

“They’re Moving North”:

Milwaukee, the Media, and the Murder of Barbara Anderson

Benjamin Schultz

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Professor Jerald Podair

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On April 21, 1992, employees and diners at the T.G.I. Friday's just outside of Northridge Mall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were shocked to find that a woman had been stabbed repeatedly in the parking lot behind the restaurant. The woman was Barbara Anderson, and her husband Jesse Anderson had sustained a few superficial stab wounds as well, the knife sticking out of his hand. As soon as help arrived, Jesse began to describe what had just happened: that a gang of young black men had attempted to mug them and had suddenly turned violent.

Many in Milwaukee were unsurprised by the story. Northridge Mall, once a prestigious location in a wealthy suburb, was going through a major demographic shift. African Americans have been historically concentrated on the city's north side, in neighborhoods that have been described as among the most segregated in the United States. Those African Americans who could afford a middle-class lifestyle and homeownership found that communities like Northridge Lakes, across the street from the mall, were convenient and safe, being only a few miles north of those predominantly black areas. Rumors and fears of crime and violence followed them into these new surroundings, causing many whites to flee the area for more distant northern suburbs like Cedarburg and West Bend.

The Andersons, a typical white middle-class family from Cedarburg, were instantly relatable victims to the same types of people who were already beginning to fear Northridge. Jesse was a well-respected local businessman who had recently lost a close election for city council, and Barbara was a homemaker who cared for her three children. Local television news reports covered the story breathlessly, giving the Andersons glowing and sympathetic coverage, while radio hosts warned about the dangers of areas like Northridge. One local resident interviewed on TV, when asked about the case, simply responded "They're moving north."

Barbara succumbed to her injuries two days after the stabbing, and her husband appeared at her funeral in handcuffs. Milwaukee police had arrested Jesse Anderson for the murder of his wife, which he had staged and attempted to blame on a stereotype of criminal black men. Although Jesse never admitted to the crime, he was easily convicted and no credible black suspects were ever found. While the initial reports had disturbed local residents, this turn in the story escalated the sensation of the case and cast doubt on the local media. Few Milwaukeeans could ignore the story which had taken over the local conversation.

Today, however, the case is remembered mostly as a strange footnote in the story of fellow Milwaukee murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, who had been arrested the previous summer. Anderson and Dahmer ended up in the same prison, and in 1994 they were assigned to clean a prison bathroom together with fellow inmate Christopher Scarver. When the three inmates were unsupervised, Scarver bludgeoned both Dahmer and Anderson to death with a stolen piece of exercise equipment.

Northridge Mall, meanwhile, never recovered from the blow to its reputation, even after the truth behind the murder became known. The white flight that the area had already been experiencing accelerated, and the mall's last stores closed in 2003. For nearly two decades, the building has stood vacant and abandoned, with weeds overtaking the parking lot and windows boarded up, a frequent target of vandals and trespassers. Condemned by the city, the mall's owner has refused to obey a series of demolition orders issued in 2019, and so it still stands as nothing but an unintentional monument to bigotry and fear.

Chapter 1: “A real family man”

Jesse Michael Anderson was born on May 3, 1957 and grew up in Alton, Illinois, on the eastern outskirts of the St. Louis suburbs. “Mike,” as he was known in his childhood, was part of an average middle-class family, and his peers would later remember that he “didn’t leave much of an impression on his hometown.” His high school teachers and counselors could not remember him.¹ One of the few things that was memorable about him, recalled his childhood neighbor Sue Johnson, was his short temper.² Shortly after his thirteenth birthday, his father Levi died unexpectedly.³ His mother Mary married her second husband Willard Forsee, with whom Jesse had an extremely negative relationship. On one occasion as a young adult, Jesse got into a fight with his stepfather and beat him so badly that he was taken to the hospital.⁴

Jesse attended Knox College for two years, studying pre-med and military science, and dropped out in 1977 when his scholarship ran out.⁵ He moved to Iowa and began working at Happy Joe’s, a local chain pizza restaurant. A fellow employee, Bill Rees, introduced Jesse to his sister Debra. Debra fell in love with Jesse, despite the warnings of her parents and brother that he was untrustworthy, and married him.⁶ Meanwhile, Bill Rees’ suspicions grew when he found that Jesse was taking Debra on expensive dates he couldn’t possibly afford on Happy Joe’s wages. The owner of the restaurant soon found that Jesse was stealing money from the cash register and he was fired, but he avoided any criminal charges for the theft.⁷

¹ “Suspect’s family expresses love and support,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 28, 1992, p. 5A.

² Ibid; “Friends know him as family man,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 27, 1992, p. A 6.

³ Homicide file of Barbara Anderson, Milwaukee Police Department (MPD), p. 104; Obituary for Levi Anderson, *Alton Evening Telegraph*, May 27, 1970, p. B-6.

⁴ MPD, p. 305.

⁵ MPD, p. 323.

⁶ MPD, p. 305.

⁷ MPD, pp. 305, 308-313.

Jesse would later tell Debra that he had committed several burglaries when he was in high school, and had never been caught. He became a controlling husband, frequently criticizing Debra's weight and lying to her about basic things like her own work schedule, although she would later say that he never physically abused her.⁸ Jesse moved the two of them to Chicago so he could finish a degree in business administration, and after receiving it he filed for divorce, claiming that Debra had subjected him to "extreme and repeated mental cruelty." Ultimately, Debra won the battle for custody over their child, and Jesse briefly paid child support before leaving town.⁹

Barbara Ellen Lynch was born December 9, 1958 in the Chicago suburb of Alsip, Illinois. Neighbors and friends remembered her, her parents, and her seven siblings fondly, and as devout Christians.¹⁰ Those who knew her closely, including her parents, said that she was "a private person" who was unlikely to tell other people about her problems.¹¹ Barbara first met Jesse Anderson in Chicago in 1983, when he was still studying business and still married to Debra. Months after the divorce, Jesse and Barbara were married, and by 1987, they had moved to Cedarburg, Wisconsin and had their first child.¹² Barbara's brother, Thomas Lynch, was a police officer in suburban Chicago, and he expressed concern after investigating his brother-in-law's past and finding his criminal record, which allegedly included a 30-day jail sentence for battery (which Milwaukee police were unable to corroborate during their investigation).¹³

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Journal*, April 27, 1992, A 6; *Sentinel*, April 28, 1992, p. 4A.

