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Samuel Little: A Brief Summary and Analysis of America's Most Prolific Serial Killer

In 2014, a serial killer who had murdered for over forty years was sentenced to life in prison for the murders of three women (FBI, 2018; Meding et al., 2020a). It was not until 2018 that police discovered that this killer's actual body count was over ninety victims (Meding et al., 2020b). From 1970 to 2005, Samuel Little, also known as Samuel McDowell, sought out female prostitutes and transients (Meding et al., 2020a). After having sex with his victims, Little would strangle them using only his hands and dispose of their bodies (Meding et al., 2020a). He was eventually dubbed the "choke and stroke killer" by the Los Angeles Police Department because of the nature of his crimes--Little became sexually aroused while choking his victims and may have participated in masturbation during the commission of said crimes (Lauren, 2018; Pak, 2019). His lengthy killing spree and large number of victims eventually earned him recognition as the most prolific serial killer in United States history. As such, this prominent murderer presents many traits of interest to criminal analysts and researchers. In the last several decades, analysts have developed what are called *profiles* of serial killers—sets of information that identify common patterns and characteristics of the general serial killer population (Douglas et al., 2013). This information has greatly helped law enforcement professionals identify murderers by their behavior and background. Through the following discussion of his life and crimes, readers will recognize that Samuel Little reflects many of the traits discussed in the studies and profiles, as well as some notable differences that make him a unique killer.

General Trends

Those who study serial murder have made it a goal to identify common trends in this type of crime. Throughout the years, multiple studies have been conducted in order to gain this information (Douglas et al., 2013; Hickey, 2016). Many of these studies have pointed to some

common characteristics of serial murders and their perpetrators. Interestingly, Samuel Little reflects many of these trends. According to a study examining solo male serial killers from 2004 to 2014, males make up the vast majority of serial killers in the country (Hickey, 2016). These male killers largely target adults, with a significant number focusing on female victims. The same study found that the average age at which a solo male serial killer starts committing murders is 29.5 (Hickey, 2016). According to *The 93 Victims of Samuel Little*, a TV mini-series examining Samuel Little, he was thirty years old at the time of his first murder (Meding et al., 2020a). Little also chose to strangle his victims, which is a common method for male killers, though not as common as shooting (Hickey, 2016). Additionally, Little had an accomplice for a period of time—an elderly woman who assisted him in the commission of theft offenses (Meding et al., 2020a). Many familiar serial killers are lone wolves; however, it is actually not uncommon for killers to have partners. It is possible that nearly twenty-five percent of serial killers have one or more accomplices (Hickey, 2016). It is also common for lust murderers like Little to have a relationship or live-in partner, as he did (Hickey, 2016; Meding et al., 2020a). Clearly, Samuel Little reflects much of the typical profile of a serial killer, but there are also some factors that may surprise the public. Although statistics prove otherwise, media representations have led the general population to believe exaggerated serial killer stereotypes, including that they are all Caucasian men who are socially incompetent (Hickey, 2016; Picart & Browning, 2015). Samuel Little was neither one of these things. He appeared as a charming individual who was able to seduce dozens of women (Meding et al., 2020b). Perhaps even more interesting, however, is Little's race. As an African American man, Samuel Little completely defies society's stereotype of the white male serial killer. Another interesting point to make is that the public typically view serial killers as people who cannot stop killing once they have started. This is actually not the

case, with serial killers such as Dahmer and BTK appearing to have periods of cessation (Hickey, 2016). Little told police that his last murder occurred seven years prior to being arrested (Meding et al., 2020b). Lastly, though many serial killers commit their crimes over a period of a few years and in a local area (Hickey, 2016), the so-called “choke and stroke killer” targeted victims for a shocking thirty-five years, in more than fifteen states (Meding et al., 2020b). Serial killer expert Dr. Joni Johnston notes the uncommon characteristics of Samuel Little’s length of killing, saying: “A thirty-five year career is incredibly long. It is really unprecedented to have a serial killer who starts around age twenty-nine to thirty and commits his last murder at sixty-five” (Meding et al., 2020b). Little’s mobility was also atypical of most serial killers. According to Hickey (2016), the large majority of serial killers remain in one local area during their career. This mobility often makes it difficult for police departments to recognize similar patterns of killing across states and jurisdictions, which may be the reason many highway serial killers escape arrest for an extended period of time (Hickey, 2016). These unique aspects are of particular interest when examining Little’s history.

