awakened by a fire engine. I looked at the clock, and it was 4 a.m. I was in a panic."

His wife was still gone. Dressing quickly, Joe rushed to White Station and found the family's yellow Ford sitting in the narrow lot between the school complex on South Perkins and Eudora Baptist Church next door on Poplar. Apparently, Jean *had* returned to the school. But where was she? Using a pay phone at a nearby Pure Oil station, Joe called his wife's

friends but discovered that none had seen Jean since the previous night. He then drove back home, hoping his wife would be there. She wasn't.

Not knowing what else to do, Joe returned to the school grounds with several fellow Jaycees, including Bob Jamison, Dan Forrester, and Vernon Ellis. Jamison remembers that the position of Jean's car seemed odd. "That car wasn't *parked*," he says today. "It was just sitting in the parking lot, like maybe she was talking to somebody and got out of the car. When we pulled up there, and you saw the door was open, I just thought, Gee whiz."

While waiting for the police to arrive, the men peered anxiously into the darkened windows of the school and searched under bushes. Years before, Jean had surgery for an aneurysm, and the men worried that she had perhaps blacked out in the school somewhere, so they awakened the custodian who lived on the grounds, and he unlocked the doors. All the rooms were empty. Then they went back outside and began to walk around the church building. Joe told a reporter from the old *Memphis Press-Scimitar* what happened next.

"We turned a corner, and Bob was still talking and suddenly stopped," he said. "I knew it was something. I saw her about 50 yards away. She was lying face down. I started running toward her, but Bob caught me. I never did see how badly she was beaten."

Ellis ran to the woman and discovered it was Jean.

"They took me away from the scene," said Joe. "Nobody would tell me if she was alive. Finally, Dan came and told me she was gone."

The rising sun cast light on a grim scene that morning. The body of Barbara Jean Smith lay sprawled on the edge of the parking lot, close to the southeast corner of the church building. Investigators would quickly determine that she had been clubbed in the head and then shot in the back three times with a .38-caliber weapon. Two of the bullets struck her heart; all three came out through her chest. She had then been shot a fourth time in the face, the bullet entering one of her nostrils. The gun had been held so close that her nose was burned with gunpowder.

The custodian lived in a small house tucked between the school and the church, not 50 yards from where the body lay. His wife, Jewell Freeman, told police, "I heard a bang, then another about 30 seconds later" at around 11 o'clock the previous night. The first sound was louder than the second, she remembered. "It could have been more than one noise going off close together. I thought it was firecrackers. I started to look, but didn't."

Investigators found Jean's purse and shoes outside the double doors leading into the church complex from the parking lot. The purse was unopened and still contained her money and keys. Police also discovered the broken pieces of a revolver handle by the dead woman's car and what appeared to be smears of blood on another door to the church.

The body was found fully clothed, and Jean had not been molested. "It just doesn't make any sense," her sister, Carol Kline, told *The Commercial Appeal*. "If it had been a sex maniac, it would make sense. But they didn't even touch her."

Who had killed Barbara Jean Smith, and why? And how did her body end up on the south side of the church building, when her car was parked on the north?

The Investigation Begins

Clues discovered by the police eventually answered some of these questions. They also revealed a frightening scene of a helpless woman fighting for her life.

The pistol fragments and a small pool of blood in the parking lot revealed that Jean had been slugged with the gun as she was standing near her car, and high-heel prints in the mud around the church building showed where the injured woman had run from her attacker. Also found were tracks from a "large-sized man's shoe." At one point, Jean apparently pressed her hand to her head, getting blood on it, and smears against the church doors showed where she had struggled to get inside.

But the doors were locked, and her killer caught up with her as she fled across the parking lot, shedding her purse and shoes as she ran. Just as she was about to turn the corner of the building, which would have put her in view of busy Poplar Avenue, her murderer shot her in the back, then fired the final bullet into her face as she lay on the asphalt.

Detectives from the Memphis Police Department's Homicide Division immediately began a door-to-door search for suspects or witnesses. They took aerial photographs of the Poplar-Perkins area so they could verify tips or statements. Those pictures also gave them a view of nearby rooftops, on the assumption that the killer may have discarded the weapon by tossing it atop a building. Scuba divers even searched the lake at nearby Audubon Park for the gun.

The autopsy added another mystery to what was already a baffling crime. The medical examiner estimated the time of death between 10 and 11 p.m. meaning the killing occurred while the pageant was taking place just a few hundred yards away. According to the autopsy report, Jean's stomach contained "relatively undigested fragments of what appear to be sliced green beans and a fragment of sliced pickle," which should have been digested within an hour or so (suggesting that she had *not* gone directly back to the pageant from her home).

