

Arthur Shawcross

Murderer (1945–2008)

Serial killer Arthur Shawcross murdered 11 women from 1988 to 1990 in upstate New York, earning the nickname "The Genesee River Killer."

Synopsis

Arthur Shawcross' parents dispute his claims that he was molested as a child, but it's clear that he was troubled. In 1972, he confessed to killing two children and went to prison. His records were sealed so he could settle in a new town without causing a panic. But from 1988 to 1990, Shawcross killed 11 women in upstate New York, earning the nickname "The Genesee River Killer." He died in prison.

Early Life

Serial killer Arthur Shawcross was born on June 6, 1945, and died on November 10, 2008 while serving a life sentence for the murder of 11 women. From his birthplace of Kittery, Maine, his family moved to Watertown, a small town near Lake Ontario in New York State, when he was still a child. Shawcross claims that his adolescence was turbulent, and cites a difficult relationship with both parents, particularly his domineering mother, for his later troubles. He says he also exhibited behavioral problems at an early age, including bed-wetting and bullying.

Shawcross also made extreme reports about his early sexuality. He claimed his aunt sexually molested him when he was 9, and that he had sexual relations with his younger sister. He also admitted to his first homosexual encounter at the age of 11, which he says was followed by experimentation with bestiality.

In contrast to these claims, however, his parents and siblings maintain that he had a normal childhood, and the described events were largely the product of his imagination. There is no way of knowing whose version represents the reality of his upbringing, but what became clear, later on, was that Shawcross would change his stories at will, as he was interviewed by various professionals in the course of their investigations.

From school records it can be independently verified that he was an inveterate truant, with a particularly low IQ, a tendency to bullying and violence and that he came under suspicion for a series of juvenile arson attacks as well as burglaries. He dropped out of school after failing to pass the ninth grade, and the next few years were punctuated with violence and jail sentences. He received his first probationary sentence in December 1963 for smashing a shop window.

NAME
Arthur Shawcross

OCCUPATION
Murderer

BIRTH DATE
June 6, 1945

DEATH DATE
November 10, 2008

PLACE OF BIRTH
Kittery, Maine

PLACE OF DEATH
Albany, New York

AKA
Genesee River Killer

Arrest and Imprisonment

Shawcross married first wife, Sarah, in September 1964. The couple produced a son in October 1965. But another probationary charge for unlawful entry in November 1965, proved the last straw for his marriage and he was divorced soon after.

His second marriage, following drafting into the Army in April 1967, was also tainted by violence and was equally short-lived. He served a tour of duty in the Vietnam War in October 1967, and he later claimed that he murdered and cannibalized two young Vietnamese girls and several children while there. There is no corroborating evidence to support this, however. He also claimed a "combat kill" total of 39 which, when investigated later, was also discounted as fabrication; authorities claim he killed no one on his tour of duty.

On his return from military duty in 1968, he landed in trouble yet again when he was caught and convicted for an arson attack. Shawcross served two years of a five-year jail term. He was released in October 1971 and returned to Watertown again. A year later, on April 7, 1972, he claimed his first victim: 10-year-old neighbor Jack Blake. Shawcross took him fishing just a few days before he disappeared, but denied any knowledge of the disappearance. Several weeks later on April 22, 1972, he married his third wife, Penny Sherbino, who was pregnant with his child.

Five months later, his victim's body was finally located. He had been sexually assaulted and suffocated, but police had no leads to the identity of the killer. Jack Blake would be the first of many more victims.

In September 1972, the body of 8-year-old Karen Ann Hill was found under a bridge. She had been raped and murdered. Police found mud, leaves and other debris had been forced down her throat and inside her clothing. Neighbors remembered that Shawcross had been seen with Karen in the vicinity of the bridge before her disappearance, and he had a history of minor run-ins with local children. Shawcross came under immediate suspicion.

He was arrested on October 3, 1972, and finally confessed to both killings, although he was only charged with Karen Hill's killing, given the lack of evidence tying him to Jack Blake's death. He received a 25-year jail sentence, and third wife Penny divorced him shortly thereafter.

