

A City In Fear (Part One)

Thirty years ago this summer a brutal killer named George Howard Putt stalked the streets of Memphis.

by Michael Finger

Roy K. Dumas. Bernalyn Dumas. Leila Jackson. Glenda Sue Harden. Christine Pickens.

Those five names probably mean very little to Memphians today. But 30 years ago this August, sensational news reports reminded residents, over and over again, just who these people were -- and many Memphians were terrified that their names might be added to the list.

Each of these -- one man and four women -- was the victim of a ruthless killer named George Howard Putt. In the summer of 1969, Putt led this city through a 28-day reign of terror and confusion. This is a look back at the terrible summer of "The Putt Murders."

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Roy and Bernalyn Dumas became George Howard Putt's first victims on the afternoon of August 14, 1969.

The Dumases lived at 1133 South Cooper, part of a 20-building complex still standing at the corner of Cooper and South Parkway East. Roy Dumas, 58, was a self-employed tax examiner and notary public. He had been badly wounded in World War II and part of his stomach was removed; as a result, his health was poor and he weighed scarcely more than 100 pounds.

Bernalyn Dumas, 46, worked at Baptist Memorial Hospital as a nursing supervisor. Friends of the couple described them as "quiet and respectable" and "two of the finest people that God ever put on this earth."

On August 14th, the Dumases were supposed to join their son Michael for dinner to celebrate his wife's birthday. But they never showed up that evening. Michael tried telephoning them several times before he left home to attend night class at the University of Memphis. After class, he decided to drive by their apartment to check on them.

When Michael arrived at the complex, he noticed that his parents' lights were still on and his father's car was parked in the rear lot. No one would answer the door, though, so he used his key to get in.

In the bedroom, he found his mother, lying on the bed with a gag over her mouth and a stocking knotted tightly around her throat. She was dead.

Michael ran outside and banged on neighbors' doors to call for help, then forced himself to go back in the apartment to use the phone in the kitchen. After shouting at the operator to call police, Michael waited outside for them to arrive. He had not seen his father.

Police came within minutes and quickly determined that Bernalyn Dumas, still dressed in her nursing uniform, had been strangled with one of her own stockings. Her wrists were bound to the bedposts with stockings and a scarf, and pantyhose had been wrapped around her mouth as a gag. A pair of surgical scissors lay on the sheets between her knees.

While detectives were examining Mrs. Dumas, other policemen made a surprising find in another bedroom -- the body of Roy Dumas. He too was in bed, with his ankles and wrists bound with suspenders, his mouth blocked with a wool scarf. A gray stocking had been knotted, "with ferocious tightness" according to news reports, around his throat.

The apparent motive for the murders was robbery. The apartment looked as if it had been hastily searched, and Michael Dumas helped police establish that his mother's purse was missing.

Police initially told the press that the Dumases' bodies "were so bloodied that they were not sure immediately how they were killed." Frank Holloman, then fire and police director, said the double murder was "the most atrocious and revolting crime he had seen in years." The next day, police spokespersons toned down their comments considerably, trying to stem rumors that Roy had been castrated, and that his wife had been "cut to shreds." They announced, "There was no blood, and there were no signs of a violent struggle."

This was correct, but the whole truth -- which police wanted to keep quiet as long as they could -- was just as alarming. The medical examiner's report showed that this was not just a murder for money; police were confronted with a very ugly crime.

When detectives searched Bernalyn Dumas' bedroom, they noticed that a bedside lamp had been twisted so its light would shine directly on her. Although there was no evidence of intercourse, the medical examiner determined that her sexual organs had been cut internally with a sharp object. Examination later revealed blood on the scissors left on the bed.

Authorities announced that every available officer was assigned to an "around-the-clock" investigation, and all vacations and leaves were cancelled. But except for one unidentifiable fingerprint left on a cake knife in the kitchen, no worthwhile evidence turned up.

Somehow a killer had walked into the middle of a crowded apartment complex, entered a residence without any sign of force, and murdered and molested a helpless man and woman. The murderer then rifled through their belongings and left the apartment without being seen or heard by any neighbors. He --or she -- had left behind no clues. It seemed a bold and incredible crime.