Investigators questioned the employees of Memphis restaurants. The *Press-Scimitar* ran Jean's picture on the front page under a headline asking, "Did You See Her, or Serve Her?" Among other things, detectives wanted to know if she had dined alone or had met somebody that evening. They never found an answer.

At least one person noticed Jean's car at the school that night. Mrs. David Parker, whose husband was production manager of the pageant, afterwards went with friends to the Carousel

Restaurant (now the Half Shell) on Mendenhall for coffee. She and her husband then returned to the school auditorium about two hours later to help clean up. "Her car was the only one in the parking lot at 1 a.m. We couldn't miss it," she told a reporter. "We had to drive right by it. My husband remarked, 'I wonder what Jean's car is doing here so late?'"

But days passed, and nothing turned up. Police Commissioner Claude Armour announced, "All days off have been canceled by all our homicide officers, and I have detailed additional men to the investigation." At one point, police suggested, "The way she was attacked and shot and the way that she ran indicated that she knew her killer." That notion put a scare into everyone who had attended the Miss Memphis Pageant that evening. Would any of them be next, they feared?

The mother of Jean's babysitter, Elaine Boyuka, told reporters the girl was terrified: "She believes the murderer thinks she may have seen him and will try to get her next." Adults were nervous too. "We didn't even go out of the house for the longest time," recalls Bob Jamison. "We were afraid to. I just didn't know *what* was happening."

Police didn't elaborate on any theories about the crime, but people were already wondering why Jean, after being confronted by her killer in the parking lot, didn't run toward the relative safety of the crowded auditorium but instead fled in the opposite direction, around the deserted church building.

They also wondered if there was any connection between Jean's death and the murder of Mary Elizabeth Barker, shot

with a .38-caliber weapon inside her apartment at 2842 Kimball on Christmas Eve just a few months before. Then, two days after Jean's death, another woman, Lessie Gates, was found shot to death inside the Coach House Restaurant she operated at 1085 Poplar. Armour tried to reassure nervous citizens. "I want to make it perfectly clear that there is no maniac at loose in Memphis responsible for these deaths," he told the newspapers. (The Gates murder was later pinned on a disgruntled restaurant worker. The Barker killing, however, remains unsolved.)

After a week passed with no progress in the Smith case, homicide inspector Edward C. Swann didn't try to conceal his frustration, telling the newspapers, "Some people are playing cat-and-mouse games with the police who have information that will aid in the investigation but, for one reason or another, are not giving them to police." He admitted, "We need all the help we can get."

That help never came. Barbara Jean Smith wife, mother, civic worker, den mother, Berclair School PTA president was laid to rest in Mt. Vernon Cemetery. "No one had anything except good words about her," said a *Press-Scimitar* story headlined "She Was So Nice: Why Kill Jean?"

Memphian Ann Kane graduated with Jean in 1954 from Tech High. She remembers, "She was a real sweet girl. She took art and liked to draw. She was really outgoing and friendly. A lot of girls had 'reputations' in high school, but she wasn't like that.

"I would never have thought something like this would have happened to her," she continues. "When you're looking through your old annuals, you think, Gee, I never thought that girl would have been murdered."

A few days after the murder, Joe Smith told reporters, "She was always at my side. She helped me work through college. She raised these kids in the grandest fashion. We had a real, real deep love. This [the pageant] was going to be our last big civic project. We were going to really concentrate on our children and go on vacation.

"I'm really going to miss her."

Looking for Suspects

When the police failed to turn up a suspect, it didn't take long for friends and associates to wonder about Joe.

"It was very obvious the police thought Joe did it," Jack Morris, a former Jaycees president, says today: "And listening to what they said we kind of suspected the husband did it. Either he had done it, or a complete and total stranger did it." Even Jamison agrees it looked bad at the time for his pal Joe: "The way he talked, the way he acted, after everything was said and done, it was all but pointing at him. But nobody really *said* anything, because nobody really *knew* anything."

Police never formally identified Joe as a suspect and made it clear that he was working with the authorities: "Mr. Smith has been down here several times voluntarily, and we have talked

to him on the phone," Swann told reporters. "He has cooperated with us in various ways." Detectives questioned him off and on for more than a week, until attorney J.B. Cobb, hired by the family, put a stop to it. "I certainly think that eight days is long enough to question someone over and over," Cobb complained to reporters.

Besides, what was the motive? Most people said the couple seemed very happy together. "She had a real nice figure and what I would call a flirtatious way about her," remembers Morris. "But I never knew of anything, any infidelity she was involved in."

As Jean's sister said, it just didn't make sense.

One immediate problem was what to do about the Miss Memphis Pageant, which was to conclude on Saturday evening the same day Jean's body was found. The Jaycees finally decided the show must go on, and Judy Cobb was named the 1965 Miss Memphis.

