



EO Media Group

Samuel Valdez listened to testimony during his trial in Wahkiakum County Superior Court last week. Valdez was charged with trying to hire a hitman, illegally producing and selling marijuana products, and burning down a neighbor's home.

## Former Altoona man awaits sentencing in murder-for-hire plot

### Found guilty of four crimes

By NATALIE ST. JOHN  
EO Media Group

CATHLAMET, Wash. — A jury found a former Altoona man guilty Friday of murder for hire, arson and marijuana-related charges in a plot that targeted his ex-wife.

Samuel Fredrick Valdez, 64, was arrested last July following a Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Narcotics Task Force investigation and subsequent raid on his home that uncovered large quantities of marijuana and marijuana byproducts with an estimated street value of more than \$100,000.

Key to the investigation were three recordings made by a confidential informant who told the task force that Valdez had asked him for help finding a hit-man who could murder his ex-wife, Elizabeth Robbins, and possibly others, too.

In court, Valdez's defender, Tacoma-based attorney Wayne Fricke, cast doubt on the informant's credibility and motives. Witnesses for the defense said the informant's real interest had been in edging Valdez out of the lucrative business of producing marijuana concentrate for a growing market.

Whatever the informant's motives, they weren't enough to make the jury disregard the damning recorded conversations, the testimony of his ex-wife and others, and evidence that suggested Valdez printed out photographs of Robbins' house and face right around the time the informant said Valdez made a down payment on the hits with a jar of marijuana oil.

After deliberating for seven hours, the 12-person

jury reached a verdict. Valdez's mother, sister, and girlfriend, Katie Commons, of Altoona, sat in the front row. Robbins, her son and their supporters sat two rows behind them. The courtroom was silent as a court official read the verdicts. Valdez was found guilty of arson, first-degree solicitation to commit murder, delivery of marijuana and marijuana possession with intent to manufacture or deliver.

As the convictions piled up, Robbins and her friend gasped and gripped each other's arms, but Valdez's stunned relatives sat in silence and Valdez sat erect in his seat and remained stony-faced. It was not until he was led from the courtroom that he began to show any sign of emotion.

A bailiff stood between the Robbins family and Valdez as he was ushered back to his jail cell. His family and attorney quickly left without making any comment.

Robbins and her companions quickly left the courtroom to meet with Deputy Prosecutor Sue Bauer, who handled the state's case against Valdez.

"We were so relieved, because we were going to move if he wasn't convicted," said Kathy Cantrell, one of Valdez's Pillar Rock Road neighbors, whose home burned to the ground a week after she testified against Valdez during his divorce trial.

Elizabeth Robbins emerged a moment later with tears of relief in her eyes, and gave Cantrell a long hug.

"We're free," she said. A close friend of Robbins added, "And safe!"

Valdez's sentencing hearing has been tentatively scheduled for March 14 in the Wahkiakum County Courthouse.

## Judge rules inmate not responsible for restitution

By KYLE SPURR  
The Daily Astorian

The two inmates who tried escaping from Clatsop County Jail last summer have each been on the hook to pay off more than \$2,100 in restitution for the damage they caused.

Kevin Michael Burnham and Anthony Craig Osborne were accused of breaking off a shower drain grate, tying it to a bedsheet and swinging it against a window multiple times until the window shattered. Both are serving prison sentences related to the escape incident and other previous charges.

Osborne, 25, of Seaside, successfully argued in Clatsop County Circuit Court Friday that he should only have to pay for damage he caused to a smaller window a few days prior to the escape attempt. He claims he was not involved in damaging the larger window.

"That's what I was accused of, but I was never convicted," Osborne said via video link from prison.

Judge Philip Nelson agreed, and ruled that Osborne will be responsible for paying \$673 for the

smaller window. Burnham, 26, of Seaside, will be responsible for paying off the remaining restitution.

The \$2,154.73 restitution amount covers the temporary and permanent fixes to the two windows involved.

Burnham pleaded guilty to first-degree attempted escape for the jail incident. Osborne pleaded no contest to first-degree criminal mischief.

During the escape attempt, the inmates flooded a toilet in a cellblock and added soap to make the floor slippery for any responding corrections officers.

Their plan was foiled once a corrections officer started hearing the muffled thumping sound of the grate hitting the window. A couple of more swings and the inmates could have broken through the window, which is large enough for them to climb out.

