

Hitchhiking Slaying Suspect Arrested: Man Linked to 3 Santa Barbara Killings in '76-77.

By John Hurst and Jerry Belcher

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Santa Barbara—a 21-year-old Goleta man, arrested 16 days earlier in Hollywood as a suspect in the bizarre but nonfatal shooting of a young woman hitchhiker, was booked Friday on suspicion of murdering three young women hitchhikers whose deaths terrorized the University of California campus here in the winter of 1976-77.

Each of the young women was shot once in the head with a small caliber pistol. But the fourth and latest victim survived, escaped and three months later played a key role in the man's arrest, according to sheriff's investigators.

Thor Nis Christiansen, a student at Santa Barbara City College and a waiter at his father's Danish restaurant in Solvang, was arrested by Santa Barbara County sheriff's deputies in the Goleta apartment he shared with a young woman.

Santa Barbara County Sheriff John Carpenter said Christiansen had first come to the attention of investigators in February 1977, when they were questioning over 100 persons in connection with the three so-called "look-alike" slayings. But Carpenter indicated the young man was not considered a suspect at that time.

According to an affidavit in support of the search warrant served Friday at his apartment, Christiansen had been cited in Santa Barbara in February, 1977, as a minor in possession of liquor. The affidavit said a .22-caliber pistol was found in his car at the time, was confiscated and still is in the possession of authorities.

His arrest here apparently stemmed directly from a strange shooting incident in West Hollywood last April 18, when 21-year-old Lydia Preston accepted a ride from a young motorist who shot her in the left ear a few minutes later.

Although severely wounded, she managed to leap out of the car and seek help. She was taken to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where the bullet was removed. She was released a few days later.

Ms. Preston called sheriff's investigators early on the morning of July 11, reporting that she had spotted a man resembling her attacker in the Bottom Line Bar in Hollywood, according to a sheriff's spokesman.

Detectives arrested Christiansen at the bar a short time later.

The next day, Los Angeles Sheriff's Sgt. Daryl Walker, who was handling the investigation, contacted Santa Barbara authorities because of Christiansen's Goleta address. It apparently was at that point the investigation began here.

On July 13 Christiansen pleaded not guilty to a charge of felonious assault in Beverly Hills Municipal Court and was released on \$5,000 bail.

An affidavit filed to support a search warrant obtained by Los Angeles authorities show that Christiansen was arrested by Los Angeles police July 7 as a drunk-driving suspect and another .22-caliber automatic pistol was found in his car at that time.

Ms. Preston and the three “look-alike murder victims”—so-called because they bore a remarkable resemblance to one another—all were shot with small-caliber weapons, according to investigators, according to investigators. Each was shot in the side of the head.

Although the slug was removed from Ms. Preston’s head, it was fragmented, a source said, clouding the possibility of ballistics tests.

The murder victims were Patricia Marie Laney, 21, a UC Santa Barbara student whose body was found Jan. 19, 1977, in Refugio Canyon near Goleta; Jacqueline Anne Rook, 21, also a UCSB student, whose body was found the next day in the same area; and Mary Anne Sarris, 19, a waitress whose body was found May 22, 1977 in Drum Canyon north of Santa Barbara.

Miss Sarris, who was last seen alive in Goleta, had been reported missing Dec. 6, 1976.

Miss Laney, last seen at a Goleta bus stop, had vanished only the day before her body was found. Miss Rook, who also disappeared from a Goleta bus stop, was reported missing Nov. 20.

All three were known to be hitchhikers.

Their disappearances and the subsequent discovery of their bodies threw the university campus into a turmoil and inspired campaigns against student hitchhiking and to provide night bus service to the Isla Vista campus.

Christiansen was living in a Goleta apartment with Kerry Soliz, a woman in her early 20s, when he was arrested Friday. Sources said they had met while she was hitchhiking.

Ms. Soliz described Christiansen as “very, very nice,” and said, “He’s not capable” of murder. “These things they’re saying are wrong . . . They (deputies) don’t know what they’re doing.”

The suspect’s father, Nis Christiansen, said in a telephone interview, “My boy said he is being mistaken for somebody else.”