

Man Once Suspected In Zodiac Case Dies

By Erin Hallissy
Chronicle East Bay Bureau

A man once suspected of being the Zodiac killer, who taunted police and terrorized Northern California with threats of murder, died Wednesday in Vallejo of a heart attack at the age of 58.

In 1971, attention focused on Arthur Leigh Allen when relatives and friends told police that he was acting erratically and that they feared he might be the sadistic slayer who killed at least six people and perhaps as many as 37 between 1966 and 1974.

In his book "Zodiac," former Chronicle editorial cartoonist Robert Graysmith described Allen under a fictitious name as "the gut-feeling choice of most detectives" for the Zodiac killer. Graysmith could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Former San Francisco police detective Dave Toschi said yesterday that Allen was investigated as a suspect in 1971 and his trailer was searched, but there was never enough evidence to file charges against him or any other suspect.

Allen had reportedly told some people that he was the Zodiac killer.

"Mr. Allen was a very, very good suspect," Toschi said. "We looked into Mr. Allen very closely."

In the mid-1970s, Allen was convicted of child-molesting charges and sentenced to prison, said Vallejo Police Captain Roy Conway.

Last year, the Vallejo Police Department searched Allen's home in Vallejo as part of a follow-up investigation into the unsolved case.

"We found some writings, some pipe bombs, some illegal weapons," Conway said. "None of it was sufficient to make an arrest for him being the Zodiac."

Conway said Allen, who for many years was unemployed and lived on general assistance, cooperated with police. The officer described Allen as highly intelligent. His interests included diving and Hobie Cat sailboat racing.

Conway said there have been as many as 1,000 suspects in the Zodiac killings.

The killer who called himself "The Zodiac" sent chilling letters with coded clues to newspapers and detectives about a string of murders, which occurred in Vallejo, Lake Berryessa, San Francisco and Riverside.

"It was like he was taunting us and saying, 'I'm better than you and smarter than you,'" Toschi said. "He actually set out a challenge and said, 'Catch me if you can.'"

Last year, a Vallejo lawyer held a press conference to announce that his dead brother had been the

Zodiac killer. William L. Beeman privately published a two-volume set called "Jack the Zodiac" in which he wrote that 101 pieces of circumstantial evidence pointed to his brother, Jack Beeman.

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