

Forensic Computer Investigation Brings Notorious Serial Killer BTK to Justice

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Between 1974 and 1991, a serial killer terrorized the citizens of Wichita, Kansas, murdering 10 people under the moniker he created for himself: BTK, which stood for “bind, torture, kill.” The Wichita police dedicated more than 100,000 hours, investigated thousands of suspects, and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to identify and capture BTK. What made this case especially bizarre was the killer's habit of sending numerous taunting communications to the Wichita police and media over the years. Detectives used many tactics to encourage BTK to send these communiqués, believing they would eventually lead to the killer's identification and capture. Decades later, they were proven correct and the sadistic murderer was finally brought to justice.



Dennis Rader, arrested and charged with the BTK serial killings.

The BTK Investigation

On January 15, 1974, the nation was shocked at the news that four people, Joseph and Julie Otero and their 11-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son, had been brutally murdered in their home. These would be the first of BTK's string of murders. Those that followed were spread out over many years, with the final confirmed killing carried out on January 19, 1991. Besides the Otero family, all of the BTK victims, whom he labeled his “projects,” were women who varied widely in age and lived in same general area.

BTK was an oddity among other serial killers in that he regularly engaged police and the media in cat-and-mouse type games involving cryptic messages, puzzles, and other forms of communication threaded with half-truths, lies, and false leads. This was especially strange in comparison to other serial killers, as psychopaths who would carry out such heinous crimes will normally avoid any activity that could get them caught. At one point BTK even sent police a biographical sketch of himself, although police doubted the information was correct, a hunch that was later confirmed when the killer was finally identified.

BTK mysteriously ended his frequent communications with police and the press in 1979, and was not heard from again until 2004, when he sent a letter to *The Wichita Eagle* claiming responsibility for a murder he committed in 1986. Until that time, the murder had not been linked to BTK. This led detectives to pursue a new investigation centered on that cold case, which involved the gathering of thousands of DNA samples from potential suspects. Unfortunately, this angle of the investigation did not lead to any concrete results and the case remained unsolved. However, this would not be the last time BTK would be heard from; in the months leading up to his arrest he planted numerous cryptic messages and bizarre symbolic objects around the Wichita area.

In 1983 police tried to revamp the BTK investigation by launching two teams of detectives on a cross-country trip to collect voluntary saliva and blood samples from 200 potential suspects for comparison to DNA left at some of the crime scenes. Most of this DNA was the killer's semen, which was a type that would only match 6% of all men. All but 12 of the tested individuals were cleared, five of whom had refused to comply with the tests. However, no charges were filed based on the effort.

In 1984, police established a task force named “The Ghostbusters” to compile and reanalyze the massive amount of evidence collected in the BTK case. This task force worked with a computer consultant to develop a database that analyzed this evidence to create a list of potential suspects and hopefully find links between the crimes that investigators had not yet discovered.

This task force revealed that all the BTK murders had taken place less than 4 miles apart from one another, suggesting that BTK was familiar with and lived in the area. The task force also determined that one of the letters BTK

had sent to the media had been Xeroxed at the Wichita State University (WSU) library. One of the poems BTK sent to the media was also modeled after the poem *Oh Death*, which was published in a WSU textbook. These discoveries suggested that BTK had likely attended the university.

Two lists of potential suspects were created based on the task force's findings. One list contained the names of all men living within 1 1/4 miles of the victims' homes. The other contained the names of all white males who had attended WSU between 1974 and 1979. Unfortunately, these lists did not lead to BTK's identification.

In 1997 a former FBI agent helped create a profile of BTK directing police to seek a graduate student or professor in WSU's criminal justice department who would have been in his mid-to-late 20s at the time of the murders. This profile described BTK as an avid reader of materials about serial killers and theorized that he had either left the Wichita area, died, or been institutionalized or imprisoned, a guess based on the abrupt end to BTK's string of murders. Another profiler suggested that BTK was intelligent but also extremely immature, a theory based on the mind games the killer played with police and the fact that he did not sexually assault his victims. This profiler theorized that BTK was not married and that any relationships he had with women would be superficial. He was also described as a compulsive psychopath who loved to kill and would never stop his pattern of crimes.

Detectives also formulated their own profile based on the information BTK provided in his communiqués. BTK's messages often involved police lingo, leading to suspicion that he worked in law enforcement. This led to a request that all male retired police officers in the area voluntarily provide DNA samples for comparison to the killer's DNA. All but one officer complied with this request, but the tests did not lead to any new suspects.

The Break in the Case: BTK Slips Up

BTK sealed his fate when he made the mistake of mailing a package containing a computer disc and 3x5 index card to a Wichita television station. This package was taken to police officials, who quickly went to work to glean any evidence contained in this, the latest of BTK's communiqués.

The disc that Rader sent contained only one file labeled "TestA.rtf," which contained a single sentence directing detectives to read the index card he had sent with the disc.