¹⁰ *Sentinel*, April 28, 1992, p. 5A.

¹¹ MPD, pp. 99-100, 300.

¹² MPD, p. 91; *Journal*, April 27, 1992, p. A 6.

¹³ Ibid.

Upon moving to Cedarburg, Jesse took a job as a salesman at the Lakeside Oil Company in Milwaukee. He had worked in various positions at the Chicago and North Western Railroad since he was twenty-one, and already had connections at Lakeside, which was one of the railroad's suppliers. The owner of Lakeside described Jesse as a "model employee" and "a real family man," but admitted that as a salesman, Jesse was not in the office much.¹⁴ He also applied to work for both the FBI and the CIA, and later claimed that the FBI had told him "they were not hiring white males because of Affirmative action."¹⁵ FBI records confirm that Jesse applied for a job there, but the details of his job interview remain confidential.¹⁶

In 1987, the same year that her first child was born and her husband started working at Lakeside Oil, Barbara wrote a letter to her husband which was found after her death, in which she mentioned being beaten by him, and his consistent threats of divorce.¹⁷ In March, a month before the attack, Jesse and Barbara spent four days on a "second honeymoon" in Jamaica, leaving their three children behind with Barbara's brother. While this vacation seemed to contribute to the idyllic picture of the Andersons' lifestyle that the Milwaukee media would soon begin to paint, Barbara told a friend how miserable Jesse had made her on the trip, and how on multiple occasions she had "feared for her life." At one point, Jesse attempted to convince her to climb up the side of a waterfall while wearing sandals, ridiculing her for being unable to do so. Upon her return, she decided she would never go on vacation alone with Jesse again.¹⁸

¹⁴ MPD, p. 98; *Journal*, April 27, 1992, A 6.

¹⁵ MPD, p. 210.

¹⁶ Homicide file of Barbara Anderson, Behavioral Science Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), p. 3.

¹⁷ MPD, pp. 293-95; "Man gets 60 years for wife's murder," *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 30, 1992, p. 5B.

¹⁸ MPD, pp. 99, 275, 287, 318-19.

April 7th was the date of the county board election in Ozaukee County. Jesse Anderson ran against a 24-year veteran of the local school board, Clarence Boesch. In the nonpartisan race, Jesse touted his experience as a businessman and stated that “it’s time to... start running our county government as a business.”¹⁹ He was described by friends as having a “burning yet unfulfilled desire to attain political office,” and the county board race was not his first political campaign. He ultimately lost that race by twelve votes, two weeks before he and Barbara would go to Northridge.²⁰

On March 30, Jesse visited the county dog pound and dropped off the family’s English setter, Shane, as well as a cat.²¹ Barbara had recently been upset about the dog’s behavior, distressed that it could harm her children because of its temperament, and that when it frequently ran away she and the children would have to go looking for it, without help from Jesse. A week before Shane was given away, Barbara told a friend “that it was either the dog or her who had to go.” Shane was euthanized at the pound on April 14.²²

Chapter 2: Race relations and retail locations

When it opened in 1956, Capitol Court was one of the first enclosed shopping malls in Milwaukee. As in the many other cities where these malls were popping up in post-World War II America, Milwaukeeans saw Capitol Court as a revolutionary new development, and it was even more important in the frequently cold climate of Wisconsin. Conveniently located on the city’s

¹⁹ “Candidates give views on major issues facing county,” *Journal*, April 1, 1992, Ozaukee-Washington Metro section, page C.

²⁰ *Journal*, April 27, 1992, p. A 6.

²¹ MPD, pp. 253, 314.

²² *Ibid*; MPD, p. 319.

north side, in the urban triangle between 60th Street, Fond du Lac Avenue, and Capitol Drive, the mall was popular from the beginning and competed closely with the similar shopping centers, such as Bayshore and Mayfair, that appeared on the city's rapidly expanding fringe in the 1950s. However, the particular locations of these three malls, despite their being only a few miles apart from each other, would soon come to define their very different futures.

Although some African Americans had lived in Milwaukee since the city was settled in the mid-19th century, for the first several decades of the city's history they did not make up a large demographic, typical for a Northern industrial city. This changed rapidly in the early 20th century, as cultural and economic conditions in the South worsened for blacks and the industrial cities of the North promised a solution to both, provoking the Great Migration. At this time, in the 1910s and 1920s, the urban area of Milwaukee was only a few miles across, and African Americans soon found that few parts of that small area were welcoming to them.

Discriminatory practices such as redlining, where banks and insurance companies would selectively refuse service to limit blacks to particular areas, soon became far more common in cities like Milwaukee than they had been in the Jim Crow South. One of the least restrictive neighborhoods was a predominantly Jewish area centered around Walnut Street, about two miles northwest of downtown. This area soon became home to so many African Americans that by the 1930s, referencing its residents' brown skin, the neighborhood was christened "Bronzeville."²³

Twenty years later, while developers were building expansive shopping malls on the city's outskirts, almost every part of the landscape of Milwaukee was undergoing drastic changes of its own. Freeway construction and "urban renewal" projects, done by the state and federal

²³ "Halyard Park," Neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
<<http://www.neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/Halyard%20Park.pdf>>

government in the 1950s and 1960s, decimated Bronzeville and demolished thousands of homes and businesses, pushing African Americans into new neighborhoods nearby in the northwest, towards Capitol Court in particular. Meanwhile, thirteen miles north of downtown, the rural township of Granville was facing the gradual approach of suburban industry, creating a sudden need for modern water and sewage systems. Unable to cover these costs, the residents of western Granville Township agreed to be annexed by the city of Milwaukee in 1956, making Milwaukee's city limits extend further out into the countryside than those of almost any other city in the United States at the time.²⁴

