

Man is charged in 1980 slaying

DNA leads to arrest in death that had been connected to serial killer Lucas and Morton case

By **Claire Osborn**

cosborn@statesman.com

Declaring a notorious cold case solved, officials said Tuesday that DNA evidence links a Dallas-area man to the 1980 slaying of an elderly woman in Williamson County.

Mildred McKinney, 73, was restrained, beaten, sexually assaulted and strangled in her home on Sherbourne Street in what



Steven Alan Thomas

was then southwestern Williamson County in November 1980. Serial killer Henry Lee Lucas had once confessed to the killing, and some later speculated that her death could be related to the slaying nearby of Christine Morton six years later.

But Williamson County officials said Tuesday that Steven Alan Thomas, whose name had not previously surfaced in the case, was charged Monday with capital murder in McKinney's death. Thomas, 53, described as a self-employed carpenter in court documents, was arrested at his parents' house in Northwest Austin and is being held in the Williamson County Jail with bail set at \$1 million.

Sheriff's investigators got a

DNA in federal database prompts another test

Arrest

Continued from A1

break in McKinney's case June 27, when they received a report that a recent search of the federal DNA database showed that Thomas' DNA matched DNA taken from a ligature used to restrain McKinney, according to an arrest warrant.

A sheriff's detective interviewed Thomas in Dallas on July 5 and got a sample of his saliva, the warrant said. During the interview, Thomas said he did not know McKinney, did not recognize her home and did not sexually assault and kill her, according to the warrant.

Investigators learned July 21 that DNA from Thomas' saliva matched the DNA found at McKinney's home, the document says. A Texas Department of Public Safety fingerprint examiner also told officials that he had matched a fingerprint found at the homicide scene to Thomas, the affidavit said.

Authorities would not say Tuesday why Thomas' DNA was in a federal database. Court documents, however, show that Thomas was indicted in March in federal court on three counts of possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance. The indictment said the substance was marijuana.

Thomas got a plea bargain that reduced the indictment to one count of possession with intent to distribute less than 50 kilograms of marijuana, required him to submit a DNA sample and live at a residence near Dallas, the court documents said. He has not yet been sentenced, according to court documents.

Despite Lucas at one time confessing to McKinney's death, Williamson County sheriff's officials said there was no matching DNA evidence.

Then lawyers and relatives thought McKinney's slaying might be linked to the 1986 beating death of Morton, who died less than a mile away from McKinney's house in much the

same manner.

McKinney's daughter, Pat Stapleton, joined a lawsuit filed in 2007 by the Innocence Project that requested that DNA tests be run on evidence at her mother's crime scene and at the Morton crime scene.

Michael Morton, Christine Morton's husband, was mistakenly held in prison for 25 years for her murder until investigators charged Mark Norwood based on DNA evidence.

Williamson County sheriff's officials said in January that they had not ruled out Norwood as a suspect in McKinney's death, even though there was no DNA match.

Thomas' arrest affidavit said a purse, jewelry and a silver tea set had been taken from McKinney's home.

One of McKinney's grandsons said Tuesday in a news release that he and his family were "very grateful" for the arrest.

The grandson, Bob Stapleton, said it was "news which comes bittersweet that it was not realized before the passing of first our father and then our mother over the last year and a half, but it does not alter our sincere gratitude to the Williamson County sheriff's office and Sgt. John Foster for their (his) years of tireless and steadfast work in solving this case."

At his home Tuesday, Thomas' father declined to comment.

A neighbor, Yolande McGann, said she was surprised to hear about the arrest. McGann said Thomas had told her he was a contractor when she moved into her house seven years ago and that he had helped her hang pictures.

She said she often saw him helping his parents in their backyard when he visited and said he would talk to her about the plants in her yard.

"I never felt nervous with him or threatened," she said.

Contact Claire Osborn at 246-7400