



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Where were you during the Boston Strangler case?

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For many of us baby boomers and our surviving parents, AMC's *Mad Men* has served to refresh lots of memories, some pleasant and others painful, about the early 1960s ... where we were and what we were doing at the time.

Today's 50th anniversary of the first Boston Strangler attack, when 55-year-old Anna Slesers was found molested and murdered inside her 3rd floor apartment at 77 Gainsborough St., should bring back, for those of us who were living here then, some distressing recollections of the panic that enveloped the city and the suburbs for years to come.



Although the house number has since been changed, 77 Gainsborough St. was the home of 55-year-old Anna Slesers, the first murder victim linked to the Boston Strangler case.

I was 11 years old when the Boston Strangler first struck. Although the case predates the term "serial murder" by more than two decades, this was the nation's first major crime of its kind - one of Boston's more ignominious firsts. Sure, there were short-lived spree killings prior to 1962, such as the string of murders committed by Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate in the Midwest, and repeat gunslingers like Bonnie and Clyde. There were modestly infamous black widows/widowers and a variety of hideous sexual sadists. But the Boston Strangler case broke new ground in terms of multiple murder and its investigation, becoming a forerunner of the likes of Theodore Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer and too many other villains.

As a young boy living in the Oak Hill Park section of Newton, I hardly fit the lustful designs of the Strangler or his signature *modus operandi*. But that hardly prevented me from being scared and losing lots of sleep worrying that the Strangler would target my home.

It was years before the killings stopped, and longer until the welcome news that the assailant, Albert DeSalvo, was in custody and had confessed to the murders. I also recall the collective terror in 1967 when DeSalvo briefly escaped from Bridgewater as well as the mixed emotions when it was reported years later that the suspected Boston Strangler had been fatally stabbed inside Walpole State Prison.

The Boston Strangler case was unusual for that era in many respects, including some novel approaches taken by the task force to piece through the piles of evidence that grew with each additional victim. A Medical-Psychiatric Committee was established to study psychological clues emerging from the crime scenes, one of the earliest applications of behavioral/investigative profiling.

Although not of one mind, the Committee tended to believe that there were, in fact, two stranglers - one who had killed the eight older victims, ages 55 through 75, and the other who had murdered the five younger women, ages 19 through 23. However, despite the effort and some elaborate psychological theories about the killer or killers, profiling proved to be of little value in the Strangler case. Of course, the tools of profiling have improved considerably over the past half-century; still, the accuracy remains far short of that achieved by fictional profilers portrayed in television dramas.

The debate over the Strangler's identity - be it DeSalvo, DeSalvo plus one, or someone other than DeSalvo) - will likely continue at least through the 100th anniversary by which time all of us who were around Boston in 1962 and beyond will have died. This is an opportunity for us all to think back 50 years, to June 14, 1962, when the words stranger and strangler became frighteningly similar -- not just in their spelling.

I invite you, my readers, to post comments detailing your own memories of those dreadful days in Boston. Surely, some of you have tales of terror far more interesting and poignant than mine. So let's hear them.