

A Killer's Only Confidant: The Man Who Caught Susan Smith

By Rick Bragg

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The case of a lifetime is closed for Howard Wells. The reporters and the well-wishers have begun to drift away, leaving the Union County Sheriff at peace. He will try to do a little fishing when the police radio is quiet, or just sit with his wife, Wanda, and talk of anything but the murderer Susan Smith.

It bothers him a little that he told a lie to catch her, but he can live with the way it all turned out. Mrs. Smith has been sentenced to life in prison.

Still, now and then his mind drifts back to nine days last autumn, and he thinks how it might have gone if he had been clumsy, if he had mishandled it. It leaves him a little cold.

For those nine days -- from Mrs. Smith's drowning of her two little boys on Oct. 25 until she finally confessed on Nov. 3 -- he handled her like a piece of glass, afraid her brittle psyche would shatter and leave him with the jagged edges of a case that might go unsolved for weeks, months or forever.

"Susan was all we had," Sheriff Wells said, sitting in his living room the other day with a sweating glass of ice tea in his hand. If he had lost her to suicide, or to madness, because he had pushed too hard, there would have been nowhere else to turn. There had been no accomplices, no confidants, no paper trails.

The manhunt for the fictitious young black man she had accused of taking her children in a carjacking would have continued. The bodies of the boys would have continued to rest at the bottom of nearby John D. Long Lake, under 18 feet of water. The people of the county would have been left to wonder, blame and hate, divided by race and opinion over what truly happened the night she gave her babies to the lake.

Even if the car had been found, it would have yielded no proof, no clues, that everything had not happened just as she said, Mr. Wells continued. He would have been left not only with the unsolved crime but also with the burden of having driven a distraught and -- for all anyone would know -- innocent woman to suicide at the age of 23.

Mr. Wells says he has no doubt that he and other investigators walked a tightrope with Mrs. Smith's mental state and that as the inquiry closed around her, she planned to kill herself. For nine days she lived in a hell of her own making, surrounded by weeping, doting relatives she had betrayed in the worst way. "She had no one to turn to," he said.

So although he was her hunter, he also became the person she could lean on, rely on, trust. But unlike Mrs. Smith, he had no way of knowing that the boys were already dead, had no way of knowing that they were not locked in a car or a closet, freezing, starving.

Someday the Smith case will be in law-enforcement textbooks. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has already asked Mr. Wells to put down in writing the procedures he used in the case, as well as any useful anecdotes from it.

But the story of how he, with the help of others, was able to bring the investigation to a close in little more than a week begins not with anything he did but with who he is.

Mr. Wells, 43, is the antithesis of the redneck Southern sheriff. He has deer heads mounted on his wall but finished at the top of his class in the F.B.I. Academy's training course. He collects guns but quotes Supreme Court decisions off the top of his head.

"I'm not a smart fellow," he said. But tell that to the people who work for him and around him, and they just roll their eyes. When the attention of the nation turned to Union in those nine days last fall, and in much of the nine months since, "we were lucky he was here," said Hugh Munn, a spokesman for the State Department of Law Enforcement.

People in the county say they like him because he is one of them. He knows what it feels like to work eight hours a day in the nerve-straining clatter and roar of the textile mills that dominate Union's economy: after high school, he worked blue-collar jobs until he was hired by the town's police force at the age of 23.

He went on to be a deputy in the county Sheriff's Department. Then, for several years, he stalked poachers and drug peddlers as an agent with the State Wildlife and Marine Resources Division.

When his brother-in-law quit as Sheriff in 1992, Mr. Wells himself ran, as a 10-to-1 underdog. He promised not to operate under a good ol' boy system of favors gained and owed, and white voters and black voters liked his plain-spokenness and the fact that he was neither backslapper nor backscratcher.

He won, by just 10 votes.

His mother, Julia Mae, was then in the hospital dying of cancer. She had lain there unmoving for hours but opened her eyes when he walked in after the election.

"Who won?" she asked.

His father, John, has Lou Gehrig's disease, and every day Mr. Wells goes by to care for him. The Sheriff went without sleep when the Susan Smith saga began on Oct. 25 but did not skip his visits to his father.

The Wellses have no children. Wanda suffered a miscarriage a few years ago, so they have become godparents to children of friends and neighbors. The Smith case pitted a man who wants children against a woman who threw hers away.

His investigation had to take two tracks. One, using hundreds of volunteers and a national crime computer web, operated on the theory that Mrs. Smith was telling the truth. The other, the one that would build a bond between a weeping mother and a doubting Sheriff, focused on her.

Mr. Wells says Mrs. Smith never imagined, would never have believed, that the disappearance of her children would bring in the F.B.I., the state police, national news organizations. He thinks that when she concocted her story, she believed that the loss of the boys would pass like any other local crime.

