

in this issue



THE GRASS BENEATH OUR FEET — John Corley

More than four years after a group of death row inmates filed suit, a federal judge accepted the terms of a settlement agreement between the plaintiffs, the penitentiary, and the Corrections Department. As part of a historic policy shift, mandatory segregation is no longer acceptable, interaction is encouraged, and solitude is a matter of choice.

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THE BEST IS YET TO COME — Jim Nguyen

*Suspended for two years due to coronavirus restrictions, the Angola Prison Rodeo and Arts & Crafts Festival is expected to return in full bloom in the spring of 2022. The Angolite takes a look at what makes the only prison rodeo in America one of the largest regional events in Louisiana and known around the globe as *The Wildest Show in the South*.*

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STATES OF EMERGENCY — Tiana Herring & Maanas Sharma

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Prison Policy Initiative has been grading the responses of corrections departments in all 50 states. A year after the first report, PPI found that most state agencies and the federal Bureau of Prisons are still failing on even the most basic virus mitigation measures.

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Also: **SOMEBODY ELSE WAS THERE** — John Corley 16

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Back Cover: "The Note" by Jeffrey Hilburn, 2021

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Someone else was there

Murder on the Teche: A True Story of Money and a Flawed Investigation, by Tom Aswell, edited by Mary Gehman et al., 2021, DVille Press, Donaldsonville, Louisiana, 306 pp., \$17.95.

There is no mystery surrounding the murderer's identity in local author Tom Aswell's fifth book. This true crime account opens after the guilty party confessed, was sentenced, and began serving out his punishment in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. But among a platoon of unresolved inquiries a single driving question remained in an otherwise cut and dried criminal case and subsequent civil actions: Who else was involved?

Murder on the Teche: A True Story of Money and a Flawed Investigation recounts the aftermath of the brutal bludgeoning death of New Iberia orthodontist and civic activist Dr. Robert Chastant, 54, by an undocumented laborer in the closing days of 2010. The evidence was clear enough, the confession damning enough. Then the killer implicated the doctor's wife. Twenty-nine-year-old Laurie Chastant, he said, paid him \$1,000 to do away with her husband. What followed was a series of lawsuits initiated by Dr. Chastant's brother Paul, representing the estate, and countersuits by the widow in state and federal courts that spanned five more years and spawned numerous depositions and hearings that often devolved into bitter fist-shaking and blatant accusation.

At stake were millions of dollars worth of assets and insurance policies. From a money trail that led directly to Laurie—the \$1,000 murder payment—truth and lies mesh in a well-crafted narrative that cites bungling law enforcement as complicit in the melee. “Revelations, claims, and omissions would unfold in a plot that had more twists and turns than a dangerous mountain road,” Aswell writes. “And those twists and turns could be just as treacherous.”

Painstakingly researched and documented from investigative reports, court records, and firsthand

interviews, the civil actions are presented in riveting detail that escorts the reader through the legal jungle with easy to follow phraseology and explanation. As much an indictment of the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Office as a journey through civil liability, veteran newspaper reporter and editor Aswell maintains that from the beginning the criminal investigation was incredibly flawed and, as a result, someone may have gotten away with murder.

“One would be hard-pressed to find a more disjointed collection of investigative reports than those written by the five detectives.” Memory lapses, unfamiliarity with the case, overlooked evidence, and underlying character traits that would lead to one police captain's criminal issues later on, demonstrated that Sheriff Louis Ackel's office was “in over its head.” Aswell pulls no punches; the law enforcement agency was “unprofessional and incompetent” and simply “not up to the task of solving any serious crime where the facts were not clearly established.”

Established facts included a young wife with expensive tastes; a successful husband whose financial mismanagement endangered the couple's lifestyle; marital infidelity that lent credence to motivation; and a killer's assertions of conspiracy.

The Chastants' 2004 prenuptial agreement specified that she would receive only about \$80,000 should they divorce, and divorce had become a possibility. Within weeks of his death, Laurie filed a claim for more than \$2 million in survivor benefits. She knew that her husband was likely having an affair with another woman. She denied signing a spouse consent form waiving her rights to the doctor's defined benefit and profit-sharing plans 10 days before he was murdered, and before he had time to redistribute funds from these accounts. She also gave inconsistent statements about her actions on the day of her husband's murder.