Release from Prison

After serving less than 15 years of this sentence, he was released on parole in April 1987. The well-publicized resettlement of a child killer in the Binghamton area of New York State was greeted by a public outcry, and he was forced to leave the area after a few months along with his new girlfriend, Rose Whalley.

His past meant that he would be unwelcome almost anywhere, and the authorities made the decision to seal his criminal record in order to prevent a recurrence of the public alarm in Binghamton. They moved Shawcross and Whalley to Rochester, New York, where she became his fourth wife. In Rochester, Shawcross took on a succession of menial jobs. His lackluster marriage to Whalley meant that he was soon seeking solace elsewhere, both from prostitutes as well as his new girlfriend, Clara Neal.

It did not take long for Shawcross to return to his murderous ways. Hunters discovered his next victim, 27-year-old prostitute Dorothy Blackburn, on March 24, 1988. Her body was found in the Genesee River, dumped there following a vicious attack, which included bite marks in the groin area and strangulation.

With little evidence, and no public impetus to solve the murder of a prostitute, her case languished for over a year. There were other murders of prostitutes in that time but, given the danger of the profession, nothing untoward was noticed that linked any of the cases.

The discovery of the body of another prostitute, Anna Steffen, on September 9, 1989, linked several of the victims. She died of asphyxia, and her body had been dumped in a similar manner to Blackburn's corpse. Her body, however, was found far from the original murder scene, so again the possibility that a serial killer was at work was not recognized.

Mounting Death Toll

On October 21, 1989, the body of homeless woman Dorothy Keeler, aged 59, was discovered followed six days later by another prostitute, Patricia Ives, in the same area. Both had been asphyxiated and the press started to show an interest as the cases were linked. They nicknamed the offender "The Genesee River Killer."

In all the previous cases at least some attempt at concealment had been made, which police felt indicated previous criminal or military experience. They began to advise prostitutes working in the area to exercise caution, and sought as much information as possible about strangers operating in the area. They also began checking criminal records for offenders who might be living in the immediate area. Shawcross' sealed criminal record meant that he shielded him from police scrutiny.

As prostitutes continued to disappear, it became apparent that the killer must be someone familiar to the women who worked in the area. Police were able to piece together a description of a regular client called "Mitch" or "Mike." Women said this particular john was prone to violence.

Then the body of 26-year-old June Stott, who was neither a prostitute nor drug user, was found on Thanksgiving Day. She had been strangled, anally mutilated after death, had her labia removed, and was gutted from throat to crotch like a wild animal.

Police Investigation

With the body count mounting, the police sought assistance from FBI profilers. They divided the 11 unsolved prostitute murders into sub-groups according to method and position. They developed a profile that described the killer as a white male in his 20s or 30s, who was strong, probably with a previous criminal record, familiar with the area, and comfortable enough with the victims that they would enter his vehicle without question.

The lack of sexual interference indicated it might be someone with sexual dysfunction. The post-mortem injury inflicted on June Stott, and not on any other victim, indicated that the killer was becoming more comfortable around corpses, probably returning to the crime scene again later to relive the attack.

The discovery of the body of Elizabeth Gibson, on November 27, brought a breakthrough: suspect "Mitch" had been seen with her shortly before her disappearance, but they seemed no closer to establishing his identity. Police tried various tactics, including canvassing all the local bars, to no avail.

When a pair of discarded jeans was discovered near the river on December 31, 1989, containing an ID card for a girl named Felicia Stephens, police began an aerial search of the surrounding area. On January 2, 1990, a helicopter spotted what appeared to be a naked female body lying on the ice surface of the river by a bridge in the forest. The body was not Felicia Stephens but that of missing prostitute June Cicero. She had also been mutilated post-mortem, as well as sawn practically in half.

Apprehension and Arrest

Even more importantly, the helicopter spotted a man standing on the bridge next to a small van. He appeared to be either masturbating or urinating. Fortunately for the authorities, Shawcross had, as speculated, returned to the scene of one of his crimes to relive the pleasure of the attack.

