Case Closed Cold, An Ozark Tragedy

This is a true story resulting from a 2 ½ year investigation into a 1984 double homicide in Fayetteville, Arkansas and the patsy set up to take the fall for it. It exposes evidence that local law enforcement either chose to ignore certain facts because they failed to fit a pre-textual narrative or simply instructed to look the other way resulting in discovered evidence never being considered. Either way, since the fall-guy who police theorized to have murdered a young couple and their unborn child in their home was conveniently found dead in a cow pond 10 days following; having succumbed to “suicide by drowning”, according to the Arkansas State Crime Lab, and therefore, leaving no need for an in-depth investigation. Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight and a deeper analysis of at least part of the evidence; things don’t quite appear as they did in the spring of 1984. Is this a case that simply illustrates the dangers of dealing drugs in the early 80’s? Or is this a case where powerful people involved in the illicit drug trade feared exposure and thus ordered a hit of a Pharmacist and his wife along with creating an easy goat to pin it on, who also had to die?

Chapter 1

Lee and Karen Dickson

Lee Francis Dickson was reared in Newark, Arkansas, a town located in Eastern Arkansas with a population of 900 in 1969, the year he graduated from Newark High School. Lee was the only child of James and Alice Dickson. James wasn’t Lee’s biological father but raised him as his own since a toddler. In 1969, Lee met a cute brunette named Karen Kay Bryant from Batesville, a town of approximately 7,000 only 15 miles northwest up highway 69. Karen was the youngest daughter of Donnie and Burnell Bryant and is best described as a true southern beauty adored by everyone she met. She loved art, baton twirling and as a teenager dreamed of one-day twirling on the football field for the Arkansas Razorbacks in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Lee and Karen dated throughout high school and college and eventually married in Batesville on June 30, 1973. Karen first attended Arkansas State University and the University of Central Arkansas but eventually graduated from the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa with a Bachelors of Art in 1975, while Lee finished up his Pharmacy Doctorate in 1977. Following graduation and certification as a Pharmacist, he and Karen moved to Mena, Arkansas where he worked in a small retail pharmacy for less than one year. In 1978, Lee was offered a Pharmacy Manager’s position at Consumer’s Pharmacy located on Highway 62 in Fayetteville and he eagerly accepted.

In March 1984, Lee and Karen appeared to be living the American dream. They had a two-year-old son, Mason and another child due in April. They lived in a secluded yet beautiful 1,600 sq. ft. hill side home located on the east side of Sunrise Mountain just south of Fayetteville. Besides being mom to Mason and wife to Lee, Karen also taught elementary school in West Fork, just a few miles south of Fayetteville. She spent her spare time creating numerous kinds of art to include cross stitching, stained glass, macramé, drawing, painting and needlecraft. Both she and Lee enjoyed outdoor sports in the majestic Ozark Mountains that included rappelling, camping and floating the Buffalo River and all of the other Ozark rivers abundant in the area.

However, sometime in the early morning hours of March 22, 1984, evil darkened the door of the Dickson home located at 3255 Coach Street and brutally claimed the lives of Lee, Karen and Baby Dickson while only young Mason was spared as he slept nearby.

Chapter 2

Dennis Ray Flowers

Dennis Flowers was born in Healing Springs, Arkansas on January 13, 1942 to Bert and Verma Flowers. He was the 3rd born and only boy of the 4 Flowers kids. His mother, Verma passed away in 1954 from Leukemia and Dennis...
who was 12 at the time soon became a rebellious child. He dropped out of school after the 8th grade and was later arrested in Oklahoma for armed burglary at 15 years old, for which he was sentenced 10 years at the McAlester, Oklahoma Juvenile facility. Soon after being released from prison, he met and married Betty Jo Murray of Bentonville, Arkansas. She had a 3-year-old daughter, Marla Jo, from a previous marriage, who Dennis adopted and raised as his own.

In the years following, Dennis and Betty had two more children; Dana Denise in 1969 and Marcus Bert in 1971. Dennis learned to cut hair while incarcerated and obtained his Barber license in 1965. He eventually opened and operated a barber shop in West Fork, Arkansas until he was hired as the Fayetteville Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital Barber in 1966. Family and friends all say that Dennis was a great husband and dad while he and Betty were married. He had his family in church every Sunday and even taught Sunday school in the early 1970’s. While working at the VA, Dennis became heavily involved with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Union-Local 2201, where he was voted the Local President. In early 1976, while attending a labor conference in Las Vegas, he met Ms. Linda Denton from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, who previously worked at Tyndall AFB and also an AFGE leader. They began a romantic relationship, which led to Dennis filing for a divorce from Betty in the summer of 1976. The divorce became final on December 1, 1976; the very day Dennis and Linda married. Dennis left his job with the VA in 1979 after injuring his back from falling down a flight of stairs. He could no longer stand for prolonged periods of time to cut hair and began receiving government disability. He and Linda became acquaintances with Fayetteville attorney Lamar Pettus in the summer of 1980 while working on local election campaigns. Dennis and Linda were active Democrats who for a short time in the early 80’s operated a small circular newspaper called the “Northwest Arkansas Labor Journal” out of West Fork, Arkansas. Dennis and Linda became fast friends with Lamar and eventually hired Dennis to oversee his several rental properties, which included collecting rent, making repairs and general upkeep. Dennis continued working for Lamar until the events of March 1984.

Before marrying Linda, Dennis had been known to take a drink occasionally but was never thought to be an alcoholic or an abuser of drugs. He suffered from chronic lower back pain resulting from the fall at the VA and was prescribed pain medication accordingly. However, shortly after marrying Linda, family and friends noticed that Dennis began drinking heavily and would often show up to family events like Christmas, Easter and birthdays intoxicated.

While an inpatient in 1984 at the Charter Rehabilitation Hospital in Fayetteville, he stated that he had only been drinking heavily for the previous 3 to 4 years at a rate of a pint of whiskey or greater a day. He repeatedly failed to make child-support payments to Betty, who as a single mom struggled to make ends meet with 3 school age kids. However, one thing remained constant in Dennis’ life during his years with Linda, and that was his love and adoration for his 3 children; Marla, Dana and Marcus. But that love couldn’t blot one unfortunate fact in the early 80’s and that was his addictions. One of those addictions included pharmaceutical cocaine and methadone not long after he became acquainted with a druggist named Lee Francis Dickson.

