

MURDER MYSTERY

GOOD HART — On a humid summer evening in 1968, Richard and Shirley Robison and their four children, ages 8 to 19, were slaughtered in their cabin in a remote coastal village near Harbor Springs.

The decomposed bodies of the handsome Lathrup Village family were not found until a month later, when a caretaker came to investigate complaints of a foul odor. The grisly discovery, which drew national attention, launched what the State Police called the most exhaus-

tive investigation in its history.

Twenty-five years have passed since the killings, an event that changed Good Hart forever.

"At that time, we really weren't used to this mass murder-type business," recalls Petoskey lawyer W. Richard Smith, the county prosecutor at the time. "The whole country had grown more cynical and bitter after the Kennedys were killed, but we were never used to this type of thing. Not in this country and not here, especially here."

The crime, still unsolved, continues to vex not only detectives assigned to the case, but also authors, academics and amateur sleuths bent on solving one key question: Who would want Richard Robison dead?

At first, the answer was nobody, except perhaps some madman or drifter who had stumbled upon the

isolated cabin. After all, the 42-year-old Robison had no known enemies. Friends described him as an honorable, if eccentric, family man, a regular churchgoer with no known vices. He owned a successful advertising firm and arts magazine in suburban Detroit.

But as lead detective Lloyd Stearns would soon discover, "What's on the surface isn't always what you hang your hat on."

And so it was with Richard Robison.

Investigators learned, for instance, that Robison's advertising business had been losing money for some time. Perhaps as a result, the agency had swindled its largest client, Delta Faucet Co., out of as much as \$50,000 over a three-year period.

Police also discovered that Robi-

25 years after the Robisons were gunned down at their summer cabin, the case remains

unsolved and confounding.

Investigators have encountered

mysterious notes,

shady business

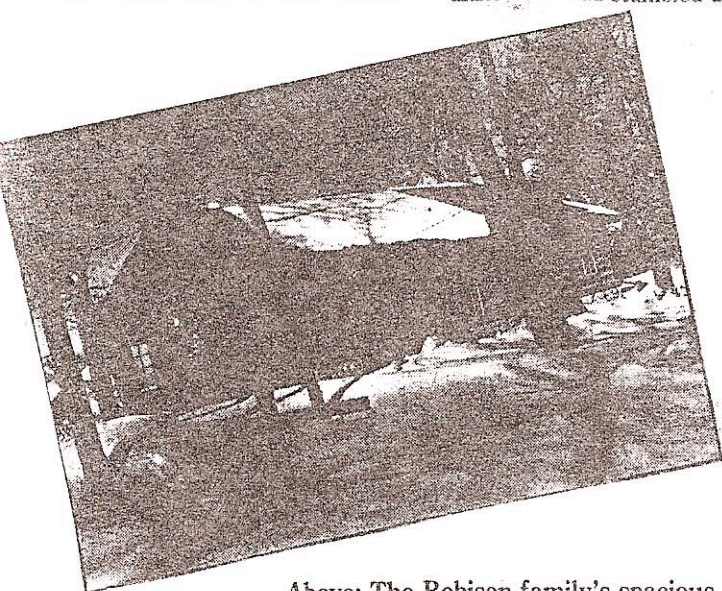
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By David Zeman

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER



Above: The Robison family's spacious summer cabin. Right: The victims. Front row: Shirley and Richard Robison and their daughter Susan; back row from left: sons Gary, Randall and Richard Jr.



“What’s on the surface isn’t always what you hang your hat on.”

Lead detective Lloyd Stearns, pictured below, on the case’s unexpected twists



son’s arts magazine, *Impresario*, had inflated its circulation numbers and was using full-page airline ads without authorization to make the magazine appear more prosperous.

And detectives were puzzled by letters and drawings found among Robison’s business papers. Notes referred to a \$100-million computerized warehousing scheme with investors known only as the “Superior Table.” The group was to be headed by a mysterious figure named “Roebert.” Who were these people? Friends and business associates had no idea.

Before long, detectives realized that their list of potential murder suspects might grow very long indeed.

Gunshots and loud voices

Robison had purchased the luxurious, tree-shaded cabin a decade earlier. Like other wealthy executives, he admired the rugged isolation of Good Hart, which stretches dramatically through hardwood forest along a bluff on Lake Michigan.