Childhood

Samuel Little, originally Samuel McDowell, was born in 1940 to a teenage prostitute in Reynolds, Georgia (Pak, 2019). Allegedly abandoned by his mother, Little lived with his grandmother in Lorain, Ohio, for most of his childhood (Pak, 2019). These early years of his life were challenging, as the two moved often and Little struggled in school (Harring, 2019; Pak, 2019). The time and area in which he was raised were also characterized by many stressors: in the 1940s, the conflict surrounding racial segregation was still raging, and the town of Lorain had limited economic opportunities (Lorain Historical Society, n.d.). These factors are of importance because relational and socioeconomic stressors often play a role in future

experiences. Criminologist Eric Hickey (2016) states that such traumatizations in “the formative years of the offender’s life” may act as contributing factors to violent behavior in the future, as the result of the inability to cope (pp. 148-149). Many of Samuel Little’s childhood experiences are unknown, but it is clear that his troubles began at an early age. In an interview with investigators, Little recounts his neck fetish starting at age five and his desire to kill beginning at the age of seven or eight years old (Meding et al., 2020b). His life of crime did not begin until his teenage years, however. At thirteen years old, he was arrested for the first time on charges of theft (Meding et al., 2020a; Pak, 2019). At age fifteen, he was exposed to true crime magazines that depicted women being strangled. According to forensic expert Angela Williamson, these crime magazines taught him to avoid leaving forensic evidence in his later crimes, as they explained the value of fibers, fingerprints, and other physical evidence (Meding et al., 2020b, 31:45). Later on, in high school, he was arrested for breaking and entering and sentenced to a juvenile detention facility (Rosewood & Lo, 2019). Starting with Little’s childhood and proceeding to examine his many offenses during adulthood, a clear pattern of behavior escalation can be observed (Meding et al., 2020a). His confirmed crimes began as relatively minor/nonviolent (theft), which in adulthood progressed to the more serious offenses of robbery, assault, and murder (Meding et al., 2020a). According to Douglas et al. (2013), escalation is a predominant characteristic in the development of serial murderers, often following a similar pattern of nonviolent to violent offenses and beginning with fantasy. Wright et al. (2015) also note that early criminal behavior significantly increases the likelihood for continued offending into adulthood. Thus, Little’s childhood and adolescent history paved the way for his future criminal enterprises.

Criminal Adulthood

After he was released from the juvenile detention center, Little continued to commit crimes as he aged. As an adult, he spent nearly fifty years on the streets (Meding et al., 2020b). During his entire life, Little would be arrested approximately one hundred times for various offenses, including drug charges, robbery, rape, and eventually murder (Weber, 2021). For a period of time, Little had an accomplice—an elderly woman named Orelia Jean Dorsey. The two met in 1971 while Little was serving time for an armed robbery conviction (Meding et al., 2020a). Reportedly, Little’s then-girlfriend was more than thirty years his senior (Meding et al., 2020a). The elderly woman would join Little in driving across the country and committing various shoplifting offenses (Weber, 2021). Only a year before meeting Ms. Dorsey, Little is believed to have begun murdering prostitutes; however, this would not come to light until several years later (Meding et al., 2020a). Little and Dorsey were together until she died in 1988.