The demographics of Capitol Court had not yet begun to significantly change by the late 1960s, when local grocery store magnate Maxwell Kohl began planning the development that would make it obsolete. As the Milwaukee suburbs pushed further out, past places like Capital Court, Kohl saw opportunity. The Kohl family, having recently expanded their business into the Kohl's chain of department stores, partnered with Taubman Centers, a real estate investment firm specializing in the creation of large, fully-enclosed shopping malls. Kohl's planned to build two almost identical shopping malls, each tied for the title of the largest mall in Wisconsin. They would be located in the extreme northwestern and southwestern corners of Milwaukee's metropolitan area, in locations where new freeways were being built, and each of them would be anchored by a new Kohl's department store.²⁵

²⁴ "Northridge Lakes," Neighborhoods in Milwaukee.

<<http://www.neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/Northridge%20Lakes.pdf>>

²⁵ Joseph A. Rodriguez. "Shopping Malls, New Urbanism, and Bronzeville," in *Bootstrap New Urbanism: Design, Race, and Redevelopment in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Lexington Books, 2014), 161-184.

Southridge Mall, the first of these twins, opened its doors in 1970. Fourteen miles due north, a straight shot up 76th Street, Northridge Mall was being built in the area that would soon become unrecognizable as the former Granville Township. In the following years, marketing for Kohl's two malls was often shared between Northridge and Southridge, and frequently emphasized the similarities between the two. Their 1983 "We've Got It!" series of television advertisements each featured a Northridge shopper and a Southridge shopper bickering over which mall had the better selection, ending with one mentioning a superficial difference ("Northridge has more skylights!"), showing that the two were otherwise identical.²⁶

Although the two malls were meant to be essentially identical from the very beginning, sharing most of the same stores since one person was unlikely to regularly shop at both, Northridge was in a less developed area and so Kohl was free to expand their development across 76th Street to the east. The result was two artificial lakes surrounded by upscale condominiums and apartment complexes, in a brand-new neighborhood that became known as Northridge Lakes.

When Northridge opened in 1972, it was a massive success. The mall's extreme northern location, half a mile away from the county line, made it accessible and appealing to the residents of towns like Grafton, Cedarburg, Port Washington and West Bend – places which had never been considered part of the Milwaukee metropolis before the suburban freeways reached out to them. While the planned Milwaukee beltline freeway was never finished, the mall's reputation was more than enough to carry customers a few extra miles on slightly inconvenient roads.

²⁶ "Northridge + Southridge Mall "We've Got It!" 1983," jonreVHS, YouTube. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tceEfXdtyA&t=33s>>

Northridge's success was the first major blow to Capitol Court. Being significantly closer to the new mall than its other competitors, Capitol Court also had less prestige, not being near the lake (like Bayshore) or the more established suburbs to the west (like Mayfair). Still, sales there were high and Capitol Court was successfully renovated and expanded in the late 1970s.

The demographics of the area were already changing by this time, however. While home prices remained high and racial discrimination remained prevalent in the wealthier suburban municipalities, such as the lakeside area around Bayshore and the park-lined neighboring city of Wauwatosa that encompassed Mayfair, Milwaukee's rapidly expanding African American population needed somewhere to live. The northwestern part of the city, right in between the two barriers and having fewer discriminatory practices because it was within the city of Milwaukee, was the best available place for them, and in response whites left neighborhoods such as Capitol Heights in droves.²⁷

Since the recently constructed freeways had made it much easier than ever before to live in an area like Cedarburg or West Bend and work in the city of Milwaukee, many of those whites who left the city's north side moved there. This further elevated the status of places like Northridge, leaving Capitol Court behind. The change in Capitol Court's reputation was rapid: as Rodriguez writes, a Boston Store department store opened in the mall in 1981 after studying the customer base and finding ample numbers of "two-income families," but just six years later company officials stated that the mall had become "too 'discount oriented'" – in other words,

²⁷ Rodriguez, pp. 161-166; "Capitol Heights," Neighborhoods in Milwaukee. <<http://www.neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/Capitol%20Heights.pdf>>

that its clientele was now mostly lower-income black shoppers – as they announced the store’s closure.²⁸

With the gradual collapse of Capitol Court, and the ongoing expansion of Milwaukee’s black population toward the north and west, Northridge became a popular shopping destination for African Americans. Being close to both the upscale but racially-exclusionary lakeside communities like River Hills and the established lower-income black neighborhoods like Capitol Heights, the Northridge area became particularly popular as a place to live for Milwaukee’s black middle class.

As the black presence at the mall grew, urban legends sprung up among the Milwaukee area’s whites. Urban legends, like any form of cultural folklore, generally serve to express the fears and moralities of their tellers. Often in modern American society, the underlying or subconscious message of these fictional tales is that black people, and the places where they tend to congregate, are dangerous and must be avoided. Popular stories claimed that unknown assailants would hide underneath cars in the mall’s parking lot with knives, waiting to stab at the ankles of random passersby. Urban legends like these helped to ensure that, although crime did increase somewhat at Northridge during the 1980s and 1990s, the *perception* of crime grew significantly more.

As early as the mid-1980s, these factors had subtly begun to discourage white suburbanites from shopping at Northridge. Some went out of their way to shop at other, more distant malls, including the almost identical Southridge.²⁹ By 1992, however, the change in Northridge’s reputation had only just begun. Most of those who now started to fear that

²⁸ Rodriguez, p. 165.

²⁹ Elizabeth Bast, personal communication with author, 2019.

something bad would happen to them at the mall had not stopped shopping there, but the stage had been set for the mall's ultimate demise.

