

These 48 women have dominated the lives of two men.

Gary Ridgway, the most prolific serial killer in American history, murdered every single one of them; and Sheriff Dave Reichert spent 20 years trying to stop him. Eventually they had to meet.
By Adam Higginbotham

January 2004: the sheriff stands on the riverbank and looks down into the swift, murky green water. Years ago, when the killings started, this short bend in Seattle's Green River was a lonely, fog-bound place on a single-track road. 'It's changed,' says Sheriff Dave Reichert, 'a lot.' He points out across the valley. 'I grew up on a hillside ten minutes from here. I picked beans on a farm over there... played basketball right over here. Where that apartment complex is now – that was all cornfields.'

And back in the summer of 1982 he came down here as a young homicide detective – called to investigate the murder of a 16-year-old girl whose naked body had been found floating face-down in the water. Three days later, a quarter of a mile away at the next bend in the river, there was another body, and another – and another. Searching the scene, Reichert himself found the corpse of Opal Mills hidden on the bank in the long grass and blackberry bushes. He knew he wasn't far behind the man who had killed her. 'I was standing right where he had stood – in his footsteps, not too long after he had dropped that body.'

But there would be another 19 years and more than 40 murders before the Green River Killer was finally caught. When at last he was, the sheriff brought him back to the riverbank, and they stood together on the spot where Opal Mills's body had been lying. 'It was just a weird feeling, the two of us, standing where it all started,' says Reichert, laughing ruefully. 'A lot of time's gone by.'

This is the story of two men born less than two years apart; two men raised in the same community, on opposite sides of the same misty valley in Washington State. They both struggled at school, dogged by dyslexia. As teenagers, they played football on the same high-school field and, eventually, both applied for jobs on the same police force.

Over the years they would come to know the same people, and their paths would cross several times. Even so, they would never actually meet until much later, when they were both in their early fifties. By then, the younger of them would have become the elected Sheriff of King County, Washington, and responsible for the safety of 570,000 people. The elder would merely have spent 30 unremarkable years working as a spray-painter at a local trucking company. But in his spare time Gary Leon Ridgway would also have strangled more than 48 women, and become known as the most prolific serial killer in American history.

Gary Ridgway always wanted to be a murderer. He first experimented with killing when he was a 14-year-old schoolboy in King County. One day in 1963 he came upon a six-year-old boy in a cowboy outfit – a boy he had never seen before and would never see again – walked right up to him and plunged a knife into his side. The blade punctured the boy's liver. 'Why,' the boy asked, as blood poured into his boots, 'did you kill me?' Ridgway laughed and wiped both sides of the knife on the boy's shirt. 'I always wanted to know what it would feel like to kill somebody,' he told him.

The boy was hospitalised for weeks and, miraculously, survived; last year he was tracked down and interviewed in California by a King County detective. For a while Ridgway had felt bad about what he'd done. But not for long: 'I soon forgot about it,' he wrote decades later, in the fragmentary autobiographical notes he produced in police custody.

In 1969, having tried and failed to join the local police force, the 20-year-old Gary Ridgway enlisted in

The 48 women Gary Ridgway confessed to killing. His victims were runaways and prostitutes – women who moved on, changed their names and of whom there would be little trace



the American navy. He served for two years before once again returning to his home in the suburbs of Seattle in 1971. And at some point after that, he committed his first murder. He can't remember exactly when. It was probably back in the 1970s sometime – although as to who it was, or where it happened, he says he has no idea. But it now seems reasonable to suppose that it was a woman, and that he strangled her.

Dave Reichert has always had a knack for attracting trouble. He's full of stories about the strange things that have happened to him on duty. He's like Pigpen, he says, in the *Peanuts* cartoons: "There's this dust cloud that's followed me around. It was always, "Work next to Reichert, that's where the action's going to be." And that was the way it worked out.'

Reichert, 53, has been a police officer for 32 years. A tall, wiry, athletic man with a thick wedge of silver hair, he perfectly fills out the image of the hero cop, and gives the textbook answer when asked why he joined the police: he just wanted to make a difference and help people. I first meet him in December, in his office at the King County Courthouse, on the afternoon before Gary Ridgway's sentencing. In conversation, Reichert is frank and sincere, but sometimes corals his opinions into the bland middle ground of the calculating politician. And often – in the space of a few sentences – his vocabulary slides jarringly from pious discussion of his family and his lifelong Christian faith into the blunt, expletive-littered idiom of the career policeman.