Like other investigators, he was suspicious of her early on. As he talked to her only minutes after she had reported her children missing, he asked her whether the carjacker had done anything to her sexually. She smiled.

It would be months before the comprehensive history of her troubled life, of suicide attempts, sexual molestation, deep depression and affairs with married men, including her own stepfather, became known. But as bits and pieces of it fell from her lips during questioning, and as cracks appeared in her already unstable mental state, Mr. Wells began to realize that Mrs. Smith, and the case, could come apart in his hands.

He had to hold her together even as he and other investigators picked her story apart, had to coax and soothe and even pray beside her, until he sensed that the time was right to confront her and try to trick her into confessing.

And he had to shield her from others, who might push too hard. Once, on Oct. 27, a state agent accused her outright. She cursed loudly and stormed away.

After that, the people who had contact with her were limited. With the assistance of Pete Logan, a warm, grandfatherly former F.B.I. agent now with the state police, Mr. Wells asked for her help in finding the boys, but did not accuse her.

The whole time, her family, her hometown and much of America were following her story, sharing her agony.

"She couldn't turn to her family, she couldn't ask for an attorney," said Mr. Wells. "She painted herself into a corner where no one could help her."

On Nov. 3, he told her, gently, that he knew she was lying, that by coincidence his own deputies had been undercover on a narcotics case at the same crossroad where she said her babies had been stolen, and at the same time, and that the officers had seen nothing.

Actually there had been no such stakeout.

He prayed with her again, holding her hands, and she confessed. "I had a problem telling the lie," he said as his story unfolded in his living room the other day. "But if that's what it takes, I'd do it again."

After the confession was signed, as she sat slumped over in her chair, there was still one thing he had to know.

"Susan," he asked, "how would all this have played out?"

"I was going to write you a letter," she said, "and kill myself."

He feels sorry for her, and is disgusted by the men who used her and in their own ways contributed to the tragedy. But he is not surprised that a 23-year-old mill secretary could fool the whole nation, at least for a little while.

"Susan Smith is smart in every area," he said, "except life."

It's 'extremely rare' for a mother to kill her children, crime writer says

By Knight-Ridder Newspapers

THE BALTIMORE SUN

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No one wants to believe a mother is capable of murdering her children.

"It's extremely rare," said best-selling author Ann Rule.

When the Seattle crime writer heard about Susan Smith's claim that a stranger had stolen her car and abducted her two young boys, another case came to Ms. Rule's mind.

"The minute I heard about it, I had my own feelings of *deja vu*," said Ms. Rule during a telephone interview yesterday.

She remembered Diane Downs, the mother from Eugene, Ore., who claimed one night in May 1983 that a stranger had flagged down her car on an isolated rural road and shot her three children. One child died; the other two were severely wounded. Downs was later convicted of shooting her children.

Ms. Rule spent three years writing "Small Sacrifices," a best-selling book on the case that was turned into a TV movie starring Farrah Fawcett. Her work on the book made her more attentive to child-abduction cases.

Ten days ago, Ms. Rule heard news reports about Ms. Smith, a Union County, S.C., mother who claimed a black man with a gun stole her car and drove off with her two sons, 3-year-old Michael and 14-month old Alex.

"My first reaction was 'Oh, that poor mother,'" said Ms. Rule. But, as a former police officer, Ms. Rule grew skeptical of Ms. Smith's story.

For one thing, she said, most car jackers only want cars. If they discover kids after they've taken the car, they usually leave the kids.

Ms. Smith told investigators the gunman would not allow her to take her children, saying he didn't have time.

"Most mothers would die protecting our babies," said Ms. Rule, mother of four children and a foster son.

The entire nation, it seemed, kept a 10-day vigil hoping to hear of the safe return of the Smith children. Police yesterday found Ms. Smith's car in a South Carolina lake with two bodies inside. She was charged with two counts of murder in the deaths of her sons.

Dr. Herbert Modlin, a Topeka, Kan., forensic psychologist, has testified about the mental conditions of women accused of killing their kids.

"The roots of it are kind of irrational usually," said Dr. Modlin.

Experts say some of the mothers are poor, young, uneducated women who can't handle the responsibilities of motherhood. Others have psychiatric disorders. Still others are impaired by drug or alcohol abuse.

Still other child-killers are driven by guilt. "The children are often seen as products of sin -- sex is sin, in other words," Dr. Modlin said.

Some mothers kill their children while in the throes of postpartum depression. But mothers who kill toddlers are even more rare, Dr. Modlin said.

