

A Squirrel Hunter's Tale

Nick Johnson KNEW BETTER.

Johnson was a 12-year veteran of the Newport, Washington police department.

He KNEW Stanley Christofferson would never admit to killing Joanne Wilson.

The story began one October, 2008.

Wilson was a blonde mother of two pushing a cart of groceries out of a Newport store.

That was the last a friend saw her alive.

Posters circulated bearing her picture and a phone number.

Her picture appeared on cereal boxes.

And Christofferson?

He was a thirty-two-year old homeless man who admitted being hungry that day.

Wilson's friend (Lillian Smith) picked Christofferson out of a lineup.

Smith recognized him as someone there that day.

Wilson's husband Chuck grew concerned when she was hours late returning at the agreed time.

He paced the floor.

Then called police.

Her vehicle was found in a wooded area near home.

Searchers formed a meticulous hand-by-hand line there searching for clues.

Snatches of hair.

Clothing.

Anything.

No trace of her.

The searchers ranged from a broadcaster to a thirty -five year-old mechanic to a retired schoolteacher.

Johnson was TROUBLED.

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Wilson's children were without a mother.

Johnson had a partner detective (Ray Jones.)

Jones was a thirteen-year department veteran.

Days of probing turned into nights.

Then BLURRED back into days.

Once-promising leads became dead ends.

But experience taught Johnson and Jones to expect that.

This was their first major felony case working together.

Others had been misdemeanors (such as marijuana possession, minor thefts, etc.)

They suspected Smith wasn't telling them everything.

So they continued probing.

Questioning.

Smith made numerous trips to police headquarters.

Along with Christofferson.

Christofferson was staying in a motel room.

Authorities were still looking for a body.

Finally, SMITH CRACKED.

She told police they were part way home when Wilson realized she'd forgotten her purse.

Back to the store they went.

Smith said she went into the store for the purse.

Then when she came back out she saw Wilson talking to Christofferson.

She said Christofferson was clearly homeless.

Even carried a sign.

He seemed anxious.

Smith said the conversation appeared tense

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She said they then got into the vehicle.

They went in the direction of what she assumed was a local food bank.

Which seemed odd.

Considering that Smith had her purse.

Smith handed in the purse.

A BREAK in the case came when two squirrel hunters stumbled upon Wilson's body.

The body was found in a ditch adjacent to the wooded area where her vehicle was located.

Cause of death?

Strangulation, said the Medical Examiner.

Christofferson was an obvious "person of interest."

But Johnson and Jones knew that nothing could be taken for granted.

Even though Christofferson's fingerprints were all over Wilson's car.

Christofferson was arrested

He was accused of deliberate homicide.

Bond was set at a million dollars.

Trial was scheduled for November 1.

Christofferson (meanwhile) felt tempted.

Tempted with bedsheets.

Suicide.

The so-called "easy way out."

Those impulses began when he was a high school senior,

Surely, he reasoned, no one would miss just another homeless man.

He waited.

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And WAITED.

His best chance came after dinner one evening.

The lights went out.

Christofferson stripped a sheet off his bed.

He slung one end over an overhanging pipe.

Christofferson tied a knot on one end.

And fashioned a noose around his neck with the other.

He stood on a chair.

Then contemplated kicking the chair out from under him.

But the lights flicked back on.

The area was heavily patrolled.

Johnson became curious about Christofferson.

How did he become homeless?

Johnson learned that Christofferson came from a devout Christian family in northern California.

His father was a truck driver.

Christofferson's mother was a housewife.

He had one brother and a sister.

The father was deceased.

His relationship with the brother was strained.

He became homeless when he

Lost his job at a Newport-area lumber mill.

Unemployment compensation DIDN'T COVER THE RENT.

And food.

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On and on.

Life inside jail got SLOWLY BETTER.

Emphasize “slowly.”

Herman Miller was the prosecuting attorney.

Miller (predictably) had little sympathy for Christofferson.

James Olsen was Christofferson's public defender.

Judge William Jameson would preside over the trial.

November 1 (opening day for the two-week trial) dawned BRIGHT AND CLEAR.

Location: Newport's Pend O'Reille County courthouse.

A six-man, five-woman jury was seated.

Miller (in his opening argument) stressed the many places Christofferson's fingerprints appeared on Wilson's car.

“ELEVEN?” he said.

“THIRTEEN?”

He noted the groceries in the vehicle were missing.

Miller argued Christofferson killed Wilson for the groceries.

The defense (in its opening statement) countered that no groceries were found on Christofferson when he was arrested.

Squirrel hunter William Maxness detailed how he and a friend found Wilson's body.

He said they “happened” upon the body in a place rich with acorns.

Squirrels don't eat red oak acorns.

They store them.

MAXNESS said he had a squirrel in his gunsights, and almost stepped on the body.

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The body had been outside for weeks.

Testimony wore on.

Day after day.

Miller argued Christofferson killed Wilson to silence her.

Defense attorney Olsen argued if that had been his intent he could have done it long before.

He also cited Christofferson's lack of a prior record.

November 14: the case went to the jury.

The jury's verdict the following day: guilty.

Next step: sentencing.

Miller declined to seek the death penalty because of Washington State's recent failures in such cases

Jameson sentenced Christofferson on January 2 to life with no chance of parole.

He was sent to the state penitentiary in Walla Walla.