Reichert, the eldest of seven children, was not a good student at school, but he went to college on a football scholarship and, with his grandfather's encouragement, began instruction to follow him into the Lutheran ministry. He never completed it. In February 1972, at the age of 21, he joined the King County Sheriff's Department as a deputy. During his five years as a patrolman he received two valour awards and the Washington Attorney General's Award for courageous action above and beyond the call of duty. One award was for the time he saved a woman and her two children from a teenage sniper with a deer-hunting rifle. The other was for rescuing a woman whose husband was trying to kill her with a butcher's knife, during which the husband slashed him in the throat. He was 24 at the time. 'You can still see the scar here,' he says, pulling at his collar to expose the shining path of the knife stretching around his neck. 'Fortysomething stitches. I'm lucky to be here.'

These days Dave Reichert is something of a local celebrity around Seattle – renowned as much for his single-minded determination to uphold the law as for his cheerful preparedness to publicise his efforts on television (earning him the office moniker 'Hollywood Dave'). One of Reichert's most spectacular exploits took place in May 1999. Arriving at a house in which 21-year-old Lonnie Davis had barricaded himself and was firing at police (after killing his mother and his nephew, running over a motorcyclist, beating a 63-year-old woman to death and breaking

the neck of another in her eighties), Reichert immediately dispensed with the idea of negotiation and called for a police sniper to shoot the gunman between the eyes. Two minutes later Davis was dead. In a city renowned for its progressive attitudes, such drastic action was unheard of. 'You don't do that here,' Reichert says. 'This is a very liberal-thinking community we live in. They expected us to stand around for five hours – and put everybody at risk.' Afterwards, when television news crews wanted an explanation, Reichert told them how easy a decision it was for him to make. 'Look,' he said, 'this is what you pay me to do. The bad guy is dead and everyone else is going home safe.' In February this year Reichert, a Republican, announced he was running for congress.

The first officially recorded victim of the Green River Killer was 16-year-old Wendy Coffield, a high-school dropout, runaway and prostitute from Pierce County, Washington. She was last seen on 8 July 1982.

Her strangled corpse was found a week later, her clothes snagged on a piling in the Green River near the Meeker Street bridge just outside the city of Kent. Detectives from Kent began exchanging information with Reichert, who was investigating the death of another prostitute killed under similar circumstances in January.

By the time he came to be standing on the bank of the Green River on 12 August 1982, Reichert had become pretty good at solving murders. He'd only been made a homicide detective three years earlier; he was one of the youngest in the history of the sheriff's office. By that August, he'd managed to wrap up each of the crimes he'd investigated within two or three months at the most. But by autumn 1982 six prostitutes had been found dead.

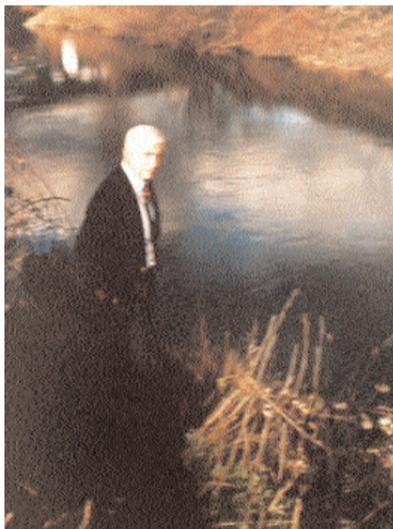
The six, who worked the infamous SeaTac Strip – a four-lane highway out near the airport, between Seattle and Tacoma, cluttered with low-rent businesses and cheap motels – were all believed to have been strangled by the same man. And Reichert, now the lead investigator in a team of five, was no closer to catching him.

But by November no more bodies had been found: Reichert's team were reassigned to their original duties, and he began working on the case alone. It seemed to everyone involved that the killer, whoever he was, had stopped at six. In fact, as was found out later, the killings had

continued with terrifying ferocity: Terry Milligan, Mary Meehan, Debra Estes, Linda Rule, Denise Bush, Shawnda Summers, Shirley Sherrill and Colleen Brockman all disappeared without trace during the last months of 1982. And over a two-month period in 1983 ten more women from the SeaTac Strip were murdered. Their bodies were dumped across southern Washington and northern Oregon – but their corpses would not be discovered until much later. In fact, it would be years before the total number of murdered women, or the location of their bodies, would be known to anyone but Gary Ridgway.

The standard profiling of the serial-killer personality type is remarkably rudimentary. In most cases, it's said, they are white males; single; transient; cannot hold down a job; have difficulty forming relationships with women; smoke cigarettes; and drive nondescript vehicles. They kill people.

