

Murder and then rage: Savage Caledonia killing sparked fear of lynching

By Douglas Foley and David Estok, The Spectator

IT WAS the crime of the century in Caledonia.

The savage murder of 60-year-old Dorothy Lang and the arrest of two juveniles in October 1982 generated a sense of rage among the 5,000 residents of this quiet town on the banks of the Grand River.

Only now can the full story be told, because publication bans imposed during the trials of Ronnie Ashford and Randy Edie ended when they were sentenced to life imprisonment.

One hearing ended with the trial moving to St. Catharines because the court ruled the youths could not get a fair trial in Caledonia.

The arrest of the 15½-year-old high school students, gave rise to such feelings of hostility that one court document noted a fear Ashford “would be lynched by the first person to see him.”

The Crown Attorney’s office and local newspapers were flooded with letters from civic leaders and citizens crying out for justice. An outpouring of anonymous hate mail also prompted fears of vigilante justice.

It took a 2½-year trek through the court system before Ashford and Edie pleaded guilty on April 24 to second degree murder and were given life sentences.

Haldimand County Crown attorney Steve Howarth said this week he reduced the charges from first degree murder in exchange for guilty pleas because he feared Edie might be found not guilty.

His concern arose after the Supreme Court of Ontario ruled inadmissible the contrasting versions of the murder Ashford and Edie gave to police.

“There was enough to warrant first degree murder,” Mr. Howarth said. “Dorothy Lang was kidnapped, forcibly confined and killed. That makes it first degree murder. But was there enough evidence to show that Edie was involved without those statements? There was a risk he would walk free.”

Mr. Howarth hoped to balance the reduced charge by having the court increase the time the two must spend in jail before being eligible for parole. But instead of the 20 years sought for Ashford and 15 years for Edie, Mr. Justice J.R. Barr set 12 years for Ashford and 10 for Edie. An appeal is being considered by the Ontario Attorney-General.

Mr. Howarth said he was shocked by the brutality of the crime and stunned to discover it had been committed by such young offenders. Calling it the crime of the century in Caledonia, he said it also opened his eyes to the world of juvenile crime.

“We’ve got to start realizing that juveniles commit serious crimes and it’s go to be made known that the punishment must fit the crime,” he said.

In Cold Blood

DOROTHY LANG was an unlikely candidate for a violent death.

For 60 years, her life had been as neat and well regulated as her white frame home on Caledonia's main street.

By contrast, her death on Oct. 13, 1982, was obscenely incongruous, the life all but crushed out of her in an attack of unimaginable savagery. Her back, jaw, nose and 13 ribs were broken and then she was drowned in a muddy pond by two 15½-year-old kids.

It as a cold-blooded slaying that horrified the community where Miss Lang had lived all her life.

SHE WAS well known to most of the people who lived in and around Caledonia. They remembered her as a quiet, pleasant woman, always ready with a smile and friendly greeting. She was active in community affairs and in the parish of St. Paul's Anglican Church, where she always sat in the same seat for service.

Born on the family's 200 hectares (500 acre) dairy farm, she moved to her Argyle Street North home in 1957 with her parents when they retired. Never marrying, she cared for her parents in their old age and after both died, continued to live alone in the two-storey house.

She also worked for many years as a cashier and clerk in a number of Caledonia stores where she came in contact with and got to know most of the townspeople.

Unfortunately for her, one of those people was Ronnie Ashford.

And Ashford, a boy with a history of personal and psychological problems, knew Dorothy Lang. He knew where she lived and that she worked at the Magic Mart variety

store in downtown Caledonia That is where she was when he broke into her home on the night of Oct. 11, 1982.

Disappointed because that entry had turned up only some cheap costume jewelry, Ashford returned to her home two nights later determined to find money for drugs and booze. This time, however, he was accompanied by Randy Edie.

Edie, a grade 9 classmate of Ashford in the two-year course at Cayuga Secondary School, tagged along hoping to steal enough money to take his girlfriend to a concert by he heavy metal rock group Judas Priest in Buffalo that week.

But Ashford and Edie's plans for an easy score went awry because Miss Lang was home that night. She had spent most of what was to be the last day of her life cleaning the mess from Ashford's earlier burglary and that night planned to attend a concert by the International Harvester Men's Choir at St. Paul's Church.

AT ABOUT 7 p.m., dressed and ready to go, she telephoned her second cousin, Marion Smith, of Sutherland Street in Caledonia.

