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57/07/23 Gerber and McArthur report: Wedler story a hoax

Cleveland Press

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The Cleveland Press

The Newspaper That Serves Its Readers

Final

CLEVELAND, TUESDAY, JULY 23, 1957

Gerber and McArthur Report: WEDLER STORY A HOAX

By SAM GIAIMO, Press Staff Writer

DE LAND, Fla.—A convict's attempt to "escape" from a Florida prison camp by confessing the murder of Mrs. Marilyn Sheppard collapsed this afternoon.

Cleveland authorities branded the story of Donald J. Wedler "a complete hoax."

They said the admitted dope addict had failed to prove that he was anywhere near Cleveland July 4, 1954, the night Mrs. Sheppard was brutally beaten to death in her Bay Village bedroom.

Sheriff Rodney Thursby concurred in the opinion that Wedler knew nothing about the Sheppard case except what he had read in detective story magazines.

Infuriated when Cuyahoga County Coroner Samuel R. Gerber and former Cleveland Detective Chief James McArthur called him a liar, Wedler roared back:

"Telling the Truth . . ."

"I'm telling the truth. . . I'm telling what I remember. . . If the facts don't jibe, it's your job to clear them up. . ."

McArthur thrust pictures of the murdered Marilyn in front of Wedler. The photos showed the 35 savage wounds that killed her.

"Does that look like your handiwork?" the veteran policeman demanded.

Wedler looked away. "It doesn't seem likely," he murmured.

The convict insisted that he had slugged Mrs. Sheppard with a 9-in. long piece of pipe, about 1-in. in diameter, with a larger elbow. He insisted he had "hit her only three or four times . . . not over five times."

"It would have been impossible for that type of weapon to inflict the wounds that killed Mrs. Sheppard," Dr. Gerber declared.

Knew No Details

McArthur said Wedler "couldn't be pinned down to a single precise detail."

Wedler told of drinking in Cleveland bars, but he couldn't name or locate them.

He said he had stolen a car in downtown Cleveland, and claimed that he drove down a "side road" to park at the Sheppard home. The Sheppard home, however, is on Lake Rd., a main thoroughfare.

"We didn't break him down," McArthur said. "We didn't have to. It's plain that he isn't telling the truth. He's a million miles off in everything."

As a test, McArthur asked Wedler specific details about other burglaries he had admitted and other places where he had been.

The convict had vivid recollections about everything, but he couldn't be specific about anything in Cleve-

land, or about any details of the Sheppard case.

"His story is a complete hoax," Dr. Gerber said.

The coroner said he, McArthur and County Detective Dave Yettra would fly back to Cleveland tonight.

"As far as we're concerned," Dr. Gerber said, "the investigation of this hoax is over."

Calls Wedler a "Liar and Faker"

He branded Wedler a "complete liar and faker."

Still angrily protesting his guilt—insisting that he had committed a crime that might get him the electric chair—the 6-ft. tall, tattooed convict was led back to his cell by Sheriff Thursby.

Thursby, to whom Wedler made his original "confession," said:

"I sat in on the entire questioning. I don't see how this man could possibly be connected with the Marilyn Sheppard murder."

The quizzing of the 23-year-old convict lasted three hours and 45 minutes.

McArthur, who directed the investigation which resulted in Dr. Samuel H. Sheppard's conviction for murder, did the questioning . . . first softly and gently,



Turn to Page 2, Column 4

Donald J. Wedler's story was labeled a hoax

Wedler Story of Sheppard Slaying Called a Hoax by Gerber, McArthur

(Continued From Page 1)
then pressing hard on point after point . . . finally raising his voice as he became convinced he was dealing with a phony story.

The gravel-voiced investigator and the dope addict fought a bizarre battle of wits in the Volusia County Jail here.

During the interrogation, Wedler changed many details of his previous "confession." Wedler, who faces a long

stay in a Florida prison camp as a recaptured escapee, was trying to prove that he—not Dr. Sam—murdered the osteopath's pretty wife.

McArthur, a man whose whole career was devoted to catching criminals, sought to trip and trap the smooth-talking painter, handyman and lifelong thief.

While the two sparred, other officials were seeking evidence that Wedler was no where near Cleveland on July 4, 1954, the night Marilyn

Sheppard was murdered.

A vagrancy arrest record verified that Wedler was in Tampa, Fla., in early August.

The group which listened to McArthur's interrogation of Wedler consisted of Dr. Gerber, Yettra, Thursby, and De Land Police Chief Clyde Heath.

The Clevelanders arrived at Daytona Beach late last night. Sheriff Thursby met them at the airport.

It was the first time that

the convict, called a "psycho" by his fellow prisoners, had been brought face to face with investigators intimately familiar with every detail of Mrs. Sheppard's murder.

Wedler's "confession" resulted in Ohio Governor C. William O'Neill granting permission for Argosy to give

Dr. Sam a lie detector test in the Ohio State Penitentiary, where he is serving a life term. The lie detector test was canceled yesterday.

Investigated Past

Before starting his crucial interview with Wedler, McArthur gathered all available information on the man's past.

He found that Wedler was a jail mate of Bennie Bedwell, the Skid Row tramp who rocketed to brief notoriety when he "confessed" the murder of two Chicago schoolgirls. This "confession" was proven false. Bedwell is now in the Volusia County Jail, awaiting trial on a rape charge.

McArthur said that Wedler was the 26th person to "confess" killing Mrs. Sheppard. "All the other confessions were phony," he said, "induced by psychopathic mentalities or other factors."

Sheriff Thursby received a phone call this morning from a man believed to be James Kolofolias of Long Beach,

Calif. The call came from Waterloo, Ia.

Kolofolias is the merchant seaman who claims he was hitchhiking in Bay Village on the Sheppard murder morning. He says he was picked up by an "agitated" motorist who "might have been" the murderer.

According to Kolofolias, the driver's hands seemed "blood-stained."

At Waterloo, Kolofolias said Dr. Sam's attorneys were "rushing" pictures of Wedler for his possible identification.

Wedler claims he was under the influence of dope at the time he attempted to burglarize the Sheppard home, and killed Mrs. Sheppard and knocked out her husband in the process.

Sheriff Thursby, a newcomer to office, reported that he had been "dazzled" by the manner in which Erle Stanley Gardner, the fiction writer, and an Argosy Magazine and National Broadcasting Co. crew "moved in" on the case.

Gardner and his entourage

stormed into De Land, gave a lie detector test to Wedler, and staged a mass press conference at which the prisoner repeated his confession.

For a few days, the press agents and publicity men virtually "ran the show."

Late this afternoon, Gardner claimed another "important clue" substantiating Wedler's story.

The mystery writer said in Columbus that he had received a phone call from Mrs. Alice Fryfogle of 121 Beck Rd., Avon Lake.

Mrs. Fryfogle, he reported, said that her husband, Ellis, had seen a "dirty blue or purple sedan" parked on the shoulder of Lake Rd., almost directly opposite the Sheppard home, about 3:15 a. m.,

July 4, 1954.

She said the incident had been reported to Bay Village police.

Bay Village police

firmed that Fryfogle had made such a report. The incident, they said, was over to the Cleveland Squad.