

Aileen Wuornos: Killer Who Preyed on Truck Drivers

by Marlee MacLeod

The Myth and the Reality

Some of what you've heard about Aileen Wuornos is true.

Yes, she killed seven men in Florida. Yes, she was a prostitute. She gave a shocking, detailed confession at the behest of her lesbian ex-lover, and during her trial she was legally adopted by a well-meaning woman who claimed to receive her instruction from God. She had memorable profane outbursts in more than one courtroom, and she awaits execution on Florida's death row, the recipient of six death sentences, more than anyone else residing there. All these things are true.

It's important, however, to dispel some of the hyperbole surrounding the Wuornos case at the outset. She was not America's first female serial killer. Women have been murdering serially for as long as men, though their victims are usually family members or acquaintances, and they most often choose poison over other means of disposal. Wuornos killed strangers with a gun, an unusual but not unprecedented fact that the media seized upon and ran with rampantly. Furthermore, Wuornos's activities as a prostitute are ridiculously exaggerated. Her claim of having had sex with 250,000 men (which was widely reported as truth) is preposterous; such a feat would require the bedding of 35 different men a day every day for 20 years. Wuornos had neither the stamina nor the planning skills necessary for such a record-breaking performance.

Even with these most sensational claims discredited, Aileen Wuornos remains intriguing. She is both repellent and strangely pathetic. Her belligerence all but sealed her fate from the moment she was apprehended, and inspired contempt in most who encountered her or heard of her case. Her bravado and her claims that all seven of her victims tried to rape her are as incomprehensible as her boast of having serviced 250,000 johns. Add to these the melodrama of her confession, her befriending and adoption by Arlene Pralle, and her never-had-a-chance personal history, and her story fairly reels one in.

A Poor Beginning

Wuornos's father, Leo Dale Pittman, was a child molester and a sociopath who was strangled in prison in 1969. Her mother, Diane Wuornos, married Pittman when she was fifteen and bore him two children. She divorced Pittman less than two years into the marriage, a few months before Aileen was born. Diane found the responsibilities of single motherhood unbearable and in 1960 she abandoned Aileen and her brother Keith, who were then adopted by their maternal grandparents, Lauri and Britta Wuornos. The Wuornoses raised Aileen and Keith with their own children in Troy, Michigan. They did not reveal that they were, in fact, the children's grandparents. Aileen discovered the truth at around age twelve, information, which did not help an already troublesome situation. Lauri Wuornos drank heavily and was strict with the children; when they discovered their true parentage they rebelled against his severity, quickly becoming incorrigible. Aileen was pregnant at age fourteen and sent to an unwed mothers' home for the duration of her pregnancy. The staff found her hostile, uncooperative, and unable to get along with her peers. She delivered a baby boy, who was put up for adoption, in January 1971. In July of the same year Britta Wuornos died. Diane Wuornos offered to let Aileen and Keith come live with her in Texas, but they declined, as she intended to establish rules and keep order in her household. Aileen, known to friends as Lee, dropped out of school, left home and took up hitchhiking and prostitution.

In the next few years Keith died of throat cancer and Lauri committed suicide, and Lee headed for Florida, where she met and married an elderly man named Lewis Fell who had a comfortable income from railroad stocks. The marriage was short; Fell obtained a restraining order and an annulment after Lee was arrested for hurling a cue ball at a bartender's head back home in Michigan. He claimed she had squandered his money and beaten him with his cane when he was not forthcoming with even more cash.

Keith's life insurance had paid off well for Lee and her siblings. Lee received \$10,000, which was gone in two months. She drifted back to Florida and embarked on a decade of failed relationships and small-time crime-forgery, theft, and a rather ridiculous armed robbery that put her in prison for a spell. From time to time she turned tricks, but even as an exit-to-exit interstate prostitute she was not a hot commodity. When she met twenty-four-year-old Tyria Moore at a Daytona gay bar in 1986, Lee was lonely and angry and ready for something new.

For a while it was great. Ty loved her and didn't leave her; she even quit her job as a motel maid for a while and allowed Lee to support her with her prostitution earnings. Their ardor cooled, though, and money ran short-still, Ty stayed with Lee, following her from cheap motel to cheap motel, with stints in old barns or in the woods in between. Lee's market value as a prostitute, never spectacular, fell even more. Their existence, meager though it was, became ever harder to maintain. Clearly, something had to change.

