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A Wrong Turn Led to Ted Bundy's Twisted Road to Justice

Crime: In August 1975 a policeman stumbled on Bundy's car parked in front of a house where two girls were home alone. That incident interrupted, but did not stop, an infamous murder spree.

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WEST VALLEY CITY, Utah — The patrol car's headlights drowned the Volkswagen Beetle in light, and the officer trained his gun on a shaggy-haired suspect in a black turtleneck.

"I didn't want to shoot the guy," said highway patrol Sgt. Bob Hayward. "I wish I had."

Hayward didn't know he had collared America's most notorious serial killer. By then, Theodore Bundy had already killed at least 25 young women in four states, preying on good girls from average households.

"Back in 1974, everybody's daughter was getting killed," said Robert Keppel, a lead Bundy investigator in Washington.

Hayward was sitting in his cruiser outside his home at 3 a.m. on Aug. 16, 1975, finishing a shift log, when he noticed the tan Volkswagen drive by. Minutes later, his radio crackled with a call for assistance and Hayward responded.

He took a wrong turn leaving the subdivision and stumbled on the VW parked in front of a neighbor's home. Hayward knew the owners were on vacation and their teenage daughters were home alone.

When Hayward's lights hit the car, it fled, careening through the neighborhood and barreling onto a main road before pulling into an abandoned gas station. Hayward was close behind, his gun drawn.

"I'm lost," Bundy said, his hands raised. He said he had been at the drive-in, watching "Towering Inferno." But Hayward knew that movie wasn't playing.

Hayward searched the car and found pantyhose, a ski mask, a crowbar, an ice pick and handcuffs.

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By August 1975, the county homicide team had already spent months struggling with the disappearances of three 17-year-old girls.

There was Melissa Smith, who vanished from a shopping mall and was found dead in the woods, and Laura Aime, who left a Halloween party to buy cigarettes and turned up frozen a month later in Provo Canyon.

And then on Nov. 8, 1974, Debi Kent vanished after leaving a school play to pick up her 11-year-old brother at a roller rink.

In the high school parking lot, investigators found a key to the disappearances--literally. The key matched a set of handcuffs someone had used to try to kidnap 19-year-old Carol DaRonch earlier in the day.

DaRonch was shopping at the same mall Smith had been at when a handsome young man posing as a police officer told DaRonch her car had been broken into and she needed to go with him.

They climbed into a tan Volkswagen, and within moments he had slapped the handcuffs on her wrist. She leaped from the car and grappled with Bundy before breaking free and flagging down a passing car.

"I knew he was going to kill me and nobody was ever going to know what happened to me," DaRonch recently told the makers of a Court TV cable television documentary called "Crime Stories."

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When Sheriff Pete Hayward told his detectives that his brother Bob had arrested Bundy, the tan Volkswagen set off alarm bells for detectives Ben Forbes and Jerry Thompson. So did the name Bundy.

A year earlier, Bundy's girlfriend, the daughter of a Utah doctor, had called Seattle investigators to report his suspicious behavior. She later demanded they send his name to Salt Lake.

When Hayward arrested Bundy, Utah investigators called Washington--where 10 women had disappeared. Washington investigators had narrowed their list of suspects to 25--and Ted Bundy was on it. Now Keppel thought he had his man.

"It was like a whole euphoric situation when that call came in," said Keppel.

The Washington murders had stopped after the summer of 1974--just when Bundy moved to Salt Lake City to study law at the University of Utah.

He didn't seem like a serial killer. He was a handsome young man, an up-and-comer who worked on a Washington gubernatorial campaign.

But two weeks after he arrived, a 17-year-old cheerleader named Nancy Wilcox disappeared after last being seen in a light-colored Volkswagen Beetle. Then Smith vanished. Then Aime. Then Kent.

After Kent disappeared, Bundy moved on to Colorado, where five more women were abducted between March and June 1975.

In June he returned to Utah. Soon after, 15-year-old Susan Curtis was kidnapped from a youth gathering at Brigham Young University.

For two months there had been no other victims. Then, on Aug. 16, dressed in his dark clothes and carrying two sets of handcuffs, Bundy parked his Volkswagen in Hayward's neighborhood, outside the home where two girls, 17 and 19, had been left alone.

On Oct. 2, DaRonch and two other women picked the shaggy-haired suspect out of a lineup. Bundy was arrested and charged with attempted kidnapping.

He said he was innocent, and defense attorney Bruce Lubeck was convinced.

"I certainly thought it was a case of mistaken identity, but I think it's fair to say . . . that my perceptions have changed over time," said Lubeck.

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Bundy was never tried for the murders in Utah. As was the case in the other states, detectives only had circumstantial evidence. Investigators from Utah, Washington and Colorado all agreed their best shot at stopping Bundy was by charging him with trying to kidnap DaRonch.

"This was a real challenge, knowing the consequence if Bundy had been let loose," said David Yocom, who prosecuted the case and is now the Salt Lake district attorney.

Each day, 200 people, most of them reporters, lined up for 50 seats in the courtroom--which became Bundy's stage.

"He was obviously a very bright, articulate person who had developed quite a following of people who believed that he was not guilty," said Judge Stewart Hanson, who didn't know at the time that Bundy was also suspected of a string of murders. Bundy had waived a jury trial.

The showboating grated on Yocom, who demanded Bundy stop calling him "Dave."

"What still sticks out in my mind is Bundy's almost arrogant attitude," Yocom said. "You always sensed he thought he was smarter than anybody in the courtroom."

Lubeck, who now heads the U.S. attorney's office narcotics task force and is a judicial nominee, said Bundy's act backfired.

"He testified he didn't do it, but his attitude, as I recall . . . was kind of cocky."

On March 1, 1976, Hanson convicted Bundy and sentenced him to up to 15 years in prison. That gave Colorado investigators time to nail down a murder case, and Bundy was extradited for trial there. But Bundy escaped in December 1977 and hopped a train. He was gone.

He resurfaced two weeks later in Tallahassee, Fla., where he crept into a sorority house and bludgeoned four women, killing two. He attacked another woman that same night, and weeks later he kidnapped and killed 12-year-old Kimberly Leach.

Police arrested him a week later in a stolen car.

After a trial that became a media spectacle, Bundy was sentenced to death for all three killings. He appealed for 11 years, but began confessing just before his execution.

"I felt wholeheartedly that he was trying to clear the air before he met his maker," said Salt Lake County Sheriff's Detective Dennis Couch.

Bundy admitted 30 murders, including five in Utah. Keppel believes there may be as many as 40 more scattered across the country.

Hayward, who retired in 1986 after 33 years on the highway patrol, looks back on his biggest arrest and wonders why he took that wrong turn out of his subdivision on Aug. 16--a wrong turn that landed Bundy in jail.

"I often wonder if the Lord sent me in that direction," he says. "If I didn't get him that night and stop him, I don't know how many more he would have got."