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John Wayne Gacy: The Serial Killer Clown

There is no term that strikes fear in the heart of people as the term serial killer. It was FBI investigator Robert Ressler who was said to have coined the term in the 1970s while using the technique of criminal profiling to understand the mind of the serial killer. Robert Ressler was also known for interviewing people like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy (B. Sullivan, npr.org). John Wayne Gacy was at one time a husband and father, a successful business owner, and a Democratic precinct captain. However, he is most well known for being a brutal serial killer. John Wayne Gacy sexually molested and murdered at least thirty-three young men and boys. He was caught in 1978 after the disappearance of Rob Piest from a pharmacy in Des Plaines, Illinois where he last spoke to Gacy. **A closer examination of the life of John Wayne Gacy will illustrate what his path to becoming a notorious serial killer was; how he committed his crimes and eluded authorities; and what led to his capture and what law enforcement procedures changed as a result of his case.**

An overview of the John Wayne Gacy murders and its history is merited before investigating the above-listed research questions. According to an excerpt from Chicago Days: 150 Defining Moments in the Life of a Great City, “During the chilly nighttime hours on this date, [December 22, 1978] police began one of the grisliest excavation projects in the history of American crime.” (Smith, 228) This excerpt is referring to the

mass murders of thirty-three young men and boys that were committed by John Wayne Gacy, a Chicago contractor. Gacy disposed of his victims by burying them in the crawl space of his Chicago home, as well as in various locations on his property. Gacy disposed of four bodies in area rivers. Another source reported that Gacy's first victim was sixteen-year-old Timothy McCoy who was killed in 1972 as he was passing through Chicago on his way to Omaha from Michigan. McCoy was picked up by Gacy at the Greyhound bus station in the middle of the night. (Nelson, 8) Gacy's last victim in 1978 was Robert Piest, a fifteen-year-old who worked at Nisson Pharmacy in Des Plaines. Piest told several people that after his shift ended, he was going to talk to Gacy about working for him that summer at his construction business, PDM Contractors. Piest went missing that night, December 11, 1978. About ten days later, Gacy confessed to his attorneys and police that he killed Piest and others. Gacy told them "I used the rope trick" and proceeded to demonstrate (Amirante et al., 193).

What was John Wayne Gacy's path to becoming a notorious Chicago serial killer?

The case of the People vs. John Wayne Gacy which began on February 6, 1980, was not a trial to determine the guilt or innocence of the notorious serial killer. John Wayne Gacy had already told investigators and his lawyers several times about the murders he committed. This was a trial to determine if John Wayne Gacy was mentally ill and guilty by reason of insanity or if he was just a monster. Gacy was not found insane by the jury and was sentenced to death for his crimes. However, one of the larger questions that remains about his case is how and why John Wayne Gacy developed into the serial killer he was. During the trial, his childhood was examined, and his mother was called as

a witness for the defense. “Amirante [Gacy’s attorney] had no difficulty establishing the fact that Gacy had had an unpleasant childhood and that he was frequently beaten by his father...” writes Kozenczak. “Gacy had had a good deal of physical sickness in his childhood, and had not been well-liked by his father, who frequently called him stupid.” (Kozenczak, et al., 192) One online source reported that during an interview for a documentary, Gacy’s sister, Karen, explained how “he [Gacy] was beaten by their father, who was an alcoholic, and sexually abused regularly by a contractor in the neighborhood.” (Kranc, Esquire.com) It is easy to conclude that his sexual, physical, and mental abuse as well as illnesses during his childhood may have had the consequences of developing into a sexually abusive serial killer who also described his own victims as stupid.

John Wayne Gacy’s personality was unusual. On the one hand, he had been described as someone who was well-liked, hard-working, a good father, a good neighbor, and a person who had volunteered as a clown to entertain sick children. On the other hand, there were accounts of his temper and violent nature. Sam Amirante, described Gacy as “truly a Jekyll and Hyde, despite what psychiatric terms you put on it... He was so good, and he was so bad, and the bad side of him is the personification of evil” (360). When discussing the thirteen psychologists and psychiatrists that testified at the trial, Amirante reported, “after hours of interviews, study, and contemplation, none of these learned men and women diagnosed Mr. Gacy in exactly the same manner. Gacy was an enigma” (393). Some of the diagnoses mentioned were narcissistic, anti-social, schizophrenic, psychotic, dissociative, and sadistic. Despite Gacy freely discussing his

alter-ego, Jack Hanley, none of the professionals, however, believed he had multiple personality disorder. It is safe to say that John Wayne Gacy clearly suffered from mental illness. What remains questionable is if his mental illness was the direct cause of his criminal actions.

