

**VERNA
MONK
STAFFORD**
1953-



**CRIME
THAT
CHANGED
OKLAHOMA**

In the 1970s a senseless crime spree rocked Oklahoma City, when Verna Stafford, along with her husband Roger and brother-in-law Harold, murdered nine victims for some quick cash. Verna remains in an Oklahoma prison for her heinous role for these murders.

On June 22, 1978, Air Force veterans Melvin and Linda Lorenz and their 12-year-old son Richard stopped on I-35 near Purcell to offer assistance to stranded motorist Verna, who needed money to find a place to live in Tulsa. Harold needed cash for his girlfriend's abortion. Roger and Harold came out of the woods, demanding money. When Melvin refused, he was shot. When Linda offered assistance, Roger shot her too. Young Richard was shot through the camper window. The crime took twenty minutes, netting \$600. After driving to Stillwater, the trio dumped the stolen pickup back in Oklahoma City.

On July 17, 1978, the Staffords entered the Sirloin Stockade restaurant at Southwest 74th and Penn Avenue around 10pm. A short time later, Carlos Joy, boyfriend of employee Terri Horst, noticed their idling green station wagon in the parking lot. The trio forced assistant manager Louis Zaharias to show them the cash register, which was empty. In the back office, Roger got the money bag from the safe, which he handed to Verna. The trio herded six employees, including four teenagers, into the walk-in freezer and shot them.

Worried, Carlos entered the restaurant and called out for Terri, but got no response. He returned to his car and blared on his new CB's loudspeaker, "This is the police. We have your surrounded," hoping that would scare any robbers. It did cause the killers to speed away from the scene, rear-ending a driver who identified the car. Around 11pm, manager Michael Click arrived, wondering why the night's receipts hadn't been called in. He discovered the victims and called police, who found Terri barely alive, but she died upon arrival at the hospital. Carlos' testimony would help convict them.

On September 3, 1978, 11-year-old Gregory Martin found a bag of pistols in northeast Oklahoma City. The serial numbers matched one stolen from a Purcell pawn shop and two owned by Melvin Lorenz. Police believed that solving the Lorenz murders might unlock the Stockade mystery. The composites of the possible suspects were published on January 4, 1979. Almost immediately, a drunken Roger Stafford called anonymously claiming to be a trucker who partied with suspects Verna and Harold in Tulsa. The police had no names until Roger provided them.

Harold Stafford died in a motorcycle crash in Tulsa on July 22, 1978, a week after the murders. Verna was arrested in Chicago, living with her children. Back in Oklahoma, she confessed to what happened, but minimized her role. Roger was arrested on March 13, 1979, in a Chicago YMCA.

With her testimony, Roger was convicted on October 17, 1979 for the Stockade killings and on February 28, 1980 for the Lorenz murders, and sentenced to death. Claiming Verna lied on the stand, Roger arrogantly claimed his innocence until he was executed on July 1, 1995. Verna pleaded guilty to two counts of second-degree murder and was sentenced to ten years to life. During a 1989 resentencing, her sentence was increased to two life terms plus 999 years. She applies for parole every few years.

OSBI lead investigator Arthur Linville never believed robbery was the trio's motive. He called it a joy killing. "Through a combination of public vigilance, diligent investigation and quirks of fate, the killers were punished."