Fortunately, the disc contained more evidence than was immediately visible. This evidence, uncovered through modern forensic computer detection, would eventually lead to BTK's capture.

The disc was sent to the Wichita Police Department's forensic computer crimes unit, where a detective went to work delving into the disc's hidden files and cryptic digital information. Within minutes, this detective uncovered residual information that identified the last person who had used the disc: someone named Dennis. The detective then dug deeper to learn the disc had been used on computers registered to two local organizations, Christ Lutheran Church and the Park City Library. A simple Internet search on Christ Lutheran Church provided the name of the congregation's president: Dennis Rader.

To many detectives, this exciting discovery seemed too good to be true. They suspected BTK was simply playing one of his twisted games and that the information uncovered on the disc would lead to yet another dead end. A sentence that BTK had written on the index card he'd sent with the disc fueled this suspicion. It read: "Any communications will have a # assigned from now on, encase one is lost or not found." The misspelled word "encase" concerned detectives because it is the name of a sophisticated software program that police use in forensic computer investigations. Since it was already suspected that BTK was involved in law enforcement, many worried that the killer knew of the program and had purposely misspelled the word as a hint that the information on the disc was nothing more than another false clue. Still, the investigators ran with the information, which provided the most promising lead they had uncovered in the case so far.

Detectives located Dennis Rader's home and found a Jeep Cherokee parked in the driveway, the same type of car that had been captured on surveillance videos at a location where BTK had planted one of his cryptic messages. This detail had been withheld from the media, which gave police additional hope that they were on the right track.

Police carefully conducted the final stages of their investigation to ensure that Dennis Rader truly was BTK before taking him into custody. These measures included comparing a DNA sample subpoenaed from Rader's daughter to DNA that BTK had left at his murder scenes. This DNA was a close match, confirming that the serial killer truly had been found. Nine days later Rader was taken into custody.

About Dennis Rader, A.K.A. "BTK"

Rader, born in 1945 and raised in Wichita, was married with two children at the time of his arrest. Although he wasn't well liked by many in his life, few people who knew Rader believed he could be dangerous. His ability to fool those around him and hide his psychopathic personality was evidenced by his roles as church council president and Boy Scout troupe leader.

Once Dennis Rader was apprehended, several clues linking him to the murders, clues that investigators had missed, became glaringly obvious. For example, Rader graduated from WSU with a degree in criminal justice and had worked with two of the BTK victims. He also lived near the victims, just down the street from one of them. Rader had served in the Air Force, coinciding with some investigators' belief that the BTK moniker could have been based on the Air Force squadron term "Born To Kill." One of the puzzles that BTK sent to police even contained hidden words and numbers hinting at his identity, including "DRader" and "6220," which was Rader's house number.

Once Rader was captured, he provided a full confession filled with bizarre and disturbing revelations. He claimed his sadistic sexual appetite began when a "demon" possessed him at a young age, and said he was driven to murder to fulfill fantasies involving bondage and torture. He also believed his victims would serve him as "sex slaves" in the afterlife.

At the time of Rader's arrest he was employed as a city compliance officer for Park City, Kansas. In this position Rader was responsible for enforcing city codes and regulations, such as dog leash laws and minor public nuisance violations. Numerous complaints were made about the overzealous, bullying way he carried out his duties, but no disciplinary action was ever taken against him. Rader even allegedly harassed one citizen to the point of peeping into her windows, banging on her doors, and putting her dog to sleep. This woman made at least one complaint to local police, but they dismissed her claims. Desperate to escape Rader's persistent and increasing harassment, the woman was finally forced to move out of the area.

Before holding this position with the city, Rader worked with ADT Security Services, installing security systems in customers' homes, and with the U.S. Census Bureau, going door-to-door collecting information from citizens. It is theorized that Rader encountered some of his first victims while working for these organizations.

Rader often tricked his victims into letting him into their homes using his authority with Park City and his roles with his church and the scouting group he led. He even used the church to carry out some of his sadistic activities; in addition to using the church computer to create some of his communiqués, he once took a victim to the church basement, where he took photos of the body posed in bondage positions for his personal collection.

Rader's killing spree was far from over when he was finally captured. Police have now revealed that Rader had selected his future target victim and had even set October 22, 2005 as the day he would attack her. Officials have notified this potential target, whose identity remains anonymous.

Rader's Trial and Sentencing

Rader's trial was completed in 2005, just a surprisingly short amount of time after his arrest. After Rader pled not guilty and waived his right to a jury trial, prosecutors presented their case, which included evidence ranging from his confession to the DNA that matched him to some of the crime scenes. Items found during searches of Rader's home, Park City office, and camper also helped seal the killer's fate, including a knife and mouth gag used in the Otero family murders. Rader kept copies of nearly all the messages he sent to the media and police, which he planned to eventually digitally scan for safekeeping. He also stored mementos from his murders, including photos and personal items taken from the victims' homes, and pre-assembled "hit kits," bags containing rubber gloves, tape, handcuffs, rope, and bandannas for use in future attacks. Rader also collected hundreds of self-made pornographic materials, often photos of women and children that he wrote and drew over to depict his sadistic sexual fantasies. He also had a collection of dolls that he practiced bondage with; these were found bound with rope and handcuffs on his property. Photos that Rader had taken of himself in various bondage poses wearing women's clothing, such as pantihose and bras, were also located. In one photo Rader was half-buried in a shallow grave that had been intended for one of his victims.