"She said she was just putting in time and she called me," the cousin said. "We just got to talking and she said 'I'll have to go. There's someone at the door. I'll call you back.' That was the last I was talking to her."

Dorothy opened the front door much to the surprise of Ashford and Edie who quickly pushed their way in demanding her car keys and money.

"I Know you," a startled Miss Lang said to Ashford. 'You're Ronnie Ashford. I know your parents.'"

With those words, Dorothy Lang's fate was sealed.

"Soon as she recognized me only one thing entered my mind...kill," Ashford would later tell police. "There was nothing else to do."

RONNIE ASHFORD was no stranger to violence.

The year before he broke into Dorothy Lang's house, he was involved in an apparently motiveless but vicious daylight assault on a 54-year-old woman. He knocked her to the ground in a park and beat her repeatedly over the head as she screamed for help.

BUT ASHFORD'S dark side had emerged long before. In kindergarten, his teacher caught him squeezing a classroom pet gerbil to death and in grade 4 a classmate watched him break the neck of a kitten on the school playground.

"I taught quite a few children but Ronnie would be very hard to forget," said the kindergarten teacher. "He was a real handful. He could be an endearing little boy but he was extremely aggressive with other children. Sometimes he would take pins off the bulletin board and stick them into other children."

Ashford was diagnosed as a hyperactive child and treated with the drug Ritalin, a stimulant that has the effect of reducing the restlessness, distractibility and impulsive behaviour characteristic of the syndrome.

But Ashford's disregard for authority, his aggressive behaviour and his temper landed him in numerous fights and kept him in constant trouble. A psychiatrist later com-

pared Ashford's angry outbursts to the sudden arrival of a summer storm "that comes out of nowhere."

Psychiatrists said many of Ashford's problems stemmed from his "confused kinship relationships."

He was the illegitimate son of Pamela Ashford who was 17 when Ronnie was born June 8, 1967. At the age of three weeks, Ashford was adopted by Pamela's parents, who were considered hard-working, law-abiding people. He grew up believing his grandparents were his parents and his mother was his sister.

ASHFORD'S grandfather, Arthur, worked as a transport driver and served as an auxiliary officer with the Haldimand-Norfolk police department.

Ashford's mother moved away a few months after he was born but she continued to visit the family on a regular basis. But the mother and son relationship was stormy and never close. Instead, Ashford was close to his mother's youngest sister, Susan, and he was shattered when she died at age 21 in a car accident in the fall of 1978. Ashford was 11 and his trouble with the law began that same year.

Although the family explained Ashford's parentage situation to him in about 1981, he already knew. A teenage pregnancy would be difficult to keep quiet in a small town like Caledonia and Ashford had heard his family background on the street.

By the time he had reached 15½, Ashford had been in trouble for shooting a girl with a pellet gun, thefts, fights, break-ins, vandalism, and threatening. He was also drinking and bragged of being a heavy LSD user.

Ashford was sent to a number of juvenile homes but he managed to escape from most of them. He was released from one only three months before Miss Lang's murder. Ashford was also facing a juvenile court charge for break and enter and was still on probation for the attack on the woman in the park when he killed Miss Lang.

'Ronald is a boy with a number of psychological and personality problems of a deeply ingrained and longstanding nature,' Dr. M.H. Ben-Aron, chief of forensic services at the Clarke Institute in Toronto, would later state in a report on Ashford.

'He has not demonstrated an amenability for rehabilitation or benefitting from any of the treatment programs or resources he has been offered within the child and adolescent system. He has either abandoned the treatments or simply not responded to them.'

DR. BEN-ARON'S report on Ashford stated the youth suffered from a probable psychosexual disorder that produced sadistic tendencies illustrated by his crimes of violence against women and his admitted preference for gory movies.

Ashford's criminal and personal behaviour led the doctor to classify him as an undersocialized and aggressive type.

Despite the problems, Ashford made it to grade 8 but he failed the year and was given the alternative of repeating or entering a two-year high school course. He chose the latter and in September of 1982 began attending Cayuga Secondary School where he first met Randy Edie.

It was a friendship that would prove costly for both and fatal for Dorothy Lang.

USING A knife from the kitchen, Ashford pushed and prodded Miss Lang up the stairs and into her second-floor bedroom as Edie went to the house's attached garage to get her car for their escape.