Chapter 3: "They're moving north"

April 21, 1992 began as a typical Tuesday at Northridge Mall. Tuesday was typically the slowest day of the week at the mall,³⁰ and as Jesse Anderson described it, it was a slow day at the office, too. He left work after only three hours, then ran errands, watched the children while Barbara went to a clinic to have a sinus infection treated, then played nine holes of golf at his favorite country club. The Andersons hired a babysitter for the evening, because tonight was a date night they had planned for weeks.³¹

Jesse and Barbara then left their home in Saukville at 6:30 pm, and, because of the mall's convenience to drivers from the distant northern suburbs, barely missed the start of the 7:00 showing of *City of Joy* at the six-screen movie theater inside the mall. After the movie, they returned to their car, drove around the mall, and parked behind the T.G.I. Friday's restaurant on the outer edge of the parking lot, facing the apartment blocks of Northridge Lakes. They ate at the restaurant for about forty minutes without incident, according to Eric Shernell, who waited on the pair.³²

At 10:15 pm, Daniel Brautigam heard screaming coming from outside the window of his mother's fifth-floor apartment in Northridge Lakes. He ran down the stairs and into the building's parking lot, where he assumed a woman was being sexually assaulted. Instead, he

³⁰ David Bernacchi, interview.

³¹ MPD, p. 101.

³² MPD, pp. 106-107.

realized, the screams were coming from across the street, from the T.G.I. Friday's parking lot, so he went into the restaurant to raise the alarm. By this time, other residents of the apartment building had called the police, and officers arrived within five minutes, in which time diners and employees at the restaurant had begun to congregate in the parking lot.³³

Jesse Anderson was found with a fishing knife sticking out of his hand, sitting beside his car, directing onlookers and paramedics to help his wife instead of him. Barbara was lying underneath a car, her upper body coated in blood. Medical examiners struggled to determine exactly how many times she had been stabbed in the face, because the wounds were so severe and so close together, but it was later reported that there were at least nineteen separate cuts.³⁴

When questioned by police, Jesse said that they had been confronted by two young black men who attempted to mug them with the fishing knife. The men had stabbed her, he said, then ran away without taking any money or other valuables from the couple. Jesse said he then grabbed the hat of one of the assailants who was fleeing the scene, which had the logo of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team on it, and which Jesse gave to the police as evidence along with the knife removed from his hand.³⁵

The Andersons were brought to the Milwaukee County Medical Center, with Barbara being put on life support in critical condition.³⁶ Meanwhile, throughout the night and into the following day, Milwaukee police officers searched for potential suspects meeting Jesse's description of the attackers. While they questioned white suburbanites about reports of similar

³³ MPD, pp. 6-7, 10, 18, 164-165.

³⁴ Homicide file of Barbara Anderson, FBI; further documentation is accessible only on site at the Milwaukee County Safety Building.

³⁵ Associated Press. "Husband charged in wife's slaying," *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 29, 1992, p. 4D.

³⁶ FBI, p. 9.

robberies, and black locals looking for any relatives known to wear Clippers gear,³⁷ the shadow of their department's mismanagement of the Jeffrey Dahmer case the previous year hung over them.³⁸

On May 26, 1991, less than a year before the Anderson case, Dahmer kidnapped a 14-year-old Laotian-American boy named Konerak Sinthasomphone and brought him to his Milwaukee apartment. Sinthasomphone escaped, naked, and three witnesses called the police. When Officers John Balcerzak and Joseph Gabrish arrived on the scene, Dahmer told them that Sinthasomphone was his 19-year-old boyfriend, and successfully convinced them to return Sinthasomphone to his apartment over the protests of the (black) witnesses, who pointed out that the victim was bleeding. After the officers left, Dahmer killed and dismembered Sinthasomphone.³⁹

The officers did not ask for Dahmer's identification, which would have shown that he was already a convicted sex offender. As Balcerzak and Gabrish returned to the station, they were recorded making homophobic comments about the pair to their dispatcher over the radio. When Dahmer was caught two months later, and the two officers' role in facilitating the murder of Sinthasomphone was discovered, the officers were fired. In 1994, however, they were both reinstated, and Balcerzak later became the president of the Milwaukee police union.⁴⁰

³⁷ MPD, p. 44-47.

³⁸ David J. Kane. "Barbara and Jesse Anderson," in *MPD Blue* (Xlibris, 2010), p. 73-77.

³⁹ "Mother of Dahmer Victim Sues Police," *Jet* 81.9, December 16, 1991, p. 28; Brian Masters. *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p. 180.

⁴⁰ "Milwaukee police officer who gave 14-year-old back to Jeffrey Dahmer retires," WTMJ, June 15, 2017.

<<https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/milwaukee-police-officer-who-gave-14-year-old-back-to-jeffrey-dahmer-retires>>.

The incident had seriously damaged the reputation of Milwaukee police, and served as a tragic object lesson about the consequences of not investigating a suspicious situation. Now, several months later, officers grew suspicious of Jesse's testimony, particularly because, despite the urban legends that circulated about Northridge, the mall had a low crime rate.⁴¹ Lieutenant Ernie Meress, an officer who had supervised the crime scene that night, said as early as the following morning that the case "stinks to high heaven," according to a fellow officer.⁴² Nevertheless, police stopped and detained numerous black men in the Northridge area, and did not attempt to dispel the media sensation that grew in the coming days.⁴³

Despite their skepticism, local media began to report heavily on the incident, with extensive interviews of the Andersons' grieving friends and relatives. A particular focus was placed on the changing reputation and racial makeup of the Northridge area, and what that change meant to white suburbanites from places like Cedarburg. These suburbanites saw themselves as "safe" from the crime and violence they associated with the black population of inner-city Milwaukee, and they found that the Anderson incident shattered their illusion of safety.⁴⁴ One local resident being interviewed on television summarized the perceived implications of the stabbing: "They're moving north." It was clear that "they" were both the stereotypical gang members of the suburbs' nightmares and African Americans as a group.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Associated Press. "Parking lot attack puzzles police," *Stevens Point (Wis.) Journal*, April 23, 1992, p. 16.

⁴² Kane, *MPD Blue*, p. 73-77.