Chapter 3

Fayettenam

Mr. Harold Jones, a US Air Force Vietnam Veteran and owner of small limo company in Fayetteville operated what some might describe as an organized crime crew that ranged in racquets from petty theft to prostitution and drugs. Jones was a popular fellow in the Fayetteville party scene throughout the 1970’s and early 80’s. He was the “Go to Guy” for those seeking a protected high stakes card game or girls (prostitutes) for an event. He also provided cocaine and other narcotics to those he knew and trusted. Numerous Fayetteville and other Northwest Arkansas high rollers utilized Mr. Jones’ services and others were known to work for and with him in
the vice trade. Those included, Eloy Sanchez, owner of a successful Mexican restaurant; Bill Murphy, a long time Fayetteville attorney and former State Legislator as well as one of President Bill Clinton’s appointees to the Presidential Commission on the World War II Memorial 1993; Dennis Flowers began associating with Jones in or around 1980 and soon found a role inside the crew by providing security for high-stakes poker games; collecting unpaid gambling debts and other miscellaneous tasks.

During the fall of 1983, Lee Dickson found himself lured to parties with some of Fayetteville’s most elite including powerful business figures and prominent attorneys. Lee was best known by his family and friends to be a quiet unassuming intellectual with a tendency to smoke pot occasionally but by September 1983, his closest friends couldn’t help but notice that he was associating with a new crowd that he liked to impress. It’s apparent that Lee was skimming from the Pharmacy’s inventory and either selling or giving pharmaceutical grade cocaine to his new powerful friends. However, a review of Lee’s checking account following the murders showed no significant deposits; moreover, they indicated that the Dickson’s were living pay check to pay check in late months of 1983 and early 1984.

Also during this time, Karen was growing tired of Lee’s shenanigans which included heavy drinking and drug use. He frequently stayed out into the wee hours of the morning on week nights, while Karen stayed home pregnant caring for Mason. Karen might have also discovered a relationship between Lee and one of his former employees at the pharmacy which could have been the reason she left Lee in October 1983 and stayed with her sister in Jonesboro, Arkansas for a few days. That employee was Tricia Davidson, a known associate of Harold Jones and hired by Lee earlier in 1983 to work as a clerk at the pharmacy. Might she have informed Harold Jones that her new boss could be a potential source for pharmaceutical cocaine? Regardless, it appears that Jones tasked Ronnie Teague to become acquainted with Lee in or around July 1983. Ronnie Teague originally from Mountainburg, Arkansas was known to law enforcement both in Crawford and Washington Counties. He had been arrested numerous on occasions in the 70’s and early 80’s for selling drugs and being in receipt of stolen property. However, it appears his attorney, Bill Murphy helped him avoid any significant jail time.

During the early fall of 1983, Teague drove Dennis Flowers by the Consumers Pharmacy and introduced him to Lee Dickson. Their initial conversation involved a shared hobby of buying and selling miscellaneous items such as watches and rings and reselling them for a profit. A friendship quickly grew and eventually led to Dennis working for the Dickson’s, doing odd jobs on their property, which included lawn and garden care. At some point though, it appears that Flowers also began serving as a liaison between Harold Jones’s group and Dickson’s pharmacy. It’s undetermined how much product Dickson funneled through Flowers between December 1983 and February 1984 or the identity of the eventual consumers. It is known however, that during this time, Dennis Flowers became heavily addicted to narcotics, including morphine, cocaine, codeine, Demerol, Percodan, Dilaudid, and Valium; all of which presumably provided by Dickson and his pharmacy inventory. Apparently he and Lee found themselves indebted to some powerful, unscrupulous men during this time for an amount of $40,000; exactly how or why is unknown. However, it’s safe to presume that it was related to an illegal scheme they were running through the Pharmacy.

Chapter 4

Dangerous Water

By early February 1984, Dennis was well aware that treacherous people were looking for him and Dickson over money they allegedly owed. It’s speculated that as a means of eluding those people, he convinced his brother in-law, Dr. Hugh Higginbotham to admit him into Washington Regional Hospital in Fayetteville on February 12, 1984 for back pain. However, word eventually got out as to where he was hiding and though they couldn’t get their money with him in the hospital, Eloy Sanchez and Ronnie Teague both stopped in for a visit the night of February 12th and requested a private conversation while Dennis lay in his hospital bed. There are no witnesses to what Sanchez and Teague told Dennis but whatever it was; it scared him enough to call Lee Dickson and ask him to bring a pistol to the hospital for protection. Shortly thereafter, Dickson showed up with a .44 Magnum along with
some morphine and seconal. In fact, a few hours later Dennis overdosed on those very drugs. Since he overdosed while admitted in Washington Regional, Dr. Higginbotham referred Dennis to Charter Vista Rehabilitation Hospital in Fayetteville that very day, where visitation was limited to only family and those that Dennis placed on a visitation list.

During Dennis’ rehabilitation and while participating in group sessions, he often discussed his guilt over leaving his first wife, Betty Jo for Linda and the impact it had on Marla, Dana and Marcus. He loved his kids so much and knew that he had to get clean for them to have the Dad they deserved. It was his entire family that included his wife, Linda, daughters, Marla and Dana, son Marcus and step son, Scott that gathered for an “Intervention” early in his treatment at Charter Vista. Each one of them read aloud exactly how his addictions had impacted their lives and detailed the fear for his health and even his life. They served as his rock and he only wanted to get through the miserable, wrenching experience of withdrawal so he could make them proud and start a new life.

Dennis would eventually overcome his addiction and spoke often of how he was to going to get away from the people he’d been associating with and start his own pawn shop in Fayetteville. In his release order, Dr. James Merritt wrote “Patient did very well in rehabilitation. He always seemed cheerful and self-motivated. He appeared to be making progress in displaying real honesty and feelings. He had very good involvement from his family in the family programs.” Even though Dennis left Charter Vista on that early Spring Day of March 14, 1984, the problems that he had evaded for the previous 32 days were still out there and he’d have to face them really soon. But, he was now clean and sober and he would find those that held his debts and convince them that had he’d make good on every dime he owed plus interest. He only needed time.