Mysterious Deaths

Richard Mallory liked a change now and again, too. The middle-aged owner of a Clearwater, Florida electronics repair business was known to close up shop abruptly and disappear for a few days at a time on drinking and sex binges. He changed the locks to his apartment eight times in three years. He kept employees at his business only long enough to clear the backlog of work that accrued during one of his disappearances, letting them go once his repair orders were caught up again. His only constants were alcohol, sex and paranoia. So when he didn't show up to open his shop in early December 1989, no one thought much of it. There was no one close enough to him to notice he was gone. It wasn't until his 1977 Cadillac was found a few days later outside Daytona that anyone knew anything was amiss.

On December 13, 1989, Jimmy Bonchi and James Davis were looking for scrap metal along a dirt road close to Interstate 95 in Volusia County, Florida. Instead of saleable junk they found a body wrapped in carpet. Fingerprints carefully taken from the badly decomposed hands proved that this was Richard Mallory. He had been killed with three shots from a .22. Several months of investigation into his sordid lifestyle and somewhat shady acquaintances produced no real leads. Initial suspicion revolved around a stripper who went by the name of Chastity, but the evidence, what little of it there was, didn't add up. Mallory's case went cold.

On May 5, 1990 the body of an unidentified male was found naked in Brooks County, GA, close to Interstate 75 and just across the state line from Florida. Two .22 caliber slugs were found in the remains, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had no leads as to the identity of their mysterious corpse. On June 1, another unidentified naked male body was found in the woods of Citrus County, Florida, about 40 miles north of Tampa. Police initially suspected Mathew Cocking, a surveyor who had found the body, as he was known to carry a gun and spewed profanity and threats at anyone who questioned him about his find. The identification of the body on June 7 as that of David Spears of Bradenton, Florida cleared Cocking. Spears had been a heavy-equipment operator who was last seen on May 19th. His truck was found shortly after that on Interstate 75 with the doors unlocked and the license plate missing.

Meanwhile, thirty miles south in Pasco County, yet another naked body was found a few miles off Interstate 75. This one was discovered on June 6, and was so badly decomposed that medical examiners were not able to obtain fingerprints and could not estimate time of death. The nine bullets found in the remains were damaged by the decomposition, but were determined to have come from a .22 caliber weapon. Pasco County detective Tom Muck had no immediate luck identifying his John Doe (later determined to be Charles Carskaddon), but had heard about the case in Citrus County. He notified Citrus County sheriff's investigator Marvin Padgett about the similarities and told him to stay in touch. Searching further for leads, he called the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and was told of their own mystery guest. Again, he noted similarities, but didn't feel he had enough information to put together an investigation.

Killing Spree Continues

On July 4, a car careened off State Road 315 near Orange Springs, Florida and came to rest in some brush. Rhonda Bailey, who was sitting on her porch at the time and watched the accident happen, said two women clambered frantically from the car, throwing beer cans into the woods and swearing at each other. The brown-haired woman said little; the blond, whose arm was bleeding from an injury sustained in the crash, did most of the talking. She begged Bailey not to call the police, saying her father lived just up the road. She and her companion got back in the car, which now had a smashed windshield and other damage, and got it out of the brush. The crippled vehicle didn't take them far, though. They abandoned it just down the road and began walking. Hubert Hewett of the Orange Springs Volunteer Fire Department responded to a call about the accident and asked the two women if they had been the ones in the car. The blond cursed at him and said no, they had not, and they did not want any help. He left them alone and they walked on.

Marion County sheriff's deputies found the car where the women had left it. It was a 1988 Pontiac Sunbird, gray with four doors. The glass in the front doors, as well as the windshield, was smashed. There were apparent bloodstains throughout the interior, and the license plate was missing. A computer search based on the VIN number revealed that the car belonged to Peter Siems, who had disappeared on June 7 after leaving his home in Jupiter, Florida to visit relatives in Arkansas. Siems was a 65-year-old retired merchant seaman who devoted much of his time to a Christian outreach ministry. John Wisnieski of the Jupiter Police, who had been working the case since Siems was reported missing, sent out a nationwide teletype containing descriptions of the two women. He also sent a synopsis of the case and sketches of the women to the Florida Criminal Activity Bulletin. Then he waited. He was not optimistic about finding Siems alive.

