

## Horrible Torture And Murder Of Black Woman Video-Taped In Gadsten, Alabama Police Station

**BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT**

If you saw that bizarre scene from today's Dark Ages on a Cable News Network special two weeks ago, then I am sure your stomach is still turning over like mine. The tapes of the Rodney King beating and of that black teenager being deliberately held by Los Angeles police while a police dog (the other animal) was literally eating him alive were bad enough, but this new exercise in evil, depravity and barbarism goes beyond previous human experience.

The following transcript of that documentary, furnished by Journal Graphics (copyright 1992), should give an indication why Amnesty International is now pursuing its investigations of inhuman outrages right here in the United States--Not just in Europe, Asia, south Africa or Central America, but right there in America where even "legal" violence approaches that of former Nazi Germany. This transcript tells the story better than I.

### Crime Stories - Woman's Mysterious Death Probed

*From Journal Graphics,  
Inc.*

Susan Rook, Anchor: Welcome back. In our next crime story we're going to take you into the Deep South and follow the trail of a poor black woman who was running from fear.

Edie Howsell, who's family was in a New York witness protection program came home again to Gaston, Alabama, to hide from a gang of killers. Back home, she wound up dying in the county jail. Officials called it an accident, but Art Harris found witnesses who contradict the officials' story and lots of questions that won't go away.

**Announcer:** It was a murder that outraged the country. On February 26, Edward Burn [sp?], a New York City police rookie was gunned down while protecting a drug case witness--a cold-blooded cop killing ordered by a king-pin of crack.

**Pres. George Bush:** This badge was worn by Eddie Burn [crosstalk].

**Harris:** Burn became a drug war martyr, his badge a symbol in George Bush's last law and order campaign for president. Police arrested four hit men. There was only one eye witness - a 22-year-old prostitute and crack addict, Rachel Mosley. Police prosecutor Kirke Bartley convinced her to testify.

**A. Kirke Bartley, Jr., Queen's Assistant D.A.** Rachel was, in fact, the sole eye witness to this murder. She really was the case.

**Rachel Mosley:** [from a tape of the trial] They all came out with guns and they started shooting and I hit the ground, you know, up under the car.

**Harris:** During the trial, Rachel received death threats. The judge barred pictures of her face. But she wasn't the only one threatened.

**Mr. Bartley:** A threat was made to Rachel's mother, a threat indicating that if Rachel testified, that Rachel's mother would be killed and that her family would be killed.

**Harris:** This is a story about what happened to Rachel's mother after her daughter agreed to testify--a mystery that takes us from the killing streets of New York City to the Deep South where Rachel's mother ran into cops with an attitude, and finally, death in an Alabama jail.

Rachel's mother, Edie Howsell, was 45 years old, a poor black woman who once juggled work as a maid with the burdens of raising children and grandchildren in the violent inner city.

**Mr. Bartley:** She essentially was the mainstay of this family. She kept everybody together.

**Harris:** After the death threats, New York police put the whole family under witness protection and relocated them to a secret city down south. While her daughter was back in New York testifying against the gunman, Edie panicked. She thought she saw a hit man from the old neighborhood so she packed up and ran here--Gadsden, Alabama, her home town.

Along with her husband, Shorty [sp?], Edie moved in with a cousin. But the next day, she thought she saw the hit man again. She begged neighbors for help.

**Barnard Vann, Neighbor:** She said call the police. I called the police. Three to five minutes, they were out here.

**Harris:** When a squad car pulled up, Edie told officers she wanted protection. Instead, she was arrested.

**Mr. Vann:** She tried to get in the police car, which she couldn't, and then the police put handcuffs on her and put her in the back of the car and drove off.

**Harris:** Gadsden police charged her with being drunk and disorderly. [interviewing] Did she seem drunk to you?

**Mr. Vann:** No.

**Harris:** Why not?

**Mr. Vann:** Her reaction. To me, she was scared to death.

**Harris:** Police also arrested Edie's husband, Shorty, when he tried to button up her housecoat. That's Shorty on police videotape at the city jail. He's trying to explain despite a speech defect. That's Edie crying out. Now you see Edie, practically naked, shoved through the jail.

At first, police withheld the tape. Even now Gadsden's police chief denies she was mistreated. [interviewing] Can't you tell us why Edie Howsell was stripped and marched naked through the booking area?