While there were several incidents during his childhood that one can argue were the beginning of Gacy's issues, it was his behavior in Waterloo Iowa that was clearly the beginning of his deviant sexual behavior with boys. Terry Sullivan reports, "Waterloo was the place where it [his idyllic family life] began to unravel, where warning lights would be noticed but their messages ignored" (259). Terry Sullivan described the dichotomy of a man that was "charitable" but also able to "manipulate people and ingratiate himself" (264). As part of the local Jaycee's chapter, "Gacy set up a social club in his basement recreation area, where...the [underage] boys were free to drink beer and other alcoholic beverages" (T. Sullivan 265). Gacy would challenge the boys to games of pool or enlist them to help him with his "sexual experiments" for the state of Illinois to manipulate them into sexual encounters. His encounters, which on some occasions became violent, caught up with him when two boys reported him to the police in 1968. Gacy was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to ten years imprisonment in the Iowa State Reformatory for Men at Anamosa. (Wilkinson, Newyorker.com) Gacy applied for early release and only served eighteen months of his sentence due to good behavior. However, there were differences of opinion on the parole board if Gacy was truly reformed or again being manipulative. One doctor that recommended paroling him stated, "The likelihood of his again being charged with and being convicted of antisocial conduct

appears to be small” (T. Sullivan 276). Gacy was clearly able to adapt his behavior to the situation. Gacy was able to fool many people into believing he was changed and was really a good man. He, however, was just a good conman.

How did John Wayne Gacy commit his crimes and elude authorities?

On the exterior, it seemed John Wayne Gacy was a charming and seemingly normal person. However, he was living a double life and used his good community reputation to commit his crimes and elude authorities. According to Sam Amirante, Gacy “enjoyed helping people” (Netflix.com). Gacy was the owner of the construction company PDM Contractors, where he was regarded as hard-working. When he was not working, Gacy volunteered some of his free time as Pogo the Clown for parades and children’s hospital visits. Gacy also spent time in local politics, even gaining Secret Service security clearance allowing him to be photographed with first lady Rosalynn Carter. Gacy was recorded saying, “Politics is power. The feeling of being important. The feeling that they trust you. I am a power person. I enjoy power” (Netflix.com). In the late evenings, Gacy admitted to “cruising” various areas of Chicago that were known for their gay hangouts and sex workers, such as Bughouse Square, where he would pick up young men. Gacy was heard on tape admitting to looking for the “innocent ones” where he would be seen as a “fatherly image” (Netflix.com) Gacy “lured his victims with the promise of construction work or some other ruse, and then captured, sexually assaulted, tortured, and eventually strangled most of them” (Biography.com). He lured his victims in several ways such as by giving them drugs or offering to pay for sex acts. He also picked up boys by impersonating Jack Hanley, a Chicago detective he had met.

According to one source, Gacy himself said, “Everybody came to my house willingly, understandably, and knowing what’s going to happen” (Rogers, NBCChicago.com). When questioned about an incident or any of the missing boys, he would lie to the police. Police would believe Gacy over the young gay complainants or the surviving families because of his standing in the community and political connections. David Nelson describes an incident where Gacy had “offered a ride to a twenty-four-year-old man” (179). When Gacy began driving elsewhere, the young man objected and Gacy replied by presenting a fake badge and demanding oral sex to “avoid trouble” (ibid). After struggling to get away from Gacy, the man went to the police and Gacy “faced charges of aggravated battery and reckless conduct” (ibid). However, “police dropped the possibility of charges as soon as they looked into the victim’s past: charges for prostitution and disorderly conduct” (ibid). Unfortunately, Gacy’s reputation and political influence were significant factors in why he was able to commit his crimes and elude authorities. In addition, most of the young men and boys involved were considered by police to be less respectable members of society or just runaways and they took Gacy’s word over theirs or their families.

