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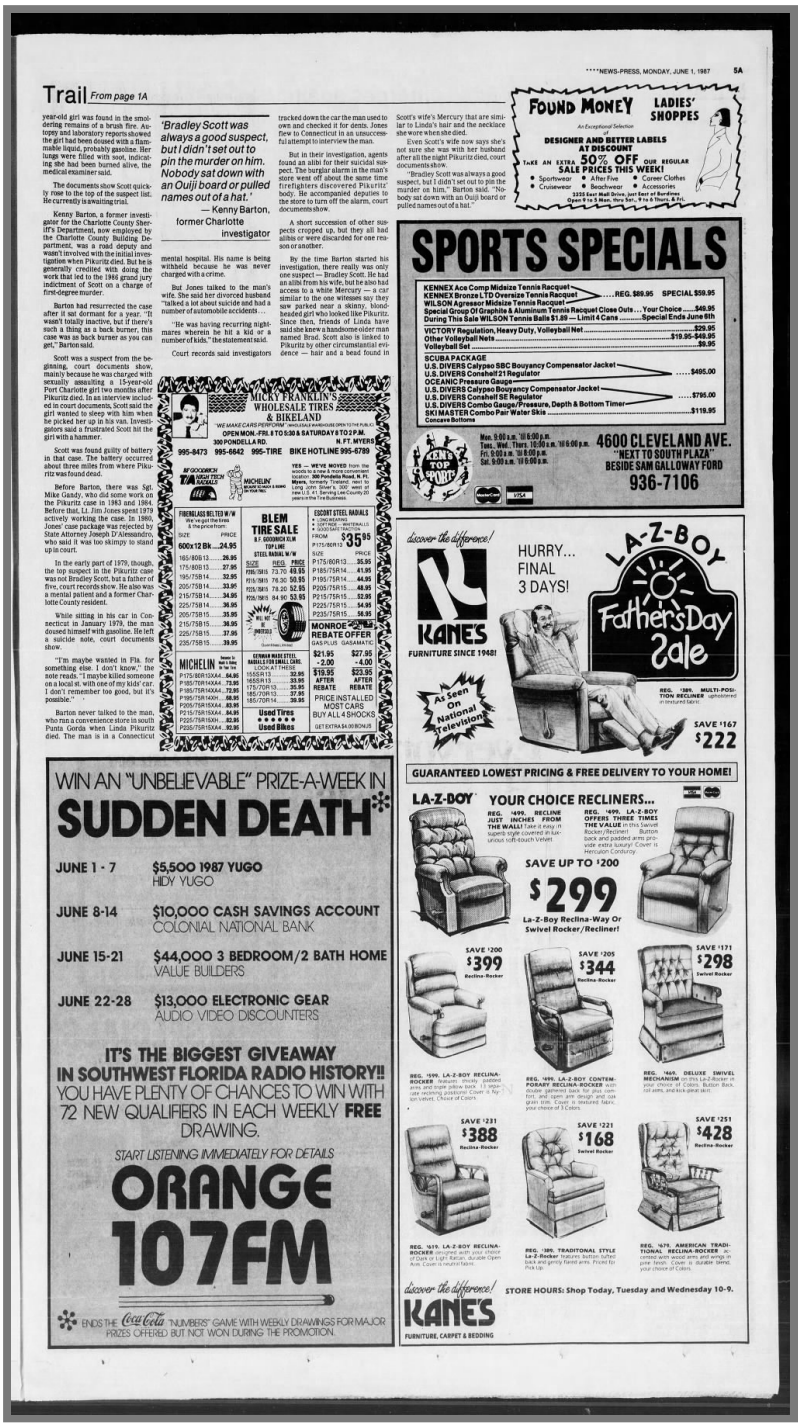

Trail From page 1A

year-old girl was found in the smoldering remains of a brush fire. Autopsy and laboratory reports showed the girl had been doused with a flammable liquid, probably gasoline. Her lungs were filled with soot, indicating she had been burned alive, the medical examiner said.

The documents show Scott quickly rose to the top of the suspect list. He currently is awaiting trial.

Kenny Barton, a former investigator for the Charlotte County Sheriff's Department, now employed by the Charlotte County Building Department, was a road deputy and wasn't involved with the initial investigation when Pikuritz died. But he is generally credited with doing the work that led to the 1986 grand jury indictment of Scott on a charge of first-degree murder.

Barton had resurrected the case after it sat dormant for a year. "It wasn't totally inactive, but if there's such a thing as a back burner, this case was on back burner as you can get," Barton said.

Scott was a suspect from the beginning, court documents show, mainly because he was charged with sexually assaulting a 15-year-old Port Charlotte girl two months after Pikuritz died. In an interview included in court documents, Scott said the girl wanted to sleep with him when he picked her up in his van. Investigators said a frustrated Scott hit the girl with a hammer.

Scott was found guilty of battery in that case. The battery occurred about three miles from where Pikuritz was found dead.

Before Barton, there was Sgt. Mike Gaudy, who did some work on the Pikuritz case in 1983 and 1984. Before that, Lt. Jim Jones spent 1979 actively working the case. In 1980, Jones' case package was rejected by State Attorney Joseph D'Alessandro, who said it was too skimpy to stand up in court.

In the early part of 1979, though, the top suspect in the Pikuritz case was not Bradley Scott, but a father of five, court records show. He also was a mental patient and a former Charlotte County resident.

While sitting in his car in Connecticut in January 1979, the man doused himself with gasoline. He left a suicide note, court documents show.

"I'm maybe wanted in Fla. for something else. I don't know," the note reads. "I maybe killed someone on a local st. with one of my kids' car. I don't remember too good, but it's possible."

Barton never talked to the man, who runs a convenience store in south Punta Gorda when Linda Pikuritz died. The man is in a Connecticut

> 'Bradley Scott was always a good suspect, but I didn't set out to pin the murder on him. Nobody sat down with an Ouija board or pulled names out of a hat.'
> — Kenny Barton, former Charlotte investigator

mental hospital. His name is being withheld because he was never charged with a crime.

But Jones talked to the man's wife. She said her divorced husband "talked a lot about suicide and had a number of automobile accidents ...

"He was having recurring nightmares wherein he hit a kid or a number of kids," the statement said.

Court records said investigators tracked down the car the man used to own and checked it for dents. Jones flew to Connecticut in an unsuccessful attempt to interview the man.

But in their investigation, agents found an alibi for their suicidal suspect. The burglar alarm in the man's store went off about the same time firefighters discovered Pikuritz' body. He accompanied deputies to the store to turn off the alarm, court documents show.

A short succession of other suspects cropped up, but they all had alibis or were discarded for one reason or another.

By the time Barton started his investigation, there really was only one suspect — Bradley Scott. He had an alibi from his wife, but he also had access to a white Mercury — a car similar to the one witnesses say they saw parked near a skinny, blond-headed girl who looked like Pikuritz. Since then, friends of Linda have said she knew a handsome older man named Brad. Scott also is linked to Pikuritz by other circumstantial evidence — hair and a bead found in Scott's wife's Mercury that are similar to Linda's hair and the necklace she wore when she died.

Even Scott's wife now says she's not sure she was with her husband after all the night Pikuritz died, court documents show.

"Bradley Scott was always a good suspect, but I didn't set out to pin the murder on him," Barton said. "Nobody sat down with an Ouija board or pulled names out of a hat."

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