On March 31st, the police commissioner held a press conference to announce well, not much. *The Commercial Appeal* reported that Armour said no arrests had been made, but "many suspects are being questioned." In answer to a rumor that someone had actually confessed to the crime, he said, "I don't know where these things get started. But I will say that we have not eliminated anyone as a suspect in this case."

Have the other bullets been found?, a reporter asked, referring to the three slugs that passed through Jean's body. Answer: "I don't believe we care to comment on that."

Has the murder weapon been found? Answer: "I don't believe we want to say anything about the evidence at this time."

Were any fragments of the gun handle found? Answer: "No comment." And so on.

A week later, police revealed they were working on a bizarre theory that Jean had turned into the parking lot and interrupted a "peeping tom" who was peering into the school windows and watching the Miss Memphis contestants change their clothes. According to a *Press-Scimitar* story, "Mrs. Smith could have called out to ask what he was doing and the man could have turned, and they saw they knew each other, and he killed her."

The paper didn't reveal the source of this theory which disregarded the fact that the contestants actually dressed inside the school auditorium, not even close to where Jean parked her car.

Other people had other theories. "Suppose some man saw Jean driving alone back to the school and followed her," said Morris. "He could have followed her into the drive, and it could have been a sex maniac."

But police discounted that the murder was a random act, telling reporters, "The slayer probably knew her because of the brutal

beating and the four shots, the last into her face to make certain she was dead."

Those same reporters noted that Swann was "alternately optimistic and glum." At one time, he told *The Commercial Appeal*, "doors are opening," while later saying, "I can't foresee any arrests at this time. We have questioned at least 80 or 90 people so far in this case. This one is a real mystery."

In fact, Swann had personally carried evidence, including Jean's clothing, to FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. The results, he told reporters, were "enlightening," but he wouldn't explain why. Police also never revealed if the slug from Jean's body matched any of the bullets taken from the body of Barker.

Even the time of death couldn't be determined, adding to the confusion. Many people at the pageant that evening insisted they would have heard the gunshots if Jean had indeed been killed between 10 and 11 p.m. So, the medical examiner, Dr. Jerry Francisco, revised his earlier statement and said Jean could have died as late as 2 a.m. "Only Sherlock Holmes and TV sleuths can pinpoint the exact time of a murder," he admitted to reporters.

He also revealed one other detail. Jean had died instantly. "The bullet that killed her entered her back and pierced her heart," he said. "The bullet in her face was not lethal."

Even amid all the uncertainty, one thing struck a *Press-Scimitar* reporter as a bit unusual: "Security around this investigation is the tightest in recent years."

A Year Passes

Joe soon resumed his job as credit manager at General Electric Credit Corporation. In May 1966 a little more than a year after the murder newspapers reported he was marrying Sarah Frances Cox, who worked in the same building as he did. GE gave Joe a promotion, and he moved with Sarah and his three children to Texas.

"The children love Sarah, and she loves them," Joe told reporters. "We hope to make a new start in Houston."

That same month, Jean's murder was included in a *Press-Scimitar* cover story on five unsolved murders in Memphis. Attorney General Phil Canale revealed his office had new information about the Smith case: "Because of a bus driver, we now have evidence to think she was killed between 10 p.m. and 10:40 p.m., a time when a good many people were still at the pageant area."

Who was this bus driver, and what did he see, exactly? Canale "would not elaborate."

Even more mystifying, however, was a statement from police commissioner Armour in that same story. The police, he said, "have enough evidence on the Smith and Barker cases to convict. We know who the killers are. It's just a matter of time, of waiting. You don't make an arrest unless you know you have all the holes plugged up."

Certainly, a poor choice of words regarding shooting victims, but no arrests were made in either case.

Two Years Later

Two years after Jean's murder, however, a special crime committee formed by Mayor William B. Ingram dropped a bombshell. Without revealing the source of their information, on April 22, 1967, the group told reporters that they believed a Memphis police officer was involved in her death.

Newspapers reported, "The officer had met Mrs. Smith a year before the slaying, had driven her home on one occasion, and telephoned her several times for a date. Mrs. Smith, it was stated, had complained to her husband that the officer was bothering her, and Smith had complained to the police department." The officer was not named, but newspapers said he "reportedly holds a rank above that of patrolman." Ingram would only say, "He is a suspect."

That didn't sit well with the police department. "They ought to name him," complained police chief James C. MacDonald. "It's unfair to all the other officers. By not naming him, they're indicting me or any other law enforcement officer. Let's call a spade a spade."

