

Historian aims to shed light on nearly 60-year-old cold case



Nearly 60 years ago, students at a local independent school found Geraldine Pickford choked to death on the banks of Tannery Creek.

Pickford, 40, had spent four months working as a server at St. Andrew's College before her murder, and despite considerable publicity, the person responsible for her death was never found.

But local historian David Heard aims to rekindle the cold case next Thursday, October 19, at 7 p.m. with a Gathering and Candlelight Walk, beginning at Machell Park, in Pickford's memory.

“The 40-year-old was discovered by a group of students on September 20, 1965, at the all-boys boarding school,” says the York Regional Police. “At the time, the creek ran through the college grounds near the rugby and cricket fields. She was found completely nude, her clothes strewn about nearby among pieces of garbage. Working as a server in the college's dining areas, Geraldine would clock in and clock out repeatedly throughout the day, as boys came and went to eat their meals. After clocking out for the last time and leaving the women's quarters just after 9 p.m. on September 19, Geraldine was never seen alive again.”

York Regional Police have kept the case open, providing an online hub of information available on the murder, encouraging tips that might help identify the killer.

They also provide crime scene photos and a poignant contemporary article by Sylvia Sylvie, then a staff reporter from the Toronto Telegram, delving into just who Pickford was.

“To most she was a nameless, faceless individual for her 40 years on this earth,” wrote Sylvie. “She married in 1962, but the marriage lasted six months. Few people at St. Andrew's College remember her at all, even though they had seen her day in, day out since April. Not even the salesmen who often pay particular attention to the girls who work as waitresses in the school dining room can remember her. Geraldine Pickford stood out to nobody. The most attention that has ever been paid to her has been since she died.”

Interviewing people who knew Pickford, she is quoted in the article as having red hair, chronic respiratory issues, a “great scar” on

one shoulder blade that no one who knew her knew her could pinpoint the origin.

People in her orbit sadly described her as 'moody,' 'aggravating,' 'lonely,' and perhaps most poignantly 'and telling of the time' 'insignificant.'

This is something Heard would like to help change with next week's walk.

'I went down a rabbit hole,' says Heard, who says he felt compelled to begin digging deeper when visiting a bookshop, Bookworms & Co., in the plaza adjacent to where Pickford's body was found. 'Sometimes when you're researching something it is that gut feeling and the gut feeling was right. Because of that, I fell upon her cold case and was interested to see that the YRP had loaded up just mounds and mounds of evidence, photos, maps and newspaper articles. I read the material and I got very sad ' her story is heartbreaking. [When they said she was insignificant] my first thought was that isn't possible. Everyone is significant. Everyone has a place, good or bad. People are part of our community. They shouldn't be forgotten about and that's what seemed to be happening with her.

'She was forgotten. Bless the police for putting everything out there just because it inspired me and inspired others, and we decided to get together.'

The result is a walk that will take participants from Machell Park, through the trails, to some of the sites that are significant to the case.

In preparation for the event, Heard says he was in touch with Sylvie who said she is still 'haunted' by the case.

'Geraldine's life was taken away, maybe it won't get solved, but here's what this could do: this will bring her life again,' says Heard. 'She didn't have many friends, her family didn't really know anything about her, she lost her mum when she was nine years old which resulted in living in many different communities in Ontario. If this brings the community together and it links members of our community with law enforcement in this day and age, we all win ' and who was the catalyst? Geraldine Pickford.'

For more information on the Geraldine Pickford case, visit www.yrp.ca/en/community/Geraldine-Pickford.asp.

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