In 1982, a prostitute by the name of Melinda LaPree was found dead in Pascagoula, Mississippi. She had gone missing in September of that year and her decomposing body was found four weeks later (Meding et al., 2020a). Officials determined that she had been strangled to death and, according to Detective Darren Versiga, the hyoid bone in her neck had been “dislodged,” which can often happen during forceful manual strangulation (Meding et al., 2020a). Another prostitute who had worked with LaPree was able to identify the last car that picked her up—a vehicle registered to Samuel Little (Meding et al., 2020a). When Mississippi law enforcement arrested Little, they discovered that a BOLO (be on the lookout) had been placed on a similar vehicle in Florida. A woman named Patricia Mount had been strangled to death and found in a hayfield near Gainesville, Florida, on September 12, 1982 (Meding et al., 2020a). Samuel Little was then connected to that case and charged in Florida. Mississippi

officers were told they did not have enough evidence to prosecute Little for the murder of Melinda LaPree, but in 1983, the trial for Patricia Mount's murder began (Meding et al., 2020a). A short-term accomplice of Samuel Little agreed to testify in the trial; however, he vanished before it began. Without the crucial eyewitness testimony, Little's defense attorney succeeded in obtaining an acquittal (Meding et al., 2020a). Clearly disappointed, Deputy Kenny Mack of the Alachua County Sheriff's Office (Florida) stated that "it took the jury all of thirty minutes to find him 'not guilty'" (Meding et al., 2020a, 1:09:00). Little was then released.

However, in 1984, Samuel Little was again the center of attention in another trial. Detective Sergeant Wayne Spees of the San Diego Police Department arrested Little for rape when Tonya Jackson was found naked and bleeding in his car (Meding et al., 2020a). Around the same time, a woman named Lori Barros called police to report a man who had kidnapped, raped, and rendered her unconscious. Barros identified Little in a lineup and both women agreed to testify in the rape case. Much like before, however, the prosecution fell apart when witness testimony failed. During the trial, police found out that Barros lied about being kidnapped; instead, she was a prostitute who willingly went with her alleged attacker. Because she had lied to police and to the court about the circumstances surrounding her ordeal, there were doubts as to her credibility. In addition to this, Tonya Jackson testified on the stand while intoxicated, further damaging the prosecution's case. The defense then introduced Samuel Little's girlfriend, Orelia Dorsey, as an alibi witness. Forty-four-year-old Little then testified, and although the prosecution pointed out evidence of interest, including possible defense wounds on his neck, the jury failed to convict. Instead, the result was a hung jury. In an attempt to avoid another trial but still ensure Little was incarcerated, Deputy District Attorney Gary Rempel offered Little a plea deal, saying: "If he would plead guilty to two assaults with intent to commit rape/bodily injury and go to

prison on those charges, we'd have to dismiss the other charges against him" (Meding et al., 2020a, 36:13). Little took the plea deal for a four-year sentence but only served two and a half years before he was released in February 1987. Not long after, Los Angeles began exhibiting multiple cases of strangulation deaths.

One of the Los Angeles murder victims that appeared in 1987 was Carol Elford. Police were able to gather the perpetrator's DNA evidence from her clothing. That evidence would also later match the DNA found on the bodies of murder victims Guadalupe Apodaca and Audrey Nelson in 1989 (Meding et al., 2020a). Apodaca and Nelson were both strangled and had damaged hyoid bones. Years went by, and while the DNA linked the three victims, the identity of the perpetrator was not discovered until 2012, when Little's DNA was matched. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2018) explains how this occurred after Little was arrested for a separate crime:

Little was arrested at a Kentucky homeless shelter in September 2012 and extradited to California, where he was wanted on a narcotics charge. Once Little was in custody, Los Angeles Police Department detectives obtained a DNA match to Little on the victims in three unsolved homicides from 1987 and 1989 and charged him with three counts of murder. (para. 3)

At his time of arrest, Little was seventy-one years old and this time he would not be released. In September of 2014, he was convicted of all three murders and given "three consecutive life sentences with no possibility of parole" (FBI, 2018, para. 3). He immediately filed multiple appeals, to no avail. Little was placed in a California state prison in Los Angeles County to serve his sentence.