Five days after their deaths, Roy and Bernalyn Dumas were buried in Memphis' National Cemetery. Roy's Bronze Star, a presidential citation, and other war honors were displayed beside his casket. After the funeral, Michael issued a public statement on the evening news:

"Whoever brought this tragedy to Memphis and to our beloved needs help. It was a terrible thing and a sick act, and we have trained people who can help them. We harbor no malice, but we don't want such a thing to happen again, so we ask the guilty parties to come forward and seek help."

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Across town, in a run-down apartment house in North Memphis, George Howard Putt slumped in a chair and stared at the TV through his sunglasses. He listened quietly as Michael Dumas read his plea on the news, then looked over at his wife when the broadcast ended.

"That's just a come-on," he sneered. "If he turned himself in, they'd just lock him up and throw the key away."

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On the afternoon of August 26th, Putt struck again.

Leila Picard Jackson, 80, lived at 21 N. Somerville, in a white clapboard rooming house that had been converted into four apartments (since replaced by a high-rise). A widow, Jackson occupied quarters in the rear of the house and rented out rooms to people who worked in the Medical Center.

Described by a neighbor as a "right good old soul," Jackson had discussed the Dumas murders with a friend, and had remarked that no one would want to rob her - she never kept any money in the house.

On the night of August 25th, Jackson's daughter-in-law grew concerned when the elderly woman didn't answer her telephone. She knew Jackson liked to sit on her porch in the evenings, but "she was always in the house and locked up before dark." So a grandson, Donald, drove over to make sure everything was all right.

When Donald arrived at the house, he was surprised to see the afternoon paper still folded up on the porch. Even more alarming, the front door was standing open and the screen wasn't latched. The boy stepped inside and called his grandmother's name, but there was no answer, so he crept down the hall until he reached her bedroom.

When he switched on the light, he saw Jackson lying in bed. Donald at first thought his grandmother was asleep. Then he saw the butcher knife on the bed.

Homicide bureau chief Robert Cochran decided to meet the other officers at the scene. When he walked into the bedroom where Jackson lay, the first thing he noticed was the lamp. A reading lamp attached to the headboard had been cranked out so the light would shine directly on Jackson's body -- just like the lamp in Bernalyn Dumas' bedroom.

"When I saw that lamp, I was the loneliest bastard that ever lived," Cochran would admit later. "I knew it was the same one."

He was right. Leila Jackson lay on the bed with a stocking knotted around her neck. A butcher knife lay on the bedspread between the woman's knees, its blade smeared with blood.

The medical examiner confirmed that the woman's sexual organs had been lacerated, probably with the butcher knife. Her house had been ransacked and her purse, containing about \$80, was missing.

The Commercial Appeal declared that "fear and tension have moved into the neighborhood where Mrs. Jackson, a semi-invalid [was] strangled." Many Midtown residents were afraid the killer would return, and refused to open their doors to talk with detectives or reporters. Like a contagious disease, fear was spreading throughout the city. Who would be next?

The police scrutinized the obvious suspects, such as the boarders in Jackson's house, but nothing developed. Now faced with three murders in only 11 days and no suspects, police and fire director Holloman knew it was a bad situation. Still, he tried to sound reassuring: "We would like to ask the citizens of Memphis to have confidence in their police department. We are working around the clock to solve this murder."

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Not many blocks away George Howard Putt came home and waved a newspaper in front of his wife.

"Remember that old lady I tried to rent the room from over near the Terrace Hotel?" he asked excitedly. "That Mrs. Jackson? Remember her? Somebody killed her just like that Dumas couple!"

He paused, then said, almost to himself, "There must be some kind of really bad nut loose in this town."

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The "really bad nut" decided to kill again just five days later, on August 30th. His next victim was 21-year-old Glenda Sue Harden, a secretary for Jackson Life Insurance Company.

Glenda Sue was young and pretty, described by a family member as "a very sweet, outgoing, lovable Christian girl. She loved people; she didn't know what it was to be unkind to others." The Kingsbury High graduate lived with her mother and stepfather at 1256 Holliday and was engaged to marry a young fellow from Ripley in January.

At 5 p.m. that Friday afternoon, Harden left work in the Falls Building downtown. Co-workers remembered that she crossed Front Street, walked through Confederate Park, and headed to her Mustang parked on the promenade lot by the river. Her friends would never see her alive again.