⁴³ Jodie DeJonge. "Man detained in wife's stabbing death," *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 27, 1992, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Dave Berkman, "Jesse Anderson Case," WUWM, April 27, 1992; Bob Edwards, "Milwaukee media criticized on murders," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, April 30, 1992.

⁴⁵ Ronald Schultz, personal communication with author, 2019.

(The major Milwaukee television stations – WTMJ, WITI, WISN, and WDJT – have all refused requests to view or copy their archival footage regarding the case.)

Two days after the stabbing, as Barbara's chances of recovery dwindled, Jesse asked for his wife to be removed from life support, saying that she had told him she never wanted to be kept alive in such a state. After she was pronounced dead, Jesse received her life insurance policy of \$250,000.⁴⁶ At that same time, police were following up on a call they had received the previous night from an 18-year-old black student who said that the Clippers hat found at the scene of the crime belonged to him.

Tommie Myles and his girlfriend Wanda Jackson, both from the Capitol Heights neighborhood, visited Northridge Mall shortly before noon on the day of the murder. They were there to apply for jobs at the mall, when they were approached by a middle-aged white man who said he was also applying for a job. This man told Myles that as part of a job interview, he was being asked to buy something from a mall customer, and offered Myles \$20 for his Clippers hat. Myles said that the person who bought his hat strongly resembled Jesse Anderson, and that he recognized the hat as soon as he saw it on the evening news.⁴⁷

Rumors about Myles' story spread across Milwaukee faster than the police could investigate, and they became mixed with another story about a suspicious black man wearing a similar hat at a nearby gas station. By Friday, three days after the stabbing, these rumors grew into false reports that Jesse Anderson had been arrested for the death of his wife, which were then apparently reported on the local news, greatly upsetting Jesse.⁴⁸ Further investigation of the

⁴⁶ FBI, p. 5.

⁴⁷ MPD, pp. 69-72, 92-94, 136-137.

⁴⁸ MPD, pp. 135, 139-40.

hat showed it had hairs inside it, which matched the hairs of the Andersons' dog that were found all over the floor of their car. On the basis of this evidence, Jesse was arrested Saturday afternoon, shortly after he was discharged from the hospital.⁴⁹ Having just been told the previous day by police that the rumors of Jesse's arrest were false, however, the local media was slow to report about this new development, with the *Milwaukee Journal* saying on Sunday only that Jesse had been questioned by police again.⁵⁰

With Jesse in custody but not yet formally charged with a crime, police further investigated the other key piece of evidence found at the crime scene. Ora Ronkowski, an employee at a local surplus store, told police she recognized the unusual red-handled fishing knife that appeared to be the murder weapon. About a month ago, she said, she had sold one of those knives to a balding white man who resembled Jesse Anderson, and she remembered this because it was the only time in several months that one of those knives had been sold.⁵¹ On further investigation, police were unable to find any other store in the Milwaukee area that sold the same type of knife.⁵²

Monday, April 27, was the day of Barbara's funeral. Police officers brought Jesse to the funeral home in handcuffs for a private viewing of her casket, in the hopes that it would inspire a confession.⁵³ On the way there, Jesse was casual, chatting with the officers about sports and even offering to buy them breakfast, which they declined as a matter of policy. When they arrived, the

⁴⁹ MPD, pp. 149-155.

⁵⁰ Mark Lisher. "Police question wounded husband," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 26, 1992, pp. A1, A16.

⁵¹ MPD, pp. 212-213, 219, 224, 231.

⁵² MPD, p. 231.

⁵³ Associated Press. "Cops admit motive in funeral visit," *Chippewa Herald-Telegram*, May 1, 1992, p. 3; FBI, pp. 9, 23-24; MPD, p. 217.

officers reported, “his entire demeanor quickly changed from the person that they had in the back seat of their car to the person that was viewing the body.”⁵⁴ Meeting his attorney in the lobby, Jesse reportedly said “Honey, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I love you” as he stood over the casket, then became ill and was escorted to the back of the room.⁵⁵

While Jesse continued to maintain his innocence, the news of his visit to the funeral home in handcuffs proved to the media that the rumors of his arrest had become true, despite the reluctance of the police to say so outright. This news was bolstered by Jim DeShazer, the owner of the surplus store that sold the knife, and Tommie Myles, both of whom went to the media to back up the incriminating allegations they had made to police.⁵⁶ These revelations sparked a backlash against the media, both from members of it who felt they had been duped, and local black community leaders, who argued that the reporting of the case was irresponsible and contributed to a long pattern of racism and racial double standards in the media.

On Wednesday, the *Milwaukee Journal* published an editorial cartoon by its cartoonist Gary Markstein, lampooning the response to the case. In it, an unlabeled caricature of local conservative radio host Mark Belling speaks hysterically about the murder representing the danger of gang violence to suburbanites. He then introduces his guest, a wart-covered troll labeled “RACISM” sitting next to him.⁵⁷ The *Journal* retracted the cartoon in the following day’s paper, after many of Belling’s regular listeners protested and said that Belling was actually critical of the sensational reporting of the case.⁵⁸ UWM professor and media critic Dave

⁵⁴ FBI, p. 9.

⁵⁵ MPD, p. 217.

⁵⁶ FBI, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁷ Gary Markstein. Editorial cartoon, *Milwaukee Journal*, April 29, 1992, editorial page.

⁵⁸ David Behrendt. “Belling cartoon was wrong,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 30, 1992, editorial page.