**John Morris, Chief Gadsden Police:** I don't know that she was.

**Harris:** The chief instructed his officers not to discuss Edie Howsell. But the sergeant on duty that day says he argued for her release. And another

officer told us it was a mistake to arrest her at all. He spoke with us on the condition that we protect his identity.

**Gadsden Police Officer:** I have serious question of why she was put in jail. I have serious questions of why she was nude.

**Harris:** According to their own records, Gadsden police counted \$1,397, in her purse--far more than she needed to make bail. But police say she didn't want to be released. A trial date was set for a week later. Also in her purse, names and phone numbers of New York detectives and the Queens D.A.--people who could vouch for Edie Howsell if anyone had called them.

**Mr. Bartley:** no one in my office that I'm aware of received any call. And certainly we would have been rather concerned had we learned that she was arrested.

**Harris:** The next day Edie Howsell was moved across town to the Etowah County jail. On her first day here, doctors treated her for a stab wound in the neck. Jailers say she stabbed herself with a ballpoint pen.

On the second day a police officer hit Edie Howsell several times with a nightstick. Jailers say she was violent, acting crazy. But we talked to inmates who tell a different story.

**Greg Patterson,** a convicted burglar, was one cell away. On Edie Howsell's third day in jail, he was awakened by screams.

**Greg Patterson:** I heard someone strike Ms. Howsell and tell her to shut her mouth. And she responded by saying I know who you are and please don't hurt me. Well, after they said--after she said that, then I heard several more strikes like somebody was hitting her and she was screaming to the top of her lungs. And all of a sudden everything just went silent.

**Harris:** Later that morning another inmate, Gary Lancaster, walked by her cell and saw her choking. He says she was trying desperately to clear her throat, then she slipped and fell hard.

**Gary Lancaster:** I found her and tried to get help three times and they wouldn't--nobody would help, you know. I might as well been talking to the wall, you know.

**Harris:** Lancaster says paramedics weren't called for at least an hour after his first warning. By then it was too late, Edie Howsell was dead.

On the same day her daughter took the stand in New York to put away the last of the Burn gunmen, Edie Howsell choked to death on a bar of soap. Another bar of jail soap, still in its wrapper, was later found in her stomach. [interviewing] How did Edie Howsell die?

**Chief Morris:** Edie Howsell died in the county jail. Of course I can't speak much on this subject because this is under litigation.

**Harris:** You're understanding though as to how she died?

**Chief Morris:** Well, I understand

that she was eating soap over there.

**Harris:** The medical examiner ruled it a self-inflicted accident. Police called it suicide.

**Mr. Bartley:** When I heard the word suicide, to say that I was--found that suspect would be an understatement.

**Harris:** After she died, Gadsden police dropped all charges against her husband Shorty. They handed Shorty half Edie's money and put him on a bus out of town. The department later borrowed some of her money to buy coffee and doughnuts.

In this amateur videotape, the funeral home director documented what he found to be a surprising number of cuts and bruises. The tape is expected to be used in a \$20 million lawsuit filed by Edie Howsell's family against both the city of Gadsden and Etowah County. Dr. Micheal Baden: This is not suicide.

**Harris:** We showed the tape and autopsy report to forensic expert doctor Michael Baden. He's reviewed all inmate deaths in New York for the last 19 years [interviewing] Have you ever heard of an inmate committing suicide that way?

**Dr. Baden:** No. It's hard to choke yourself on any kind of gag-like substance such as soap because you'll just cough it out.

**Harris:** You don't buy it?

**Dr. Baden:** No, I don't think so. I think that it's more likely that somebody else put the soap in the mouth.

**Robert Avery, Gadsden City Councilman:** If you ask my opinion, I think she was murdered.

**Harris:** Murdered?

**Mr. Avery:** I think she was murdered.

**Harris:** Robert Avery is a Gadsden City Councilman.

**Mr. Avery:** There was just too many things that happened or too many things that didn't happen to say that she committed suicide at this point.

**Harris:** Who could have killed her?

**Mr. Avery:** Any number of people. I would think, had access to the cell at that point in time.

**Harris:** Among those with access--jailers, deputies and on special inmate, Robert Taylor. He inspired fear in the other inmates.

**Gadsden police Officer:** He was the enforcer. When somebody cam in that was unruly, Robert Taylor--you can check with those inmates, they'll tell you, Robert Taylor was the one that took care of it. He enjoyed hurting people.

**Harris:** Taylor, serving time for stealing tractors, was the head trustee. He had access to jail keys. He also handed out the jail house soap.