The next morning, police came across the girl's car on the cobblestones at the foot of Monroe, south of where Harden had parked it the day before. Inside the unlocked vehicle were a gold button from her dress, her shoes, and an empty purse. The car keys were in the ignition.

Alerted by her parents, police fanned out to search the entire downtown area, no easy task. Late that afternoon, the desperate hunt came to the end many feared.

Two patrolmen searching Martin Luther King Riverside Park walked to the end of a dirt path and found the girl, dead. Harden lay on her face in the grass, with her hands fastened tightly behind her with her own pantyhose. She had been stabbed 14 times in the head, neck, chest, and back. The medical examiner would later report that any one of the wounds would have been fatal.

Glenda Sue Harden's murder -- the fourth in two weeks -- caused a sensation in Memphis. Clearly, a madman was loose in the city. For the first time, police and fire director Holloman admitted, "We are faced with a cunning sex killer."

Newspaper headlines described Memphis as "a city hushed in fear." *The Commercial Appeal* balanced wedding stories and social news with such somber articles as "Precaution Is Watchword as Killer Stalks City." The sale of dogs, especially big, mean-looking ones, soared, and some locksmiths reported their business was up 300 percent.

Police stepped up an investigation that had already swelled into the largest manhunt in Memphis history. Police Chief Henry Lux said that more than 100 homicide detectives were on the case, along with 35 vice squad officers.

Harden's car was scrutinized and dusted for fingerprints, and evidence was sent to the FBI labs in Washington, D.C. Plainclothes detectives even attended the girl's funeral, looking for anyone who had also shown up at the Dumas or Jackson services.

But they found nothing, and director Holloman complained, "We're getting very little in the way of tips. Someone has the answer and we're hoping they will come forward and tell the police." As an incentive, a reward was offered that eventually topped \$20,000.

A *Commercial Appeal* editorial reminded readers that this was "the grisliest crime spree which the present law-enforcement force has ever had to face." A waitress summed up what most felt when she told a reporter, "Sure, I'm afraid! Who in hell wouldn't be?"

Authorities even explored a possible Boston Strangler connection. In 1964, a maniac killed at least 13 women in the Boston area, usually by strangling them with their own clothing and then sexually mutilating some of the victims. Memphis police suspected a link, and began to investigate everyone who had checked out copies of the book, *The Boston Strangler*, from the public library.

The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* took it a step further, by contacting the book's author and asking his advice. Gerold Frank admitted that the Memphis murders had "marked similarities" to those in Boston, and even offered a profile of the person who would commit such crimes: "This murderer is probably the kind of man that, once caught, everyone who knows him will express great surprise and say, 'But he was such a sweet, nice person!'"

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That morning, George Howard Putt strolled over to the Bible salesman who had driven into the Hudson station where he pumped gas. "I sure would like to have that for my wife," Putt told him, picking up a \$50 family Bible. "But I won't get paid until next week."

Won over by the young man's smile and pleasant manners, the salesman gave Putt the Bible anyway and said he'd pick up the first payment for it later.

"I just couldn't believe it," the salesman told police later. "He was such a nice young fellow, as nice and gentlemanly as you please."

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The murderous career of that "nice young fellow" came to a dramatic end on September 11, 1969. That day was also the birthday of Putt's last victim.

Christine Pickens, a 59-year-old widow, worked as a dental receptionist in the Sterick Building downtown. She lived on the second floor of the old LaBlanche

Apartments at 41 N. Bellevue (now a parking lot). A neighbor there said, "She was one heck of a nice person, the kind of person who would bring you a bowl of soup if she knew you were sick."

Pickens worked until noon on Thursdays. That particular day, she left the offices shortly after 12 but did not go straight home. Instead, she stayed downtown to buy a gift for her boss' grandson.

That act of kindness may have cost her life.

A woman named Grace Oldham lived on the third floor of the LaBlanche building. A few minutes after one o'clock that day, she heard a knock at the door. Without opening it, she asked the visitor what he wanted.

"I'm here to collect a bad check on Oldham," he said.

Oldham thought that was odd. "Which Oldham?" she asked.

There was a pause, and the man answered, "Johnny Oldham."