The officers detained the inmates and placed them in a more secure part of the jail.



Anthony Craig Osborne

## OREGON WOMAN'S DISAPPEARANCE

# New mystery replaces the old

## Detective thinks car went over guardrail, flipped

By CHELSEA GORROW  
The Register-Guard

EUGENE — An observant driver, a summer drought and two rear tires peeking out of a pond.

That's all it took last fall to put one big mystery surrounding the disappearance of Linda Lee Perry — and her remains — to rest.

Perry, who had vanished eight years earlier, was an accident victim, police concluded. No foul play. Case closed.

But a new mystery emerged to replace the first one: How did Perry wind up in the pond without damaging a guardrail and without anyone witnessing the crash?

How does a person go missing all those years, only to be found near a busy interchange in an urban area?

It would take several weeks of investigation before detectives felt confident in providing their theory on how the accident occurred.

"We believe the car went airborne over the guardrail," said Lane County sheriff's Detective David Silano. "We go back to look where she went in at, and there is only one way we can surmise she could have done it."

### Where to look?

When Perry, 59, a resident of Junction City, disappeared in 2007, no one quite knew where to look for her — until an unusually dry year revealed those tires peeking out of the water off Northwest Expressway near Randy Papè Beltline last October.

Perry was headed west on Belt Line Road — as the highway was known at the time — when her car went off the road. She had left home that day to visit some friends in Springfield and go shopping in Eugene.

Detectives believe Perry's car, a blue 1987 Honda Prelude, must have left the roadway and crossed onto a grassy median, and then a highway onramp berm, before vaulting over the onramp and clearing the guardrail that protected the pond.

The car then "pitch-poled" — flipped end over end — into a fir tree, detectives believe.

Once striking the tree, the

vehicle spun counterclockwise, landing on the embankment, then continued into the pond, investigators have concluded.

### Damage consistent with theory

The vehicular damage is consistent with that theory, Silano said, as the front of Perry's car had pop-up headlights that were not damaged, but would have been had she hit anything head-on.

The windows were shattered, consistent with hitting the tree with the top of the car, and the roof of the car was caved in from the front to the back, further suggesting that the car struck the tree vertically, Silano said.

If a car had simply traveled off the road at a normal speed,

body was discovered, Silano said.

Detectives found no evidence to suggest that any other person or vehicle was involved in the crash.

Silano said he does not have any evidence to suggest Perry was suicidal and, even if she had been, "no one would have foreseen that they could have pulled that off," he said, referring to the way in which her car sailed over the onramp and guardrail.

"There's no guarantee that it would have happened like this. No one would have thought, 'Oh, I will just fly over this and land in this pond,'" Silano said. "So there's nothing suspicious and we don't think she was trying to hurt herself."

"Why it happened, we just don't know."

surgery to fuse two of her vertebrae together. The serial number on the plate used to connect the vertebrae is what the medical examiner used to identify the skeletal remains found in the pond.

### The disappearance

A missing person report issued by Junction City police shortly after Perry had gone missing sheds some light on her personal situation. She was in ill health at the time she disappeared, which only intensified family and friends' concern for her well-being.

Perry's husband, Gerald Ballard, "said Linda had problems keeping weight on," Junction City police detective Corey Mertz said in the report. Ballard said Perry had weighed as little as 80 pounds in the past.

In fact, Perry was on daily medications for health problems, she wore dentures, and had previously battled a drug addiction to heroin, on which she had overdosed multiple times, the report states.

Perry's son, William Perry, feared his mother had gone somewhere, overdosed and died, the report said. William Perry this month did not return messages seeking comment on his mother's disappearance and the recovery of her remains.

Perry was last seen between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Sept. 30, 2007, by Ballard. She was not reported missing until more than a month later, on Nov. 4, by her son's fiancée, Kila Howard, according to Mertz's report.

Ballard, who could not be reached for comment, was not initially concerned about Linda Perry's absence, Mertz wrote in his report, because she "had a history of leaving relationships without giving notice. ... He said at first he thought 'she left me,' but she did not take any of her clothing."

Ballard told Mertz, the report states, that a year prior to her disappearance, Perry had left without telling him and was gone for three days.