By the time he was arrested in 2001 Gary Ridgway had been married to his third wife for 14 years and had fathered a son, Matthew, in 1975. At the plant where he worked for 30 years painting trucks, he had a reputation as a hard worker; his attendance record was nearly perfect. He had spent



'I was standing right where Ridgway stood when he dropped the body'



Sheriff Dave Reichert by the Green River near Seattle, top, and, above, Gary Ridgway, arrested for soliciting in 1982

almost his entire life living in the suburbs of Seattle. He did not smoke. He did, however, drive a beaten-up pick-up truck.

In April 1983 Gary Ridgway killed his 21st known victim, 18-year-old Marie Malvar. Two nights after she disappeared, Malvar's boyfriend went looking for the pick-up truck she'd been getting into when he last saw her. He found it parked outside Gary Ridgway's house and called the police. Without evidence, detectives from nearby Des Moines Police Department weren't allowed to enter Ridgway's home, but stood outside to question him. No, he said, he hadn't been driving around in his truck that night; no, he hadn't seen Marie Malvar. The detectives left, satisfied. In fact, Malvar had fought hard for her life, scratching at Ridgway's arms as he choked her. Throughout the detectives' visit, he leant against a fence to conceal the gouges; immediately afterwards he burnt them with battery acid to disguise them. He still has the scars today.

From 1984 onwards Ridgway was one of some 1,300 suspects in the Green River case; he was in Dave Reichert's top five. But it proved almost impossible to find evidence to connect him to it. Ridgway was extraordinarily careful and systematic about the murders. If one of his victims scratched him, he made sure that he clipped their fingernails after he had killed them. Although he murdered many of the women in his own home, he washed everything down afterwards, separately disposed of their personal effects and used the same piece of carpet to carry each body, simply rolling them out on to the ground when he reached the remote dump-sites where he left them.

And above all, Gary Ridgway preyed on prostitutes and runaways: women who regularly moved on and changed their names without warning; who were rarely observed by reliable witnesses; who were happy to climb into pick-up trucks with men they had never met before. 'I picked prostitutes,' Ridgway said in the statement read at his plea-hearing last November, 'because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.'

In January 1984 the Washington State authorities established a 60-man, cross-agency Green River Task Force. Reichert was its lead investigator. By the end of that year, the number of identified victims had reached 28, with 14 more listed as missing; in total, 42 women were thought to have been killed. But still there were no arrests.

Reichert was frustrated at his own lack of progress, and angry every time another body was discovered. But, as each successive body failed to provide any further clues, he couldn't help himself wanting to discover another. 'We spent most of our time in the 1980s collecting remains,' he says. 'Your worst nightmare was to find another body – but how else are you going to solve it?'

In May 1984 Ridgway was brought into task force headquarters for a polygraph test and asked about his involvement in the murders. He passed. A polygraph detects stress – something a clinical psychopath simply doesn't experience. 'I just, uh, relaxed and took the polygraph,' Ridgway said later.

By the end of the year, after the expenditure of millions of dollars and the disappearance of dozens of women, all the task force could say publicly was that the killer might be driving a pick-up truck with patches of primer on its paintwork, and that he might look like one of several composite drawings of a white man in his thirties or forties.

Reichert finally obtained a warrant to conduct a full search of Gary Ridgway's home, in Auburn, in April 1987. 'We took all sorts of evidence out of there,' says Reichert. 'But again – nothing.' In the hope that it might at least provide a blood-type to the crimes (this was long before DNA finger-printing was possible), detectives had Ridgway provide a saliva sample by biting down on a piece of gauze. This, along with everything else taken that day, was simply filed with all the other tens of thousands of pieces of Green River evidence.



Sheriff Dave Reichert interrogates Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, 2003

In the meantime, although it seems he never repeated the frenzy of 1982 to 1984, Ridgway carried on killing women. In 1986 Reichert travelled to death row in Florida to speak to the serial killer Ted Bundy, who had offered his insights into the case. And in 1988 Reichert delivered an impassioned plea on national television for the Green River Killer to contact him ('If you've got the balls, give me a call.') Still a breakthrough eluded him. As the 1980s came to a close, the investigation was scaled back, and detectives on the task force were reassigned. At the beginning of April 1990, Reichert was promoted to sergeant, and officially left the task force. But he never left the case.

By 1992 the 60-strong Green River Task Force had been reduced to a single man, Detective Tom Jensen. For the rest of the decade he would be the only detective working on finding the Green River Killer. Reichert stayed in touch with Jensen as he laboriously tied up loose ends. There were no more bodies being found; no new leads coming in.