Interviews and Confessions

In spring 2018, FBI crime analyst Christina Palazzolo came across several unsolved strangulation murders with characteristics similar to those of Samuel Little's confirmed victims (Meding et al., 2020a). One case from 1994 involved a prostitute named Denise Brothers, who had been murdered and left outside an abandoned building in Odessa, Texas. After realizing that Little could be responsible for the murder, Palazzolo and forensic expert Angela Williamson contacted the Texas Rangers. Ranger James Holland then accompanied the two women to the California State Prison to interview Little in an attempt to solve the cold case (FBI, 2018). At first, Little was uncooperative and refused to talk to Ranger Holland (Meding, et al., 2020a). However, once a deal was made to extradite Little to Texas for the interview and waive any possibility of the death penalty, he became more forthcoming. The extradition to Texas set off a chain reaction of confessions.

Ranger Holland began his interaction with Little by establishing rapport (Meding et al, 2020a). Once Little became comfortable around Holland, he proceeded to ask questions about Little's murders. During forty-nine days of interviewing, Samuel Little not only confessed to the murder of Denise Brothers, but to ninety-two other women across the United States, the first occurring in 1970 and the last occurring in 2005 (Meding et al., 2020b). Naturally, when a serial killer confesses to such a large number of murders, suspicion is cast on the truth of the claims. However, although the FBI and ViCAP (Violent Criminal Apprehension Program) acknowledges that some of Little's recollection was skewed, they believe that most, if not all, of his confessions are legitimate. Notable reasons for this belief is that Little was able to recall many of his murders with accuracy, and was also able to sketch the faces of dozens of victims (FBI, 2019). Thanks to his memory of locations and victim appearances, police were able to

connect several unidentified bodies to his stories (Meding et al., 2020b). As of 2020, his confessions and sketches have allowed the FBI to close over sixty murder cases. Thirty-five years after his trial for the murder of Patricia Mount, Little also confessed to killing her. He was also convicted for the murder of Denise Brothers as a result of his confession and sentenced to another life term (Rosewood & Lo, 2019). Police were able to trace his other murders to more than fifteen states, including Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Ohio (Meding et al., 2020b).

End of Life

After the interviews were complete, Little was transported back to California. His health had been failing for quite some time, and he was confined to a wheelchair by the time of the interviews (Meding et al, 2020b). As an elderly man in his seventies, Little suffered from diabetes and a heart condition, for which he had surgery, according to *New York Magazine* reporter Jillian Lauren (2018). He remained in a California prison for a few years until his many health problems overtook him, and he died in prison on December 30, 2020 (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2020). He was eighty years old.

Criminal Analysis

There are some unique characteristics of Samuel Little and his crimes that are necessary to acknowledge during the examination of this serial killer. That information proves vital to crime prevention in the future. Analyzing Little's methodology, victim selection, and behavior helps researchers gain insight into how these crimes were committed, why they were committed, what contributing factors were present in their commission, and who is at risk for victimization.

Methodology

There are several things to note when examining Little's method of operation (MO) in his murders. First and most prominent is his preferred way of killing his victims. Little strangled each victim with his hands; only on one known occasion did he deviate from this medium, drowning a woman because she was too large to subdue by his normal means (Weber, 2021). As noted by law enforcement, Little's large hands and the force with which he strangled the women left many victims with bruising and crushed hyoid bones (Meding et al., 2020a). Both his method and isolated dumping sites proved advantageous to avoiding arrest for many years. With some victims not being found for weeks or months after being murdered, decomposition often fought police effort to identify the cause of death. Evidence of strangulation was often lost during the period between death and discovery, leading law enforcement to rule many deaths as accidental (Meding et al., 2020b). Another factor is the way he went about luring his victims. There is little evidence to suggest that Little used force to isolate his victims before killing them. Instead, He often propositioned women to get them alone with him (usually in a car). After beginning consensual sex, Little chose to attack, wrapping his hands around his victims' throats and choking them. Sometimes, he even allowed his victim to revive before choking them a second time, eventually killing them.