Chapter 5

Audit

On March 16, 1984, Arkansas State Pharmacy Board Investigator, Jim Mulkey, appeared unannounced at the Consumers Pharmacy to conduct an audit. At the conclusion of the audit, Mr. Mulkey found that approximately 8 ounces of pharmaceutical cocaine, 5,000 tablets of Percodan were unaccounted for. This meant huge trouble for Lee Dickson and when combined with his recent troubles in his marriage, he was hoping that things would return to normal. However, missing narcotics on a State Pharmacy Audit meant that law enforcement would soon be notified and they’d be asking a lot of questions regarding how the drugs came up missing. Dickson was scared and confused when he called his father in law, Mr. Donnie Bryant for advice the weekend after the audit. He told Mr. Bryant of his predicament and said, “I’ll either have to go to prison or turn state’s evidence and tell them everything I know.” He explained that if he came clean with the authorities, he’d be allowed to undergo drug rehabilitation and keep his pharmacy license.

The following is a speculated theory on what might have happened between March 16 and the early hours of March 19 1984 based on information contained in the case file and conversations with those having knowledge of events during the period. Dennis, only 3 days out of Charter Vista was excited about picking Dana and Marcus up at their Mom’s house that Friday afternoon on March 16th. He’d spent a month in rehab, and he knew he would have never made it through had it not been for his family. This would be the first time in years that Dana and Marcus would see him completely clean and sober. However, early that Friday afternoon, the phone rang and it was Lee Dickson who was extremely upset and needed help. So Dennis did what he had done so many times before; fail to keep a promise to his kids. He called Dana and Marcus and told them he wouldn’t be able to pick them up that afternoon but he promised he would come get them on Sunday, the 18th.

After calming Lee down from his hysterical fear of going to jail and being forced to talk to police about the people he was providing product to, he and Dennis developed a plan. They decided it would be best to collect whatever valuable product was still in the Pharmacy and take it to Oklahoma City and sell it. In the meantime, they’d set up a fake robbery of the Pharmacy that next night on Sunday and report all the drugs stolen to further confuse the inventory. Dennis’ wife, Linda was an Oklahoma City native and had good friends there in the drug trade, one of
which was Wayne Johnson. According to Linda, Dennis called Johnson and asked if he’d help make the break-in happen so he and Dickson could have solid alibies. Wayne agreed and said he’d send one of his guys to get it done; whose identity is unknown. On Saturday, March 17th, the plan was set; the Consumer Pharmacy would be robbed in the later hours of Sunday, March 18th/early hours of March 19th.

Dennis awoke the next morning on Sunday, the 18th still committed to spending time with Dana and Marcus. He had now arranged to pick up the kids at Betty Jo’s house after church and take them out to his Dad’s farm in rural Benton County for a party being thrown in his honor to celebrate his rehabilitation. Dennis and the kids stayed at the party for most of the afternoon and everyone there was so proud of Dennis for drinking something other than alcohol. The day ended with the Flowers’ returning to a new house on Ora Street in Fayetteville, they recently rented from Lamar Pettus. Dana remembers thinking that everything was so nice; her dad was sober; he and Linda had a new house, where she and Marcus Bert can visit more often and she was looking forward to spending an entire week hanging with her dad. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t happen.

Dickson and Flowers went by the pharmacy that Sunday evening and removed all the product they would be selling through Johnson. Linda Flowers’ role in this plan was to rent a car on Sunday from Hertz and depart for Oklahoma City with the stolen narcotics Monday morning; deliver it to Johnson and return by Wednesday evening. However, she learned that Sunday afternoon, while Dennis and the kids were at his party, that she couldn’t rent a car without a major credit card. She then called Lee Dickson and he rushed to the Fayetteville Airport with his credit card and rented a 1984 White Ford Tempo in his name.

Whoever tasked with making it look like the pharmacy was broken into arrived at the Consumers Pharmacy just after midnight but evidently wasn’t that interested in spending a lot of time to make the break-in look legitimate. Instead of kicking the door open and trashing the pharmacy to mislead the police; they simply found a rock and through into the plane glass window on the front of the pharmacy and took off. At approximately 3 O’clock AM on March 18, 1984, Dickson reported to Fayetteville Police that the Consumers Pharmacy had been broken in to, where numerous drugs were reportedly stolen. Those drugs included 200-300 Percodan tablets; 300 Tylox tablets; 3 vials of Morphine (Injectable); 20 tablets of Demerol (100mg); 100 Tablets of Seconal (100mg); 3-4 bottles of Valium; Dionin Powder (Cocaine) and Brompton’s Cocktail (Morphine and Cocaine mixture). Retired Detective Mike Mitchell responded to the dispatch and recalls that it was obvious that Dickson or someone made it look like a robbery by breaking the store front glass but the hole wasn’t big enough for a person to fit through. He said there were no other indications of forced entry besides the broken glass.

On Monday, March 19th, Dickson was contacted by the Arkansas State Pharmacy Board and informed that he would be required to appear before a State Pharmacy Board Panel regarding the shortage in his pharmacy. Also on the 19th, he received a call by Washington County CID Detective, Rick O’Kelley and learned that he and Arkansas State Police Narcotics Investigator, Chris Anderson wanted to meet with him on Thursday, March 22nd to discuss the narcotics shortage and possible criminal charges. The next day, on March 20th, Dickson was informed that his employment with the Consumer Pharmacy was terminated and the locks on the pharmacy doors were changed. Dickson knew that he would likely be charged by police so he contacted Fayetteville attorney John Everett on the same day to discuss his legal options. In his interview conducted on March 22, 1984, Everett stated that Dickson came by his office the previous Tuesday and was concerned about the results of the audit and having to appear in Little Rock before the Pharmacy Board. Everett recalled Dickson showing him a piece of paper written by a man named Johnny Wyman where he asked Dickson to destroy some prescriptions, that he’d filled for Wyman and to “be aware of Tricia and the Con.” When asked about this, Everett speculated that Wyman thought that Dickson was romantically involved with this Tricia (Davidson) as opposed to some sort of violent conduct. He recalled that Dickson told him that “she used to work for him and she has some kind of problem.”