She knew no one by that name, and told the stranger to go away. To her relief, he did. As his steps faded away, Oldham cracked open the door and saw a young man pause as he reached the stairway at the end of the hallway. He stood there for a few moments, staring out the window. Then Oldham saw him hurry down the steps.

The man was George Howard Putt, and he had just seen Christine Pickens walking across the lawn toward her apartment.

Emma Gross, a nurse at Baptist Memorial Hospital, lived on the third floor directly above Pickens. She was making a sandwich that afternoon and getting ready for work when an awful scream suddenly pierced the floor of her apartment. It was a woman's voice, pleading, "No, no, no, don't! Oh, you don't have to do that! Don't kill me! Murder!"

Without thinking what she was doing, Gross ran downstairs to Pickens' apartment. Just as she reached the door, it flew open and Putt stepped into the hall. His hands were red with blood. In one of them he held a woman's purse, in the other a dripping knife.

Emma Gross almost became his sixth victim. "He had a terrible murder face," she told police later. "He showed me the knife and blood fell off the blade onto my uniform." But she was lucky. Without saying a word, Putt flung the purse at her and bolted down the hallway.

Gross banged on apartment doors, screaming, "Christine's been killed!" One of the neighbors heard her. Wayne Armstrong shouted back that he was in bed, but moments later burst out of his door in his underwear, waving a pistol.

Armstrong ran out of the building and confronted Putt in the driveway. The young man sneered, "You wouldn't shoot me in the back" and began to walk toward the street. Armstrong raised his pistol and pulled the trigger. But he missed! In his haste, he had forgotten to put on his eyeglasses, and he could barely see his target.

Putt ran down Bellevue toward Madison, as Gross yelled after him, "He's a murderer! Catch him! Catch him!" At the corner he leapt over a fence, pitched the bloody knife into a patch of weeds near the street, and sprinted west along Madison.

The chase was on. Ray Brenner, a customer at the corner gas station, and Roger Meckley from Shipman's Optical next door followed Putt as he fled along Madison. Just ahead of them, Armstrong was still pursuing on foot, wildly firing his pistol.

Putt was now far ahead of all of them. But a bloody man being pursued down a busy street by a man in his underwear firing a pistol was bound to attract attention.

In a few minutes, a squad car pulled up to the LaBlanche Apartments. Police ran up to Pickens' apartment, but it was too late. She was dead. As Gross recalled the scene, "She [Pickens] was lying down by the door and already killed. The blood looked like the Mississippi River." Pickens, getting ready to celebrate her 59th birthday, had been stabbed 20 times.

Her murderer almost got away. When Putt reached the Madison overpass for the

expressway, then under construction, he swung over the railing and dropped down into the dirt roadbed. Brenner and Meckley jumped the railing on the other side and blocked his escape.

Putt then turned around and ran south, leaving the older men far behind. A few blocks later, he scrambled over a wire fence near Linden and disappeared into an alley.

By this time, however, police cars had converged on the scene. Officers Glenn Noblin and Phil Scruggs were cruising along Linden when they saw a man Scruggs at first thought was a painter. His pants were spattered, Scruggs recalled, and "his arms looked as if they'd been dipped almost to the elbows in a bucket of blood."

Scruggs and Noblin stopped the man and asked, "What's the hurry?"

"No hurry, officers. Going home," the man replied. Both patrolmen noticed he was out of breath.

"You were running," Scruggs persisted.

"I was trying to get away from some dude," he said. "He was shooting at me. You'd run too if some dude was shooting at you."

Scruggs looked down at the man's red arms. "What's that all over your hands?"

"Oh," the man paused. "Blood, I guess. I cut myself jumping over the fence."

Scruggs stepped out of the car. "Pretty bad cut, I'd say." He clamped handcuffs around the bloody wrists of George Howard Putt. The hunt was over.

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NEXT WEEK: Who was George Howard Putt, and where is he today?

This story originally appeared in the September 1989 issue of Memphis magazine. Direct quotations and other information were taken from accounts of the crimes published in The Commercial Appeal and the Memphis Press-Scimitar. Passages in italics were obtained from The Memphis Murders, written in 1974 by Gerald Meyer, who was then a staff writer for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Meyer had been retained by Putt's wife, Mary, to tell her side of the story.

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