Troy Burress left on his delivery route from Gilchrist Sausage early on the morning of July 30. When he didn't return that afternoon, Gilchrist manager Johnny Mae Thompson started calling around and discovered Burress hadn't shown up at his last few delivery stops. Late that night she and her husband went out looking for him. At 2:00 a.m. Burress's wife reported him missing. At 4:00 a.m. Marion County sheriff's deputies found his truck on the shoulder of State Road 19, twenty miles east of Ocala. It was unlocked and the keys were missing. So was Burress.

He was found five days later. A family out for a picnic in the Ocala National Forest happened upon his body in a clearing just off Highway 19, about eight miles from where his truck was found. The Florida heat and humidity had hastened decomposition, precluding identification at the scene, but his wife identified his wedding ring. He had been killed with two shots from a .22 caliber gun, one to the chest and one to the back. Investigator John Tilley's initial suspect was a drifter named Curtis Michael Blankenship. He had been hitchhiking on Highway 19 the day of Burress's disappearance and was picked up close to the abandoned truck. It became evident as the investigation

progressed, however, that Blankenship was not involved. For the time being, Tilley had no more suspects.

Women Suspected

Dick Humphreys never made it home from his last day of work at the Sumterville office of the Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. A protective investigator specializing in abused and injured children, he was about to transfer to the Department's Ocala office. He was fifty-six, and this was not his first career; previously, he'd been a police chief in Alabama. He celebrated his thirty-fifth wedding anniversary on September 10; on September 11, he disappeared. On the evening of September 12 his body was found in Marion County. He'd been shot seven times. Six .22 caliber slugs were recovered from his body; the seventh went through his wrist and was never found. His car was found in late September in Suwanee County.

About a month later the nude body of Walter Gino Antonio was found on a logging road in Dixie County. Sixty-year-old Antonio was a trucker, a sometime security guard, and a member of the Reserve Police. He'd been shot four times with a .22. When he was found on November 19 he'd been dead less than 24 hours. His car was found five days later across the state in Brevard County.

Captain Steve Binegar was commander of the Marion County Sheriff's Criminal Investigation Division, and he knew about the crimes in Citrus and Pasco Counties. He could not ignore the similarities and was formulating a theory, along with a multi-agency task force with representatives from counties where victims were found. No one stopped to pick up hitchhikers anymore, he reasoned, so the perpetrator(s) of these crimes had to be initially non-threatening to the victims. He suspected women—specifically, he suspected the two women who had wrecked Peter Siems's car and walked away. He turned to the press for help. In late November, Reuters ran a story about the killings, saying police were looking for the women. Papers across Florida picked up the story and ran it, along with police sketches of the women in question.

Investigation Pays Off

It didn't take long for the leads to start pouring in, and by mid-December, police had several tips involving the same two women. A man in Homosassa Springs said the two women had rented a trailer from him about a year earlier. Their names were Tyria Moore and Lee. A woman in Tampa said the women had worked at her motel south of Ocala. Their names, she said, were Tyria Moore and Susan Blahovec. An anonymous caller identified the women as Ty Moore and Lee Blahovec, who bought an RV in Homosassa Springs. Lee Blahovec was the dominant one, the caller said, and a truck stop prostitute. Both were lesbians.

The mother lode, though, came from Port Orange near Daytona. Police there had been tracking the movements of Lee Blahovec and Tyria Moore, and provided a detailed account of the couple's movements from late September to mid-December. They had stayed, primarily, at the Fairview Motel in Harbor Oaks, where Blahovec registered as Cammie Marsh Greene. They spent a bit of time living in a small apartment behind a restaurant very near the Fairview, but returned to the motel. In early December they left the Fairview. Blahovec/Greene returned alone, and stayed until December 10.

A quick computer check gave driver's license and criminal record information on Tyria Moore, Susan Blahovec and Cammie Marsh Greene. Moore had no real record, breaking and entering charges against her in 1983 having been dropped. Blahovec had one trespassing arrest, while Greene had no record at all. Additionally, the photograph on Blahovec's license did not match the one for Greene.

