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Virginians United Against Crime

Virginia Death Penalty Case Summary



Victims: Orlene Christian, Michael McDuffie, Mary Gowen, Christopher Philips, John Gallaher, Mary Wilfong, Harvey Wilkinson, Harvey Barton, Judy Barton

Murderers: Linwood Briley, James Briley

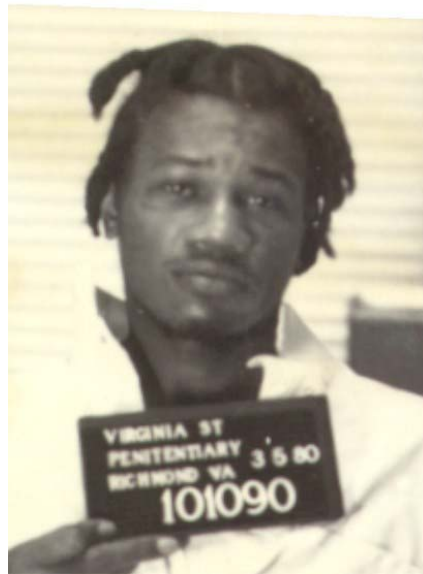
Date/Location of Crimes: 1971 and 1979, Richmond metropolitan region,

Aggravating Factors: Robbery, Rape, Kidnapping, Multiple Homicides

Execution Dates: October 12, 1984 (Linwood Briley); April 18, 1985 (James Briley)



Linwood Briley



James Briley

Case Summary:

Instigators of Richmond's bloodiest killing spree to date, brother James "J.B." and Linwood Briley mixed smooth outer demeanors with equally violent impulses. When either Briley was crossed, or they 'just felt like killing', they would lash out – often leaving gruesome results. The City of Richmond and the surrounding suburbs was thrown into terror for nine months in 1978-1979 by the killing spree, which struck victims both black and white, suburban and urban, well-to-do and humble.

Born to a stable home with two parents on the Northeast side of Richmond, the two brothers along with a younger sibling Anthony were regarded by older neighbors as ones who would help neighbors fix cars

or mow lawns. Yet, a surreal and dark world existed inside their house on Fourth Avenue. The three boys (including a younger brother Anthony) collected deadly pets, such as tarantulas, piranhas, Dobermans and boa constrictors. The boys watched with glee when they would feed live mice to their boa constrictor. Their father, James Sr. was unnerved enough by their behavior that he kept his bedroom door padlocked from the inside overnight.

In 1971, the first killing was committed by the then 16 year old Linwood. While alone at home one day, he took shot and killed an elderly next door neighbor, Orlene Christian, as she passed by her window sill. The crime almost went undetected, however her grieving relatives noticed a small bloody mark on her back at the viewing and asked the funeral director to reexamine the body.

Upon a second examination, the director found a small caliber bullet wound in her back. Police investigators were contacted and they sought to find the source of the gunshot. Standing at the open window in her home where Mrs. Christian was killed, a detective used a sheet of plywood to represent her body, with a hole cut out to represent the bullet wound. He soon determined that the bullet could have only come from the Briley home next door. There, the murder weapon was found and Linwood admitted to the crime, downplayed his crime,

"I heard she had heart problems, she would have died soon anyway."

Linwood was sent off to reform school to serve a one-year sentence for the killing. His young brother, James or 'J.B.' followed in his path at the same age having been sentenced to time in juvenile hall for having pulled a gun and fired upon a police officer in the midst of a pursuit.

In 1979, the three Briley brothers and an accomplice, Duncan Meekins, began the eight month spree of random killings that terrified the city and surrounding region.

Their first attack came on March 12th, when Linwood knocked on the door of Henrico County couple William and Virginia Bucher. Claiming that he had car trouble and needed to use their phone, Linwood was allowed into their home. At this point, he pulled a gun on the couple and waved his brother Anthony inside. The two Brileys tied up the couple and looted the house, dousing each room with gasoline after picking it clean of valuables.

As they left, a lit match was tossed on the fuel. The two hurriedly packed their stolen loot - a television, cb radio and jewelry into their trunk and sped off. They were not around when Mr. Bucher managed to miraculously free himself and his wife from their restraints and escape just before the house became engulfed in flames. They would be the only survivors of the rampage.

Michael McDuffie, a vending machine serviceman, was murdered by gang members at his suburban home on March 21st with use of force. The gang shot him dead and proceeded to steal valuables.

On April 9th, the gang followed seventy-six year old Mary Gowen across town from her babysitting job, then raped, robbed and shot her to death outside her home.

Seventeen year old Christopher Philips was spotted hanging around Linwood Briley's parked car on July 4th by the gang members. Suspecting that he might have been trying to break into the vehicle, the gang surrounded him and dragged him into a nearby backyard. There pinned to the ground by three members, Philips screamed for help, but was silenced forever as Linwood Briley dropped a cinderblock on his skull, crushing it.

On September 14th, disc jockey John "Johnny G." Gallaher was performing with his band at a South Richmond nightclub. Stepping out between sets for a break, he inadvertently came right into the hands of the Briley gang, who had been looking around town for a victim all night without success. They decided to lie-in-wait for whomever might happen to step outside.

Gallaher was jumped by Linwood and then manhandled into the trunk of his own Lincoln Continental. He was then driven out to Mayo Island in the middle of the James River, where the remnants of an abandoned paper mill stood. There, he was removed from the trunk of his Lincoln Continental and shot dead and point blank range. His body was then dumped into the river. The remains were found two days later. When arrested months later, Linwood was still wearing a ring stolen from Gallaher's hand.

