



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

The Chillest of Cold Cases

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It was a great day for so many folks: law enforcement professionals and others with more than a passing interest in the half-century old Boston Strangler investigation. With today's stunning announcement, Albert DeSalvo -- considered by many (including his attorney F. Lee Bailey) to be the infamous Boston Strangler, yet doubted by others as a fraud -- was all but confirmed as the man who murdered Mary Sullivan in her Charles Street apartment in 1964. The last piece of evidence will soon be taken from the court-ordered exhumation of DeSalvo's body, permitting forensic analysts to go the final step beyond an already convincing familial match between semen preserved from the crime scene to a biological sample recently taken from DeSalvo's nephew.

Mary Sullivan's family has indeed anxious for the long-awaited closure. Championed by nephew Casey Sherman, the Sullivan clan (joined by the DeSalvo family) had been convinced a decade ago that Albert DeSalvo's shaky confession was pure fiction. The DNA tests arranged by Sullivan/DeSalvo alliance had apparently excluded Albert as Sullivan's murderer. This revelation then served as the cornerstone of Sherman's 2003 book, *A Rose for Mary: The Hunt for the Real Boston Strangler*, which persuaded many skeptics that DeSalvo was just a convenient scapegoat for a misguided and mismanaged investigation.



Present day view of Mary Sullivan's apartment at 44A Charles Street, Boston.

Not everyone present at the packed press conference was overjoyed about the sudden defrosting of this chilliest of cold cases. Elaine Whitfield Sharp, attorney for the DeSalvo family, had lots of concerns, not the least of which surrounded the use of covert surveillance of members of the DeSalvo family in order to gather biological evidence to use for the familial DNA comparison. It was saliva from a discarded water bottle from a nephew of Albert DeSalvo that revealed a Y-chromosome match to crime scene evidence.

Attorney Sharp criticized the practice of surreptitiously following an innocent party. However, this strategy is both legal and commonplace. Absent a search warrant, citizens do indeed have the right to privacy of their possessions (including their bodily fluids), but that protection ends with anything discarded as trash.

Even if DeSalvo is confirmed as Mary Sullivan's killer through the planned direct DNA comparison, the identity of the person who took the lives of the 10 other women considered part of the Strangler case will still be uncertain. The belief that I and many others have held that DeSalvo was responsible for many, if not all, the murders has been supported.

Lots of dedicated people in the Boston Police Department, the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office and the Office of the Massachusetts Attorney General Once deserve to be praised for this latest break in the case. However, once the direct DNA link has been established between Albert DeSalvo and the Sullivan crime scene, it will be time to put this case to rest for good. There are certainly countless fresher cases to which to devote our time and resources toward finding a solution. Even if DeSalvo did not murder all 11 Strangler victims, the one who did the remainder is undoubtedly no longer a threat to the citizens of Boston. If not already dead, then he is certainly well past his killing prime.