Patrol teams on the ground were alerted to the vehicle, which had sped away. They finally tracked down Shawcross via the car's registration, which was in the name of his girlfriend Clara Neal. When approached, Shawcross agreed to assist the police with their enquiries. When they asked for his driver's license, he admitted he did not have one and then revealed that he had been in jail for manslaughter.

Police were confident they had their killer, and further questioning revealed the earlier child deaths and a grandiose account of his Vietnam War service, which was later discounted. A photo taken of him during the initial questioning soon confirmed his identity as "Mitch," and official enquiries unearthed the reason for Shawcross' sealed record, which prevented the police from tracking him down sooner.

Still, police were unable to get Shawcross to admit to the murders—until they confirmed that a piece of jewelry he had given to Clara Neal previously belonged to victim June Cicero. When police threatened to implicate her in the killings, Shawcross capitulated and admitted to most of the murders, giving detailed excuses about why he had been "forced" to kill each one. He even admitted to the killing of two undiscovered bodies, those of prostitutes Maria Welsh and Darlene Trippi, leading investigators to their bodies. His formal confession was nearly 80 pages long.

Trial, Imprisonment and Death

In November 1990, Shawcross went on trial for the 10 murders that had occurred in Monroe County. The last victim, Elizabeth Gibson, had been killed in neighboring Wayne County. The trial was a national media event, extensively televised and widely viewed.

Shawcross' defense team tried to build a case based on an insanity plea, citing various mitigating factors, such as his upbringing, post-traumatic stress as a result of military service, a cyst on the brain and a rare genetic defect.

The prosecution was quick to dispute the claims about his childhood and military service, casting doubts on Shawcross' testimony. The physiological evidence about brain science and genetic factors was, at best, spurious and beyond the understanding of the jury. It was also hindered by poor presentation on the part of the expert witnesses called to testify.

Shawcross was declared sane—and guilty of 10 instances of second-degree murder. The judge sentenced him to 25 years for each count, a total of 250 years imprisonment. A few months later, Shawcross was taken to Wayne County to be tried for Elizabeth Gibson's murder. Rather than claim insanity this time, he pleaded guilty and received a further life sentence.

Shawcross was held at the Sullivan Correctional Facility in New York State until November 10, 2008, when he complained of pain in his leg. He was transferred to a hospital where he died later that day of cardiac arrest.

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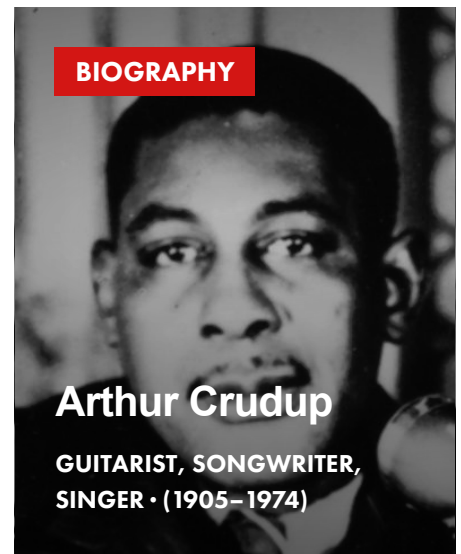
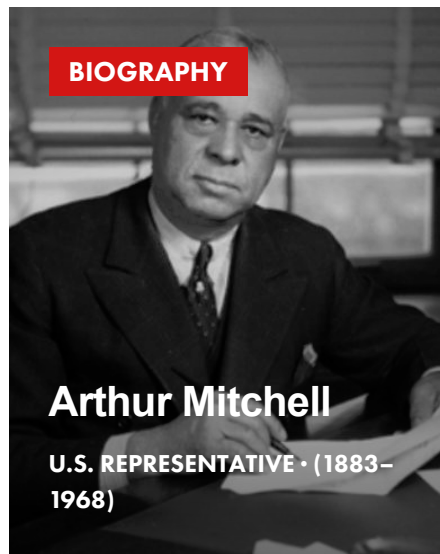
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