After forcing her to undress, Ashford used masking tape and venetian blind cord to tie Miss Lang's arms and legs and he fastened a piece of tape over her mouth to prevent her from crying out.

He then wrapped a pair of nylon stockings around her neck and twice twisted them hard in an unsuccessful attempt to choke the woman to death.

Meanwhile, a frightened and panicky Edie was unable to open the garage door and he ran up the stairs to get Ashford. Deciding to flee, the two took \$40 and ordered the woman to dress. They took her to the garage where Ashford broke open the door and shoved Miss Lang behind the wheel of her turquoise 1966 Chevy Nova. He got in beside her while Edie climbed into the back seat.

Miss Lang backed out of the driveway on to Highway 6 but when she attempted to turn toward downtown Caledonia, Ashford punched her in the face and ordered her to drive in the other direction and out of town. Once in the country, Ashford took over the driving and told Edie the woman would have to be killed because she had recognized him.

'We thought about shooting her,' Ashford later told police. 'But we didn't have a gun so we thought about drowning her and that's what we decided to do. We ended up beating her to death. That was a little cruel.'

ASHFORD drove on Highway 54 toward York and after turning off on Emerson Road stopped the car. A light drizzle of rain fell,

both youths led the woman into a bushy, isolated area.

Ashford took a tree branch and began swinging it at Miss Lang who tried to hide behind Edie. But he pushed her away and then both began to beat her. During the attack, Edie remembered he had left the car lights on and he ran to the vehicle to shut them off.

When he returned, the woman was on the ground with Ashford standing over her hitting her. Edie began to punch and kick the woman.

As she lay unconscious, Edie and Ashford dragged Miss Lang to a swampy pond and dropped her broken body face down in about six inches of water. Despite the savagery of the beating that left the woman with a broken back, a broken nose, broken jaw and 13 broken ribs, the official cause of Miss Lang's death was drowning.

Dr. James Ferris, former chief of pathology at Hamilton General Hospital, has performed more than 5,000 post mortem investigations in his career and of those, more than 500 involved homicide. But Dr. Ferris would later say he had never encountered injuries as severe as those inflicted on Dorothy Lang.

His report stated the chest injuries, "were typical of someone whose chest has been stomped on...and would indicate something like someone jumping on the chest."

With Edie at the wheel of Miss Lang's car, the murderers sped away but lost control and ran the vehicle into a ditch. Unable to free the car, the pair split up and went home.

ASHFORD began hitchhiking in York and was given a ride in a pick-up truck by two Cayuga secondary students he knew.

"I just gotta get out of here," a nervous and visibly upset Ashford told the driver as he squeezed into the cab. "Could you give me a ride to Caledonia. I'll give you ten bucks for gas."

Ashford told the driver he and Edie had stolen a car and smashed it going 110 miles an hour.

Two days later, after learning of the death of Miss Lang, the driver of the pick-up truck went to the Cayuga OPP detachment on Highway 3. "I might have some information that could help you," he said.

ONE THOUGHT dominated Randy Edie's mind as he tried desperately to open the garage door at Dorothy Lang's house — He didn't want his mother to find out what he was doing.

Edie was always close to his mother and had continued living with her and her new husband after his parents divorced. He still visited his father and it was during those visits to Amherstburg near Windsor over the previous two summers that Edie had his first involvement with crime.

BUT STEALING apple strudels in a bakery, smoking pot and drinking under age were a far cry from the break and enter at Dorothy Lang's and a world away from what was to happen. In a matter of a few fateful hours, Randy Edie went from juvenile delinquent to cold-blooded murderer.

Psychiatrists would later label Edie insecure, intellectually slow and immature

with his emotional and intellectual development lagging as much as three to four years behind his age.

But more importantly they found Edie was “easily influenced...and tended to be a conformist within whatever social context he finds himself,” even murder.

Edie had ignored a friend’s pleas not to get involved with Ashford on the day of the killing saying: “Don’t worry about it, I ain’t going to get caught.” The next day he bragged about “getting away clean” and offered to sell Miss Lang’s car for \$50.

But the police investigation was well underway by this time. It had begun shortly after midnight when a Haldimand-Norfolk regional policeman on routine patrol noticed the garage door open and the lights on at Miss Lang’s house.

Aware of the earlier break-in and accustomed to the woman’s normally fastidious habits, the policeman checked the house and discovered evidence of the crime.

The next morning, Miss Lang’s car was found and after a short search of the area, her body was located at about 1:25 p.m.

