

# Lone investigator follows long trail to murder's solution

Continued from Page 43A.

determined sleuthing in the annals of Texas crime.

As a patrol sergeant, Simons wasn't directly assigned to the murders. Nevertheless, he tracked the investigation, routinely reading reports filed by the 14 men who were designated to work the case.

The murders grabbed wide-spread news coverage. During the first 48 hours after the bodies were discovered — critical ones in any murder investigation — Waco police averaged 50 telephoned tips an hour. These came mainly from well-meaning citizens who wanted to help. Investigators ran up dozens of blind alleys.

The cops were stumped. The two girls from Waxahachie and the boy from Waco had been killed by a person or persons unknown.

The news media were soon enticed away by other breaking stories, and lawmen returned to more promising, less puzzling cases.

One night about two months after the murders, Simons, looking over the shoulder of a detective, saw another meaningless report being prepared. He said the detective sent the report to an inactive file.

Shocked that the probe, however frustrating, would be suspended, Simons phoned Waco Police Chief Larry Scott at home. Scott, agreeing that the investigation shouldn't be suspended, listened to Simons' plea.

his claim to a police pension and taking a pay cut of \$1,000 a month.

He made the move solely to pursue unhindered his investigation of the Lake Waco murders.

Professionally, it wasn't a step off a curb for a police sergeant — it was a dive off an economic cliff.

Simons became a turnkey for Sheriff Jack Harwell, who assured him that he could work on the Lake Waco murders in his free time. Sheriff's Capt. Dan Weyenberg had persuaded the sheriff that Simons was sane. Weyenberg had once been chief of police in the McLennan County town of Robinson where Simons had grown up.

How Simons spent months gaining the confidence of his chief suspect, an ex-con held in the county jail for an unrelated crime, and how the lawman eventually overcame daunting obstacles to crack the Lake Waco case is the subject of a new book.

Carlton Stowers, who used to cover the Cowboys for *The Dallas Morning News*, tells the story movingly and dramatically — so dramatically that Warner Brothers already has optioned the book for a TV movie.

Billed as "the true story of a triple murder and the determined lawman who would not give up," the book — *Careless Whispers* — was written with the cooperation of Simons, who isn't down for a cent from it. Getting Simons to help on the book was an impressive feat by

"There are some cops I have no use for. But there are some really good people at the Waco PD. I'm not bad-mouthing the whole department."

— Truman Simons

Stowers. Simons has always worked without public attention.

Indeed, when Simons talked with me last week, he mentioned it was the first sit-down interview he had given a newspaperman in nearly 20 years of law enforcement work.

Simons' sudden forthrightness is attributable to his wanting the story told as a caution to all teen-agers. But he also wants his account of the controversial investigation in the record.

"There are some cops I have no use for. But there are some really good people at the Waco PD. I'm not bad-mouthing the whole department," he says.

Still, several Waco cops can be expected to explode when they read Simons' version of how they handled the Lake Waco case.

Stowers traces a bloody trail through a maze of human and subhuman lives to the conclusion of the mystery.

Today two men — David Wayne Spence and Muneer Deeb — are on death row, and two brothers — Gilbert and Tony Melendez — are serving life sentences as a result of Simons' work.

ering spot for young people at Lake Waco. Miss Montgomery resembled Miss Kelley. Spence, accompanied by the other two ex-cons, attacked.

Franks was stabbed 20 times. The girls were stabbed repeatedly and their throats were slashed.

The bodies were hauled in the pickup of Gilbert Melendez to remote Speegleville Park, directly across the lake from Koehne Park.

As a rule, murder for hire is hard to prosecute. But the Lake Waco murders were further complicated by Jill Montgomery's mistaken identity. Deeb never collected the insurance on Gayle Kelley, and Spence was never paid the \$5,000 he'd allegedly been offered. Consequently, cops had no easy trail of money to follow.

Had things gone according to the criminal plan, the murders would probably have been quickly solved. As it was, the case was a complex mess that was solved only through the statements of the Melendez brothers. Convictions — bolstered by the dental evidence against Spence — brought McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell to a peak of popularity.

Now facing a re-election race on Nov. 4 while beset by a federal indictment charging racketeering and mail fraud, Feazell may see *Careless Whispers* as a welcome political asset.

Stowers says the book (Taylor Publishing, \$18.95) isn't really about Feazell, who figures only sporadi-

cally in the last half of the story. Stowers says the hero of his book is Simons. In its treatment of Feazell, however, *Careless Whispers* is friendly.

The book will thrust Simons into an unaccustomed spotlight.

What will he do?

The maverick cop-turned-deputy, booted and be-jeaned, smiled through a cloud of cigarette smoke:

"I don't know. I've never been in that position before. As for what I did, I don't think it's that remarkable. Anyone in law enforcement who was dedicated would have done the same."

What about his reduced income?

"Judy and I have never lived beyond our means. We'll get by. I can always go back to working on cars. I used to be a pretty good mechanic. Judy and I do have a responsibility to our little boy. He's four, named Jason. He used to want to be a cop. Now he tells me he wants to be a deputy sheriff."

Will Simons run for sheriff?

"I'm no politician. I can't go around with people I don't like. When I hired on, I told Sheriff Harwell I wanted to work on this case. And after the case is over, I told him, I don't know whether I'll stay or not."

"The sheriff backed me up real strong. I liked the way he treated me. Right now, I'm in law enforcement on a day-to-day basis. I don't know how long I'll stay in it. I'm real discouraged."