In court Rader provided detailed and graphic accounts of how he had stalked and murdered his victims. When the judge overseeing the case asked Rader whether he had killed to satisfy his sexual fantasies, Rader answered yes.

Rader's defense team took very few measures to fight his conviction. They did not request a change of venue and made no attempt to suppress any of the evidence brought against their client. They also did not postpone Rader's trial, although such a request would almost certainly have been granted.

Rader's sentencing hearing was mostly a formality; the only issue the judge was asked to rule on was whether Rader would serve his 10 life sentences consecutively or concurrently. Since Rader's murders were committed before 1994, the year that Kansas reinstated the death penalty, he was not eligible for execution. However, the judge gave Rader the harshest sentence possible: 10 consecutive life terms with no chance of parole for 175 years, ensuring that Rader would be imprisoned until the time of his death.

An additional trial was held this October to help determine how limited Rader's life in prison would be. At this trial the judge recommended that the Kansas Department of Corrections deny Rader access to any materials or objects that would fuel his sadistic sexual fantasies, including pictures of people or animals. The judge also ruled that Rader should not be allowed to view, listen to, or read any media coverage of his crimes, since he is known to thrive off this attention.

The Kansas Department of Corrections will make the ultimate determination as to what materials Rader will have access to in prison. However, it is expected that the judge's opinion will strongly influence the agency's decision on the matter.

Other issues were also decided during this trial, including whether Rader should be treated as a sex offender and pedophile. The judge decided that Rader should be considered a sex offender, but did not specifically label him a pedophile. The judge also ordered Rader to pay \$42,000 in restitution and ruled that all evidence from the BTK case, including personal items that had belonged to the victims, be held by police officials until Rader has completed his appeals process. At that time the issue will again be raised to determine the future of these materials. The families of Raders' victims are expected to be involved in these trials, fighting to prevent Rader from profiting from the sale of the items. Kansas state law prohibits criminals from profiting from telling the story of their crimes, but similar laws in other states have been ruled unconstitutional. Kansas does not have laws barring Rader from profiting from the sale of his personal possessions and items saved as mementos of his crimes.

The final issue decided during this trial declared that the thousands of DNA samples collected from former suspects during the BTK investigation be destroyed. These DNA samples were not entered into any database, preventing them from being used in any future cases and protecting the subjects' privacy.

Relatives of the BTK Victims File Civil Suits Against Rader

Although Rader's initial criminal trial and sentencing phases are now over, he still faces a series of civil lawsuits, including wrongful death suits, filed by his victims' family members. Most of these lawsuits are aimed at ensuring that Rader never profits from his heinous murders.

Rader will be representing himself in these civil suits, which is allowed under Kansas state law. However, Rader has missed filing deadlines in all the civil cases brought against him to date; these inactions have resulted in several default judgments against him.

Rader's former wife has filed a petition to intervene in these civil lawsuits to protect her portion of her husband's assets, including the profit generated from the sale of the home they lived in while Rader carried out his years of crime. Attorneys for the victims' families are fighting to have part of the proceeds from the auction of the Rader home given to victims' family members. These attorneys argue that the home sold for \$30,000 more than its estimated value due to Rader's notoriety; they hope to have this excess amount awarded to their clients.

Congress Seeks Bill to Deny Rader an Honorable Military Burial

Under federal law, Rader, an Air Force veteran, is technically guaranteed the military honor of burial in one of our nation's federal cemeteries. However, Congress is working on bills to prevent this from happening. Under these laws any veteran convicted of a capital offense would be denied this honor in the future.

Rader's Future in Prison

Today Rader is being held in a tiny cell at the El Dorado prison, secluded from fellow inmates for his own protec-

tion. In an ironic twist of fate, one of Rader's current prison guards had actually been one of his targeted victims. This guard was a teenager when Rader knocked on the door of her home in 1977, intending to gain entry and attack her. When she did not answer his knocks Rader moved on and chose an alternate victim living down the street.

While developments are still ongoing in Rader's case, one thing is sure: This killer will die behind bars, never again free to carry out his sadistic murderous fantasies.

A note from the author: The Wichita Police forensic computer crimes unit received the prestigious “Forensics Investigation Case of the Year” award from the International High Technology Crime Investigation Association in honor of their breakthrough on the BTK case. Other awards and recognitions have been given to the investigators who helped bring the case to a successful conclusion.

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