

CRIME

'I'M JUST A PIG MAN, THAT'S ALL I GOT TO SAY'

What defence could be possible for Robert 'Willy' Pickton?

This story contains details of testimony some readers may find disturbing.

BY KEN MACQUEEN AND NANCY MACDONALD

Robert William Pickton speaks softly, slumped in a black leather chair, legs stretched before him, seemingly without a care. He's dressed in black sweats. He looks gaunt. It's Feb. 23, 2002, at the RCMP detachment in Surrey, B.C. The day before, members of the missing women's task force arrested him for the first two of what will later swell to 26 counts of first-degree murder. A police interviewer asks what it means to him that he's a suspect in the murders of up to 50 women, sex-trade workers from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He gives a dismissive chuckle. "What does it mean to me, hogwash," he replies. "I can't tell you much. I don't know much about this. I've got nothing to say."

The "interview," a polite term for an 11-hour interrogation, grinds on. Pickton alternates between awkward silence and disjointed, rambling responses. "I'm just a working guy is all I am, now I've got all these charges. It's a little far-fetched," he says. Another laugh. "I'm just a pig man, that's all I've got to say." At this point, the decrepit Port Coquitlam farm Pickton shared with his younger brother David had been sealed for two weeks, after police investigating a firearms infraction discovered the personal effects of several of the women. A media frenzy is building. "You're like the pope for Chrissakes," the officer tells him. "I'm a bad dude," he says, several times.

Almost five years have passed since that day. A video of the first segment of that interview was played in a New Westminster courtroom Tuesday, as Mike Petrie, heading a seven-member team of Crown prosecutors, began building his case against Pickton in a trial limited to six of the women he is charged with killing. The video offered jurors and the public the first insight into the mind of the 57-year-old accused, who has sat like a cipher though years of court proceedings, breaking his silence only to plead not guilty. It seems a strange place, his mind, as bizarre and untidy as his farm and as full, the prosecution claims, of dirty secrets.

The trial opened Monday with the Crown's chilling assertion that Pickton is solely responsible for the murders of Sereena Abotsway, Mona Wilson, Andrea Joesbury, Marnie Frey, Georgina Papin and Brenda Wolfe. "He murdered them, butchered their remains and disposed of them," said prosecutor Derrill Prevett. Speaking in gentle, grandfatherly tones, Prevett said some of the victims were shot in the back of the head and then decapitated. He described how the heads were bisected with a reciprocating saw and some—together with hands and feet severed with clinical precision—were found in buckets in a freezer, and in a garbage pail on the farm. Pickton, he said, had butchered pigs since he was 13 years old. A woman will testify, he said, that she found him in the slaughterhouse one night dismembering a woman.

Prevett described Pickton's evasive first interview with police, and how he seemed to both deny and admit to the murders. He tells police: "I should be on death row." At another point, confronted with the poster of some 60 missing women, he says: "You make me more of a mass murderer than I am." Then, to an undercover police officer planted in his cell—another video the jury will see—he says he was arrested because he got sloppy. "I was going to do one more, make it an even 50."

Several family members of the victims sobbed quietly as the Crown laid out its allegations, grabbing for the boxes of Kleenex that staff had placed throughout the courtroom. At least one person bolted from the building in horror. The shell-shocked jury had no such option. They must endure a year or more before deciding if the man they're watching on video—the man who sits expressionless in the courtroom—is a serial killer. Or if he is, as his lawyers suggest, an innocent dupe.

The length of the trial is a serious risk. The case could collapse in a mistrial if more than two of the jurors are unable to continue due to illness, stress or other personal reasons. Both the Crown and defence say the extraordinary length is necessary, despite—and perhaps because of—the damning collection of body parts found at the farm, and the complexity of the investigation. At least 240 witnesses are expected to be called, some dealing with the intricacies of DNA evidence. This



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readying it for development. He is not charged in the murders and Robert Pickton, the Crown noted, told interrogators his brother isn't involved. Ritchie also contrasts the crack police interrogation team against the "level of sophistication" displayed by Pickton. The man the Crown considers a canny murderer Ritchie seems determined to portray as a hapless innocent. "Pay particularly close attention to the evidence relating to his intellectual competence and close attention to his level of understanding," he urged.