Meanwhile, life seemed to continue normally for Edie and Ashford and both attended school the day after the murder. Ashford maintained a cool attitude but Edie, despite his earlier bravado, was showing signs of unravelling as the day progressed.

“Randy’s upstairs scared to death,” Ashford told a few friends. “We stole a car and he’s afraid he’s going to get caught.”

IN A telephone call to his girlfriend that afternoon, Edie talked about Miss Lang and told of standing in front of the woman’s

house and seeing her being brought out on a stretcher.

Ashford was also talking about Miss Lang but he had a lot more to say in a phone conversation with his girlfriend.

“He called me up and said he had done something real stupid, that he was scared and everything. That he had to tell someone that he had broke into a house in Caledonia where an older lady had lived and he knew her. He said they took her to the dump in York and one of them had kicked her in the mouth.”

By the following day, Friday, Oct. 15, word had spread about the discovery of Miss Lang’s body and some students were pointing fingers at Ashford and Edie, who had bragged of their break-in.

One student approached Edie in the cafeteria and jokingly asked” ‘Why’d you have to kill her?’” much to the dismay of an obviously upset and very nervous Edie who said he would run to Buffalo if the police came for him.

In contrast, Ashford appeared cool and collected and even told another girl, who he had met only a month earlier of taking money from an entry.

At about 2 p.m., Constable Bob Adams and three other policemen went to room 209 at Cayuga secondary where Ashford and Edie were in a math class.

Principle Bill Coon, after locking exit doors in the area, had Ashford come out of the room and Const. Adams identified himself.

“I am arresting you for the murder of Dorothy Lang,” he said and read Ashford his

constitutional rights as the other policeman put him against a locker and frisked him.

“How come I got blame for this? Ashford asked as he was led from the school to a waiting police car.

“Because of the people you talked to,” he was told.

“Have you got proof of where I was that night? I have. I was with Randy Edie on the Abbey Road. We’re going to Cayuga are we?”

With Ashford on his way to the detachment, Constable Ron Fox and another policeman returned to the classroom with Mr. Coon who called for Randy Edie to come out.

“Are you Randy Edie?” Const. Fox asked.

“Yeah, why?” Edie replied.

“I am involved in the investigation of the murder of Miss Dorothy Lang, I have reason to believe you were involved. I am arresting you in connection with this matter.”

CONST. FOX grabbed Edie by the left arm and could feel the youth’s muscles tighten. Edie swallowed hard several times and his heart could be seen beating under his shirt.

The police then searched Edie’s locker before taking him to the OPP office in Cayuga.

AT THE police station at about 3:15 p.m., Ashford was placed in an interview room where he began asking questions of Const. Adams.

“Like all I did was drive the car. That’s it. Is that still classed as murder for me?” he asked.

“You’re charged with murder,” Const. Adams replied.

“All I did was drive the car. Does that mean I’m still charged with murder? Wouldn’t that be just theft or something like that?”

“No, it’s still murder.”

“I hope I don’t get jail for it. So did someone see me do this or what?”

“We’ll discuss that later.”

“So I’ll probably go to jail or training school.”

“Possibly to the observation home.”

“Not to jail I hope. I’m not allowed to smoke, eh?”

“No one under 16 can smoke.”

At about 3:45 p.m. Ashford’s grandfather, Arthur, arrived.

“Well Ron you got much to say? There’s not much I can say. You know what this will do to your mother.”

AT ABOUT 4:20 p.m., Const. Adams again interviewed Ashford with the grandfather present.

“Did you break into her house Monday night?”

“No.”

“You didn’t expect her to be home Wednesday?”

“No we thought she’d be at work that night.”

Mr. Ashford then interrupted saying: “Do you know what this means to you and the

family? You can't see a dog hurt but can do that to an old lady?"

Ashford replied: "There was nothing else to do."

Meanwhile, Edie was taken to another office in the detachment and was told by Const. Fox he was formally charged with the murder of Dorothy Lang.

"I don't know anything about the murder," he said, maintaining that he had been behind his house tracking a racoon.

"I fully appraised him of the police investigation as to why we had come to arrest him," Const. Fox said. "I noticed he was very nervous. I was watching his chest rise and fall very rapidly. His breathing was shallow." Edie was also avoiding eye contact with the policeman and wiping his hands on his pants. "I told him we had Ashford in custody."