The Greene ID was the one that paid off best. Volusia County officers checked area pawnshops and found that in Daytona, Cammie Marsh Greene had pawned a camera and a radar detector, and had left the requisite thumbprint on the receipt. These items had belonged to Richard Mallory. In Ormand Beach, she pawned a set of tools that matched the description of those taken from David Spears's truck.

The thumbprint was the key. Jenny Ahern of the Automated Fingerprint Identification System found nothing on her initial computer search, but came to Volusia County and began a hand search of fingerprint records there. Within an hour, she found what she came for. The print showed up on a weapons charge and outstanding warrant against a Lori Grody. A bloody palm print found in Peter Siems's Sunbird matched Lori Grody's prints as well. All this information was sent to the National Crime Information Center. Responses came from Michigan, Colorado and Florida. Lori Grody, Susan Blahovec and Cammie Marsh Greene were all aliases for Aileen Carol Wuornos.

The Hunt for Wuornos

The hunt for Wuornos began in earnest on January 5, 1991. Pairs of officers, including two undercover as "Bucket" and "Drums," drug dealers down from Georgia, hit the streets hoping to track her down. On the evening of January 8, Mike Joyner and Dick Martin, in their roles as "Bucket" and "Drums," spotted her at the Port Orange Pub. They meant for their takedown to develop gradually, as they wanted an airtight case, but Port Orange police entered suddenly and took Wuornos outside. Mike Joyner frantically phoned the command post at the Pirate's Cove Motel, where authorities from six jurisdictions had come to work the case. This development wasn't because of a leak, they surmised; these were just cops doing their jobs. Bob Kelley of the Volusia County Sheriff's Office called the Port Orange police station and told them not to arrest Wuornos under any circumstances. The word was relayed to the cops in the nick of time, and Wuornos returned to the bar. Joyner and Martin struck up a conversation with her and bought her a few beers. She left the bar at around 10:00, declining an offer for a ride. Once again, the cautious takedown was almost ruined. Two Florida Department of Law Enforcement officers pulled up behind Wuornos as she walked down Ridgwood Avenue, following her with their lights off. Officers at the command post made a call and got the FDLE officers off the street and Wuornos made it to her next destination, a biker bar called the Last Resort. Joyner and Martin met her there for a while, drank more beers, shot more bull. They left just after midnight. Wuornos didn't leave at all. She spent her last night of freedom sleeping on an old car seat in the Last Resort.

The following afternoon, Joyner and Martin were back at the Last Resort as "Bucket" and "Drums," talking Wuornos up and wearing transmitters that kept the police apprised of everything that went on. They had planned on making their collar later that night, but the Last Resort was gearing up for a barbecue, and bikers would start pouring in any second. The decision was made at the command post to go ahead with the arrest. Joyner and Martin asked Wuornos if she'd like to get cleaned up at their motel room. She accepted their offer and left the bar with them. Outside on the steps, Larry Horzepa of the Marion County Sheriff's Office approached her and told her she was being arrested on the outstanding warrant for Lori Grody. No mention was made of the murders, and no announcement was made to the media that a suspect had been arrested. Their caution was wise: as of yet, they had no murder weapon and no Tyria Moore

Confession

On January 10 Moore was located. She was living with her sister in Pittston, Pennsylvania. Jerry Thompson of Citrus County and Bruce Munster of Marion County flew to Scranton, Pennsylvania to interview her. She was read her rights but not charged with anything. Munster made sure she knew what perjury was, swore her in, and sat back as she gave her statement. She had known about the murders since Lee had come home with Richard Mallory's Cadillac, she said. Lee had openly confessed that she had killed a man that day, but Moore told her not to say anything else. "I told her I didn't want to hear about it," Moore told Munster and Thompson. "And then any time she would come home after that and say certain things, telling me about where she got something, I'd say I don't want to hear it." She had her suspicions, she admitted, but wanted to know as little as possible about Lee's doings. The more she knew, she reasoned, the more compelled she would feel to report Lee to the authorities. And she didn't want to do that. "I was just scared," she said. "She always said she'd never hurt me, but then you can't believe her, so I don't know what she would have done."