Even today, a casual visitor might miss the town entirely, so secluded are the million-dollar lodges tucked below the scenic shoreline road. With lake frontage now going for \$2,400 a foot, the summer crowd runs toward the rich and reclusive.

The Robisons traveled to Good Hart on June 16, 1968.

Nine days later, on the morning of June 25, a Tuesday, Richard Robison made several phone calls from the cabin. He called the National Bank of Detroit, where his agency kept its checking account. He asked if a \$200,000 deposit had arrived. It had not. He then called his office, where his business partner, Joseph Scolaro, was running things in Robison’s absence.

What happened next remains unclear. What is known is that Robison had told several neighbors he would be flying out with his family that day to Kentucky and Florida.

Sometime that evening, a couple living about a quarter-mile down the beach said they heard gunshots and the

loud voices of two males and a female coming from the direction of the Robison cottage.

“We just heard a series of shots . . . one with a little short pause . . . and then three or four others after that,” the woman recalled. “It was still light out, so we thought that somebody was shooting gulls on the beach.”

The Robisons’ closest neighbors weren’t home that evening. They would put their cabin up for sale after the murders and never return to Good Hart.

Rifle fired through window

With no eyewitnesses, police theorize the murders happened like this:

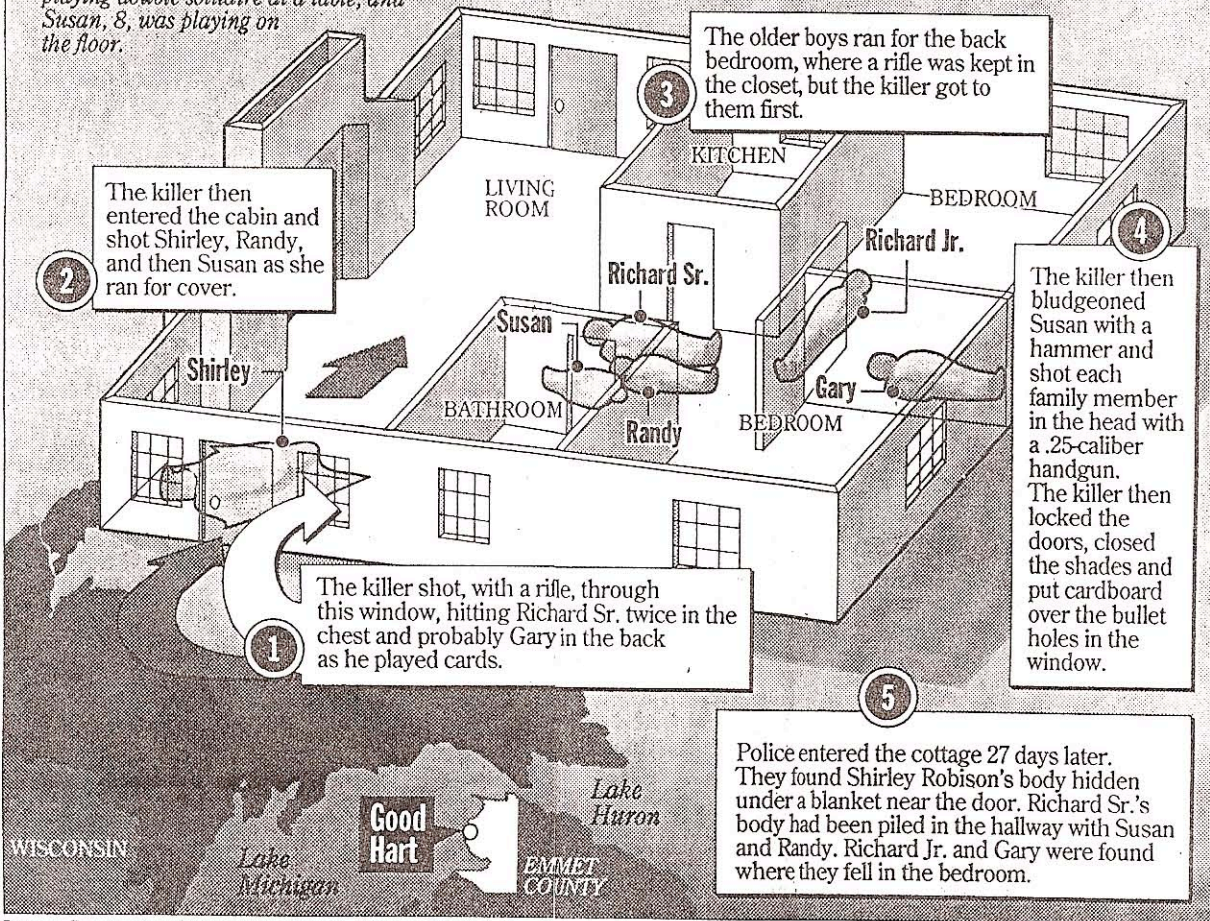
Richard Robison was relaxing in an easy chair with his youngest son Randy, 12, standing beside him. Shirley Robison, 40, sat in an armchair nearby. The oldest boys, Richard Jr., 19, and Gary, 17, were playing double solitaire at the table. Susan, 8, played on the living room floor.