Chapter 6

March 22, 1984
Mr. Oran Tisdale, a poultry farmer on Habberton Road located between Fayetteville and Springdale contacted the Washington County Sheriff’s Department the morning of March 22, 1984 reporting that at an intruder had entered his home at 4:00 AM that morning. SGT Richard Murphy and SGT Wayne Williams of the Washington County Sheriff’s Office responded to the call later in the afternoon of March 22 and took Mr. and Mrs. Tisdale’s individual statements. Mr. Tisdale said that a man had entered his home with a gun and asked to use the phone, where he placed two calls; one to someone named Lamar and the other to someone else. He claimed to have overheard the man admit to “killing two people” while talking on the phone. Tisdale stated that the man shot up drugs in his presence while he was on the phone. He further stated the man turned all the lights out and suddenly ran out of the house and backed his car into the ditch and was unable to extract it. He then started walking north on Habberton Road never to be seen again. Mr. Tisdale described him as around 30 years old, about 200 lbs., short dark hair (I’m not sure what color it was) he was about 6 ft. tall and wearing a dark coat. Ms. Virginia Tisdale, in her statement, described the assailant as 35-40 years old, about 6 Ft. tall, 190 to 200 lbs. She stated that he had short dark hair, dark eyes and was dark complected and wore a dark jacket and tan pants. Ms. Tisdale recalled the incident in her recorded and transcribed statement; “Oran and another man came into my bedroom. Oran told me that the man wanted to use the telephone and for me to get up. The man had a black revolver in his hand. He turned to Oran and said, “Get her up, please, I don’t want to hurt anybody.” I got up and we all three went into the living room and sat down. The man told Oran to get him a glass of warm water and a glass of cold water. Oran got it for him and gave it to the man. He told us to run our heads and not watch him. He made a phone call and talked to somebody but it wasn’t who he was wanting to talk to, so he made another call. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye. He was calling this person Lamar, I couldn’t hear his conversation real good, but I did notice he had a syringe stuck in his arm. While he was talking to this Lamar person, the man was telling him to take care of things after he was gone, and to tell this kids he loved them and tell Linda he loved her and he also mentioned his ex-wife and said, ‘After all she is the mother of my kids.’ The man kept saying over and over that he was a sick man and that he was going to die. All he wanted was his medicine. He said that he had already killed two people and didn’t want to kill anybody else. After he finished talking to Lamar, he acted like he heard somebody outside. He noticed the lights were on in the kitchen. He turned to Oran and said “Turn the lights out.” Oran and the man got up and started into the kitchen. He was pushing Oran. After they went through the kitchen door, I didn’t see them for a couple of minutes. Then the man came back through the living room and he was crouched down and going as fast as he could. He went out the front door and I opened the curtain a little and watched the man get into his car. He started it up and backed out the drive, but he didn’t stop in time to keep from getting in the ditch. After he got in the ditch, he spun his wheels in the mud and got stuck. He got out of his car on the passenger side. He went behind his car and looked at it. Then he started running north up the road (Habberton), and he fell down. He then got up and tried running again, but he fell down again. Then he started crawling on his hands and knees going north and that’s the last I saw of him.”

Lamar Pettus’ phone rang at approximately 4:13 AM on the morning of March 22, 1984 and he recognized the voice on the other end as being Dennis Flowers. After answering the phone, Pettus recalls Flowers saying “There’s been a pharmacist murdered in Fayetteville and I wanted to call you and tell you that I’d never do anything to harm a child. I’ve got a couple of hostages and I’m going to tie them up and get out of here.” Pettus states that he asked Dennis to not hurt the hostages, to which he said he would not. Flowers then alleged stated; “The reason I’m calling is to let you know when they find my wallet, your money will be the money that’s folded twice.” Pettus also recalls that Flowers told him; “Don’t believe what they tell you; I’m being setup.” The call ended at approximately 4:18 AM with Flowers stating “I’m gotta truck on down the road”.

After hanging up the phone, Lamar Pettus fell back in bed and though of his obligation as an officer of the court to report what he’d just heard contrasted with attorney client privilege. After doing some research into the question, he ultimately concluded that he needed to contact the authorities. Being well acquainted with Washington County Prosecutor, Kim Smith, he decided to call him at his home and report what he knew.

At approximately 7 AM on the morning of March 22, 1984, Fayetteville Police arrived at the Dickson’s house and knocked on the front door; 3-year-old son, Mason answered the door. Lee and Karen Dickson were found by Fayetteville PD shot to death in their home on Coach Road in Fayetteville; both with one shot to the head and
one to the torso. Once inside, the police found both Lee and Karen Dickson deceased; both killed by gunshot wounds to the chest and head. Because of Pettus’ report to Kim Smith and the Tisdale’s report of a person entering their home earlier that morning where he mentioned the name, “Lamar” in his phone call, Arkansas State Police Investigator Doug Fogley concluded that it had to be Dennis Flowers. FPD centered its focus immediately on locating Dennis Flowers. A multi-agency man-hunt for Flowers began immediately in the area surrounding Habberton Road in Springdale and established its Headquarters on the Tisdale Farm.

The multi-agency task force consisted of Arkansas State Police, Fayetteville Police, Springdale Police, Washington County Sheriff’s Office and Madison County Sheriff’s Office and was under the Command of Washington County Sheriff Bud Dennis. The task force, heavily armed scoured the area bounded by Habberton Road, Highway 68 east and Highway 45 east. In addition to patrol vehicles and cross country searches, by officers on foot, the manhunt included the Springdale K-9 Unit and a search plane, but to no avail. The only indication of Flowers’ presence, besides the car, was dogs leading law enforcement from Flowers’ car at the Tisdale residence to a pack of cigarettes approximately 100 yards north of the Tisdale farm on Habberton Road and the scent went cold.

Fayetteville resident, Mark Volkert showed up at Harold Jones’s house the morning of March 22nd at approximately 11 AM and met with Jones and former Arkansas State Trooper and at the time, Circuit Court Investigator, Kenneth McKee. Volkert, a towering presence standing over 6’6’ tall and nick-named “Bear” was known at the time in Fayetteville drug culture. McKee was legendary in Arkansas law enforcement for his years with the Arkansas State Police. For some unknown reason, he just happened to be at Jones’s house to take Mark Volkert’s statement regarding the events Volkert claimed took place earlier in the morning at his Fayetteville residence. Volkert told McKee and Jones that Dennis Flowers banged on his door at 3:30 AM covered in blood and holding a .44 Caliber, Ruger Blackhawk. He stated that Flowers was visibly upset, waving and pointing the gun. He claimed on several occasions that Flowers pulled the hammer back and pulled the trigger and he heard the click. Volkert recalled that Flowers said he’d killed two people and “You won’t make any difference; you’re lucky your kid is in the bed with you.” Volkert claimed that after approximately 15 minutes, Flowers left in a vehicle that he couldn’t describe but before leaving said he was getting out of town. Volkert also mentioned that he had known Flowers for a long time and was introduced to him by Ronnie Teague through a construction job.