Statistics don't show how often mothers kill their children. But child murders, in general, are rare. In 1992, five North Carolina children under the age of 1 were murdered, according to the State Bureau of Investigation. Ten more between the ages of 1 and 5 were killed.

Ms. Rule said women kill for different reasons than men. Those reasons usually involve love -- including revenge or jealousy -- or money.

"They plan their murder much more carefully than men do," said Rule. "They tend to kill someone they know, someone who is related, someone who trusts them, someone you would expect them to protect."

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A Woman's False Accusation Pains Many Blacks

By Don Terry

Nov. 6, 1994



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As racial hoaxes go, the lies Susan Smith told in Union, S.C., about a black man stealing her two children were not novel or new, but they shot around the world anyway as the gospel truth spoken by a grieving mother.

Now, with the news that Mrs. Smith has confessed to killing her own offspring comes a different kind of grief -- a weary, when-will-it-ever-end sadness.

"I guess she figured if she said a black man did it people would believe her no matter what kind of story she came up with," said Tyrone Mason, a 38-year-old tennis coach in Chicago. "That's what hurts. As long as it's allegedly a black man involved, America will fall for anything."

In nearly two dozen interviews from Boston to Los Angeles, on street corners in Union and Harlem and in ivory towers in Evanston, Ill., black people, especially black men, bemoaned what many said the small town saga represented beyond the murder of innocents: another assault on the souls and honor of black folk.

"It just goes to show that racism is alive and well and free in America," said Inez Chappell, a 67-year-old retired manicurist in Baltimore who grew up on stories of the Scottsboro Boys, the 1930's case of nine black teen-agers falsely accused of raping two white women.

On a street corner in Harlem, not far from where countless rallies for the Scottsboro Boys were held, Michael Major, a 29-year-old security guard, said it made him sad that desperate people think blaming blacks will solve their problems.

"It's kind of upsetting after a while," he said, "and it gets to be very stressful."

Experts say the lies the 23-year-old mother told to cover her trail fit a long history of scapegoating black men for the ills of the nation.

"This case demonstrates once again the stereotypical view of black men in America, that they are other, that they are dangerous, that they should be imprisoned," said Aldon Morris, who is black and the head of the sociology department at Northwestern University.

"And this view, of course, is nothing new," he said. "It was the same view that guided lynch mobs during the days of segregation in the South. It is the same view that causes black men to be stopped, searched and harassed on a routine basis by the police."

But the voices bemoaning the power of racial lies do not belong only to blacks.

During a shopping trip to Atlanta on Friday, the day Mrs. Smith was charged with murdering her two sons, Louise Taylor, a white school psychologist from Mount Pleasant, S.C., said Mrs. Smith had chosen the right-colored monster to generate the most sympathy and fear for her plight, especially in the hearts of whites.

"It did make her story seem more likely," Ms. Taylor said. "I wouldn't like to think we're all prejudiced, but I guess there's that typical profile of the old bad black guy. We're just too ready to accept that."

In recent years, there has been a string of high-profile crimes like the one in Union.

In Boston, the South Carolina case has brought back ugly memories of another murder which was initially pinned on a fictitious black carjacker: the 1989 case of Charles and Carol Stuart.

Mr. Stuart shot and killed his pregnant wife, Carol, as they drove home from a childbirth class. He blamed the shooting on a black man. Dozens of black men were searched and questioned by the police.

One black man, Willie Bennett, was arrested and charged in the killing before Mr. Stuart's story began to unravel and Mr. Stuart jumped to his death into the Boston Harbor.

Kelvin Pippins, 23, who is a hospital orderly, was a teen-ager when the police swept through his housing development, stopping and searching every young black man in sight.

When Mr. Pippins heard about the South Carolina case, the first thing he thought about was Charles Stuart and the hurt that episode had caused.

"It was the same exact thing," Mr. Pippins said. "I thought, 'Why'd she have to blame it on a black man. Why not a white male?' Not that race is an issue, but to cover up their hoax they use a black man. That's not good at all."

By all accounts, the authorities in Union acted much differently than their Northern counterparts did five years before. There were no mass sweeps through black neighborhoods, no humiliating searches on busy street corners.

"What she did hurt a whole lot of people here," said Deborah Jeter, who is black and was standing outside the Union County Courthouse as Mrs. Smith arrived for her first court appearance on Friday. "I volunteered to search for those boys. I prayed and then she goes and blames a black person."

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, said it appeared that police departments around the country are slowly learning not to jump so fast in cases like Mrs. Smith's.

But he is sure that sooner rather than later someone else will try to cover their own sins by blaming a black man in a knit ski cap.

"Susan Smith was in tune with the racism in society," Dr. Poussaint said. "She knew what would work best to direct attention away from her: point the finger at a black man."