Trail was cold when detectives arrived

DEATH OF A FAMILY

On June 25, 1968, Richard and Shirley Robison and their four children were murdered in their Good Hart cabin. Twenty-five years later, the case is still unsolved. With no eyewitnesses, police speculate about what happened that evening.

All family members were in the living room when the shooting began. Richard Sr., 42, was in an easy chair with son Randy, 12, standing beside him. Shirley, 40, was in an armchair. The oldest boys, Richard Jr., 19, and Gary, 17, were playing double solitaire at a table, and Susan, 8, was playing on the floor.



Source: Emmet County Sheriff Department, Michigan State Police, Petoskey News Review

MOSES HARRIS/ Detroit Free Press

The killer, approaching from the woods, raised a .22-caliber rifle and fired through a window near the front door, striking Richard Sr. twice in the chest. A bullet may have also struck Gary in the back as he played cards.

The killer entered the cabin, shooting Shirley Robison, Randy, and then hitting Susan as she ran for cover.

The older boys bolted for a rear bedroom, perhaps trying to reach a rifle stored in a closet. But they were gunned down before they could reach the weapon. Playing cards were found scattered by their bodies.

Before fleeing, the killer bludgeoned the little girl with a hammer and shot each family member once in the head with a .25-caliber handgun. The doors were then locked, the bullet holes in the window covered with cardboard, and the curtains drawn. The heater was left running.

When police entered the cottage 27 days later, they found Shirley Robison's body under a blanket near the door. She was nude from the waist down and positioned in a manner to suggest a sexual assault.

Her husband's body had been piled in the hallway with those of Susan and Randy. The bodies of Richard Jr., a sophomore at Eastern Michigan University, and Gary, a senior at Southfield-Lathrup High School, were found where they fell in the bedroom.

Wearing gas masks because of the stench, investigators searched for clues.

A suitcase had been partially packed and the family appeared to be dressed for travel. A note, apparently written by Richard Sr., had been post-

MURDER & MYSTERY

ed outside the cabin. It read: "Be back 7-10 — Robison."

Some money and jewelry were missing: Shirley's \$9,000 diamond ring and a string of pearls; Richard Sr.'s Omega watch and \$700 he had withdrawn from a local bank that morning. Other expensive items, including cameras, electronic equipment and the children's wallets, were left behind.

If there were fingerprints on the bloody hammer, they were wiped clean when a sheriff's deputy held the hammer aloft for a news photographer.

While detectives pursued leads that had already grown cold, townspeople struggled to remain calm.

"The newspapers try to make this area seem strange and sinister," a woman told the Free Press that August. "It's as unsinister as it can be." Still, she added, "I didn't like to be alone at night when it happened."

The woman was right, of course. Good Hart wasn't used to murder. The last homicide in all of Emmet County had been in 1958, when Petoskey police paid a visit to Paul Achenbach and discovered the dead body of his mother wrapped in a carpet.

Probe changes course

In October 1968, the Robison investigation shifted to the Detroit area. The maniacal gunman theory had been abandoned. "We now believe the killer was familiar with the cabin, that he knew the family and they knew him," Emmet County Sheriff Richard Zink announced.

Two young State Police detectives from Detroit, Lloyd Stearns and John Flis, were assigned to the Robison case. In the years that followed, the murders would consume them.

"For a long time, I couldn't get it out of my mind," Stearns, now 58, said last month. "When you get little kids out there . . ." He paused. "Here was a

wife and four kids who didn't do anything. They had their whole lives ahead of them and they were wiped out. I just felt so *bad* about it."

The two detectives soon focused their attention on one man: Robison's business partner.

The bookish-looking Scolaro seemed an unlikely suspect. But the evidence against him was compelling, if entirely circumstantial.