Berkman, on the other hand, described Belling as “somebody who preaches [a] vitriolic, racist message”, and said that his popularity illustrated how “racism is the overriding reality of America, historically and contemporaneously.”⁵⁹

The same day that cartoon was published, two thousand miles away from Milwaukee in Los Angeles, four police officers were acquitted of the assault of Rodney King. The reaction to that verdict, which culminated in the 1992 Los Angeles riots, quickly became national news and swept the Anderson case out of the Milwaukee headlines.⁶⁰ The news of these riots was similarly sensationalized: the national media breathlessly reported on incidents of crime, looting, and violence, and in doing so encouraged further violence.⁶¹ While these incidents were real, not just racially-motivated hoaxes, the media’s role in perpetuating the violence through its coverage validated Berkman’s prediction that news outlets would learn nothing from the Anderson incident.⁶²

Jesse Anderson’s choice of Northridge Mall as the location to murder his wife was an obvious effort to make use of existing racist fears, and the mall’s resulting declining reputation, for his personal gain. In doing so, he perpetuated those fears and that decline, and had an effect that lasted long after the hoax had been uncovered. Social scientist Katheryn Russell-Brown cites the Anderson case as a prominent example of a racial hoax crime designed to capitalize on the stereotype of “the *criminalblackman*” – with the spaces between the words removed to represent how closely American society associates blackness with crime. As she puts it, “the harm of the

⁵⁹ Berkman, “Jesse Anderson Case,” WUWM, April 27, 1992.

⁶⁰ See, for example, the front pages of the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Sentinel*, May 1, 1992.

⁶¹ LaVerle Berry, Amanda Jones, and Terence Powers. “The Los Angeles Riots, 1992,” *Media Interaction with the Public in Emergency Situations: Four Case Studies* (Washington: Library of Congress, August 1999), pp. 15-26.

⁶² Berkman, *ibid.*

racial hoax is not limited to reinforcing centuries-old, deviant images of Blacks. Hoaxes also create these images for each new generation.” She argues that creating such a hoax should be treated as a criminal offense in its own right.⁶³

Chapter 4: Aftermaths

Jesse Anderson’s trial began on August 3, 1992. Although Jesse maintained his innocence throughout, his defense attorneys were limited to asking for some of the evidence to be ruled inadmissible, given the weight of the evidence against him. The defense tried and failed to have the trial moved out of Milwaukee, because of the overwhelming media coverage that almost all local residents had seen, which they argued would bias all potential jurors. After nine hours of deliberation, the jury found Jesse Anderson guilty of first-degree homicide on August 13.⁶⁴

He was sentenced to life in prison, with the possibility of parole no earlier than 2052, by Judge Michael Guolee, who said in his sentencing that he had “preyed upon ‘fear and racism.’” Jesse said that he had “been made a scapegoat in a farce that some people call a trial,” and that he would “never stop looking” for what he claimed were Barbara’s true killers.⁶⁵ His sentencing drew attention to the fact that, under Wisconsin law, a parent being convicted for the murder of their child’s other parent was not grounds for revoking their parental rights, preventing the

⁶³ Katheryn Russell-Brown. *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Macroaggressions* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), pp. 70-71.

⁶⁴ Criminal trial records of Jesse Michael Anderson, Milwaukee County Circuit Court, pp. 6-9.

⁶⁵ Associated Press. “Man gets 60 years for wife’s murder,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 30, 1992, p. 2.

Andersons' children from being put into foster care. This inspired state legislators to introduce the "Barbara Lynch Anderson Bill," changing the law to eliminate the situation.⁶⁶

While in prison at the Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage, Wisconsin, Jesse appealed his conviction. In an exclusive interview with Jim Stingl of the *Milwaukee Journal*, he described his efforts to get a new trial, the occasional letters of support he had received, and his interactions with fellow Columbia inmate and notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who worked as a recreation assistant in the prison. Stingl counterbalanced his sympathetic profile with a more negative article headlined "Victim's family grants her husband no forgiveness".⁶⁷

Acting as his own attorney, Jesse hired a private investigator and found two men who claimed to have witnessed the botched mugging Jesse had described. Together, they claimed to have identified three black men as the attackers, prompting the district attorney who had prosecuted the case to respond that the claims were clearly implausible and had "not only not shaken our belief that Jesse Anderson did this, but has reconfirmed it."⁶⁸

While working in the prison's hobby shop, Jesse did not get along well with his fellow inmates. At one point, he vandalized a prisoner's drawing of Martin Luther King, Jr., adding to it a bullet pointed toward King's head. He then said that another prisoner had done this, one that he already had a known dislike for, and whom he had previously said he wanted to get into trouble.

⁶⁶ Richard Eggleston, Associated Press. "Latest ideas readied for '93 session," *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 11, 1993, p. 1D; Associated Press. "Parental rights are targeted," *Oshkosh Northwestern*, April 28, 1993, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Jim Stingl. "Tearful Anderson believes he'll be cleared of murder," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 18, 1993, p. A1, A20; Jim Stingl. "Victim's family grants her husband no forgiveness," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 18, 1993, p. A20.

⁶⁸ Associated Press. "Man convicted of killing wife ready to start appeal," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, September 22, 1993, p. B-3; Associated Press. "Defense claims new evidence in Jesse Anderson murder case," *Oshkosh Northwestern*, March 8, 1994, p. B4.

After the marker used for the vandalism was found in Jesse's cell, a hearing examiner ordered Jesse to spend five days in solitary confinement, making the ruling on April 21, 1994, the second anniversary of Barbara's death. A spokesperson for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections noted the irony: "That's what he did in his crime, wasn't it, set it up and blame others?"⁶⁹

On August 30, 1994, Judge Diane Sykes agreed to hear the testimony of the two alleged witnesses Jesse had located, after months of debate. By this time, the defense team had dropped their claim to have identified the real perpetrators. One of the witnesses quickly admitted that he had lied, while the other told an inconsistent story, and halfway through the following day of testimony, Sykes threw out the case.⁷⁰ Jesse continued to maintain his innocence, and began to work on his defense against a wrongful death lawsuit seeking \$20 million on behalf of his and Barbara's children. On November 15, that case was postponed until the following year.⁷¹

Two weeks later, on the morning of November 28, 1994, Jesse Anderson was assigned to a routine bathroom-cleaning detail at the prison, alongside two of his fellow inmates: Christopher Scarver, a black man who had been convicted in the 1990 murder of his former employer, and Jeffrey Dahmer. While the three were unsupervised for upwards of twenty minutes, Scarver used a metal bar he had removed from the prison's weight room to severely beat Dahmer and Anderson.⁷²

⁶⁹ Associated Press. "Man who killed wife punished for defacing art," *Racine Journal-Times*, May 6, 1994, p. 12B.

