

MURDER IN THE MANSION: A TALE OF DEATH IN VT. VILLAGE

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WHITINGHAM, Vt. -- For 25-year-old Christopher Fauber, whose home was a park bench in New York City and whose meals often came from dumpsters and garbage cans, the offer was irresistible: a job in the green hills of Vermont and a room of his own in a soaring Victorian manor.

He got the job. He got his room. But then he got killed.

The story of what went on in the huge house in this tiny town has unfolded in the many months since Fauber's killing in a lurid tale of bone-crunching death, a body missing for months, drugs, AIDS, and intimations of greed, fast living and jealousy.

Along the way one of two men originally charged in Fauber's death gave a still-secret deposition just 48 hours before he died of complications of AIDS. A key witness recanted a major piece of his testimony, clearing that now-dead suspect. The high-powered Boston law firm of F. Lee Bailey was hired to defend the remaining suspect. Investigators made what could! prove to be two key mistakes in their probe of the murder. And in ways that were often threatening, a small town's blind fears and bitter prejudice toward gay lifestyles surfaced.

The drawn-out legal case has forced the prosecuting attorney to appeal to the Vermont Supreme Court to overturn a lower court ruling that would block the introduction at trial of what he acknowledges is crucial evidence. The remaining defendant, who has an illness his attorneys won't publicly name but say could prejudice a country jury, charges that the state is trying to stall a trial. And a small town that prides itself on being the place where Brigham Young was born wonders if it will ever know how Fauber died in the rambling house on the night of Dec. 9, 1985.

Whitingham is one of those tiny rural towns that cling to the steep land of dark hollows that are viewed from loftier highways by tourists who wonder what goes on down there. It lies just below Route 9, the twisted spine of a road that carries vacationers over the mountains and through the ski country between Bennington and Brattleboro.

The Sawyer family has been in Whitingham for generations, and the showpiece of the Sawyer clan has long been the Victorian estate on Route 100, just above the center of town. It is owned by Robert Sawyer, a wealthy furniture parts manufacturer.

James Cronan, the Vermont State Police officer who headed up the search for Christopher Fauber's killer, said in an affidavit for probable cause that "The residence itself is extremely large as it has approximately 38 rooms and several small cubby-holes and one cupola."

Dominating what was once open field behind the house is the sprawling Sawyer Bentwood furniture parts factory, owned by Sawyer and his brother, Houghton.

The gothic house proved a large playground for its owner, the middle-aged Robert Sawyer, and two young men he met in New York City and brought home with him -- David A. Platt Jr. and Michael Guerrera.

The factory gave Sawyer the kind of money he would need to pay the pair the "\$500, \$700, \$800" he has testified he gave them every week. They had no other apparent means of support. It would also provide the combined \$65,000 it would take to bail them out when they were later charged with murder, and the money to hire the expensive defense team after Platt was the only defendant left.

"These were two boys in the fast lane," said Kathy McMasters last week. McMasters, a free-lance writer whom Guerrero and Platt took into their confidence, said that when the two weren't at the Sawyer place, they were often on the road, in a red Chevrolet convertible that Sawyer bought for them, hitting parties and gay hotspots in Brattleboro and Greenfield and North Adams, Mass.

McMasters said that Platt maintains to this day a powerful hold on Sawyer.

"It's like he's got the hook in and just keeps holding it tight," she said, recounting one visit to the house when she found Platt and a friend frolicking in a front room as a paunchy, pale Sawyer stood in a doorway eating cold Spaghetti-O's from a can.

Sawyer has said in court papers that he had an "experimental" sexual relationship with Platt.

Michael Garvie, befriended by Platt and Guerrero when they picked him up hitchhiking, would later become their chief accuser in the Fauber case. Garvie told police he was not sure what relationship the three had, but that "I've known that Bob gave money to Dave and Mike. They would be in a room for an hour and a half or so, and they would come back out with a couple hundred dollars or so, and would go out partying."

It was not long after they moved into the Sawyer house that Guerrero and Platt found Christopher Fauber, once of Buena Vista, Va., but more recently of the streets of New York, on a park bench in the city. In late 1984, with the promise of a job in the furniture factory and a room in the mansion, Fauber moved north. McMasters said Fauber was known as a loner, happy in his work, often retiring to his room to write at night. Court records indicate that in the months that followed, Platt and Guerrero may have felt their own setup threatened by Fauber's presence.

"Chris got closer to Bob than Dave or Mike were, and they were jealous over it, and Dave said that Chris was trying to blackmail him at that time," Garvie, who lived in the house for several months, told Cronan. Officials declined to speculate for publication on what grounds there might have been for blackmail.

Late in the afternoon of Dec. 9, 1985, Fauber came into the house after a day's work at the factory. Garvie, Platt and Guerrero were in the house. Somebody crushed Fauber's skull with an iron pipe, wrapped his twitching body in plastic, removed his clothes and possessions from his room and set out into the night to dispose of it all.

The way Garvie first told the story, according to a transcript in court records, Platt and Guerrero had plotted for some time to kill Fauber. On the day of the murder, they allegedly ordered him to stand lookout in case Sawyer came home.

Garvie said Sawyer drove into the yard minutes after the attack. According to Garvie, he warned Platt and Guerrero and Guerrero rushed out to intercept Sawyer. He then left with Sawyer in Sawyer's car, according to the transcript.