The next day Moore accompanied Munster and Thompson back to Florida to assist the investigation. A confession would make the case against Wuornos virtually airtight, and Munster and Thompson explained their plan for obtaining one to Moore on the flight. They would put her in a Daytona motel and have her make contact with Lee in jail, saying she'd received money from her mother and came down to get the rest of her things. Their phone conversations would be taped, and Moore was to tell Wuornos that authorities had been questioning her family, that she thought the Florida murders would be mistakenly pinned on her (Moore). Munster and Thompson hoped that, out of loyalty to Moore, Wuornos would confess.

The first call from Wuornos came on January 14. She was still under the impression that she was only in jail for the Lori Grody weapons violation. When Moore broached her suspicions, Wuornos reassured her. "I'm only here for that concealed weapons charge in '86 and a traffic ticket," she said, "and I tell you what, man, I read the newspaper, and I wasn't one of those little suspects." She was aware, though, that the jailhouse phone was monitored, and made efforts to speak of the crimes in code words and to construct alibis. "I think somebody at work -- where you worked at -- said something that it looked like us," she said, "And it isn't us, see? It's a case of mistaken identity."

For three days the calls continued. Moore became more insistent that the police were after her, and it became clear that Wuornos knew what was expected of her. She even voiced suspicion that Moore was not alone, that someone was there taping their conversations. But as time passed, she became less careful about what she said. She would not let Moore go down with her. "Just go ahead and let them know what you need to know...what they want to know or anything," she said, "and I will cover for you, because you're innocent. I'm not going to let you go to jail. Listen, if I have to confess, I will." And on the morning of January 16, she did.

Wuornos came back to two main points over and over during her confession to Larry Horzepa and Bruce Munster. First, she made it clear that Moore was not involved in any way in any of the murders. Additionally, she was emphatic in her assertion that *nothing* was her fault, not the murders and not any circumstance that led her down the criminal path that was her life. All the killings were done in self-defense, she claimed. Each victim had either assaulted her, threatened her, or raped her. Her story seemed to develop as she told it. When she thought she'd said something incriminating she would back up and retell that part, changing details to suit her overall scenario. She'd been raped several times in the past few years, she claimed, and had had enough. When each of her victims became aggressive she killed out of fear. Several times Michael O'Neill, a public defender from the Volusia County public defender's office, advised Wuornos to stop talking, finally asking in exasperation, "Do you realize these guys are cops!" Wuornos answered, "I know. And they wanted to hang me. And that's cool, because maybe, man, I deserve it. I just want to get this over with."

An avalanche of book and movie offers poured in to detectives, relatives, Moore and even Wuornos herself. Wuornos seemed to think she would make millions from her story, not yet realizing that Florida had a law against criminals profiting in such a manner. She was all over the local and national media. She felt famous, and she continued to talk about the crimes with anyone who would listen, including Volusia County Jail employees. With each retelling she refined her story, casting herself in a better light each time.

Aileen's Defender

Into this tumult came Arlene Pralle, a forty-four-year-old "born-again" Christian who ran a horse breeding and boarding facility near Ocala. She had seen Wuornos's picture in a newspaper and wrote her a letter. "My name is Arlene Pralle," she began, "I'm born-again. You're going to think I'm crazy, but Jesus told me to write you." She provided her home telephone number, and on January 30 Wuornos called her (collect) for the first time. Almost immediately, Pralle became her ardent defender and helpmate. Pralle advised her that her public defenders were trying to profit from her story, as was everyone else. Wuornos asked for and got new attorneys. Pralle spoke with reporters, describing her relationship with Wuornos to a *Vanity Fair* reporter as, "a soul binding. We're like Jonathan and David in the bible...It's as though part of me is trapped in jail with her. We always know what the other is feeling and thinking." To another reporter she said, "If the world could know the real Aileen Wuornos, there's not a jury that would convict her."

Throughout 1991, Pralle appeared on talk shows and in tabloids, talking to anyone who would listen about what she perceived as Wuornos's true, good nature. She arranged interviews for Wuornos with reporters she thought would be sympathetic, and in this forum Wuornos continued to tell and embellish her fantastic story. Both Wuornos and Pralle emphasized Wuornos's troubled upbringing, and both leveled accusations of corruption and complicity at anyone who was handy-the agents proffering the book and movie deals, the detectives, the attorneys and, especially, Tyria Moore. And just when it seemed things couldn't get any weirder, they did. On November 22, 1991, Arlene Pralle and her husband legally adopted Aileen Wuornos. Pralle said God had told her to.