⁷⁰ Criminal trial records of Jesse Michael Anderson, Milwaukee County Circuit Court, pp. 18-21; Associated Press. "Judge denies new trial for killer," *Racine Journal-Times*, September 1, 1994, p. 3C.

⁷¹ "Judge postpones trial in wife killer's suit," *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 16, 1994, p. 4.

⁷² Don Terry. "Jeffrey Dahmer, Multiple Killer, Is Bludgeoned to Death in Prison," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1994, p. A1.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/29/us/jeffrey-dahmer-multiple-killer-is-bludgeoned-to-death-in-prison.html>>; Don Terry. "Suspect in Dahmer Killing Said, 'I'm the Chosen One,'" *The New*

Scarver then calmly returned to his cell. The bloody aftermath was discovered by guards only after they asked Scarver why he had stopped working early, to which he responded, “God told me to do it. You will hear about it on the 6 o’clock news. Jesse Anderson and Jeffrey Dahmer are dead.” Dahmer was pronounced dead an hour after the incident at a nearby hospital. Jesse Anderson remained in critical condition for two days before succumbing to his wounds.⁷³

The exact motivations of Scarver, who had had a history of schizophrenia and had previously claimed that voices in his head told him he was the “son of God” and “the chosen one”, have been discussed mostly regarding his killing of Dahmer, several of whose victims were black and other people of color. The racial motivation in Scarver’s killing of Anderson is even more obvious, and frequently serves as a footnote at the very end of biographies and documentaries about Dahmer. The means of their deaths have also provoked suspicion, with some suggesting that prison guards deliberately allowed Scarver to work unsupervised with the prison’s two most notorious inmates, knowing or expecting that he would kill them.⁷⁴

In the aftermath of Barbara’s death, her family was shocked to hear about Jesse’s history of abusing her, because she never told her family about the abuse. Believing that Barbara would never have been killed if that silence had been broken, the Lynch family started BELA Charities, a non-profit organization aimed at supporting victims of domestic violence, raising thousands of dollars for family shelters and pro-bono divorce lawyers near their hometown of Orland Park,

York Times, November 30, 1994, p. A18.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/30/us/suspect-in-dahmer-killing-said-i-m-the-chosen-one.html>>.

⁷³ Elizabeth Gleick. “The Final Victim,” *People*, December 12, 1994.

<<https://people.com/archive/cover-story-the-final-victim-vol-42-no-24/>>; Associated Press. “Steel bar used to bash Dahmer,” *Oshkosh Northwestern*, December 16, 1994, p. B4.

⁷⁴ Doug Hissom, interview with author, July 10, 2019.

Illinois.⁷⁵ By 2008, BELA (which stands for “Barbara Ellen Lynch Associates”) had raised over \$150,000 for its cause.⁷⁶

Despite the revelation that Jesse Anderson had lied, Northridge Mall never recovered from the blow to its reputation.⁷⁷ The acceleration of white flight from the area devastated retail stores in and around the mall, which like Capitol Court could not survive with only black and lower-income customers. By 2001, just nine years after the murder, three of Northridge’s four anchor stores and most of its smaller store spaces were vacant, and the whole building was sold to Tucker Development Corporation for just \$3.5 million.⁷⁸ The mall’s last tenant, a Boston Store department store, closed in March 2003, leaving Northridge empty and its new owners free to begin planning its demolition and redevelopment.⁷⁹

Tucker soon found that demand was low because the underlying demographics of the area, combined with its broader reputation, turned off companies that considered opening stores there. Today, in 2020, in the midst of the so-called “retail apocalypse” brought on by the rise of e-commerce companies like Amazon and irresponsible business practices by private equity firms, an abandoned or nearly empty shopping mall is a common sight. In 2003, it was an unmistakable sign to retailers that the mall had failed for a particular reason, so they avoided Tucker’s new project and demolition never even began.

⁷⁵ “Victim’s kin lead fight for abused,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1996, MetroSouthwest Section 2, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Duaa Eldeib. “Family launches charity to fight domestic abuse,” *Southtown Star*, July 24, 2008, p. A3.

⁷⁷ David Bernacchi, interview with author, August 19, 2019.

⁷⁸ Mark Kass. “Construction on center's redo to begin next month,” *The Daily Reporter* (Milwaukee), February 13, 2003.

<<https://dailyreporter.com/2003/02/12/construction-on-centers-redo-to-begin-next-month/>>.

⁷⁹ “Northridge's last retailer to close in March,” *Milwaukee Business Journal*, December 27, 2002. <<https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/stories/2002/12/23/daily25.html>>.

A Chinese investment firm, U.S. Black Spruce Enterprise Group, purchased the former mall from Tucker in 2008. By this time, a major economic recession was ongoing, and many of the nearby commercial developments that had initially survived the closure of Northridge were now going under.⁸⁰ Black Spruce came in with ambitious plans for the property, proposing a distribution center and emporium for goods imported from China. In the years that followed, Black Spruce made numerous promises to the city of Milwaukee that never came to fruition. The company also was inconsistent in paying its property taxes and mortgages, and at one point the mall was days away from foreclosure before its outstanding debts were paid off.⁸¹

Penzeys Spices, a retail chain based in Milwaukee, attempted to buy the property and convert it into a warehouse for its operations, but Black Spruce refused to sell. Penzeys was one of many companies looking to convert Northridge-area retail spaces into industrial facilities, essentially giving up on the area's former purpose. A nearby Target store, for example, was converted into a facility for a local refrigeration company, while a Walmart has become home to a vehicle transmission manufacturer.⁸² These conversions are often controversial, because local residents still want places to shop, but more importantly they need the jobs that the new facilities promise to provide, which the retail industry no longer can.⁸³

⁸⁰ Tom Daykin. "Brown Deer Road continues struggle," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 15, 2008. <<http://archive.jsonline.com/business/34495884.html>>.