While the search for Flowers continued, ASP Investigators began conducting interviews of family members and known acquaintances of Dennis Flowers. State Police Investigators Bill Baskins and Tommy Williams contacted Betty Jo King, (Flowers’ first wife) by phone at 10:11 PM on March 22, 1984 for an interview. An Arkansas State Police file summary of that interview indicates that Ms. King had not heard from Flowers in several days and she had not tried to make contact with him. She recalled that Flowers had recently gotten out of Charter Vista Hospital for drug rehab and she didn’t believe he had been taking drugs. When asked if she thought he murdered the Dicksons, she stated; “if he had, they forced him to do it”. She went on to state that she worried that; “He would never have the chance to prove that he didn’t commit the murders because he’d be shot down like an animal first.” ASP Investigator, Tommy Williams interviewed Ms. King again the next day on March 23rd. In a summary of that interview found in the Arkansas State Police case file, she discussed what her daughter Dana told her occurred on the night of March 21st while she was at Dennis’ home. Ms. King stated; “They told me today that Lee Dickson came to the house at approximately 5:30 PM. There were all eating pizza when he (Dickson) came in. At that time he had an envelope with cocaine in it. They also told me that Dennis did not shoot up with him. Lee Dickson left the house sometime later and came back approximately 11:00 PM. It was about midnight when Lee Dickson and Dennis left the house and kids did not see him again.”

A third interview of Ms. King took place on March 24, 1984 by ASP SGT Doug Fogley, ASP Investigators Baskins and R. D. Arnold, FPD Lt. Bob Williams and Washington County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney, Kit Williams. The third interview included Dana Flowers, Dennis’ and Ms. King’s 13 year old daughter. In that interview, Dana told officers that she last saw her Dad, on the night of March 21 (Wednesday) at approximately 12 O’clock midnight when he kissed her good night and put her to bed. She stated that earlier in the evening Lee Dickson was at their home on Ora Street in Fayetteville at approximately 5:30 PM. She stated that her dad asked a family friend, Billy Thompson to take her and her brother, Marcus, to the movies. In her interview, Dana said that before they left
for the movie, her Dad and Dickson departed together, to where, she didn’t know. Dana also stated that Dennis’ wife and her step-mom, Linda Flowers had left two days earlier on Monday (March 19th) for Oklahoma and didn’t return until later in the evening of Wednesday, March 21st. She recalled that the next morning, Linda told her that Lee had returned during the early morning hours and both he and Dennis left together. She also noted; “a package of cocaine in the living room, and it was the kind you get out of a drug store.” Dana also stated that she read her book until approximately 12:30 AM and didn’t hear anyone leave. If Dennis told his kids goodnight at 12 O’clock Midnight, then Dickson’s return had to have been after that. It should be noted that today Dana recalls that she was in her bedroom in the back of the house reading during the events later in the evening of March 21st and acknowledges that though she thought Dickson had left at approximately 11:30 PM, he could have actually remained and she wasn’t aware of it. This is vital to the timeline since it allows the possibility that both Dickson and Flowers left Ora Street at some point after midnight together and went to Dickson’s residence, where they found Karen tied up and assailants lying in wait.

Law Enforcement continued their investigation and search of Flowers until April 1, 1984 when Ken Tisdale, son of Oran Tisdale, found Dennis Flowers deceased floating in a 3 ft. deep pond on his Father’s property across Habberton road from his father’s house. Arkansas State Medical Examiner, Dr. Fahmy Malak conducted an autopsy of Flowers and ruled his death as “Suicide” with the cause of death being “Drowning with cocaine toxicity”. Arkansas State Police CID Detective, SGT Doug Fogley prepared a memorandum entitled “Specially Closed” dated April 15, 1984 to LT. Earl Rife. In the memorandum, Fogley writes; “It is requested that this investigation be listed under the heading of specially closed for reporting purposes. On 3-23-84, Washington County Prosecuting Attorney Kim Smith filed charges of CAPITAL MURDER against DENNIS RAY FLOWERS W/M DOB 1/13/1942. On 4-1-84, FLOWERS body was recovered from a pond on the ORAN TISDALE farm near Habberton Road, northeast of Fayetteville, Arkansas. The body was recovered just a short distance from where FLOWERS was last seen alive in the early morning hours of 3-22-84. On 4-11-84, this agent received a report of autopsy from the state medical examiner’s office ruling the death of FLOWERS as suicide.” Then just three months later on July 10, 1984, Washington County Prosecutors requested and the local circuit court ruled the case be closed.

Chapter 7

32 Years After

A review of the case file consisted of 5 PDF files totaling approximately 150 plus pages along with the State Medical Examiner (ME) files proved valuable. Information exists in the ME file not present in the police case file to include, photo copies of finger prints lifted from the crime scene on March 22, 1984. The ME File indicates that the prints were submitted along with evidence analysis request forms by LT Bob Williams, of the Fayetteville PD. On one request he typed instructions to match fingerprints to known prints of Lee and Karen Dickson along with Dennis Flowers. Below the typed entry, there was a hand written entry requesting to also match the prints against Ronnie Teague and Johnny Wyman, “if available”. Following the analysis, the results stated that of the prints submitted there were several developed but unidentifiable prints and the only identifiable print belonged to Dennis Flowers taken from an open but full 7-UP soda can found at the crime scene. Of the prints that were developed but unidentifiable were those removed from medical tape that bound Karen Dickson’s wrists. Of the 23 latent prints submitted for examination, no prints came back matching either of the Dickson’s. No explanation has been discovered as to why Johnny Wyman’s (Repeat Drug Offender) and Ronnie Teague’s names were mentioned in the request though one must surmise that the FPD had information regarding them to have included their names in the finger print analysis request.

