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Author speaks on Robison murders

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By Ryan Bentley News-Review Staff Writer

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It's been nearly 40 years since a downstate family of six were murdered in their northern Emmet County cottage, and an author who has extensively researched the crime doesn't see much hope for the case to be closed.

"In my point of view, we've got a situation with a case that will never be solved," said Lansing author James Pecora, whose 2001 book "Dead End" is based on the June 1968 murders of the Robison family at their vacation home near Good Hart.

On Tuesday, Pecora shared some of his findings about the case with members of the Kiwanis Club of Petoskey.

Robison noted that many who figured in the Robison investigation have died and that some evidence has deteriorated.

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In July 1968, about a month after the killings were thought to have occurred, a caretaker found the bodies of Detroit-area businessman Richard C. Robison, his wife, Shirley, and their four children in the locked cottage when investigating a foul odor coming from the area.

Law enforcement officials have tended to see Robison's business associate, Joseph R. Scolaro III, as a prime suspect in the case. Scolaro committed suicide in 1973.

Pecora, who faced several near-death experiences in the 1990s as a result of cancer and cardiac problems, read a news story following up on the Robison case while recovering from cancer treatment. At a time when life-and-death issues were prominent in his mind, his curiosity was stimulated.

The book which resulted from his research is fictional in that Pecora used names different from those in the Robison case, and created some dialogue himself. But he noted that the plot is based on the official record.

Among those who've looked into the case, Pecora noted that there are two camps: one that focuses on Scolaro as the suspect, and another that believes someone else committed the murders, perhaps someone with closer ties to the area.

Though he doesn't rule out some peripheral role for Robison's associate in the killings, "I'm in the camp that says his business partner didn't do it," Pecora said.

For example, Pecora sees weaknesses in the theory that Scolaro made the drive from Detroit to Northern Michigan on the day of the murders. Some believe he had a falling out with Richard Robison over the phone that threatened his job. From what Pecora's learned of Robison, the author said the businessman wasn't the type to have handled that type of confrontation — which some believe focused on embezzlement from the business — from afar.

In addition, Pecora noted his curiosity about the tension that had existed between Robison and the caretaker prior to the murders. Since "Dead End" was published, he noted that he's heard more about this tension from someone familiar with the situation.



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Petoskey High School teacher Rick Wiles, who's had a longtime curiosity about the Robison case and recently wrote a lengthy research paper about it, draws different conclusions about the culprit than Pecora. While Wiles said the "Dead End" author did a good job in his research, the teacher believes Scolaro's unique connections with one of the guns and some of the ammunition used in the murders help establish him as the prime suspect.

"The murder weapons were the key," Wiles said. "It's very apparent that that man (Scolaro) did something irrational that day."

Wiles noted that the caretaker, the late Monnie Bliss, had some eccentricities that might lead some to speculate about his involvement. But the teacher said he hopes careful consideration of Scolaro's access to the distinctive weapons can help put the speculation about Bliss to an end.

Pecora's work background includes stints as a business owner and in personnel management, parks and recreation and cemetery management. More than 5,000 copies of "Dead End," his first book, have been printed.

Since "Dead End" was released, Pecora noted that numerous readers have shared ideas about the Robison case with him via e-mail.

"That was the primary purpose of the book ... generating additional thinking about what could have happened," he said. "It wasn't to make money, believe me."

Along with the input from readers, Pecora noted that other details have emerged about the Robison case in recent years, such as a box of materials that was found in a closet at the Emmet County Sheriff's Office a few years ago.

Pecora is considering a sequel to "Dead End" based on his more recent findings, and plans to share some details of these during an appearance at Petoskey's McLean and Eakin Book Sellers on June 23.

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