

Jane Doe's killer denied parole

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1980 cop homicide sexual assault and child molester Robert Leroy Nelson

BLUE EARTH - The former Minnesota State Trooper who killed a still unidentified woman in 1980 was denied parole Wednesday.

Robert Leroy Nelson, 62, became eligible for parole in January in Texas. The board began reviewing Nelson's file in June.

He was convicted of first-degree manslaughter of Jane Doe and criminal sexual conduct with a child in Minnesota in 1989. He had already been convicted of aggravated sexual assault of a child in 1988 in Texas. He received a life sentence in Texas, and Minnesota sentenced him to 15 years, which would run concurrent with Texas.

Article Photos



Robert Leroy Nelson

A panel of up to seven parole board members review files. If the first three are "no" votes, the parole is denied. There must be five positive votes to release an inmate.

The first three reviewers voted down Nelson's parole. They indicated their decision was based on his criminal history and the nature of his offenses, according to a clerk for the parole board. He will be eligible for parole again in June 2011.

Nelson's criminal past led him to the Texas prison system.

He lived in Elmore during his career as a patrolman from 1970 through 1981. On May 30, 1980, the body of a nude, badly decomposed woman was found in a drainage ditch east of Blue Earth. The woman's head had been shaved except for a small strip and a cord was around her neck. The autopsy revealed she had been strangled.

Authorities estimated her age between 20 and 35. Her only distinctive trait was an overbite. She was approximately 5 feet, 3 inches tall and weighed 128 pounds. Her body was so badly decomposed that only one fingerprint was retrieved.

In 1981, Nelson transferred to the Detroit Lakes district. Eventually, Nelson joined the church cult Into the Light Ministries. In 1985, he resigned from the state patrol, citing medical and conflict of religion as reasons.

When the cult moved to Texas, the Nelson family followed.

The church pastor, Ronald Bernier, confronted Nelson and his wife in 1988 about suspicious behavior regarding Nelson and his son. Nelson then fled to Mexico.

He returned from Mexico a few months later, ready to confess. He admitted to being involved with one or more homicides in southern Minnesota, and to sexually assaulting his son. According to documents in the case file, he also admitted to being involved in voyeurism and peeping in people's windows from his squad car.

Nelson eventually gave officers more details on the Blue Earth homicide, but not enough to identify Jane Doe.

He was on duty several nights before the woman's body was found. Nelson was near a ramp off of Interstate 90 near Bricelyn when he said he saw a van stop, and a woman got out. He got out of his car to talk to her and planned to give her a ride to Blue Earth. Just before entering town, he said the woman wanted to engage in sexual activity, so he took rural roads out of town.

When she said she was no longer willing, he sexually assaulted her, eventually pulling out her fingernails to get her to be quiet. Nelson said he strangled her and disposed of her clothes at the dump, taking and hiding her purse.

Authorities searched the barn at his old farmhouse, but did not find the purse.

It was the only murder Nelson confessed to.

For the past 28 years, investigators have tried to identify the woman. Many of the retired investigators on the case still review it and look for match possibilities.

In the last five years, Blue Earth resident Deb Anderson has become interested in the case and is Jane Doe's biggest advocate.

Anderson thought the news of Nelson being denied parole was "awesome."

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm gonna be back at it in three years as he continues to come up for parole. He won't get out as long as I have anything to say about it. I just think that's great. We can't let him slip through the cracks just because it's been 28 years."

Faribault County Chief Deputy Scott Adams is the current investigator on the case. He said for the first round of parole reviews, the board made the right choice.

Adams knows there is controversy on whether Nelson committed the murder, but he believes Nelson did it. However, he does not believe Nelson was as truthful about the woman as he could have been.

"I've always thought he had a good idea of who she was," Adams said. "I never thought he was completely honest of how it happened, or what happened."

Adams said all officers ask the basics of "who are you" and "where are you headed."

"I don't think someone who hasn't come clean with a crime should be paroled the first time around," he said. "I know he's not going to sit in prison forever. I just know how the judicial system works. Eventually, I think he probably will be paroled."

Adams doesn't think Nelson will ever contact the sheriff's office and "come clean" with all he knows about the unidentified woman. However, he would like to talk to Nelson in the future to see if he'll give any more details.

"I would like to at some time," Adams said. "I don't know if he will (agree to talk). I'd gladly make that request."

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