The Arkansas State Medical Examiner file also included information regarding the time of death of both Dickson’s. Washington County Coroner, Dr. Terry Box speculated time of death to be “Sometime before midnight”, while Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Donna Jones and Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Fahmy Malak later determined time of death to be shortly after midnight at 12:12 AM (Lee) and 12:15 AM (Karen). In the weeks following the murders, Karen’s family was left to settle Lee and Karen’s estate. Part of the process included settling the life
insurance policy placed on Lee was properly disbursed to Mason. Before the life insurance company would pay out on the policy, they required knowing who died first; Lee or Karen. In a deposition taken of Dr. Donna Jones on May 18, 1984, the Bryant family attorney asked, “As I read the death certificates and the autopsy reports, is it correct that your determination was that Lee Dickson died first and then Karen Dickson died? Doctor Jones responded; “That’s correct.” The next question was “What did you base that finding on?” Doctor Jones stated; “I based the determination for sequence of dying on the autopsy findings, the police investigation done by Lieutenant Williams and Lieutenant Bradley of the Fayetteville Police Department in Washington County, Arkansas, and the scene investigation, together with photographs taken at the scene when the people were discovered. When asked what specific facts she relied upon from those sources, she stated; “I relied upon subsequent information from Lieutenant Williams indicating that as near as they could tell, neighbors in the vicinity heard a car leave at 12:30 AM, somewhere around 12:30 in the morning that the deceaseds were later subsequently pronounced dead. Information also available was that at or around the time of 9:30 PM, on the previous date, the deceased wife, Karen Dickson, was confirmed to be alive through a telephone conversation that was made to her. This information, together with the finding of Karen having been bound in a chair and rendered immobile, and the deceased husband, Lee Dickson, being found in an adjacent room having sustained two gunshot wounds, either of which would have immediately incapacitated him and therefore, rendered him unable to assist his wife in anyway whatsoever. It is subsequently determined, at least to date, that only one person was involved in this fracas, and it is presumed that the car that left the residence around 12:30 (AM) is that of the alleged assailant, who subsequently became a medical examiner’s case in our office. Karen Dickson had sustained a single gunshot wound to her that was lethal. She did live awhile, minutes after having sustained the gunshot wound; however, was rendered at least immediately unconscious after receiving it to the right side of her head and hand. I have no scientific proof to indicate that the deceased, Karen Dickson, died after her husband, other than taking the presumption that only one person was involved and to-date only one person has apparently been involved in the shooting of these two people. It is reasonable and logical that she had to first be bound to render her unable to yell and to interfere with information that was going on between Lee Dickson and the Mr. Flowers.”

Chapter 8

Questions and More Questions

One of the most perplexing questions in this case is; if Flowers wanted Dickson dead, why didn’t he take him out somewhere and shoot him? By witness accounts, they were together the entire evening of March 21st. Dana Flowers, today vividly recalls that her dad and Dickson left together when she and her brother went to the movies. Linda Flowers stated that when she got back into town from Oklahoma, they all met up at Dickson’s house at approximately 9 – 9:30 pm. Clearly, Flowers had the opportunity to kill Dickson earlier in the night, if that was his intent. Why go through tying Karen Dickson up to a chair and shooting her while her 3-year-old son is in the other room? Why didn’t investigators consider the fact that Dana Flowers gave her Dad an alibi during the time that the State Medical Examiner claimed to be the time of death for both Lee and Karen. Dana recalled vividly on March 24th while being interviewed by Arkansas State Police Detectives, Fogley and Baskins that Dennis and Lee returned home between 10:30 and 11:00 PM and Lee left at approximately 11:30 PM and her Dad remained there. She went on to state that Dennis told her goodnight at 12 O’clock Midnight. Dana’s testimony should have been considered especially, since both the Coroner and State Medical Examiner placed the time of deaths around midnight thus questioning if Flowers could have even been present at the crime scene.

How did Flowers end up on Habberton Road? It’s speculated that he was heading to Lamar Pettus’ house, which was in the vicinity of the Tisdale farm. Law Enforcement believed at the time that Flowers called Pettus as some form of dying declaration but this seems illogical when considering the last thing Flowers said to Pettus was “Gotta truck on down the road”. Sherriff Bud Dennis told the NW Arkansas Times on April 2nd, that dogs followed Flowers’ scent from the Tisdale house up 100 yards north on Habberton Road to a pack of cigarettes and then the scent disappeared. Again, logic would suggest that if he crossed the road and entered the pond, his scent would have followed him. This suggests he got into a car at that spot on the road and dropped his cigarettes while doing so. The question of how Flowers ended up in the pond on April 1st is bewildering but it’s fairly certain from the
autopsy photos included in the ME report, that he was not in the water for 10 days. (March 22 – April 1) A Forensic Investigator, whose opinion was sought on the photos stated, “He wasn’t in the water 10 hours let alone 10 days.” A retired Fayetteville Police Detective in 2014 stated that he didn’t believe that Flowers was in the Habberton Road pond for 10 days. He said that he was present when Flowers’ body was packaged to be sent to the morgue and he (Flowers) didn’t look like he was dead over 1 day. That same detective also opined; “Someone paid good money for that hit.”

According to Mark Volkert, Flowers arrived at his house at 3:30 am covered in blood and demanding money and drugs. He stated that he was there for approximately 15 minutes. Mr. Tisdale stated that he knocked on his door on Habberton Road at 4:00 am. However, there is no corroborating evidence to support Volkert’s story. Neither Olan nor Virginia Tisdale in their separate statements mentioned Flowers being covered in blood. There was no evidence collected from the 1984 Ford Tempo, which he had to have driven to the Volkert house since he allegedly appeared at the Tisdale’s 15 minutes later, indicating blood. Also, where’s the $1,400 cash that he supposedly took from Volkert? There was only $567 found on his person when removed from the pond and there was no money floating in the pond. What about the .22 Beretta that Volkert claims Flowers took? It was never recovered from the pond where Flowers body was found. Finally, Volkert told Kenneth McKee that while Flowers was in his house, he continuously pulled the hammer back and pull the trigger on a .44 Ruger Blackhawk. Why didn’t the weapon discharge? According to evidence collected, there were four (4) rounds fired at the Dickson residence and two (2) found in the pistol in the 84 Tempo at the Tisdale farm. If Flowers was pulling back and releasing the hammer, the cylinder would have advanced to fire off the two remaining rounds.