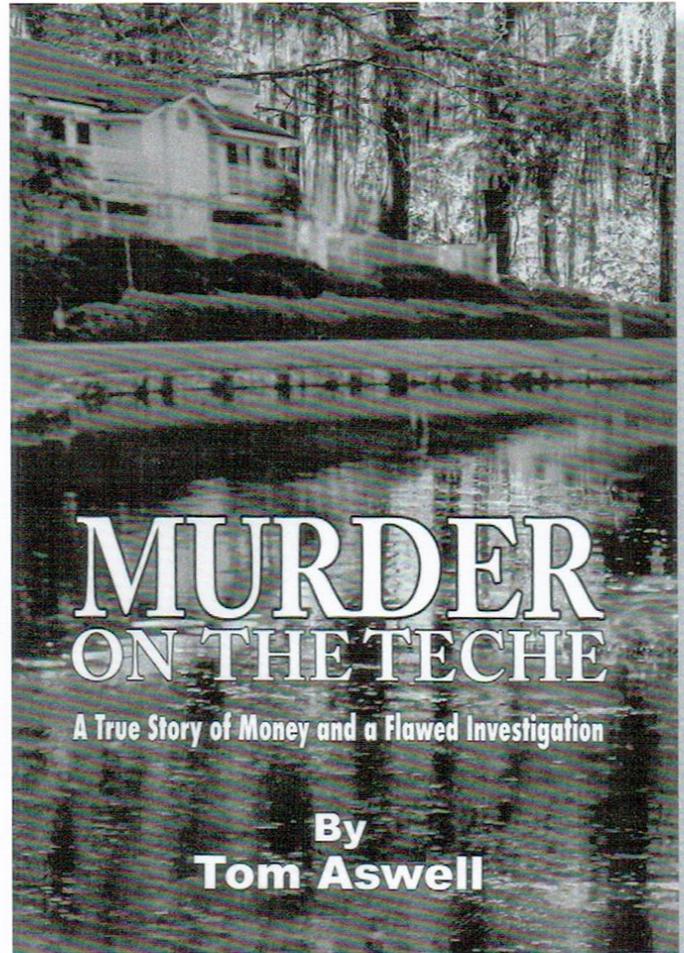
The Chastant estate fiercely pursued these facts in an effort to block Laurie from pocketing a substantial payout and ensure that all parties responsible for the doctor's murder would see justice. With equal ferocity, Laurie denied involvement and demanded compensation owed her by the estate and by the insurance companies. *

Readers can almost feel the author's disdain as he recounts how police failed to locate a missing motion-activated camera that overlooked the Chastants' expansive horse barn where the doctor was bludgeoned to death with a claw hammer. More than a year later, it was discovered by attorneys for Paul Chastant in the bed of the dead man's truck that had been seized by the sheriff's department for processing. Whatever images it may have captured on the fateful day were destroyed by months spent in the elements. Sheriff Ackel, a friend of Laurie's father and a commissioner with the Acadiana Crime Lab that processed evidence so slowly—and questionably—refused to provide information to the FBI.

If the police methods and reports demonstrated a lack of experience or even caring on the detectives' parts, the depositions and other civil hearings that followed likewise cast law enforcement in a pale light. The central premise was, had detectives done their jobs, the many unanswered questions undoubtedly would have been addressed. What exactly was the money found on the killer for if not a payment for murder? Did Laurie actually arrive immediately after the murder and manipulate the crime scene? Did she voluntarily sign away her rights to certain financial entitlements or was her signature forged? Did she conspire to kill her husband because a divorce was imminent and by terms of a prenuptial agreement her monetary package would significantly increase if he died during their marriage? Was she an innocent victim of a cornered killer and a spiteful estate, or a seasoned manipulator who planned a horrific crime that would fuel her lifestyle for years to come?

Criminal law presumes an accused to be innocent until proven guilty, and demands that proof of guilt be ascertained "beyond a reasonable doubt." Civil law is governed by the less stringent standard of "a preponderance of the evidence," or, a thing is more likely than not to be true. Aswell's frustration at investigators' handling of the case is apparent from the opening pages—even the relatively low standard of proof would be unattainable without competent evidence.

Laurie Chastant's behavior prior to, during, and after her marriage to Robert, while insufficient without definitive evidence to formally accuse her of murder or even fraud, provides insight into an unsympathetic character. While the author's per-



spective is clear, his documentary skill allows the known facts to speak toward objective opinion. The story conjures compassion and anger, juxtaposes procedure and incredulity.

Murder on the Teche connect the dots to form a portrait of violent death that leaves the reader wrestling with the uneasy possibility that not everyone involved in a man's murder has been held accountable. The time-worn motivation—greed—is again illuminated as a motive for betrayal and bloodshed. Aswell's presentation of deposition transcripts demonstrates an undeniable plethora of uncertainties, and the recorded opinion of the federal judge who told Laurie Chastant's lawyer that "... somebody was there helping, doing something other than the one guy who got convicted," brings little closure to a case that was in fact, in the eyes of the law, closed.

With a reporter's concise style and pinpoint verbiage, Aswell keeps his provocative *Murder on the Teche* moving swiftly with sustained imagery. Aficionados of the true crime genre will be proud to add this chronicle to their collections. ∞