But Reichert kept calling him. In 1997, the year he was appointed County Sheriff, Reichert started to assign more help to Jensen. They began looking at the possibility of using DNA evidence, using the semen samples taken from the bodies of the murdered women and blood and

saliva samples from suspects down the years. But early attempts to extract DNA were unsuccessful – and the samples were so old and fragile that only a finite number of attempts could be made to test them before they would be destroyed for ever. The lab told Jensen to wait until the science improved: it took years. Jensen waited patiently, and stayed on the case.

Finally, on 10 September 2001, Jensen presented Reichert with three hand-drawn graphs of DNA profiles – one each from the swabs taken from the bodies of Marcia Chapman and Opal Mills and a third one, whose peaks and troughs clearly matched those in the first two. This third graph, he

explained, was that of the man who had been identified as the killer. And then he handed over a sealed envelope containing the man's photograph.

'I don't even need to open it,' said Reichert. 'It's Gary Ridgway, isn't it?'

The King County Sheriff's Department arrested Gary Leon Ridgway on 30 November 2001. He didn't really resemble anyone's idea of the Green River Killer. A mild-looking, pasty, bespectacled man with a bad haircut who was only 5ft 10in and weighed 150lb, he quietly handed over his lunch-box when detectives came for him as he left work, and asked only, 'What's going to happen to my truck?'

Dave Reichert had been trying to catch Gary Ridgway for 19 years and two months. The two men met for the first time that night. Reichert put

'I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many as I wanted'

his head around the door of the interview room. 'Gotcha,' was all he said. Ridgway didn't say a word, but just gave him a short, blank look. 'Like, "OK – so what?"' Reichert remembers.

The Sheriff's Office had enough DNA and forensic evidence to try Ridgway for seven of the 49 murders they had attributed to the Green River Killer. But if Ridgway was found guilty and executed, the remaining 42 would remain officially unsolved. The King County Prosecutor offered Ridgway a deal: in exchange for a full confession, and helping to locate victims whose bodies had never been found, he would be spared the death penalty.

For five and a half months in 2003, King County detectives took Ridgway on 70 visits to 51 different locations in Washington State in the search for physical remains. Eventually, he would confess to killing 48 women – the first in 1982, the last as recently as 1998 – but others he refused to take responsibility for. He said he killed so many, he found it hard to keep track of them – he couldn't remember a single one of their faces. Reluctantly, he admitted that he had had sex with many of the corpses of his victims. His attorneys were forced to concede that if he hadn't been caught, he would probably never have stopped killing.

At one point during the interviews, Ridgway was asked by a psychologist to rate his own evil on a scale of one to five. 'Three,' he said.

In August 2003 it was Reichert's turn. He spent three days at Green River Task Force headquarters at 1090 East Marginal Way interviewing Ridgway, alone. The Sheriff's Department videotapes of these interviews reveal a remarkable scene: the stiff, heroic, upright sheriff in his crisp green uniform, inclined at an acute angle toward the shapeless little man in his orange prison jump suit, slumped in his blue plastic

'I don't understand it – why are you a serial killer and I'm the sheriff?'

chair. Reichert had a lot of questions, but there was one he had been waiting 20 years to ask. He wanted to know why Ridgway did it. He asked him about it many times. Ridgway's answers were all different, all circuitous: 'Because I wanted to kill them.' Why? 'Because I was angry with prostitutes.' Why? 'I wanted to kill 'em.' In the end there seemed to be only one consistent reason behind Gary Ridgway's 20-year litany of killings: he did it because he could.

On the afternoon of 16 December 2003, two days before

Ridgway was due to be sentenced to life without parole for 48 counts of murder, Dave Reichert drove down to East Marginal for one last time. Reichert told Ridgway about something that had been bothering him. One of the first things they had talked about back in August was how much they had in common. 'Ridgway didn't come from Mars,' he says. 'He grew up here in our community. This guy is not an alien being that just popped out of nowhere. He was raised and created in the human race that exists right here in Seattle. He's one of our sons.'

Now, finally, he wanted to know how it was possible that one of the two had become the County Sheriff and the other had turned himself into the country's most prolific murderer. 'Why,' he asked, 'are you a serial killer and I'm the sheriff? I don't understand it.'

Gary Leon Ridgway sat at the table in the blank basement room and considered this for a while. And when he replied, he did so in as matter-of-fact a way as you could imagine. 'I guess,' he said eventually, 'I just decided to become a serial killer.'

And then Reichert gave him his own conclusion.

'You chose weak women because you're a coward. You're an evil, murdering, monstrous, cowardly man.'

'Yeah,' said Gary Ridgway quietly. 'I am.' ●