When the video interview was conducted, police interrogators knew only a fraction of the macabre evidence that would literally be unearthed. They knew of a bloodied tote bag containing the DNA and personal effects of Abotsway. And in a laundry room of Robert Pickton's single-wide trailer they found a .22-calibre Smith & Wesson handgun. A sex toy affixed to the barrel held both Pickton's DNA and that of Wilson. It is a measure of the chaotic nature of the junk-strewn property and the pace of the search that it took almost two months before police opened a freezer to find the first severed heads and

took a substantial jump starting in the mid-1990s, were written off by Vancouver police as the inexplicable comings and goings of druggies and hookers. It was the muttering of street-level agencies, beat cops and finally the media that forced some attention. Even by 1998, Kim Rossmo, a Vancouver police inspector with an expertise in geographic profiling, was the only senior officer to raise the possibility that one or more serial killers were at work. His superiors castigated him not so much for his theory but his outspoken defence of it, as though the problem might vanish if it remained unspoken. Rossmo left the department in 2000, after being demoted to constable.

Futile attempts have also been made to wish away Pickton's notoriety, his occupation and even his name. A year after his arrest, the B.C. Pork Producers attempted to quash the "Pickton Pig Farm" label that accompanies every description of the crime, saying it was "very negative to our industry." A warning issued a year later by the B.C. provincial health officer that pork products from the farm might have been contaminated with human

'ON DEATH ROW,' HE SAID, BUT THEN ADDED, 'YOU MAKE ME MORE OF A MASS MURDERER THAN I AM'



will not be like a TV show, the Crown warned. "The witnesses are not actors following a script that is predetermined to wrap up in an hour." The investigation itself cost \$70 million to the end of 2003. A further \$46 million has been budgeted. The province has slapped a mortgage on the Pickton farm to cover part of his multi-million-dollar defence. Total costs won't be revealed until the trial ends, says Crown spokesman Stan Lowe. "At this juncture," he said, "to air costs would serve as a distraction."

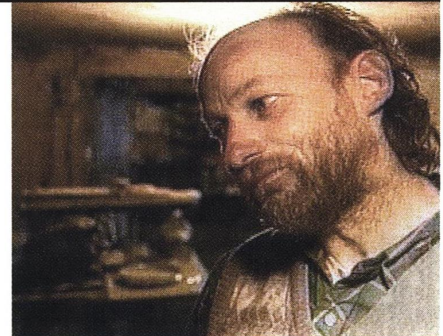
Lead defence lawyer Peter Ritchie said flatly that Pickton did not "kill or participate in the killing of the six women that he's accused of murdering." Some of his defence strategy came clear in a brief address to the jury. Pickton's taped statements tying him to as many as 49 murders were made at the end of a very long interview or in leading conversations with an undercover police officer planted in his cell, he says. Instead, Ritchie pointed blame at others who resided at or had access to the farm. "Pay particular attention to Mr. Pickton's association to this farm, the importance of the farm to Mr. Pickton," he told the jury. "Listen very carefully to what Mr. Pickton tells you about the importance of his relationship with his brother." The farm, he said, with almost disturbing understatement, "was a busy hive of activity."

David, his brother, owns a salvage company. He spent years plowing thousands of tons of fill onto the low-lying farm property,

body parts. In May, three months into the search, half of Wolfe's lower jaw was found in an animal trough. It was June before investigators separated two stacked plastic garbage pails to find the decomposing skull, hands and feet of Wilson. In July, 14 hand and wrist bones, one belonging to Papin, were found in the dirt and manure of a pigpen. In all, it took forensic investigators 18 months to scour the farm, raze the buildings and excavate and sift the dirt to a depth of as much as two metres.

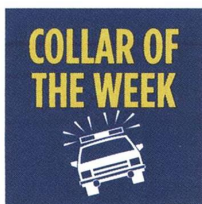
Investigators asked Pickton why he thinks it took so long to stop the run of murders. "Bad policing," he replied. It's the only area of agreement he has with the families of the victims and the women of the Vancouver stroll.

From the beginning, the case has been a train wreck of frustration, futile acts and wishes unfulfilled. "Evenhanded," the project name given the task force formed in 2001 to kick-start a stalled investigation, seemed a belated attempt to address the impression that the plight of these women had been largely ignored. Their disappearances, which



THE FARM IN 2004 (top left): it took investigators 18 months to scour the place; defence lawyer Peter Ritchie (left); Pickton (above): 'I'm just a working guy is all I am.' The charges, he says, are 'a little far-fetched.'

remains only added to the agency's woes. Now, as the trial begins, advocates for Vancouver sex-trade workers want the media to drop Pickton's name from their reports and refer to it as the "missing women's" case. They fear Pickton's celebrity will inspire copycat murders. Like so much well-meaning advice in this case, it is doomed to be ignored. **M**



CALL OFF THE BLOODHOUNDS

Two young thieves in Lindenhurst, N.Y., allegedly broke into a public works warehouse and left with 14 devices they thought were cellphones. What they had, though, were global positioning systems that the town uses to keep track of its vehicles. Police remotely activated the devices and were led to the home of one of the culprits, whose father was fiddling with the machines when they arrived.