

Sister of murder victim wants Lucas retried

Woman hopes reopening 1978 case will put convict back on death row

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Hoping to return Henry Lee Lucas to death row, family members of some victims he once claimed to have killed are trying to convince police agencies to reopen the decades-old murder cases.

Leading the charge is Ninfa Salazar Sheppard of Georgetown, whose sister, Rita Salazar, was killed in November 1978.



Rita Salazar's body was found near Hewitt in November 1978. Henry Lee Lucas confessed to killing her, and Salazar's sister wants the case reopened and Lucas back on death row.

The body of the 18-year-old Georgetown High School graduate, riddled with six gunshot wounds, was found dumped on an Interstate 35 access road about 10 miles south of Waco near Hewitt.

Salazar, who aspired to be an actress

and a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, had been on a date the night she was killed with Kevin Key, a 19-year-old Austin man whom she had known two weeks. Key's car ran out of gas, and the couple were seen walking in the rain along I-35 south of Round Rock.

Key's body, also shot multiple times with a small-caliber weapon, was found on an interstate access road about five miles north of Georgetown.

Investigators from the McLennan County Sheriff's Department, which at the time included McLennan County Commissioner Wendall Crunk, and Williamson County officials developed what they considered to be a strong suspect in

the dual slaying.

Another suspect's wallet was found close to where Key's body was discovered. That suspect was very uncooperative and immediately asked for an attorney when Crunk, a Texas Ranger and others tried to interview him, said Crunk, whose memory of the case is remarkably clear after 20 years.

The case could not be put together and the killings remained unsolved for five years. That's when Lucas, during his confession frenzy while in the custody of Williamson County Sheriff Jim Boutwell and the Texas Rangers Homicide Task Force, included the murders of Salazar and Key among the 600 or so others to

which he and his sometime traveling companion Ottis Toole claimed credit.

For almost 20 years, Sheppard and her mother, Connie Salazar, have held firm in the belief that Lucas had killed their loved one. While they did not get the satisfaction of seeing Lucas convicted and sentenced to death in Rita's case, they longed for the day when Lucas would be executed for killing a still- unidentified woman known only as "Orange Socks" near Georgetown.

They did not learn until late last month that former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell and then

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Sister of victim wants case reopened

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Attorney General Jim Mattox presented the case involving Salazar's death — and two other McLennan County murders to which Lucas had confessed — to a Waco grand jury in 1985.

The panel declined to indict Lucas in any of the cases, largely because, as in the "Orange Socks" case, there were no witnesses or physical evidence linking Lucas to the crimes, only his confessions.

Lucas has long since recanted his 600 confessions, saying he was trying to get even with law enforcement officials by making them look foolish. Not long after the McLennan County grand jury session, hundreds of other confessions he had made were called into question.

The Texas Ranger task force, which was set up as a clearinghouse for officers around the country who wanted to ask Lucas about unsolved murders, was disbanded and discredited by reports that Lucas was fed information so murders could be solved.

"I am 200 percent convinced that Lucas killed my sister, and I'll believe it until somebody proves otherwise," Sheppard said Friday during a trip to Waco in which she asked the McLennan County Sheriff's Department to reopen her sister's murder investigation.

Sheppard, 36, said then-Williamson County Sheriff Boutwell, who since has died, convinced them that Lucas killed Rita because he said Lucas knew things that only the killer could know.

"Sheriff Boutwell went to mom and said that Lucas had a message for her. He said that he remembered killing my sister because she was the one who fought him to the end," Sheppard said. "She wasn't raped, she wasn't cut up into pieces like so many of his victims, and I believe him when he said she fought him. That's how she was. I believe his confession. And we trusted law enforcement. We left it in the hands of the law to take care of it."

Sheppard said she launched her crusade, with the support of others who believe that Lucas killed their family member, because she was angered when Gov. George W. Bush spared Lucas' life June 26, four days before he



Doubts about the case that put Henry Lee Lucas on death row caused that sentence to be commuted.

was scheduled to be executed in the "Orange Socks" case.

Bush, saying that there was "enough doubt" that Lucas committed the crime, commuted Lucas' sentence to life in prison.

Sheppard said she disagreed with Bush's failure to stop the execution of Karla Faye Tucker, but thinks he was wrong to stop Lucas'.

"It is only fair he execute everybody on death row for their crimes, and when he didn't execute Lucas, it threw me for a loop," she said. "I went into shock. I still can't believe it. His appeal has gone 23 different times before judges. It was not new information, and because the governor and the attorney general were behind Lucas, that was the power that gave him life."

Sheppard met Friday with Lt. Truman Simons of the McLennan County Sheriff's Department and has called District Attorney John Segrest, asking both to reopen the investigation into her older sister's death.

Sheppard was joined in Waco by Ann Johnson of Houston, whose mother, Joan Gilmore, was killed in 1978 in Montgomery, Ala. Lucas confessed to killing her mother, and Johnson said she feels cheated that Lucas was never returned to Alabama to answer for that crime.

She is certain that Lucas killed her mother because she said he provided "very specific" information to investigators about her mother's death.

"From reading everything I have read about his confession, there is no doubt in my mind that he killed my mother. He was not spoon-fed information," Johnson said.

Simons and Segrest said most of the evidence collected in the McLennan County death of Salazar was forwarded to Williamson County authorities. Both men agreed that Williamson County would have the best shot at solving the case, since the victims were abducted there.

"They have more to work with than we do, but we will help them any way we can," said Simons, who is convinced that Lucas did not kill Salazar and Key.

Lt. David Proctor of the Williamson County Sheriff's Department said Friday that he has just begun to review reports in the case, but added that he intends to pursue Sheppard's request to pick the investigation back up.