He had joined Robison's advertising and publishing business in 1965 and had quickly gained his boss' trust. But an audit performed after the murders showed that nearly \$60,000 had disappeared from the agency's account in the months before the slayings. Only Robison and Scolaro had access to the account, and Robison had been gone most of that time.

Police also learned more about the phone calls Robison made from his cabin on the day his family perished.

Stearns said the bank official who had talked to Robison that morning had told Robison about the puzzling shortage in the agency's account. A secretary at Robison's ad agency recalled that Robison was irate when he demanded to speak to Scolaro.

Almost immediately after that conversation ended about 10:30 a.m., Scolaro abruptly left for the day.

Scolaro denied any role in the murders. He told detectives that when he left the office, he went to a plumbing convention at Cobo Hall.

From the convention, he said, he walked to the Salamander Bar at the Pontchartrain Hotel, where he had two drinks. He then went shopping before driving home in a heavy rainstorm.

Before returning to his home in Birmingham, Scolaro said he stopped by the Robisons' house in Lathrup Village to check for flooding. He said he arrived home to his wife and children between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., though

police were never able to confirm the exact time.

Police also were not able to find a single person to corroborate Scolaro's activities in the 10 or 11 hours after he left his Lathrup Village office. The distance to Good Hart is 275 miles, which police at the time estimated would have taken five to six hours to drive.

Investigators learned that the shell casings found at the cabin matched casings found at a target range used by Scolaro. But without the weapons themselves, which were never found, they could not be sure the shells came from the same weapon.

For four years, detectives hounded Scolaro in hopes he would confess. "The police told me I did it. And they said if I didn't pull the trigger, I know who did," Scolaro once told the Free Press.

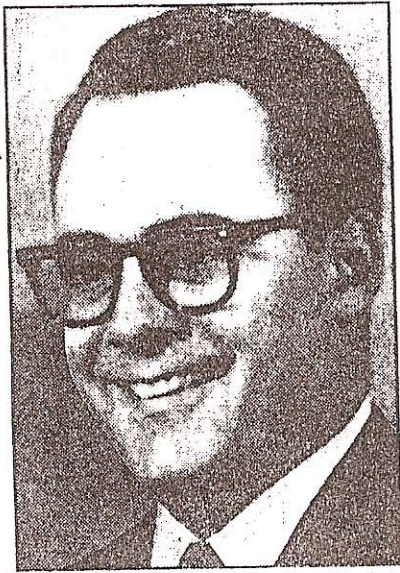
Emmet County Prosecutor Donald Noggle, who took office in 1969, came close to charging Scolaro in 1970, but backed off. "Our big problem," Noggle said, "is that we still can't place a suspect at the scene of the crime."

Hopes for charges grow dim

By spring 1973, detectives had abandoned hope that Noggle would ever bring charges. So Stearns, who had worked the case for two years with only an ulcer to show for it, approached Oakland County's new prosecutor, L. Brooks Patterson.

By the first week of March, Patterson's office was prepared to charge Scolaro in the murders. But someone in Patterson's office knew the Scolaro family and tipped off the suspect.

Cops had to sift clues, fantasies



Free Press file photo.

Circumstantial evidence led investigators to repeatedly question Joseph Scolaro.

On the afternoon of March 8, Scolaro, 38, who had bought out Robison's interest in the firm, closed the door to his office, put a .25-caliber Beretta to his right temple, and killed himself.

He left two notes. The first, on his office door, warned his mother not to enter. The second, found near his body, said the following: "I am a liar, a cheat, a phony, but I am not a killer. I am scared and sick."

He then listed the names of six people to whom he owed money, followed by this postscript: "I did not kill the Robisons."

For Stearns, Scolaro's suicide ended the saga. Despite the note, he believes Scolaro killed the Robisons to cover up his embezzlement of the agency's money.

"He had the time. He had the motive. He had the means to carry it out," said Stearns, who retired in 1982 to a 40-acre farm near Grand Rapids. "There is no doubt in my mind that if we got in the courtroom we would have had a conviction."

But detectives still working the case are not so sure.

"We can't take all the evidence that's available and say Scolaro did it and let's forget about the whole thing," said Jerry Hartman of the Emmet County Sheriff's Office. "If we could, we would have done that. I don't think it was ever that clearly established."

Sgt. Scott Croton of the State Police post in Petoskey adds: "Even if you conclude that Mr. Scolaro was involved in the homicide, did he have assistance in this homicide? ... I don't think that's ever been ruled out in the investigation."

