

Excerpt from web page about ["Killers on the Loose: Unsolved Cases of Serial Murder"](#) written by Antonio Mendoza.

The I-45 Killer(s) (32)

Over that last three decades the FBI has chronicled at least 32 dead women in an area a few miles on either side of Interstate 45 along the 50-mile stretch between Houston and Galveston. The latest victim was discovered in early 1999 by a little boy and his dog when they were out for a walk in some marshy woods. The dog came up with a bone, and then the boy saw a skull. Nearby, the police later would find earrings, shreds of clothing and a belt tied around a tree. Investigators believe the killer used it to bind the young woman while she was sexually assaulted.

Now, for the first time since the first victim's corpse was discovered in 1971, investigators believe they are making progress both in breaking individual cases and devising a method to attack the overall problem. But early indications are not good for those who hoped it could be brought to an end by finding one serial killer who could be captured and put behind bars. "It appears that there may be multiple serial killers," said Don K. Clark, special agent in charge of the FBI's Houston division.

If that suspicion proves true--and investigators caution that they remain far from bringing charges in these crimes--then the bizarre pattern of killings along I-45 would be the result of an equally bizarre occurrence. Police now worry that for nearly three decades this stretch of coastal plain has served as a hunting ground for any number of murderers. Over time, it appears to police, the killers have come and gone but shared in common the site they selected to find their victims--or to dump the bodies of people killed elsewhere.

In fact, the bayous lined with longleaf pine, beech and live oaks appear to have served as a dumping ground not only for local killers but also for Houston's predators. The refineries and ports draw transients. The small towns and country roads have proved easy places to hunt victims. The patchwork of jurisdictions makes it easy to cloak activities simply by crossing the city limits.

The victims in the I-45 cases typically disappeared while out alone, only to be found dead and abused in a remote spot weeks or months later, leaving no hint as to their attacker's identity or motive.

The investigation took an important turn after several particularly horrific and well-publicized crimes in 1997. First, Laura Smither, 12, disappeared while jogging near her home, and then Jessica Lee Cain, 17, vanished, leaving behind only her empty pickup truck parked on the shoulder of I-45. Smither's decapitated body was found in a pond almost three weeks after her disappearance. Cain is still missing.

"Before Laura Smither and Jessica Cain, each one of us was in his own little world, investigating our own individual cases, and we would have no way of knowing that some fellow we wanted to question in one murder, and had been a top suspect, had already been questioned in a very similar murder just a few miles down the highway," said Lt. Tommy Hansen of the Galveston County Sheriff's Department.

Some evidence pointed to a serial killer long ago. Two girls disappeared from the same convenience store in the 1970s. Four bodies were found between 1984 and 1991 in a scrubby patch of pastures dubbed the "killing fields." More subtle patterns now are emerging from a computer analysis of the evidence. The victims seem to cluster according to physical type, such that it appears one killer has a preference for short, slim, brown-haired women. Another killer seems to have demonstrated distinctive habits in the way he disposes of bodies, investigators said.

Stark similarities in several early cases suggest that a serial killer was active in the area in the 1970s, but it is unlikely he will ever be identified because so much time has passed. Further complicating matters, Henry Lee

Lucas roamed the Gulf Coast when some of the early I-45 murders took place, but he has not been linked definitively to any of the unsolved cases.

Police have been closely following a suspect who remains at large on the I-45 corridor, but who never has been publicly identified. "We know a guy, we know him very well, a guy who has killed before and who had some kind of contact with five of the girls, but all the evidence is circumstantial," said police Lt. Gary D. Ratliff of League City, a town of 50,000 where the "killing fields" are located.

The unnamed suspect suffered physical injuries in an automobile accident a few years ago and appears to have gone "dormant" since then, Ratliff said. While that is good news in one sense, his lack of activity makes it less likely he might commit a mistake that would allow him to be caught.

March 17, 2000 - Houston investigators believe there are at least a dozen serial killers living in or around the city, or passing through it on a regular basis. One killer is believed to be responsible for the deaths of at least two girls ages 9 and 12 whose nude bodies were found dumped in waterways. Another cluster of killings involves at least four women in their late teens and early twenties who disappeared around the southern Houston and Galveston area. Between April 1992 and July 1995 three killings in the Houston area have been linked to a serial killer who likes young Hispanic females and becomes anxious if his victims are not discovered quickly. Over a six-year period four other women have been found within a mile of each other in a field off Calder Road in Galveston County.

In the mid- to late '80s, a task force studied the killings of six prostitutes who worked in Houston's Montrose area. In the early '70s a number of young girls were abducted and murdered. In all there are about 200 unsolved murders of women and girls in Houston and the surrounding areas since 1971.