The Trial

Wuornos's attorneys engineered a plea bargain, to which Wuornos agreed, in which she would plead to six charges and receive six consecutive life terms. One state attorney, however, thought she should receive the death penalty, so on January 14, 1992, Wuornos went to trial for the murder of Richard Mallory. The evidence and witnesses against her were severely damaging. Dr. Arthur Botting, the medical examiner who had autopsied Mallory's body, stated that Mallory had taken between ten and twenty agonizing minutes to die. Tyria Moore testified that Wuornos had not seemed overly upset, nervous or drunk when she told her of killing Mallory. Twelve men told of encounters with her along Florida's highways over the years.

Florida has a law known as the Williams Rule that allows evidence relating to other crimes to be admitted if it helps to show a pattern. Because of the Williams Rule, information regarding the other killings was presented to the jury. Wuornos's claim of having killed in self-defense would have been a lot more believable had the jury known only of Mallory. Now, with the jury made aware of all of the murders, self-defense seemed improbable, at best. After the excerpts from her videotaped confession were played, the self-defense claim seemed ridiculous. On the tape Wuornos appeared confident and not at all upset by the story she was telling. She made easy conversation with her interrogators and repeatedly told her public defender to be quiet. Her image spoke from the screen—"I took a life...I am willing to give up my life because I killed people...I deserve to die."

Tricia Jenkins, one of Wuornos's public defenders, did not want her client to testify and told her so. But Wuornos insisted on telling her story. By now, her account of Mallory's killing barely resembled the one she gave in her confession. Mallory had raped and sodomized her, she claimed, and had tortured her. On cross-examination, prosecutor John Tanner obliterated any shred of credibility she may have had. As he brought to light all her lies and inconsistencies, she became agitated and angry. Her attorneys repeatedly advised her not to answer questions, and she invoked her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination twenty-five times. She was the defense's only witness, and when she left the stand there was not much doubt about how her trial would end.

On January 27, Judge Uriel Blount charged the jury. They returned with their verdict less than two hours later. They found Wuornos guilty of first-degree murder, and as they filed out of the courtroom she exploded with rage, shouting, "I'm innocent! I was raped! I hope you get raped! Scumbags of America!" Her outburst was still fresh in the minds of jurors as the penalty phase of her trial began the next day. Expert witnesses for the defense testified that Wuornos was mentally ill, that she suffered from borderline personality disorder, and that her tumultuous upbringing had stunted and ruined her. Jenkins referred to her client as "a damaged, primitive child" as she pleaded with the jury to spare Wuornos's life. But jurors neither forgot nor forgave the woman they'd come to know during the trial. With a unanimous verdict, they

recommended that Judge Blount sentence her to the electric chair. He did so on January 31.

Unrepentant

Wuornos did not stand trial again. On March 31 she pleaded no contest to the murders of Dick Humphreys, Troy Burress and David Spears, saying she wanted to “get right with God.” In a rambling statement to the court she said, “I wanted to confess to you that Richard Mallory did violently rape me as I’ve told you. But these others did not. [They] only began to start to.” She ended her monologue by turning to Assistant State Attorney Ric Ridgeway and hissing, “I hope your wife and children get raped in the ass!” On May 15, Judge Thomas Sawaya handed her three more death sentences. She made an obscene gesture and muttered, “Motherfucker.”

In June, she pleaded guilty to the murder of Charles Carskaddon, and in November, she received her fifth death sentence. In early February of 1993, she was sentenced to die after pleading guilty to the murder of Walter Gino Antonio. No charges were brought for the murder of Peter Siems, as his body was never found.

For a time there was speculation that Wuornos might receive a new trial for the murder of Richard Mallory. New evidence showed that Mallory had served ten years in prison for sexual violence, and attorneys felt that jurors would have seen the case differently had they known this fact. No new trial was forthcoming, though. The State Supreme Court of Florida has affirmed all six of her death sentences, and she is in her second round of appeals, a round that will eventually wend its way to the United States Supreme Court. Those many appeals proceed haltingly, as Florida’s efforts to streamline its appeals process create new delays. She will probably be put to death in five to seven years.

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