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Austin American-Statesman

Yogurt Shop Killings: The Aftermath

'For nearly eight years (local investigators) have dealt with this horrible crime... And that is what this case is about, bringing to justice four individuals for the brutal murder of four little girls.'

Austin Police Chief Stan Kroe



Confessions lead to arrests of 4 men

Continued from A1

event in our community that has made its best link like a shaggy dog tale... Mayor Kirk Watson said, 'I was could something so horrific, so unexplainable, happen here.'

On Dec. 4, 1991, we as a city lost our innocence," Watson said. "Today, we regain our confidence."

A question of time... The arrests, there also was an unanswered question: How close did the police come to breaking the case just days after the killings?

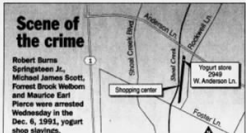
Telling the tale... At least one of the four went inside the yogurt shop before it was closed at 11 p.m. that Friday night to "case the place and unlock the back door," according to the court records.

confession contains details of the crime that should have been known only by the killers, including the type of firearms used to fire the bullets as they fled from the scene.

An early interview... Austin police questioned Pierce and Welborn last Dec. 19, 1991, Austin police arrested Pierce, then 16, at North...

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- 1. Jennifer Harrison, 17, and Eliza Thomas, 17, were working at 'I Can't Believe It's Yogurt'... 2. Before the 11 p.m. closing time, at least one man entered the store and unlocked the back door... 3. After the store closed, three men entered through the back door... 4. Jennifer Harrison, Eliza Thomas and Sarah Harrison were shot in the head with a .22-caliber firearm... 5. The killers set fire to the shop... 6. The bodies of the three girls were found along with Ayer's body at the rear of the store... 7. The killers fled out the back door... 8. The police patrolling the area reported a fire at the shop.

Scene of the crime... Diagram by Chris Scott, Staff Writer

On the Web

View video of the news conference announcing the arrests in the yogurt shop slayings by logging on to www.austintx.com

A packed hearing

On Wednesday, authorities did not identify Welborn and Pierce because they were juveniles, ages 15 and 16, at the time of the crime. Prosecutors will seek to have both certified as adults.

Breaking a cold case

About three years ago Detective Paul Johnson began reexamining the massive case file into manageable bits. He ended up with 2,500 leads.

authorities have begun extradition proceedings. Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle said prosecutors could seek only life imprisonment for Welborn and Pierce because they were so young when the crime occurred.

the killings. Welborn was arrested at the rear shop in Lockhart where he works. The killing of the four teen-age girls prompted local billboards offering rewards and national TV shows seeking leads.

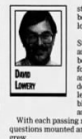
State District Judge Jeanne Meurer set Welborn's bail at \$1 million and Pierce's at \$1.5 million. Prosecutors had asked for a \$5 million bail at which Welborn, a tall, bearded man with brown hair worn past his shoulders, began to cry, covering his face with a white towel.

Welborn's immediate family sat behind his. Pierce's family did not attend. On Wednesday evening, Justice of the Peace Gisela Triana arraigned Scott, Pierce and Welborn at the Travis County Jail. The suspects all handcuffed and with their feet shackled, appeared separately before the judge, who told them their rights and the charges against them.

City's precarious sense of innocence shaken again

It seemed like a simpler time. It was before the Branch Davidian assault and fire, before the school shootings in Arkansas and Mississippi and Kentucky. Before we were shocked again by the televised massacre at Columbian High School.

At least that's the way we looked at it then. In 1991, Charlie Whitman's murder spree from the University of Texas tower was ancient history, more than a quarter century ago. That case had all but faded for most Austinites. It was as if Whitman's slaying had happened in some other place, not pleasant Austin.



With such passing months in 1992, questions mounted and frustration grew. Shortly a year after the crime, there was momentary elation when two men in Mexico were arrested and one confessed to the murder. But the evidence was shaky, the charges vaporous and the confession quickly retracted by a suspect who said he was confused. The momentary feeling that this awful desecration was still smoldered crept back into town. And stayed.

stivity or the beginning of a long nightmare? No one knew. Suspects came and went, billboards begging for help went up, and frustrated detectives chased leads up one blind alley after another.

Nothing fit. A homicidal maniac seemed likely to strike again, and some of us in a dazed frenzy would trip up and be discovered as the killer. As December 1991 slipped further into the past with no other mass murders, no new evidence and no new likelihood of an arrest, frustration and doubt lingered.

tricks on us. Only six weeks before the yogurt shop murders an insane George Hernandez had crashed his truck into a Lady's Cafeteria in nearby Killeen and perpetrated the worst shooting in modern Texas history. Hernandez gunned down more than 40 people, striding through the terrified cafeteria customers and picking his victims off one by one. He killed 23 people that day and wounded 29 more. Any sense of innocence in Austin had to be gained by forgetting Whitman's massacre and ignoring the Hernandez slaughter on our very doorstep.

Somehow massacres have become routine today. Fifteen killed in a Colorado high school, eight killed in a Jewish community center in California. But in all those cases, we know who did it and we have an understanding of their anger and alienation, two things that have until now been gaping questions in one of Austin's most unforgettable crimes.



David Lowery, an American-Statesman editor, was managing editor when the yogurt shop murders occurred.