

Police probe '70s car relation to county child killings

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

A blue Gremlin pulled from the Rouge River may provide investigators with a significant lead in the infamous Oakland County child killings of two decades ago.

Then again, it may not. "We had another blue Gremlin pulled from Stony Creek a few years ago," said Jerry Tobias, a former member of the task force organized to find the killer or killers who abducted and murdered four youngsters in 1976-77. "But it turned out to be nothing."

Tobias, who was assigned to the task force from the Beverly Hills Police Department, Saturday was anxious about the possibility that the blue Gremlin pulled from the Rouge River Friday may provide a significant breakthrough.

The vehicle, believed to be a 1970 to 1972 model, was fished from the river by a cleanup crew in Melvindale. It was one of several cars pulled from the river as part of a beautification effort.

Melvindale Police Chief James J. Brophy, who was a young officer when the killings occurred, recognized the significance of the blue Gremlin immediately and

notified the Michigan State Police, which is still investigating the four deaths.

Lt. Charles Schumacher, who still gathers investigators periodically to focus on the Oakland child killings, was very interested in the finding, said Tobias, whose career includes being deputy chief of police in Franklin.

The vehicle identification numbers on the Gremlin are clear and should be easy to trace, he said. "I'm sure there will be a lot of attention paid to that vehicle this week," said Tobias, who mentioned that his memory of the killings is vivid and persistent.

The killings started in February 1976, when Mark Stebbins was abducted near his home in Ferndale. The other victims, between the ages of 10 and 12, were Jill Robinson of Royal Oak, abducted in December 1976; Kristine Mihelich of Berkeley, kidnapped in January 1977; and Timothy King of Birmingham, who disappeared from a shopping area in March 1977.

It was in connection with the death of King that the blue Gremlin became a major focus of the investigation, recalled Tobias. The youngster was reportedly seen talking to a man

- who was subsequently depicted by police in a composite drawing - near a blue Gremlin, he said.

Once the composite was distributed, and the link to a blue Gremlin publicized, investigators - and residents - went all out. Owners of blue Gremlins were eyed with suspicion and their owners were reported to the task force, which involved more than 300 officers and is believed to be the largest investigative effort in metro Detroit.

One driver reported having all

four tires of his blue Gremlin punctured during a snow storm. Lore had it that the killer struck when it snowed.

Various theories about the killer have evolved over the years, with some having more credence than others. One theory that received renewed attention in February - the 20th anniversary of the first killing - focused on two men who many considered suspects.

One of the men, a former Warren man who moved to

Wyoming, died in a car crash in April 1981, while the other was imprisoned in another state on a child molestation charge, according to police. That potential suspect reportedly refused to cooperate with investigators.

While the Oakland child killings are not always in the news, they are always on the

minds of officers familiar with the case, said Tobias.

Tobias said it will probably take a lucky break - such as finding the actual vehicle involved in the kidnappings - to solve the Oakland County child killing.

"Luck is a big part of any investigation."

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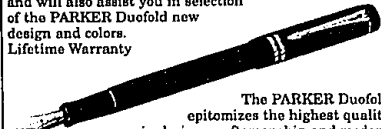
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79	U 18	Mike Koval	642-3375	June 17	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
80	U 17	Wally Barrett	442-4726	June 27	5 - 8 p.m.	JCC
				June 29	10 a.m. - 1 p.m.	JCC
80	U 17	Brian Tinnian	626-3463	June 27	5 - 8 p.m.	JCC
				June 29	10 a.m. - 1 p.m.	JCC
81	U 16	Mike Ruddy & Jay White	541-7163	June 18, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Derby
				June 22	12 - 2 p.m.	Derby
82	U 15	Doug Metzker	851-1029	June 16, 29	1 - 3 p.m.	Covington
83	U 14	Stuart McCracken	258-3247	June 17, 18, 19	6 - 8 p.m.	Derby
84	U 13	Ian Fairbrother	646-7012	June 16	4 - 6 p.m.	Groves
				June 19	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
85	U 12	Ric Filoramo	649-3642	June 17	6 - 8 p.m.	Derby
				June 22	10 a.m. - 12 p.m.	Derby
86	U 11	Kevin Argue	360-4529	June 17, 19	6 - 8 p.m.	Berkshire
				June 22	1 - 3 p.m.	Berkshire
87	U 10	TBD (Lisa Weber)	258-9186	June 22, 23	12 - 2 p.m.	Groves

GIRLS TRYOUTS

YEAR	AGE	COACH	PHONE	DATE	TIME	FIELD
78/79	U 19	(TBD) Lisa Weber	258-9186	June 18, 19	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
80	U 17	Tom Kaczmarek	433-3177	June 18, 19, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
81	U 16	Phil Good	644-7589	June 18, 19, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
81	U 16	Lisa Weber	258-9186	June 18, 19, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
82	U 15	John Holmquist & Kevin Argue	645-2760	June 16	1 - 3 p.m.	Berkshire
				June 18, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Berkshire
82	U 15	Jim Haugh & Ronnie Schulte	649-4321	June 16	1 - 3 p.m.	Berkshire
				June 18, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Berkshire
83	U 14	Russ Ives	644-7254	June 17, 18, 20	6 - 8 p.m.	Berkshire
84	U 13	John Christina	656-1488	June 22, 23	2 - 4 p.m.	Groves
85	U 12	Roger Cummings	642-2986	June 19, 24	6 - 8 p.m.	Groves
86	U 11	Ronnie Schulte	737-6405	June 22, 23	12 - 2 p.m.	Groves
87	U 10	Steve Levine	258-3906	June 22, 23	12 - 2 p.m.	Groves

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