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NEWS

BY NEWSWEEK STAFF ON 9/4/94 AT 8:00 PM EDT



NEWS

His method is always the same: the rapist slips into a garden apartment between midnight and 4 a.m., takes a knife from the kitchen and cuts the phone cord. He pounces on his victims while they are asleep, tying their hands with the phone cord and pulling a nightshirt or pillow case over their faces. In a scratchy voice, he warns the women not to resist and he's careful not to show his face. But his victims all say they smelled the stench of stale cigarettes on his clothes and his breath.

Police in suburban Minneapolis say the same man is responsible for at least 20 rapes since 1975 -- all with the same M.O. They've even had their key suspect -- a 40-year-old former elementary-school janitor -- in custody several times, put tracking devices on his van and searched his home. Police say the Oakdale resident has been questioned in several window-peeping incidents. They have not arrested him in the rapes because they don't have enough physical evidence. (Newsweek won't name him because he hasn't been

Unfortunately, he happens to be on the wrong side.

Police first closed in on the Oakdale man in 1980, when he was arrested in nearby St. Louis Park while fleeing a burglary. A search of his house uncovered a knife belonging to one rape victim and a pair of eyeglasses inscribed with another's name. But the local prosecutor plea-bargained away sexual-assault charges, apparently in favor of ensuring that the suspect went to jail for burglary. The garden-apartment rapes stopped, but three years later he was out and they began again.

Police started putting the case together last March, when the rapist struck again in St. Louis Park, just a block from the Minneapolis line. When the police report crossed Detective Jim Jezierski's desk, he recognized the M.O. immediately. "It sounded exactly like the 1980 cases," says Jezierski. "We told him back in 1980 to stay out of our city and he did. I think he made a mistake and came across." St. Louis Park police sent out fliers describing his methods to neighboring police departments, hoping to find other similar

those, the assailant had left behind traces of physical evidence that could be used in DNA tests.

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The samples from 1987 were the cops' best hope of linking their suspect to a rape -- in later attacks, the rapist had forced his victims to bathe to erase all trace of bodily contact. Armed with a list of similar crimes since 1975, police persuaded a judge to order the suspect to surrender hair, blood and saliva samples in early July. With the statute of limitations fast running out on the 1987 cases, Minneapolis newspapers and TV stations got wind of the investigation. Still more women called in saying the rapes sounded similar to attacks against them. "I've gotten calls from victims who think this is the person who attacked them 14 or 15 years ago," says Christensen.

Those calls helped authorities narrow their search for similar dormant rape cases. But that was their last bit of good luck. DNA tests from the 1987 rapes were inconclusive: 6 percent of the U.S. population share the same characteristics as the perpetrator. The Oakdale suspect is among that 6 percent -- but that isn't sufficient for an arrest; it only confirms for police that they are on the right track. For now, the authorities can only wait for more victims to call in, with better evidence, or for the rapist to strike again. "All of us are very frustrated," says Jan May, an investigator in St. Louis Park. "But we're not giving up."



Victims give eerily similar accounts of how the rapist strikes.

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