On September 30th, sixty-two year old private nurse Mary Wilfong, was followed home to her Richmond apartment. The gang surrounded her just outside the door and Linwood crushed her skull with a baseball bat. They then proceeded to enter the apartment and looted it of valuables.

Several days later on October 5th, just two blocks from the Briley home on 4th Avenue in Richmond, 79 year old Blanche Page and her 59 year old boarder Charles Garner were both brutally murdered by the gang members. Page was bludgeoned to death while Garner was fatally assaulted with a variety of weapons, which included a baseball bat, five knives, a pair of scissors and a fork. The latter two were left embedded in Garner's back.

The final crime of the spree occurred against a long time neighborhood friend of the brothers, Harvey Wilkerson. On the morning of October 19th, having promised a judge earlier that day that he was staying out of trouble while out on parole for a 1973 robbery and malicious wounding conviction, J.B. led the gang on the prowl for yet another victim that night.

Upon seeing the gang's presence down the street, Wilkerson, who lived with his 23 year old wife Judy Barton (who was five months pregnant at the time) and her five year old son Harvey, instinctively closed and locked his door. This action was noticed by the gang, which then walked over to Wilkerson's front door and knocked. Terrified by their response if he refused them entry, Wilkerson allowed them in. Carnage ensued.

Both adults in the home were overpowered, bound and gagged with duct tape. Linwood Briley then manhandled Judy Barton into the kitchen, where she was raped within hearing distance of the others. Fellow gang member Duncan Meekins continued the sexual assault, after which Linwood dragged Barton back into the living room, briefly rummaged the premises for valuables and then left the house.

The three remaining gang members covered their victims with sheets. J.B. told Meekins, 'you've got to get one,' at which point Meekins took a pistol and fatally shot the adult Harvey Wilkerson in the head. J.B. then shot Barton and the five year old boy to death.

Police happened to be in the general vicinity of the neighborhood, heard the shots and later saw the gang members running down the street at high speed. They didn't know where the shots had been fired. The bodies were not discovered until three days following the crime, but the gang members were soon rounded up afterwards.

Under arrest, Duncan Meekins quickly broke down and offered a full detailing of the seventh month crime spree. As a result, he was offered a deal with prosecutors whereby he wouldn't face the death sentence nor incarcerated in the same facility as the Brileys. A single life sentence, with parole

eligibility was handed down to Anthony Briley, youngest brother of the trio, due to his limited involvement in the killings.

Because of Virginia's 'triggerman' statute, both J.B. and Linwood received numerous life sentences for murders committed during the spree, but faced capital charges only in cases where they had physically committed the actual killing of the victim. Linwood was sentenced to death for the abduction and murder of John Gallaher, while J.B. received two death sentences, one each of the murders of Judy Barton and her son Harvey.

A Richmond judge presiding at one of the trials summed up the case following the verdict, "this was the vilest rampage of rape, murder and robbery that the court has seen in thirty years."

Both were sent to death row at Mecklenburg Correctional Center near Boydton in early 1980. There, they were disruptive inmates, who used their guile and physical prowess to threaten fellow inmate and guard alike. A flourishing drug and weapon trade operated at the prison under their command.

They were the ringleaders in the May 31, 1984 breakout from death row. Both Brileys expressed strong interest in killing the officers that they had taken hostage, another inmate stopped them from dousing lighter fluid in the cell to do so. Yet another inmate, Wilbert Evans stopped Linwood Briley as he was about to rape a female nurse who had been taken hostage.

Splitting off from their two remaining free escapees at Philadelphia, the Brileys went to live with their uncle in the north part of the city. They were captured on June 19th by a heavily fire powered and amassed group of FBI agents and police. Returned to Virginia, few sought to plead for their lives to be spared.

In short order, the remaining appeals (heard by some 70 different appellate judges) ran out for both. They were executed in the electric chair at the Virginia State Penitentiary. Linwood was put to death on October 12, 1984, J.B. followed on April 18th of the following year.

At no point did either Briley admit responsibility or express remorse for their horrific crimes. Rather, they seemed embarrassed only that they had been captured upon making their escape from Mecklenburg. James Briley was particularly defiant in his final interview with the media shortly before his execution. He hoped that a book about his life being written by his new spouse would turn a profit for his family, because 'money can make life a little bit easier for everyone'.

Their crimes scarred the consciences of Richmond citizens for many years afterwards. Fortunately, as they were executed, neither James nor Linwood Briley will endanger, rob, maim or kill any private citizen or officer of the law. If they had been sentenced to life imprisonment, they may have been able to successfully escape again from maximum security or gotten out through parole hearings. Coincidentally, their younger brother Anthony was sentenced to a single life sentence with parole eligibility. His most recent parole interview was in September of 2002.

Sources:

Article: "So Vicious, So Violent", Page B-1, Washington Post, August 16, 1984

Book: 'Dead Run: The Untold Story of Dennis Stockton and America's Only Mass Escape from Death Row' by Joe Jackson, Times Books, 1999.

Disclaimer: This summary should not be interpreted as offering a full review of all aspects of the case, nor is it intended as a substitute for trial records. Rather, its purpose is to provide a general overview of the convicted, the circumstances of the capital offense and the victims who were involved. Consequently, selected portions of court documents and newspaper reports are edited in the interest of brevity.