One of the most perplexing aspects of this case has to do with both Flowers’ and Dickson’s wallets. The police case file indicates that Dennis Flowers’ wallet was found at the crime scene, while Dickson’s wallet was nowhere to be found. That’s because Dickson’s wallet was eventually found on the body of Dennis Flowers on April 1st. This is interesting because according to both Lamar Pettus’ 1984 police interview and his 2014 recollection of events, he clearly remembers that Dennis made it a point during their phone conversation to discuss his wallet and when they find him, they would find rent money Flowers had collected belonging to Pettus inside it. It seems odd to think that a man who just murdered three innocent people, who’d been described as frantic is going to have the state of mind to bring up to his employer that his rent money will be found in his wallet when they find his body. Or is it possible that the whole wallet swap was just a ploy to place Flowers at the crime scene and further link him to the double homicide?

Then there’s the issue of the watch worn by Flowers, which is significant. One of the items removed from Flowers body was a gold Oris wrist watch with the time stopped at 2:28 on the 29th as documented in the Coroner’s report. Does this mean the watch stopped working when it contacted the water on March 29th at 2:28 AM? The watch also disappeared at some point after Flowers’ affects were inventoried. The watch was present on the itemized listing completed by Charlene Smith, of the Washington County Sherriff’s Office on April 1, 1984 but was not included in the items released back to the family on April 11, 1984.

It’s clear that local law enforcement believed that with the discovery of Dennis Flowers’ body on Habberton Road; combined with witness testimony of his “admission” that it was an open and shut case. However, with the benefit of hindsight, things are not as they might have appeared in 1984. Take the Arkansas State Medical Examiner, Dr. Fahmy Malak for example; who performed the autopsy on Dennis Flowers on April 2, 1984.

In 1998, Reporter Gary Lane described Dr. Malak’s inept handling of another drug related Arkansas case that occurred in 1987; “Dr. Malak later became infamous for his bungling of the autopsies of Don Henry and Kevin Ives in the late 80’s, after they were found murdered near railroad tracks in Alexander, Arkansas. A northbound train blazed along through the August 1987 night when the engineer spotted the bodies of two boys laying across the tracks. The train was not able to stop. The two deaths were first ruled as a double suicide by drug intoxication even though the boys were happy, healthy and had never mentioned suicide before to anyone who knew them. Dr. Malak then later changed the cause to be accidental death. One of the boys’ mothers, Linda Ives, has dedicated her life to finding out what really happened to her son, Kevin, ever since that hot August night in 1987.
Mrs. Ives was able to get a grand jury to look at the case. They had the bodies exhumed and reviewed by Dr. Joseph Burton, chief medical examiner for Atlanta, Georgia. The second autopsy showed that Kevin’s skull had been crushed and that his friend Don had been stabbed in the back hours before the train ran over their bodies. A second grand jury concluded that both boys were obviously murdered and that their deaths were tied to the drug traffic in Saline County, Arkansas. Days after the area had supposedly been scoured for evidence relatives found one of the boys’ feet and some gold chains that the police didn’t find. Dr. Malak’s autopsy report didn’t even mention that one of the boys had a foot missing. Much of the evidence surrounding the case wound up missing also, including crime scene photos. Dr. Malak’s rulings on mysterious deaths in Arkansas came under close scrutiny on numerous occasions. In May of 1992, the Los Angeles Times ran a cover story on Malak’s incompetence as a medical examiner. In the article, the LA Times cited over 20 other cases that were grossly bungled. An ABC 20/20 television special also covered the story with similar documented accounts. Some of Malak’s well known rulings include the 1985 murder of Raymond Albright who was shot 5 times with a Colt .45, but Dr. Malak ruled his death a suicide. In the case of James Milam, whose body was found decapitated, Dr. Malak ruled that he died of natural causes.”

Dr. Donna L. Jones, Deputy Medical Examiner performed the autopsies on both Lee and Karen Dickson while Dr. Malak performed the autopsy on Dennis Flowers, where as previously stated, he ruled Flowers’ cause of death as “Suicide by Drowning”. In forensic terms, there is nothing whatsoever deemed “classic” about any drowning, no one particular physical characteristic manifesting in a corpse aids in expediting such a ruling. Because of this, the methodology for reaching a determination that it was a water death and accidental is one that is chiefly focused on excluding foul play. This places a great deal of importance on the initial investigative role of police investigators who could inform or misinform a medical examiner with their onsite reports and early conclusions. There is no indication in the ME file as to whether or not the water found in Flowers’ lungs was examined to be from the pond in which he was found or to determine if it was chlorinated water. When taking the minimal decomposition of Flowers’ body, the plausibility existed that Flowers might have drowned elsewhere and moved to the pond near where he was last seen. Interestingly, a toxicology analysis performed on Flowers, found that he had 26.66mg% cocaine in his stomach, which strongly suggests that he consumed a significant amount of cocaine prior to entering the water.

Washington County Prosecutor Kim Smith filed a motion of Nolle Prosequi indicating no further interest in pursuing the case, before the Circuit Court on July 10, 1984. However, in spite of the case being legally closed, on July 24, 1984 at 10:17 AM, LT Gerald Bradley (Chief Detective) contacted Chief Criminalist Steve Cox, of the Crime Lab in Little Rock reference the case and according to the handwritten notes by Mr. Cox on the Trace Evidence Section Consultation Form, the conversation was described as; “At present time, has been ruled homicide suicide: No real need for analysis of items. But he wants to check with other persons involved in the case. If there is need for analysis of any items he will call back before the end of the day.” According to this document, LT Bradley had a lead on some other individuals involved in the case and didn’t want to cease the processing of evidence until that lead was followed up on, which he only needed until the end of the day to do. Who were those “persons”? Nevertheless, Lieutenant Bradley called Mr. Cox back on July 31, 1984 and verbally withdrew the analysis. And with that, the multiple homicide of Lee, Karen and Baby Dickson was closed until January 2015, when the fingerprint evidence discovered in the most recent investigation was submitted to Washington County Prosecutor, Matt Durrett with a request to re-open the case so the 23 developed but unidentified prints collected at 1984 crime scene could be re-examined using the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS). Current Fayetteville PD Crime Scene Investigator John Brooks reported that the analysis was completed with no tangible results.