The *Press-Scimitar* agreed. In an editorial, the paper declared, "The mayor has committed a serious blunder in making such a statement. By doing so he has cast a shadow of suspicion over hundreds of innocent law officers. If there is evidence

definitely implicating someone in the crime, let a warrant be sworn out naming the individual suspect."

That never happened. Forty years have passed, and no arrest was ever made in the murder of Barbara Jean Smith.

Still Unsolved

"Has it been that long? Forty years? I vaguely remember the name, but it's just cold," says John Carlisle, a former investigator with the attorney general's office. "I imagine a world of investigators on that case are dead."

He's right. Four decades later, this cold case has grown even colder. Many officials with the police department and attorney general's office have passed away, as have many of the Smiths' family, friends, and associates. According to Jennifer Donnals, communications director with the district attorney's office, most records before 1970 have been destroyed.

Others simply do not want to discuss what happened on the evening of March 26, 1965. "I decided I would never talk about it again," says one Jaycee today.

The Smith Family Today

Joe, now 72 years old, is still living in Houston. He and his second wife, Sarah, were divorced many years ago, and she passed away in February in Arkansas. Joe has since been married four more times. "It's really terrible for me, just to think about this." His oldest daughter was 8 at the time of her mother's murder. Now 48, married, and living in Texas,

LaBonne Casey says, "We were brutally aware that my father was a suspect, and we were with my mother the night she died. It affects our lives to this day."

She has haunting memories of the morning they found her mother's body.

"That very night, I dreamed that my father had died," she recalls. "When I woke up, the house was full of people, and I knew something was wrong, but I thought my dad had died, not my mother," she says. "All day I asked for my dad, and finally they took us to my aunt and uncle's house. I remember I asked for some comic books, and one of my uncle's friends brought over a grocery sack full of comics, and that confirmed my worst fears that something awful was happening."

LaBonne says she and her older brother and younger sister were taken back home later that day, and "our preacher and my dad told us that she had been killed."

The murder was a devastating blow to the family. "Not only did I lose my mother that night, but in a manner of speaking, we lost my father too," she says. "It was very traumatizing. I can honestly say that I was almost a lost soul, but I recovered, and I am now a productive, contributing citizen."

When the police investigation appeared to reach a dead end, some of Jean's personal belongings were given back to the family.

"They returned her purse to us," LaBonne says. "My sister believes there's a large bloodstain inside the purse. Of course, whether DNA would be intact after all this time, I have no clue. But we kids have looked at and touched that thing for 40 years."

LaBonne has heard all the theories behind her mother's death, including the notion that the killer could have been a woman. And there's always the possibility that the murderer was a complete stranger whom Jean encountered in the dark parking lot that night in 1965. "That was my grandparents' contention," she says. "The official 'party line' to the children was that it was just a random act of violence."

After all these years, she and her relatives are still waiting for answers.

"I can tell you that we are very interested to have some closure in this case," she says. "It has been an ominous cloud over our family for 40 years. It's always been my hope that someday somebody will come forward even if it's a deathbed confession."

That's what it may finally take to solve this enduring mystery.

"Right now, I'm not going to open up the Barbara Jean Smith investigation, because there is just not enough new information," says Captain James Fitzpatrick, head of the Memphis Police Department's recently formed Homicide Cold Case Squad. "You never know what someone may recall or what they have been keeping within them all these years."

Fitzpatrick has reviewed the complete homicide investigation report, which totaled several hundred pages. "It's one of those investigations where you don't see a motive," he says. "I guess a prudent individual would say this had to be somebody she knew."

According to the reports, both Jean's and Joe's cars were examined thoroughly before being returned to the family. Jean's purse, found at the crime scene, was dusted for fingerprints and also returned. ("Unfortunately, we didn't have DNA at the time," Fitzpatrick says.) Police also conducted a paraffin test on Joe's hands, looking for gunpowder that might determine if he had fired a gun recently. That test proved inconclusive.

"But we put him under the microscope," says Fitzpatrick. Looking at his actions between Friday evening and Saturday morning, detectives "put together a timeline for him that for the most part eliminated him as a suspect. And I say for the most part. But not totally."

Fitzpatrick believes that the old newspaper stories announcing the police were about to make an arrest were obviously premature: "Apparently they didn't have enough [evidence] to take to the grand jury for an indictment."

All the evidence collected during the original investigation is still stored in the MPD's Property and Evidence Room. "If anything should come up," says Fitzpatrick, "I am certain I could put my hands on it." And, as he points out, there is no statute of limitations for murder.

Today, Barbara Jean Smith lies in lot 151-D of Memphis Memory Gardens (formerly Mt. Vernon Cemetery), west of Whitten Road. Her grave is identified by a double bronze marker. Between her name and Joe's is a weathered scroll reading, "Together Forever."