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The Moonberry Pond Murder

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James Mixon was a drunk. In life a drunk is a pretty predictable person. They get people angry, frustrated, and fed up; they get kicked out of the places they live, and get in trouble. James Mixon was no different.

But a case involving the death of a drunk is not so predictable. It can be hard to investigate. Why? Because of all the same factors just mentioned above.

Who would want to kill the victim? is one of the questions we always ask in an investigation. In the 1987 Mixon case, the investigators—my team of four detectives and a sergeant—soon found that the question was, “Who wouldn’t want to?”

The Mixon family ran a fairly successful plumbing company, but none of them had wanted anything to do with Jim. As much as the most charitable of Jim Mixon’s kin had been, they all took turns giving up trying to save him. Mixon was

a mean, harsh man when he drank. And he drank all the time.

Mixon ran afoul of everyone he met. He was habitually way behind on rent payments, damaged the apartments he lived in, and disturbed tenants wherever he lived. When the 46-year-old unemployed plumber got kicked out of his last apartment, he found himself at a campground on the western edge of Dade County. His only possession of any value was a black Ford Bronco with a bag of clothes in the back.

The Campground

Chekika Hammock State Park was home to various visitors on their way to Everglades National Park further south and to those who could afford eight bucks a night to legally squat in the campground. Opposite the campground was a boardwalk through a natural hardwood hammock, and some other everglades habitat nature trails. Surrounding the park, there were a couple of lonely paved roads and maybe six or so houses within a square mile. Beyond that, there was sawgrass, as far as the eye could see.

It didn't take but a week or so for the irascible Mixon to be kicked out of Chekika's campground. He stayed up late, got drunk and nasty, got into fights, and generally disturbed the peace. So he drove his Bronco down the road until he came to a pond about a half-mile south.

From the intersection of the two paved roads, Mixon would have been able to see a small encampment on the south side of the pond, marked by a blue tent fly and a Confederate flag. He approached the rough-looking couple and asked if he could use their shoreline to fish. He convinced them he was an able fisherman, and he caught a few bass and bluegill in the pond to prove it.

Ruth and Jason Brunson were also people who didn't get along with regular society, nor did they have any money to speak of. They had landed a pretty good deal with the state: They were allowed to camp on the slender peninsula of land that led to an antenna housing, as long as they kept people from driving out to the little fenced structure. It had been getting vandalized frequently by local kids out hotrodding and plinkers who came out there to shoot anything that stuck out of the ground.

Jason Brunson posted some signs around, warning people to stay out. Ruth Brunson tended to their endearing little four-year-old daughter, who they called “Muffin.” The three of them slept in a tent, and every month or so they would hitch a ride to the nearest grocery store and buy food with the money they made doing odd jobs in the area.

When Mixon showed up, they figured he was harmless. So they let him stay on their “property.” After all, he was one more hand around camp. He could catch dinner occasionally, and could help with gathering firewood and other menial tasks. Best of all, he had wheels.

Muffin spent her time with her precious kitten, “Moonberry,” and she went around naming all the raccoons and other critters she found around the campsite. There was even a small young alligator that would appear in the pond from time to time, which she named “Tater the Gator.”

A Grisly Discovery

A man looking for a place to dump some junk metal found James Mixon’s shirtless body in a small clearing in the muddy grass. Mixon had been shot multiple times in the head. The investigative team—myself, Nick Fabregas, Larry Wilkottz, Mike Tabernero, and Sgt. Jack Remmen—found the scene kind of an oddity. In 1987, bodies found in the east Everglades, shot in the head, were not all that unusual. But they were almost always smugglers, and this guy just didn’t fit that profile. He looked rough and dirty; he wore shorts, and he had no jewelry on him. We searched the area with our flashlights, swatted at mosquitos, and left after the wagon took the body away.

At daylight, we went back, but didn’t find anything else. A family member had mentioned that Mixon had gone to live at a campground, so we talked to the rangers at Chekika, and learned that Mixon had walked south to supposedly live with some squatters. We drove down the road and spotted something off in the distance, on the other side of a tranquil-looking pond.

We pulled over. And I surveyed the scene with a pair of binoculars. What I saw was the Brunsons, their blue tent, their Rebel flag flapping in the breeze, and

their utility vehicle, which bore a kind of homemade camouflage paint job—streaks of green, brown, and black. We watched the area for a while and then we saw the truck start to pull out.

We followed and, when we stopped the vehicle about a mile away from the campsite, we encountered a heavily bearded, beady-eyed man at the wheel, a slim, brown-haired woman in the passenger seat wearing a plaid men's work shirt, and a little golden-haired girl in the back seat who grinned excitedly at us.

In between the driver and the passenger, on the console, lay a chrome-plated revolver. The man and woman politely stepped out of the vehicle while we secured the weapon. We asked them what they knew about James Mixon's death, and they both appeared startled.

"He's dead?" Jason Brunson asked us, "I can't believe it. He just left a few days ago."

The truck they were driving was Mixon's, and they showed us a handwritten bill of sale that Mixon had written for them, selling them the Bronco for a sum of \$600. The day he sold it to them, Ruth Brunson told us, he left, picked up by some friend of his who said they were heading to the Carolinas.