It’s no secret that Dennis Flowers was living as an outlaw by working as an enforcer, selling drugs and pimping prostitutes in his last months of his life. However, the theory that he killed both Dickson’s alone is questionable based on evidence combined with the fact that he had no apparent motive to murder Karen Dickson, Lee’s pregnant wife. Moreover, when one considers the fact that finger prints removed from the tape that bound Karen Dickson to a chair did not match Dennis Flowers, it strongly suggests other perpetrator(s) were present at the crime scene, who incidentally wasn’t found dead in the days following, from committing suicide. This leads to the next set of questions; if Dennis Flowers crossed Habberton Road after leaving the Tisdale residence and...
walked into a 3 ft. deep cow pond because he had allegedly overdosed on cocaine and felt like he was on fire, as suggested by law enforcement, why didn’t his body decompose over the next 10 days? Autopsy photos clearly indicate that Flowers’ body had little to no skin slippage or signs of decomposition, which should be present after being in water for that amount of time.

What about both Mr. and Ms. Virginia Tisdale’s description of the man who entered their house? She said the man as 35-40 years old, about 6 Ft. tall, 190 to 200 lbs.; around 30 years old, with short hair; and wearing a dark coat. However, when Dennis Flowers was found dead in the pond across the road from the Tisdale’s on April 1st, he was described as “......a white male, approximately 6 foot tall, had short hair and a mustache; wearing Jones corduroy pants, a blue knit shirt with tan stripes under a red and yellow plaid western shirt. He also had on cowboy boots.” Is that the same man that entered the Tisdale house the early morning of March 22nd? Where was the black coat that Ms. Tisdale claimed he was wearing when he entered her house? It wasn’t found in the Ford Tempo he backed into the ditch; nor was it found in the pond where his body was discovered. Why didn’t she mention his mustache? Surely if one is asked to describe a man, they would include his mustache if he wore one. The below photo of Flowers taken in January 1984, with a mustache was contained in the Fayetteville PD case file and presumably the one included in the lineup.

SGT Richard Murphy of the WCSO presented Mr. and Ms. Tisdale a photo lineup that presumably included a photo of Dennis Flowers and an undetermined number of other photos on it. Mr. Tisdale could not positively identify any of the suspects on the lineup card. However, Ms. Tisdale allegedly pointed out Flowers (Photo #2) among the different photos as being the assailant and stating “He has the same kind of eyes and looks a lot alike.”

After conducting victim interviews and presenting photo lineups to Mr. and Mrs. Tisdale, SGT Murphy returned to the Fayetteville Police Department and briefed Rick O’Kelley and SGT Mike Mitchell on his visit to the Tisdale’s. According to the Officer’s Report prepared by March 26, 1984, SGT Murphy informed them of the following’ “Mr. Tisdale was 77 years old and apparently suffered from some type of memory problems and couldn’t pick out the suspect in the photographic line-up, but his wife did pick him out and supplied the best information about what had occurred.” It’s unknown if the other individuals presented in the lineup wore mustaches or reasonably fit the description of the perpetrator.

Then there’s the prescriptions that Johnny Wyman warned Dickson to get rid of in the note John Everett mentioned; they turned up. Three separate prescriptions written to Johnny Wyman by an unreadable physician’s signature; two for Demerol (50 mg), one for 50 tablets and the other for 30; and a 3rd prescription for Percocet (No Strength Entered) - 30 tablets. Interesting enough, they were found by one of Karen’s family members in Lee’s La-Z Boy recliner stuffed between the side of the chair and the cushion, after moving the Dickson furniture to Batesville. The information was sent directly to the case’s lead detective, Lieutenant Bradley of the Fayetteville PD before the case was closed in July 1984 but nothing was ever heard about it again.
Why did Flowers have Lee Dickson’s wallet on his person while his wallet was found at the crime scene? Where is the wrist watch taken off of Flowers’ body on April 1st? Might the watch have provided tangible evidence of when Flowers actually entered the water? Why wasn’t it returned to the family with other items found on his body? According to the police theory, Flower’s was a reckless, cocaine crazed maniac during and after the murder of the Dickson’s. If this was the case, how did he manage to leave only one pristine thumb print on an open but full 7 Up can at the crime scene but leave no prints on either the .44 Ruger pistol or the shell casings found? The very pistol that Flowers, according to Mark Volkert, was waving around while pulling back the hammer and pulling the trigger. Furthermore, surely Flowers would have left a viable print either on or inside the 1984 Ford Tempo; the car that he allegedly drove from the Dickson’s to Mark Volkert’s house and then to the Tisdale Farm? No, according to crime lab documents, LT Rick O’Kelley of the Washington County Sheriff’s Office lifted prints found on the rear view mirror, sun visor mirror, a piece of tape on a 3x5 card and five (5) 3x5 cards, but none matched Dennis Flowers. Was he wearing gloves? None were found; neither on Habberton Road, where police theorized that he crossed and then entered into a cow pond or that pond itself.

Conclusion

Were the murders of Lee and Karen Dickson a hit ordered by someone to prevent Lee Dickson from disclosing their identity to police? Was there influence upon local law enforcement to close it up quickly in spite of evidence suggesting more to the case? Or did Dennis Flowers, out of fear for his family or of going to prison kill Lee and Karen Dickson? One must consider that even if Flowers did kill the Dickson’s, evidence suggests that he did not kill himself in the early morning hours of March 22, 1984. It’s that evidence that must be considered today to ascertain whether or not there were other parties involved in the Dickson homicides and if Flowers was murdered himself.

[1]

Within the case file, an unsigned police transcription of an interview with Lamar Pettusdated March 27, 1984 indicates that he claimed that Flowers admitted to killing two people. However, in February 2014, Lamar Pettus recalled the order, and offered additional background on his professional and personal relationship with Dennis and his wife Linda Flowers. Pettus stated that he never told police or anyone else that Dennis said he killed the Dickson’s. He said that he told them that Flowers said two people were dead and he was being set up for it. Pettus stated that he did not believe that Flowers was capable of killing anyone and he believes he was set up for the crime. This is in direct contradiction to Pettus’ interview conducted by ASP Detective Doug Fogley, Washington County Sheriff’s Office and FPD Detective, LT. Bob Williams.