One reason John Wayne Gacy was able to commit his crimes was because of his personality. Gacy was a chameleon who could change his personality to suit his needs. According to Walter Jacobsen, who interviewed Gacy before his execution, “There are personality traits that are common to mass killers including arrogance and cunning and enough cleverness to kill many times without getting caught. John Gacy has all those traits and then some” (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 3). The same source also

said, “he [Gacy] describes himself as a father, loving and caring” while a prosecutor on the case describes him as “cunning and manipulative” (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 1). Finally, Robert Ressler is captured on video saying, “such carelessness is typical of a serial killer. By the time they’ve committed ten or twelve, they are very very laid back. By the time they commit . . . fifteen or twenty, they start getting careless, cavalier” (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 4). Gacy eluded authorities because he was able to manipulate people and act in such a convincing way to make others, including the police, think that he was innocent and sometimes even the victim. His arrogance must have grown as he got away with murder again and again. Gacy must have believed that he would never be caught.

John Wayne Gacy had a methodical process of selecting and murdering his victims, which allowed him to conceal his crimes for many years until he impulsively picked up Robert Piest. Gacy selected young men and boys that were gay, selling sex for money, runaways from broken homes, and in some cases already had a police record. However, Gacy’s final victim, Robert Piest, did not fit Gacy’s typical target. Tim Cahill describes Robert Piest by saying, “Rob Piest was an A student, a standout gymnast, an ambitious intelligent boy who was very close to his family – not at all the sort of kid who runs away from home” (2). Another source quotes Gacy saying, “These other kids weren’t like him [Piest]. . .” (Amirante et al., 141). Additionally, there was a direct link between Piest and Gacy because several people knew that Piest intended to speak with Gacy about a summer job. An online source reported, “In 1978, after one of Gacy’s victims, Robert Piest, was reported missing, police learned that Gacy was the last person

known to have seen him. After obtaining a search warrant, police discovered the bodies of twenty-nine boys and young men in or near Gacy's house; four other bodies were found in the nearby Des Plaines River" (Jenkins, britannica.com). While Des Plaines and Cook County law enforcement executed the search warrant, they found several items that did not belong to Gacy and were odd items to be in his possession. Former Prosecutor Lawrence Finder commented about the first search saying, "They didn't find any bodies in the Gacy house, but they did find things that really didn't belong there such as a class ring . . ." (Peacocktv.com). During the initial investigation, police found out several things about Gacy that increased their suspicion as the prime suspect involved in Piest's disappearance. Speaking about the initial days of the investigation, Chief Hachmeister said, "They found that he had been arrested in Iowa for sexually molesting a young boy. That obviously threw some flags up." Detective Tovar said, "By checking missing person reports from the area and a specific age, we started seeing that several other people that had worked for him were missing" (Peacocktv.com). Finally, there was a key piece of evidence collected during the first search of Gacy's home, a photo receipt. This was the item that tied Gacy to Piest and provided evidence that Piest was in Gacy's home the night he went missing. Kozenczak stated, "There in a clear plastic bag, shining like a piece of gold, was the bright red receipt I had plucked out of John Gacy's garbage bag . . . This was the first and only piece of evidence we had showing that the Piest's boy had even been in the house on Summerdale" (Kozenczak 137). One online source describes, "Of the multiple young men and boys murdered by . . . Gacy, Robert Priest's murder was the crime that led to the conviction of the notorious killer" (Falk, scotsman.com). Gacy

had clearly made a life-changing mistake that exposed his crimes and his acts as a serial killer when he decided to take Rob Piest to his home on Summerdale Avenue.

What led to John Wayne Gacy's capture and law enforcement procedures that changed as a result of his case?

Gacy's modus operandi for committing his crimes was the same for most of his victims. He would use stories about clowning to show the young men his tricks after gaining the boy's trust by giving them a job, drugs, or alcohol. One source said "He [Gacy] would trick the boys by staging a magic act of removing handcuffs without the key, then telling them to try. Once the handcuffs were on, game over. He would put a rope around their neck and strangle them" (Netflix.com). Walter Jacobsen described Gacy's methods by stating "Then there's the Gacy confession about how he killed his victims, strangled them with his now infamous rope trick that police say he demonstrated to them with a rosary bead" (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 2). Jacobsen continues, "when he [Gacy] was arrested he told police what he did and how he did it, with a rope that he used as a tourniquet" (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 1). Once the young boys were dead, Gacy would bury their bodies in the crawlspace of his home on Summerdale Avenue. According to Amirante, Gacy stated "I buried them. I buried them all. Well, no, that's not right. I ran out of room, so some are in the river" (128). Jacobsen also reported, "It was the house on Summerdale that he buried twenty-six of the thirty-three bodies" (qtd. in CBS Chicago, YouTube.com part 5). While Gacy did not kill all of the boys he employed or had sexual relations with, once Gacy decided to kill his

victim, usually over money or threats of exposure, he would trick the boys, strangle them to death, and bury them in his crawlspace each time.