Victimology

As is common in serial killings, Little's victims were high-risk individuals, meaning that their lifestyles made them more likely to be victimized (Hickey, 2016). Behaviors such as drinking heavily, doing drugs, engaging in sex with strangers, and running away from home all contribute to becoming a higher risk for victimization. According to ViCAP analyst Christina Palazzolo, Little targeted prostitutes, hitchhikers, and runaways, which are generally viewed as

leading high-risk lifestyles (Meding et al, 2020a). These are also the types of individuals who are less likely to be reported missing than the general population (Hickey, 2016). Though some victims were Caucasian or Hispanic, the majority were African American. This reflects the statistical tendency of serial offenders to target individuals of their own race (Douglas et al., 2013). However, it also demonstrates the occurrence of interracial crimes, which is less common in serial murder cases. Little targeted both categories. His victims also varied widely in age, possibly ranging from late teens to mid-forties (FBI, 2019).

Behavior

Samuel Little's behavior reveals a great deal about what kind of serial killer he was. Throughout the commission of his crimes, as well as his interviews, several cues can be observed as to his motivation, mindset, and other factors. First, Little clearly provides the primary motivation for his killings. During the interviews with Texas Ranger James Holland, he described being sexually attracted to women's necks (Meding et al., 2020a). This neck fetish is what prompted Little's selection of his victims, based on whether he found their necks to be attractive. This is also why he chose to strangle his victims; by choking them, he could feel their neck and become further aroused. Criminal analyst Christina Palazzolo verified this, saying that "all of these were sexually motivated crimes. That's what he got enjoyment out of...He didn't enjoy killing them per say; he enjoyed strangling them" (Meding et al., 2020b, 29:34, 29:56). Even decades after his murders, Little would still become sexually aroused while explaining his kills to investigators (Meding et al., 2020a). Interestingly enough, though the crimes were sexually motivated, Little vehemently denied ever raping anyone. In fact, Palazzolo notes that he "took offense to being called a rapist" (Meding et al., 2020a, 28:14). He maintained that each sexual encounter he had with his victims was consensual.

Little has been described by many different labels, including torture murderer and serial sexual killer (Meding et al., 2020a). While these labels are not necessarily inaccurate, perhaps he would best fit the profile of a hedonistic serial killer. Hedonistic killers commit their crimes primarily for the thrill or pleasure that it brings (Hickey, 2016). A subtype of the hedonistic killer is that of the lust murderer, which deals specifically with pleasure derived from sexual elements. Samuel Little demonstrates several qualities consistent with the hedonistic lust murderer typology--most notably his self-confessed sexual arousal at choking and murdering his victims (Meding et al., 2020a). Even though media perpetuates that serial killers must have some kind of mental illness, Little appeared to have no record of mental disorders (Hickey, 2016). However, he did have some obvious narcissistic traits, which included believing that he would never be apprehended.

Conclusion

Samuel Little, also known by the police as Samuel McDowell and by the public as the “choke and stroke killer,” committed a plethora of crimes throughout his life. Charges of drug use, robbery, assault, shoplifting, rape, and ultimately murder have characterized the life of this infamous serial killer. Even though he was arrested multiple times for various crimes, Little managed to keep his murders under police radar for decades, and he was not permanently incarcerated until he was convicted of three murders in 2014. As commonly follows the discovery of a serial killer, police and public fascination with Little’s case ultimately resulted in his infamy today. From this fascination can also come a renewed determination to apprehend the individuals responsible for the atrocity of serial murder. Acknowledging the individual cases like that of Samuel Little, connections are made between the impersonal profiles and the reality of what occurs in our communities. By recognizing what characteristics to look for, while also

realizing that not every killer fits perfectly into the mold, law enforcement professionals will approach the use the profiles in a cautious but effective way. As for Samuel Little, unless a criminal with a higher body count emerges, he will continue to be acknowledged as “America’s most prolific serial killer” for years to come.

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