"How do I know you have him? I want to see him before I say anything."

Const. Fox took Edie to where Ashford was sitting. The sight of his partner in crime shook Edie.

He was taken back to the office and Const. Fox asked; "What's it going to be? Do we get at the truth?"

Edie began to cry and said: "Alright, where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning," the policeman replied.

At about 3:45 p.m. an emotionally upset Glen Edie, the accused's father, arrived and embraced his son.

"Randy, tell me you didn't mean to do it, my God, how could you, your life is ruined," the father said.

"I did it dad, we did it," Edie said and both began to cry.

Why the story can be told

ALL KILLINGS are shocking, but the murder of Dorothy Lang was particularly horrid because of the brutal and cold-blooded manner in which it was done.

Her killers were two boys whose identities were protected because they were 15-year-old juveniles. After a series of hearings, they were ordered to stand trial for first-degree murder in adult court.

They could then be identified as Ronald Ashford and Randy Edie, but the court banned publication of evidence at that stage of the proceedings in order to ensure a fair trial.

For the same reason, publication bans were imposed at their preliminary hearing and at a hearing which resulted in a change of venue.

Another publication ban was imposed at their trial when the jury was excluded while the prosecution and defence argued over admissibility of evidence, including confessions which were ruled inadmissible.

The trial ended abruptly when the Crown made a deal with the defence to accept a plea of guilty to second-degree murder. Ashford was sentenced to life imprisonment with no eligibility for parole for 12 years. Edie was sentenced to life imprisonment with no eligibility for parole for 10 years.

Only now can the evidence entered at various stages of the judicial proceedings be made public.

Timetable for justice

Here is timetable charting the course of justice after Ronald Ashford and Randy Edie entered the home of Dorothy Lang at about 7 p.m. on Oct. 13, 1982.

Oct. 14, 1982—Miss Lang's battered body is found in the late afternoon, off a Seneca township sideroad about two miles east of Highway 54.

Oct. 15, 1982—Police arrest Ashford and Edie at Cayuga Secondary School and charge them with first-degree murder under the Juvenile Delinquents Act. They were not identified at this point.

Dec. 20, 1982—The two juveniles appear for a section nine hearing. Under the Juvenile Delinquents Act, juveniles who commit a serious crime can be tried in adult court. But before the two can be transferred from one level to the other, the crown must prove four basic facts. First the child involved must be over 14 years old at the time of the offence; the juvenile must be charged with an indictable offence; it must be in the best interest of the accused to have his trial transferred; and it must be in the best interest of the community to have the case moved from juvenile to adult court.

The section nine session hears testimony from psychologists, child-care experts, former school teachers, and police experts who replay the details of the brutal death of Dorothy Lang before Family Court Judge Ross Fair. At its conclusion, Judge Fair states he will review the evidence before handing down a decision.

June 29, 1983—Judge Fair rules Ashford should stand trial for first degree murder in adult court. Edie, however, should remain in the juvenile system.

Lawyers for both sides immediately launch appeals. The Crown wants both tried in adult court, while lawyers for Ashford want his trial in juvenile court.

Oct. 25, 1983—The prosecution's appeal hearing on Judge Fair's ruling is delayed. Both sides want written copies of the judge's ruling and the matter is adjourned.

Feb. 24, 1984—Ontario Supreme Court Judge N.D. McRae rules that both juveniles should be tried in adult court. Lawyers for Ashford and Edie announce they will appeal the decision to the Ontario Court of Appeal.

April 6, 1984—Ashford escapes from a detention home in Oakville. He is arrested three days later in Hagersville.

A few weeks later, the appeal to have the two youths tried in juvenile court is dropped.

Nov. 19, 1984—A preliminary hearing is held in Cayuga to determine if there is enough evidence to warrant a trial on first degree murder charges. After several days of testimony, Ashford and Edie are committed for trial.

Jan. 29, 1985—Ontario Supreme Court Justice J.R. Barr rules the pair could not get a fair trial in Cayuga because of the intense publicity surrounding the case. The trial is moved to St. Catharines.

April 1, 1985—Ashford and Edie plead not guilty to first degree murder. A jury is sworn in but immediately sent home for the next two weeks while the lawyers argue about admissibility of evidence

April 17, 1985—Ashford and Edie plead guilty to second degree murder and the

jury is dismissed without having heard any evidence.

April 24, 1985—The youths are sentenced to life imprisonment.