Imagining that something positive could come from such a horrific serial killer case is mind-boggling. However, the Gacy case inspired a change in law enforcement procedure that has saved countless lives. Danny Broderick states, “In 1984. . . he [Sam Amirante] personally authored procedures adopted by the Illinois General Assembly as the Missing Child Recovery Act of 1984 (I-SEARCH), which eliminated the seventy-two-hour waiting period to initiate a search for lost children, and he is credited with helping to locate countless thousands of missing children in our state and reuniting them with their parents. . . As other states adopted similar laws. . . it became possible to create the national network, now known as Child Abduction Emergency. . . commonly referred to as an Amber Alert” (Amirante et al., 395) While it would be preferable that the serial killer John Wayne Gacy never existed and the young men and boys whose lives were taken too soon were alive today, there is at least one positive outcome of this tragedy, the Amber Alert which requires law enforcement across the United States to search for missing children in a more timely and successful way. If it were not for John Wayne Gacy murdering thirty-three young men and boys in Chicago, countless others may have also died at the hands of other child abductors.

Not to be forgotten in the details of the John Wayne Gacy case are the victims. As of today, all but five of the victims have been identified. At the time of their discovery, medical examiners identified twenty-two out of the thirty-three victims by use of their dental and medical records. Since that time, six additional victims were identified using

DNA technology. This leaves five victims that may never be identified and five families that will lack closure in the disappearance of their children or relatives (Rumore and Bentle, chicagotribune.com). When looking at the faces of the images of the victims, it is apparent how incredibly young most were. The youngest victims were fourteen years old, and most were under eighteen years old at the time of their death. One cannot help thinking about what their stories would have been if they had not met John Wayne Gacy. These boys would have been in their sixties by now and many may have even had children of their own. The image of their faces is a reminder of how quickly a single decision can have severe and even deadly consequences and how a normal-looking person can actually be a serial killer.

The photo processing receipt that belonged to Kim Byers, an employee of Nisson Pharmacy, was the smoking gun that tied the missing boy, Robert Piest, to John Wayne Gacy. Without this piece of evidence, law enforcement would not have been able to connect John Wayne Gacy to Robert Piest's disappearance. The customer receipt portion was found in the trash in Gacy's home on Summerdale Avenue. Its original location was in the coat that belonged to Robert Piest. Law enforcement was able to prove that Robert Piest had been in Gacy's home the night he vanished.

John Wayne Gacy was a smart, cunning, and manipulative person. It is crystal clear that the childhood sexual, physical, and mental abuse that he suffered throughout his childhood played a significant role in becoming a serial killer. However, it is also likely that Gacy's mental illness, such as dissociative disorder, may have also contributed to not being able to control or understand the consequences of his actions. The various

depictions of Gacy in the resources make it difficult to conclude if it was his mental illness or if he was simply being manipulative for his own benefit. It is clear, however, that John Wayne Gacy should not have been released early from the Anamosa State Penitentiary in Iowa. If he had served his entire ten-year sentence, the boys he killed would likely be alive. What is unclear is if Gacy could have been rehabilitated or if a different group of boys would have replaced his victims. Another point that comes across well in the resources consulted is the fact that Des Plaines and Cook County law enforcement handled the case extremely well. Officers clearly understood the gravity of handling this case carefully in order for Gacy to be convicted of his crimes and avoid having the case overturned on appeal.

Reflecting on the case of John Wayne Gacy over forty years after the murders was interesting as it was at a period of time I can only imagine. In several sources, it was mentioned that the victims were picked up as they were walking or hitchhiking. In the twenty-first century, it is inconceivable that a young person in the age range of the Gacy victims would voluntarily get in a car with a stranger. Gacy was able to come across as a charming father figure and likely did not present any concerning warning signs to the young boys. However, in this era, it seems less likely to occur because of the increased awareness of violence in the world due to the internet and media that didn't exist in the 1970s. The case of John Wayne Gacy can still be a warning to people of all ages that looks can be deceiving. One should think very hard before deciding to trust a complete stranger and then they shouldn't.

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