**Gary Lancaster:** Well, I've heard that Robert Taylor was going to shut her up because she was making too much racket. And he was going to shut her up.

**Harris:** We're just doing a little

story on the Howsell case and I said, I said--

**Robert Taylor:** Oh, God.

**Harris:** We found Robert Taylor at home in Gadsden a week before his recent arrest--once again, charged with stealing tractors. [interviewing] Did you kill her?

**Mr. Taylor:** No, no. I'm not that way.

**Harris:** You didn't push her soap [unintelligible].

**Mr. Taylor:** I like black people. I mean, I had one practically raise me.

**Harris:** Did somebody get away with murder in this case?

**Mr. Taylor:** The county.

**Harris:** And they're afraid to have a [crosstalk].

**Mr. Taylor:** Afraid they're going to have to pay out their rear end is what it amounts to.

**Mr. Taylor:** Letting a lady die in their jail for negligence.

**James Hayes, Sheriff, Etowah County:** Let me tell you I talked with my attorney--

**Harris:** The man in charge of the county jail, Sheriff James Hays. We caught up with him outside his office. [interviewing] Was there a cover-up in this case?

**Sheriff Hayes:** No, absolutely not.

**Harris:** Some of your trustees have said, though, that they were told to keep their mouths shut as to what they have learned about it, what they observed.

**Sheriff Hayes:** I'm not aware of that.

**Harris:** Two bars of soap found in her stomach--soap that was your jail soap. How do you think it got there?

**Sheriff Hayes:** Oh, she swallowed it.

**Harris:** All the experts we've talked to, none of them have ever heard of such a suicide.

**Sheriff Hayes:** Who said it was suicide?

**Harris:** So you're saying that there's a possibility she could have been murdered.

**Sheriff Hayes:** Accidental death's what the autopsy showed.

**Harris:** Also, her body was shown to have tape--Sheriff Hayes: That's all I'm going to say. You need to talk to the

**Harris:** A state police report cleared the city and county of any wrong doing, but never challenged the official story.

**Mr. Avery:** I feel like that case was really botched. I think there was a cover up there. I wish we could we could get someone from the outside to really come in and investigate that case.

**Harris:** Businessman James Steeley, a local civil rights activist, did ask the Justice Department to look into Edie Howsell's death.

**James Steeley:** I felt that, you know, that her civil rights had been violated.

**Harris:** Months later, Justice wrote back saying its FBI investigation found no prosecutive merit--case closed. [interviewing] Did the FBI investigate your

charges?

**Mr. Steeley:** If they did, they didn't talk to me.

**Harris:** In fact, no one we talked to--family, neighbors, inmates--had every been questioned by the FBI. The FBI didn't even know about the police videotape of her arrest when they closed the case. We tried to ask the local FBI agent about that.

**Paul Roberts, FBI Special Agent:** I have--when we spoke on the phone I told you about contacting our agent in Birmingham.

**Harris:** Yes.

**Mr Roberts:** That's what you need to do.

**Harris:** But Justice Department officials from Alabama to Washington refused to talk to us about Edie Howsell's death.

Edie Howsell is buried in an unmarked grave in this black cemetery outside Gadsden. No one ever called her a hero. She was just a grandmother struggling to protect her family in the crossfires of America's drug war. She just happened to be the mother of the star witness who put away the killers of a rookie cop. His badge now hangs in the White House.

**Mr. Bartley:** The Killers of Eddie Burn were convicted as a result of Rachel's testimony, no question whatsoever with respect to that. The irony is that the mother of the woman who made that possible is dead. There is a big, big question here. There is a big question here. And that question ought to be answered.

**Rook:** Art Harris joins us now. Art, is this a case of the New York drug dealers making good on their threat--reaching out and killing this woman?

**Harris (Live):** We asked the sheriff that, Susan, and he says absolutely not. But that's one of the questions that some people feel have not been fully explored.

**Rook:** So why won't the Justice Department reopen the case?

**Harris:** They say they've done their investigation. Even though there are some contradictions in the Alabama police report that they reviewed, they say the case is closed--even though we asked the prosecutor who would like it to be reopened. If you ask him, he would say he would like it to be looked at again.

**Rook:** What happened to Edie Howsell's daughter, Rachel, who gave the testimony?

**Harris:** She's still in hiding in the city where she was relocated to with her family. She's distraught about her mother, and she's living in fear.