The Brunsons had no problem with us taking the Ruger .357 for processing. Nor did they protest when we said we would like fingerprints and handwriting samples from them.

Witnesses or Suspects

Back at the South District substation, we got all that from them, and got a chance to interview them. Each told a fairly similar tale of Mixon's stay with them. They described him as a drinker, a kind of pain-in-the-ass type of character but not so much that he was unbearable. They weren't disappointed when he left, they both said, and they were glad to buy the truck from him.

The interview with Ruth Brunson foreshadowed what was to come. During the conversation, little Muffin played on the chair next to her Mom, cooing and talking and being a typical child. Ruth bridled her gently a few times, then

continued with her story, rarely breaking stride, until one succinct moment in the exchange. She had been talking about Nixon's personality, and his general behavior.

"Was there anything that caused you to decide he shouldn't stay?" I asked.

"Well he---

"He was mean to Moonberry!" Muffin interjected.

Ruth Brunson, who had for almost a half-hour gently shushed Muffin when she spoke, exploded.

"QUIET!" She barked at the youngster. "You shut up when Mommy is talking!"

The reaction was so markedly different than the way she had treated Muffin before that I made a mental note of it, and I pressed for more. What, I wanted to know, did he do to Moonberry?

"Oh, just being an asshole, you know, kicking the cat and things like that."

She ended the sentence with a menacing, silencing look at her daughter.

Two Telephone Calls

Was it the cumulative effect of Muffin's jabbering that had pushed Ruth over the edge? Or was there something more in the kid's remark that alarmed her? We didn't know, not yet.

We took the gun, their handwriting samples, and their fingerprints, and let the Brunsons go.

Four days later, we got two calls from the lab, one from Firearms, and one from the Questioned Document section. Two calls, same day, and two hits. The bill of sale was not James Nixon's handwriting but rather much closer to Jason Brunson's. And the projectiles taken from Nixon's head were a match to the Ruger .357.

We had identified our killers. But was it enough to charge? The state attorney's office wasn't ready to file on either one just yet. The Brunsons were in possession of the murder weapon, in possession of the truck, and had certainly forged the bill of sale so they could use it. Proving to a jury that one of them dropped the hammer on Mixon was another story, and we certainly had to show which one did. Could we have charged them? Technically yes. But the argument from the state—and it had merit—was this: They don't have the means to hop on a plane and flee, so you have time to make the case better.

We huddled up, and finally decided that the Brunsons were no hardened criminals. They came in for interviews easily the first time, and probably would again. So we'd get them in the interview room again and see if we could get a confession based on our new findings.

A Startling Confession

This time, after another early morning surveillance, we brought the Brunsons all the way from their camp to the Homicide office, some 35 miles away.

I started on Jason, and Nick, a very sharp young investigator still new to the unit, talked to Ruth. Jason's story changed three times, and I knew that I was sitting in the room with James Mixon's killer. It made sense: Mixon, drunk and idiotic, probably made a move on Ruth, and Jason killed him. Then they both covered it up. Or the two of them, desperate to have a vehicle, killed him and figured that they were far enough away from society to get away with it.

While I labored through the contradictions of Jason's remarks and told him that we were going to get the truth, Nick cracked open the door.

"I need to talk to you," he whispered.

"Not now, Nick...I'm getting close," I told him.

"Ruth just confessed," Nick told me.

In law enforcement, we see males commit violent acts so often that we get conditioned. Later, someone called it "gender prejudice," but whatever you

label it, I had become one of its victims.

Ruth Brunson gave us a complete confession and, in retrospect, I should have expected it. I'd forgotten about her outburst in the first interview, the one that seemed so uncharacteristic compared to the way she'd been relating to Muffin.

Ruth said that Mixon would get mean and nasty after a few beers, and one afternoon he saw Tater the Gator swimming nearby the shore, looking for scraps the Brunsons would occasionally toss him. Mixon seized Muffin's beloved Moonberry and heaved the kitten into the pond. Tater devoured it.

Muffin was devastated. And Muffin's mother, trying to deal with the inconsolable child, knew of one sure way to balance the scales of this outrageously cruel act that had scarred her little daughter.

Ruth invited Mixon to help her gather firewood. When they got far enough from camp, Ruth got the drunken Mixon to look out the window, took Jason's .357, and put a bullet in the back of Mixon's head. Then she got out, walked around to the driver's side, pulled the slumping Mixon out of the truck, and put three more in his skull for good measure.

Moonberry was avenged.

Lessons Learned

I have described this case to Homicide Investigation and Interview and Interrogation classes I teach at the academy, and it never fails to completely capture the recruits' attention. It's an unusual case, one I've dubbed "The Legend of Moonberry Pond."

We did some good police work in this case, but it also holds some good lessons to learn from. Things aren't always what they seem, might be one of them. The other is to keep an open mind and to take keen notice of people's behavior, particularly changes in that behavior, during interviews. I suppose a third could be the age-old, "Hell hath no fury..."

Ruth went to trial and got convicted. She's doing life with a minimum/mandatory

of 25 years. Jason pleaded guilty to Accessory After the Fact. He's out now, somewhere.

Muffin went to live with her grandparents—nice people, with a real house—on the west coast of Florida.

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