

Gary Ridgway pleads guilty to 48 murders

The confessed 'Green River Killer' admitted to the murders, committing himself to life in prison

By Ray Rivera and Ian Ith
The Seattle Times (KRT)

SEATTLE — Gary Leon Ridgway, who Wednesday pleaded guilty to the murders of 48 women, said he killed prostitutes because he hated them, didn't want to pay them for sex and because he knew he could kill as many as he wanted without getting caught.

Methodically, he placed their strangled bodies in what he called "clusters," often near landmarks, to help him keep track of the women.

But after so many, not even Ridgway, the confessed Green River Killer, could remember who was who.

"I killed so many women, I have a hard time keeping them straight," Ridgway wrote in a 16-page statement read by King County prosecutors Wednesday as part of an historic plea deal sparing Ridgway's life.

He killed most of them in his home off Military Road in the Auburn, Wash., area, some in his truck, and took most of their jewelry and clothes to make it hard for anyone to identify them, his statement said. He said he would sometimes drive his truck past the dump sites to remind himself of the murders.

In the end, Ridgway pleaded guilty to 42 of the 49 killings investigators had originally attributed to the Green River Killer, and six additional murders that had not previously been attributed to him.

The confession made him America's most prolific convicted serial killer. Ted Bundy was convicted of only three murders in Florida in the 1970s, but later admitted to as many as 36. John Wayne Gacy was convicted of killing 33 boys in Chicago in the 1980s.

One by one, lead prosecutor Jeff Baird read names, dates and locations. To each name, Ridgway laconically acknowledged the murder with a simple "Yes."

"In most cases, when I murdered these women, I did not know their names," Baird read from Ridgway's

statement. "Most of the time I killed them the first time I met them, and I do not remember their faces."

He faces life in prison without the possibility of parole or release. A sentencing date is pending.

Ridgway, the 54-year-old truck painter from Auburn who lived most of his life a relative nobody, stood with his head down. His almost-congenial expression never changed. Not when the first name was read, not when the 15th name was read, not when the 48th name was read.

Twenty years of murders, beginning in 1982 with Wendy Coffield and ending in 1998 with the strangulation of Patricia Yellow Robe.

King County Prosecutor Norm Maleng said he spent three weeks considering the plea deal before agreeing to spare Ridgway's life. But in the end, he decided that trying Ridgway for a few murders would leave too many questions unresolved and too many families wondering about the fate of their loved ones.

"Gary Ridgway does not deserve mercy, and Gary Ridgway does not deserve

to live," Maleng said at an emotional news conference following the hearing.

"Their families deserved to know the truth ... That is why we entered into this agreement."

Ridgway first came to the attention of police in 1983 because his pickup resembled one connected with one of the disappearances. In 1984, he took and passed a polygraph test. In 1987, police searched his home but had insufficient evidence to hold him.

Ridgway bicycled, camped and picked blackberries with his then-wife in isolated areas where bodies were later found.

He scrounged for garage-sale goods in illegal dump sites where bodies were later dumped.

Born in Utah and raised near SeaTac, Ridgway is a Tyee High School graduate who served a short stint in the U.S. Navy and then went to work painting trucks. He was set in his ways, holding garage sales as his parents had, taking rolls of \$20 bills to pick up prostitutes, and keeping the same job for the past 32 years.

At 24, he married a Seattle woman who bore him a son, then moved out

for unspecified reasons just before the boy turned 5. By age 33, Ridgway was divorced, paying \$275 a month in child support, seeing his son every other weekend — and picking up prostitutes.

Since the Ridgway investigation started springing leaks last spring that Ridgway was cooperating with investigators and perhaps leading them to long-lost victims, attention has steadily escalated to the point that on Wednesday, Ridgway was a lead news item as far away as Europe.

Leading to Wednesday's hearing, the public and the media had almost taken as fact that Ridgway had owned up to more than 40 slayings between 1982 and 1998 in exchange for being spared the death penalty.

Until Wednesday morning, Ridgway had officially pleaded not guilty to seven of the Green River killings, including the deaths of the only women who were found in and along the Green River itself.

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NEWS BRIEF

Neighborhood Association elects board members

The West University Neighborhood Association — after several years of dormancy — was given a jump-start Wednesday night when

residents of the neighborhood elected new board members.

The new executive board includes a 1975 University graduate, a Eugene city councilor and a University architecture student, among others. All of the board members are residents of the West University neigh-

borhood, which borders the University's western boundary.

In a meeting held at the Central Presbyterian Church on East 15th Avenue, about 30 community members gathered to discuss issues concerning the neighborhood.

Diedrich "Drix" Rixman was vot-

ed chairman and Wanda Jo Lang and Steven Baker were voted 1st vice chairwoman and 2nd vice chairman, respectively.

Rixman, a 1975 University graduate who received a bachelor's degree in broadcast communications is an eight-year resident of the neighbor-

hood who also lived in the area as a student. Rixman expressed an enthusiastic fondness for the neighborhood and was optimistic about the future of the area.

"I love Eugene, and I love this neighborhood," he said. "We're on an

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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON PRESIDENTIAL LECTURE

Nonviolence, Peace, Social Change, and Justice

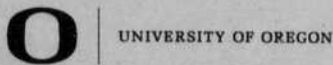


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Monday, November 10
5:30 p.m.
EMU Ballroom

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LEAVES

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But before Eugene residents start sweeping their leaves off the sidewalk, Public Works encourages locals to mulch or compost the foliage at home.

Anne Donahue, compost specialist for the city's Solid Waste and Recycling Program, said the process is easier than most people think.

Mulching, one of five main composting methods, is a simple way to reduce weeds, conserve water and add organic matter back to garden beds, Donahue said. She added that all it takes is a one to two-inch layer of leaves on top of beds to help protect them from winter freezes or keep roots cool in the summer heat.

She said composted leaves, when worked into soil, provide precious organic matter to heavy clay soil, which is common in Eugene. For information on free compost workshops in Eugene, visit www.eugenerecycles.org.

As an avid gardener, Donahue requests leaves from the pickup program each year.

"To me, leaves are like gold," she said. "Why send away this incredible resource when it is easy to compost them at home and use them as mulch in your garden?"

Those who want more compost material than they already have can apply to the leaf delivery program by filling out a request form at www.ci.eugene.or.us/pw/leaves/.

For all-year-round leaf maintenance, Eugene residents may also deposit leaves in the green yard debris container provided by most garbage companies, but residents should be careful not to confuse it with the stan-

dard black container.

"Putting leaves in the regular garbage can would be the last thing you would want to do," environmental studies Professor Galen Martin said.

Although he currently lives on a property inhabited only by pine trees, Martin said he has been composting his garden and produce waste for as long as he can remember.

"By mulching at home, you are taking some responsibility for your waste," he said. "Plus, you're returning it to your own land."

Martin said he still remembers a time when discarded leaves polluted local landfills with carbon dioxide and methane build-up. Although a large number of Eugene residents put their leaves out for collection instead of composting at home, Martin said it's nice to know that the tons of foliage collected never go to waste.

"It's a good lesson on how a waste product, under the right conditions, can become a valuable resource," he said.

Students and community members can check their local collection week by calling the leaf collection hotline at 682-5383. The schedule is subject to change.

Jobanek said participating residents should place leaf piles in the street the weekend prior to scheduled collection. Piles should be at least 15 feet from parked cars and at least a foot from the gutter line to prevent urban flooding, but Jobanek also said the fewer parked cars the better.

"If at all possible, the more vehicles off the street, the more leaves we can reach," he said.

Contact the business/science/technology reporter at caronalarab@dailyemerald.com.

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