**Rook:** Art Harris, thank you.

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## The Portland Observer

(USPS 959-680)  
OREGON'S OLDEST AFRICAN AMERICAN PUBLICATION  
Established in 1970

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**The PORTLAND OBSERVER** is published weekly by Exile Publishing Company, Inc.  
4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.  
Portland, Oregon 97211  
503-288-0033 • Fax 288-0015

*Deadline for all submitted materials:*  
Articles: Monday, 5:00 pm--Ads: Tuesday, noon

POSTMASTER: Send Address Changes to: Portland Observer, P.O. Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208. Second class postage paid at Portland Oregon.

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Subscriptions: \$25.00 per year.

The Portland Observer--Oregon's Oldest African-American Publication--is a member of the National Newspaper Association--Founded in 1885, and The National Advertising Representative Amalgamated Publishers, Inc., New York, NY.

## Education Update: "The Year Of The Woman"

**BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT**

That's what it is folks; A worldwide celebration and recognition of the importance and contributions of women to all cultures and in all times since the beginnings. And, obviously, not too soon as, ashamedly, a congressional committee hears the testimony of females that they have been grossly neglected in the nation's health funding and research.

This certainly seems to be an "education update" in the experience of our legislators and, probably, holds true for most of us self-centered males. Last week's revelations concerning the SAT pointed to another area of serious neglect in the preparation of young women for full participation in our society. These failures are doubly reprehensible, considering that, as mothers, women also have the role of the earliest nurturers of all. How can we be so crass and uncaring? "Early Childhood Education/Guidance" is the key.

Most callers told me that they really liked the form of analysis presented in my quotes (College Entrance Examination Board). "Instead of just reams of statistics, we were given a number of salient and key points that are going to prove extremely useful in examining the situation in our local schools." Several readers zeroed in on the observation, "minority females are even less likely to...pursue the more challenging college-preparatory courses." Here, it should be emphasized they were talking about the solid stuff, math and science.

Of course, we would keep in mind that these introspective observations on the part of the College Board represent an evolving change in attitude. It was only a few years ago that these people were almost universally adamant that their tests were in no way biased or skewed against any cultural group. Outside pressures and assessments by competent groups have led to a number of evaluations and corrections.

One of the key figures in securing such reassessments of the SAT has been Dr. Curtis W. Banks, an African American professor at Howard University. He is a nationally respected authority on test validity, consistency and standardization. However, this is not to suggest that minority parents can afford to give their children any slack in preparing for tests--anticipating that, perhaps, there can be some intervention or mitigation based on some kind of "fairness doctrine". Life ain't fair either.

Any "intervention" should occur early on when the parent discovers by questioning the child or by visiting the school where the child is not enrolled in those necessary "preparatory" courses--or is not being challenged and encouraged in every day curriculum, and of course there is the parent's duty to provide that tutoring and help of which they are capable. If there are disabilities here in terms of background or working hours, then there are some excellent community programs that provide educational assistance. Try the Urban League's "Whitney Young Program": Basic skills, Math, Reading and Language, weekdays, 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. until July 24. When school resumes, the classes will return to the regular after school format. Help is provided for grades 6 through high school.

One reader says that she has on her daughter's bedroom wall a copy of my July 25, 1990 article concerning the Oregon Legislature's "Minority Teachers Task Force" intent to scrap a Basic Skills Test For Teachers (not students). Centered in the article is a picture of a young black female designing a sophisticated piece of technical equipment. And underneath is the legend, "General Electric Co. engineering apprentice: Do you think a skills test failure taught her?"

This turned out to be a career the daughter enthusiastically prepared herself for, honing those "basic skills" and far more. Even more importantly, as I alluded to earlier, she changed her courses the junior year to include those "Solid" college preparatory math and science courses cited by the College Entrance Examination Board (SAT). As a result she has full scholarship to a top engineering school this fall term. It goes without saying that we need to give a good deal of credit to her mother.

Now, for those Oregon "Basic Skills Tests" again; actually the famous California Basic Education Skills Test. You can understand the anger and chagrin I expressed in that article when reading the following statistics--understanding that Minority Teachers were to be allowed to omit the examination. During the 1988-89 school year in Oregon, 11 of 25 black test takers passed; 19 of 47 Hispanics passed--but 2,413, or 80 percent of 3,027 white test takers passed. As I testified before the Oregon State Legislature, it was criminal to advance and certify minority teachers who would pass on these disabilities, to the next generation. Continued next week.

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