On Platt's orders, Garvie said in the transcript, he then helped load Fauber's body and his possessions into the red Chevrolet. He said they drove for a couple of hours -- he didn't know where -- and went to the home of someone named Joe to buy cocaine. Then, snorting coke to calm their nerves, they tried to erase all traces of Fauber, Garvie said in the transcripts. The body, unwrapped from its plastic shroud, went over a steep embankment at a highway rest area. The clothes, personal possessions and plastic wrap were thrown in dumpsters or scattered at various sites along the roadways.

In April 1986, the badly decomposed body of a man was found on a steep hill below a rest area along Route 12 in Charlestown, N.H. For months, no one would know who it was. But in early 1987, New Hampshire police told Vermont officials that an informant had come forward who might know who the dead man was and who had killed him.

Joseph Paradis of Claremont, N.H., told officials that on the night of Dec. 9, 1985, Platt and Garvie had come to his house. He said Platt wanted help getting rid of a body, court records show. Paradis said he refused. His information led State Trooper Cronan to the Sawyer house.

Robert Sawyer knew something was up even before Cronan arrived. The New England Telephone Co. had sent him a letter saying his long-distance telephone records had been turned over to authorities. And Houghton Sawyer, already approached by Cronan with his suspicions about Guerrero and Platt and asked not to tell his brother, told him anyway, court records show.

Sawyer warned the pair and they left in the red Chevrolet, the records say. They parked it in Greenfield, Mass., and took a bus to New York City. Later, with the help of Robert Sawyer, police would trace them to a hotel room there and arrest them. In April 1987, Guerrero and Platt were arraigned in Fauber's killing. A key witness against them would be Garvie, who quickly was given use immunity -- meaning nothing he said in depositions could be used against him if a case should develop against him later on.

Out on bail (\$15,000 for Platt, \$50,000 for Guerrero because of earlier run-ins with the law), the pair returned to the Sawyer house. Townspeople did not welcome their return.

Cars pulled up in front of the house. Insults were hurled. Objects were hurled. Threatening phone calls came at night. Somebody killed a pet dog. And when Guerrero collapsed one night from the AIDS that would eventually kill him, an emergency dispatcher warned on a public channel that the ambulance was carrying a person with AIDS from the Sawyer house. Police scanners, the modern ganglia of small-town gossip, fairly crackled with the news.

The men retreated to the dark shelter of the house, no longer tending the front lawn, no longer hanging out on the porch swing that had been a favorite spot.

Meanwhile, the legal case ground on. The defense won a motion to have evidence seized from the car excluded from any trial. The car was seized without proper grounds in Greenfield, a lower court ruled, and that made any evidence taken from it inadmissible. It is the state's appeal of that ruling, still before the Vermont Supreme Court, that holds up a trial.

Somewhere along the line, Garvie changed his story. Sources who did not want to be identified say he no longer placed Guerrero in the room where Fauber was killed. On Nov. 1, 1988, charges against Guerrero were dropped, leaving Platt the sole defendant. Platt's lawyers won another motion: that reference to their client's "medical condition" be withheld from any jury. The defense did not name Platt's disease, but said in its motion that "the disclosure of said material to the jury will infringe upon the defendant's rights to a fair trial" and that "This material could potentially inflame the passions and prejudices of the 'country' from which the defendant's jury will be drawn." The motion was filed to "try to secure a fair group of jurors out there," according to Kenneth Fishman, one of the lawyers representing Platt.

Questions, sure to be raised at the trial, were raised about the initial autopsy, conducted at St. Joseph's Hospital in Nashua, N.H., by Dr. George Katsas. In his report, Katsas said the body he examined had a partial denture. Fauber's dental records would show he had a full set of teeth. A dentist, called in to compare the teeth with the dental records, identified them as Fauber's. Katsas later said he somehow made a mistake in writing up the report and that his original notes did not indicate a denture.

Guerrera, meanwhile, got sicker. Platt's defense team wanted him to give a deposition, but Guerrera balked. He did not want the state coming back at him later for anything he said. Given immunity, he testified from his hospital bed at the Vermont Medical Center in Burlington. Present were his own lawyer, State's Attorney for Windham County Dan Davis and an assistant, two of Platt's lawyers and a court reporter. Sources say his testimony contradicts Garvie's version of what happened.

Guerrera gave his deposition on Thursday, Oct. 26, 1989. By early Sunday morning, he was dead. His deposition, like those of all others in the case, has been sealed under Vermont law.

In the only comments he would make when questioned last week, Platt said that Davis "hounded my friend right up to death" and is now trying to drag his own case out.

"The state of Vermont doesn't want to admit a mistake," he said.

"For what it's worth, we think we've got an innocent fella here," said Fishman.

Davis, however, said he appealed the ruling on the car because he considers evidence seized from it -- including hair, clothing and what may be blood -- crucial.

"I would not have appealed had I not thought that evidence was necessary for the state's case, " he said from his desk beneath a large blowup of the murder charge against Platt. So in the tight, converted third-floor quarters of the office of the state's attorney for Windham County, where suspended ceilings resonate with talk from other offices and drive attorneys and police officers into the hallways to protect private conversations, Davis last week awaited the Supreme Court ruling and his appointed clash with the high-powered Boston law firm from swank Long Wharf.

Garvie, according to Davis, was last known to be in jail in western Massachusetts on charges not related to the Fauber case. Garvie is forbidden to speak publicly about his deposition.

David Platt is still living with Sawyer in the rambling mansion where, according to McMasters, he entertains a regular group of young visitors. He no longer has a driver's license and is driven around town by a friend. Occasionally, with the state's permission, he has traveled to Connecticut to visit his family or to other states on trips with Sawyer.