⁸¹ Sean Ryan. "Mayor Barrett pressures Northridge Mall owners to redevelop or sell," *Milwaukee Business Journal*, April 20, 2016. <https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/blog/real_estate/2016/04/mayor-barrett-pressures-northridge-mall-owners-to.html>.

⁸² Tom Daykin. "Closed Target store near Milwaukee's former Northridge Mall proposed for redevelopment," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 21, 2018. <<https://www.jsonline.com/story/money/real-estate/commercial/2018/06/21/closed-target-near-milwaukee-former-northridge-mall-redeveloped/721486002/>>.

⁸³ Evan Casey. "Making Granville Relevant Again," *Shepherd Express*, April 23, 2019. <<https://shepherdexpress.com/news/features/making-granville-relevant-again/>>.

Since the mall was abandoned, it has become popular in a new way with rebellious teenagers, who consistently vandalize and break into the building. While some of these incursions have positive value – one group of “urban explorers,” for example, saved several abandoned boxes of photographs and videotapes documenting the mall’s history – they are dangerous, have structurally weakened the building in some places, and have made potential redevelopment even harder.⁸⁴ This became an endemic problem after YouTube celebrity Casey Neistat, with permission from the mall’s owners, filmed himself and his team converting one of the mall’s concourses into a “winter wonderland” for the benefit of local children in December 2017. While Neistat’s video was both legal and well-intentioned, it inspired some of his eleven million subscribers to go there and break in.⁸⁵

With the former Northridge Mall becoming increasingly hazardous, and Black Spruce taking little action to secure the property, the City of Milwaukee condemned the building in April 2019 and ordered Black Spruce to tear it down. At that time, the city estimated, the building was worth a mere \$81,000, mostly because the complete overhaul necessary to make it habitable again was expected to cost millions of dollars.⁸⁶ The city considered demolishing the building itself and charging Black Spruce for the costs, expected to total more than \$10 million, but Black Spruce appealed the demolition order in court, claiming that it had not been given enough time to make its proposal a reality.

⁸⁴ “Northridge Mall,” The JonRev Projects. <<https://jonrev.com/northridge/>>.

⁸⁵ Tom Daykin. “A YouTube video drew more break-ins at Northridge, spurring Milwaukee’s efforts to demolish the former mall,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 17, 2019. <<https://www.jsonline.com/story/money/real-estate/commercial/2019/05/17/3678066002/>>.

⁸⁶ Tom Daykin. “Milwaukee issues condemnation order at former Northridge Mall. Demolition could help spur redevelopment,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 11, 2019. <<https://www.jsonline.com/story/money/real-estate/commercial/2019/04/11/3428560002/>>.

By July 2019, neither Black Spruce nor the city had made any progress with the building. On July 22, Black Spruce maintenance worker Victoriano Diaz and his crew investigated a broken high-voltage transformer on the property, from which copper wires had been stolen. When Diaz touched the metal door of the transformer box, he was electrocuted and died within minutes. His coworker and brother-in-law, Alex Sanchez, pulled him away from the box and received third-degree burns from touching him. The crew had believed that power had been cut off at the mall building and were unaware that Black Spruce was still paying for electricity.⁸⁷ The death strengthened the city's case for demolishing the building immediately, but as of March 2020 Black Spruce has not begun demolition and its appeal against the order is still being heard in court.

The fate of Capitol Court and Northridge Mall may already be repeating itself at Bayshore, several miles east. Long considered upscale and relatively “safe” from crime and violence because of its proximity to Lake Michigan and the surrounding high property values, Bayshore is suffering both from the ongoing “retail apocalypse” and from a decline in its reputation. Since January 2020, a fatal shooting and a major theft at the mall, both of them highly publicized, have contributed to this decline. It is entirely possible that an incident similar to the Jesse Anderson case could occur at Bayshore today, and it is unlikely that local media outlets – including social media, which did not exist in 1992 – would handle such an incident better than how the Anderson case was covered. Nearly three decades after they were said, Dave Berkman's words still remain relevant: “if something similar happened a month from now [...] we will have

⁸⁷ Sophie Carson. “Man electrocuted at Northridge Mall leaves behind six children; family looking for answers in death,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 29, 2019. <<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2019/07/29/1844944001/>>.

the same reaction: ‘it should not be happening to fine, upstanding, blonde white people, it's OK and acceptable if it happens to black people.’”⁸⁸

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A large part of this project was based on primary sources, especially files released by the Milwaukee Police Department Open Records office, and those received from the Federal Bureau of Investigation through a Freedom of Information Act request. The police records particularly form the basis of “Chapter 1: ‘A real family man’.” Other primary sources include articles from the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*, accessed via microfilm at the Milwaukee Public Library and the Seeley G. Mudd Library at Lawrence University. Articles from other newspapers were generally retrieved from Newspapers.com.

“Chapter 2: Race relations and retail locations” substantially uses *Bootstrap New Urbanism: Design, Race, and Redevelopment in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Lexington Books, 2014) by Joseph A. Rodriguez as a source, especially the chapter “Shopping Malls, New Urbanism, and Bronzeville” (pp. 161-184).

⁸⁸ Berkman, “Jesse Anderson Case,” WUWM, April 27, 1992.

Since a primary focus of this paper is the role of the Milwaukee media, particularly local television news, in the murder's after-effects, it is unfortunate that all of the major Milwaukee television stations (WTMJ, WITI, WISN, and WDJT) declined requests for access to their relevant archival recordings. By contrast, National Public Radio, and its Milwaukee member station WUWM, were cooperative and together provided four archival recordings.

At Lawrence University, my advisor Professor Jerald Podair helped guide this project toward a manageable scope and size, alongside reference librarian Gretchen Revie. Andrew McSorley coordinated the interactive digital component of the project, which runs on Scalar, a platform created by The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture at the University of Southern California, and which can be accessed at <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/theyre-moving-north/index>.

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