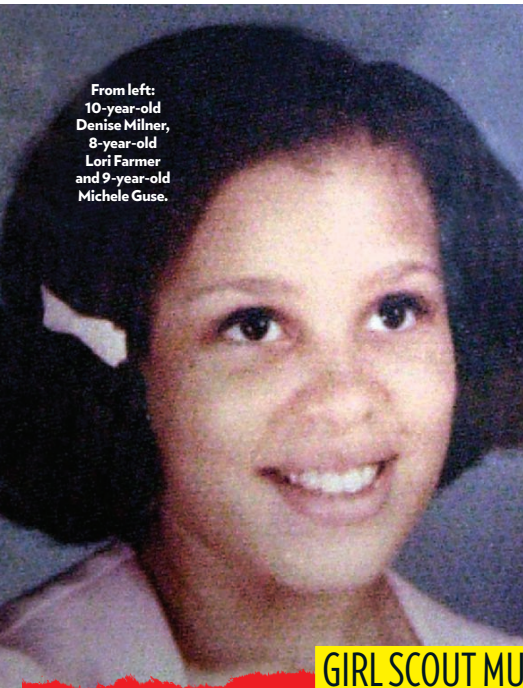


From left:
10-year-old
Denise Milner,
8-year-old
Lori Farmer
and 9-year-old
Michele Guse.



GIRL SCOUT MURDER MYSTERY

KILLED AT CAMP

Four decades after 3 girls were brutally slain, police hope DNA test results will finally solve Oklahoma's most notorious cold case **By JEFF TRUESDELL and CHRISTINE PELISEK**

Sheri Farmer can still picture her daughter Lori boarding the bus near their suburban Tulsa home for two weeks at Girl Scout camp. The bubbly 8-year-old was wearing a T-shirt and shorts and carrying a Samsonte suitcase stuffed with clothes, her camera and a Father's Day card she planned to give to her dad, Dr. Charles "Bo" Farmer, when he and Sheri visited the following weekend. "We hugged," Sheri says. "She got on, I saw her in the window, and I just waved and said, 'I love you.'"

What happened that very night at Camp Scott, near Locust Grove, Okla., would haunt the state for years: In the darkness of June 13, 1977, Lori

'IT'S HARD TO SLEEP AT NIGHT, BECAUSE THAT'S WHEN SHE DIED'

—LORI FARMER'S MOTHER, SHERI

and two other Scouts—Michele Guse, 9, and Denise Milner, 10—were raped and murdered, their strangled and mutilated bodies left under a tree 100 yards away from their tent. A 10-month manhunt led authorities to a convicted rapist who'd escaped from jail four years earlier. But a jury found the suspect not guilty. Sent back to prison to resume his prior sentence, he died two months later, leaving the murder mystery officially unsolved. Says Sheryl Stokes, Lori's childhood friend: "People just want to know what happened—and who did this."

Now they may finally find out. Thanks to a \$30,000 fund-raising effort led by Mayes County Sheriff Mike Reed last year, surviving evidence from the crime scene is currently undergoing DNA

testing that Reed thinks may reveal a forensic profile of the killer that was unavailable four decades ago. Whether he hopes to confirm a link to the formerly accused Gene Leroy Hart or make another match, he won't say. "My final opinion has to come from DNA," he says. Reed credits the victims' families, especially Sheri Farmer, for keeping the case alive. "If I can bring some kind of peace to the family members, the moms, the dads, the children," he says, "that is my goal."

Peace has eluded survivors since the murders turned Camp Scott into a killing field. The amount of blood found in tent No. 8, on the wooded camp's far edge, bore witness to an attack that was savage and brutal. Within days Hart, 33, whose mother lived in the area, became a suspect. No weapon or fingerprints ever turned up, but police did uncover a single hair that analysis said could belong to a Native American—like Hart—and items possibly stolen from the camp that authorities linked to Hart. "I feel like we got the right person, and if we didn't, we would be back out there beating the bushes," says Harvey Pratt, a former Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agent. "I never saw any evidence that it was anybody but Hart." The defense and jurors

TRAIL OF A TRAGEDY

1. The now-abandoned camp was closed and sold after the murders.
2. The three girls had been assigned to a tent on the edge of the wooded site.
3. Parents of other Scouts retrieved their daughters after the June 13, 1977, incident.
4. Authorities swarmed the scene.
5. A police sketch of suspect Gene Hart was released by police.
6. Hart (in a mug shot), an escaped and convicted rapist, was tried for the murders. He was found not guilty.



disagreed. A bloody footprint revealed a size-9½ shoe, "but Hart's foot was 11½," says his attorney Garvin Isaacs, who argued that Hart was 45 miles away in Tulsa when the killings occurred. "They tried to frame him," he says. "Hart was an innocent man."

After the murders the camp was abandoned and the property sold, its dilapidated buildings now a ghostly remembrance of innocence lost. When Hart died in 1979 of a heart attack in the prison yard, "a part of me felt like a weight was lifted, and a part of me was disappointed that I would never get to talk to him," says Sheri, who has counseled parents of other murdered children. She wants to believe in Hart's guilt but doesn't discount that others may have been involved. "I would like to know who did this," she says. "I would like to know that answer." Until she does, "what I try to do is just tell my story and tell Lori's story," she says. "So people will remember." ●

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) SHERI FARMER/SHERI FARMER; POLICE AT CAMP; PAUL B. SOUTH/BLAND/OKLAHOMAN; CAMPBELL/THE OKLAHOMAN; TULSA WORLD