Hartman is skeptical that Scolaro could carry out the murders on such short notice and within the 11 or so hours he had. He is troubled by the notion that Scolaro could have hired a hit man so quickly after Robison confronted him on the telephone.

Moreover, the neighbors who heard the shots say they came around 9 p.m., much too late for Scolaro to return home by midnight.

And investigators won't rule out

Good Hart — that the caretaker who discovered the bodies may have been involved. That caretaker, Chauncy (Monnie) Bliss, who died in 1980 at 69, was himself a mysterious figure.

Caretaker gets attention

Bliss, with his father, built the Robison cabin and others like it in the 1950s. The distinctive style of the cottages — a stone foundation topped by lacquered logs — is known in the area as a Bliss home.

Good Hart residents describe Monnie Bliss as a strange and sometimes frightening fellow who "liked to talk to the spirits." They say he had a quick temper and a fascination with fire. At night, while townspeople slept, he would drive his old truck back and forth across the dirt roads.

Two nights before the Robisons died, Bliss' son, Norman, was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Norman, 18, who was a friend of the Robison boys, was to be buried on June 25. The day before the funeral, Richard Robison stopped by the Bliss household to offer condolences. He gave \$20 to Dorothy Bliss, Monnie's wife, to buy flowers for the funeral. He expressed regret that his family could not attend.

Some people believe Monnie Bliss resented Robison's gesture and unaccountably held the family responsible for his son's death.

"Up here, it's all tied to Norman," said one longtime resident who asked not to be identified.

In the years following the murders, Bliss told several people that the Robisons "got what they deserved." One resident said Bliss had even confessed to the slayings in rambling, sometimes incoherent monologues.

Bliss' family dismisses the allegations as small-town gossip.

"If you knew my dad, he wouldn't know how to kill a gopher," said Nancy Bendickson. "And they put him through total hell. I don't know why or where they got their stuff to go on."

She acknowledged that her father was a "blabbermouth" and probably did make the remarks attributed to him. But she said he had never been properly treated for a deteriorating mental condition and simply lived in a dream world.

Dorothy Bliss said she was haunted by all the questions police asked about her husband. She, too, insists he "couldn't have done any of that."

Unanswered questions

Other questions will perhaps never be answered.

Why didn't anyone report the Robisons missing in the month after the shooting? Where are the murder weapons?

that Smith, the former prosecutor, said was found on Shirley Robison's body? Detectives say they don't recall that piece of evidence. But if it does exist, why haven't investigators compared it with hair samples from Scolaro or Bliss?

Could organized crime have played a role? An informant recounted in a 1968 newspaper report that he overheard a colleague say of Robison: "If he hadn't held back on us like he did, we wouldn't have wiped out the whole family." The informant said Robison owed the mob \$12,000 a month and was only paying back half that amount.

And what about Robison's cryptic references to Roebert? The name came up again later in the investigation when detectives noticed an engraving on the back of a St. Christopher medal worn by Robison. It read: "Richard — To my chosen son and heir — God bless you — Roebert."

A letter and chart in Superior's home also refers to the Superior Table. Roebert is the chairman, and presides over five other investors — Mr. Thomas, Mr. Richard, Mr. Joseph, Mr. Peters and Mr. Martin. The Superior Table, Robison wrote, will be a "world wide organization which is souly set on complete peace and unity among all countries of the Earth."

Police never learned if any of these people actually existed or were simply fictional characters in an elaborate fantasy created by Robison. Detectives also never confirmed why Robison spent three days at the Metro Airport Hotel a week before the trip to Good Hart.

Scolaro said at the time that Robison was using the hotel as a headquarters for his new venture. But Robison's wife apparently believed Robison was out of town on business.

"This guy's life did not help us in this case. This guy was not predictable," said Stearns, who tried in vain to make sense of Richard Robison. Stearns calls Robison an "oddball" and believes the Superior Table "was a fantasy of his. There is nothing to indicate otherwise. ... The hardest part of the investigation was building a profile of this guy."

In the years since the murder, the Robison property has been bought and sold several times. The cabin itself was destroyed in 1970 — the smell of death had seeped indelibly into the wooden frame.

The current owners of the land have grown weary of strangers who still come to examine the murder site. Recently, they planted pine trees where the cabin once stood. In a few years, it may be hard to imagine that the Robisons ever lived there.