Ballard also told detectives that, on the day his wife went missing, he had given her his debit card for her shopping trip in Eugene, and later learned she had withdrawn \$80 from the U.S. Bank in Junction City that day.

Ballard canceled the debit card a week later. It was found in the bottom of the pond with Perry's remains.

## 'Why it happened, we just don't know.'

David Silano  
Lane County sheriff's detective

### The Pond

It was 3:01 p.m. on Oct. 26 when a driver passing the pond on Northwest Expressway noticed something odd. Two rear tires were sticking up out of the water on the pond's east end.

A Lane County sheriff's deputy arrived to investigate. He in turn called in a sheriff's dive team member to see if anyone was inside the vehicle.

A little more than an hour later, the dive team member, Matt Conrad, was in the water but unable to see inside the car because of the pond's silt and lack of clarity, a sheriff's report states.

So, a tow truck was called to haul the Honda out of the water.

Meanwhile, a record's check of the license plate revealed who the car belonged to — Linda Lee Perry, missing since 2007.

Just before 7 p.m., the tow truck pulled the car to the north side of the pond. The skeletal remains were visible for the first time.

Other human bones were found on the bottom of the pond, mixed with dirt and gravel, the report says. They were collected and taken to a hospital for identification by the Lane County medical examiner.

Prior to having gone missing, Perry had undergone back

it would have lost speed on the grassy median, so Perry's foot presumably would have had to have been pressed on the gas pedal — hard — to launch the car over the onramp, Silano said.

There was some rain or drizzle that day, and the indicators on her recovered car show that her windshield wipers were on "low." Still, it's probable that the grassy median was mostly brown and dry at that time of year, thus making it easier for a car to maintain or gain speed while traveling over the median.

It's unclear exactly when Perry left her friends' home in Springfield, but it may have been late afternoon or early evening. However, her car's headlights were not turned on when she plunged into the pond. She was wearing a seatbelt.

### Never know with certainty

Detectives will never know with certainty that Perry didn't fall asleep or suffer a medical problem, such as a stroke or heart attack, right before the crash, Silano said.

Nor will they ever know if drugs or alcohol were factors, or if Perry died as a result of drowning, a medical issue or from the impact of her car striking the tree and then the pond. That's because only skeletal remains existed by the time her

## State Senate approves banking for pot dealers

By PARIS ACHEN  
Capital Bureau

SALEM — The state Senate approved legislation Friday that removes criminal liability for providing financial services to marijuana-related businesses.

Entrepreneurs who have taken advantage of the state's new legalized recreational pot laws have had to rely on cash transactions, raising security issues and concerns about how to collect taxes on sales without the convenience of a checkbook and a bank account.

State and federal laws largely restrict banks and credit unions from providing financial services to pot-related businesses because the federal government still classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug. That classification is defined as the most dangerous drugs at high risk for abuse in the Controlled Substance Act of 1970.

The emergency bill passed Friday in the Senate 18-6, and

earlier this month in the House, 56-3. It will remove criminal liability for providing banking services under Oregon law, though it gives no protection against federal prosecution. The bill now awaits Gov. Kate Brown's signature.

The bill, by state Rep. Tobias Read, D-Beaverton, also allows the Oregon Liquor Control Commission and the Oregon Health Authority to provide financial institutions with confidential information on license and permit holders in the marijuana industry. The information would otherwise be exempt from public disclosure.

The liquor control commission regulates recreational pot, while the health authority oversees the medical program.

Read said the bill would reduce the risk and liability to financial institutions and direct the Department of Consumer and Business Services to study other ways to overcome obstacles to accessing financial services.

Some financial institutions, such as Maps Credit Union in Salem, have already taken the risk of serving marijuana businesses. Maps serves cannabis dispensaries, said Kevin Cole, the institution's chief financial officer.

The legislation still can't protect banks and credit unions from lawsuits leveraging federal statutes against organized crime. Such lawsuits have sought to stop the cannabis industry in other states such as Colorado.

The Legislature passed a resolution last year urging Congress to lift restrictions on pro-

viding financial services to the marijuana industry and to declassify marijuana as a Schedule I drug.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, and U.S. Rep. Earl Perlmutter, D-Colorado, last year introduced the Marijuana Businesses Access to Banking Act to allow legal marijuana businesses to access banking services. The legislation found some support in the House but has yet to receive any action in the Senate.

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