



## A Murder in "The Friendly City"

The Nancy Brown Case and the Shadow Side of Rohnert Park

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The killing of Nancy Brown in August 1985 was the kind of crime Rohnert Park wasn't supposed to have. The city marketed itself as *The Friendly City*—a tidy, master-planned suburb built on cul-de-sacs, tract homes, and the promise of safety. But the murder of a 35-year-old hospital lab technician inside her Camino Coronado home shattered that image and exposed a darker undercurrent running through a rapidly growing community.

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### A City Built on Optimism—and Growing Pains

Rohnert Park was incorporated in 1962, one of America's earliest fully master-planned cities. It was designed as a suburban antidote to urban chaos: neighborhoods arranged alphabetically, parks every few blocks, and a civic identity built around schools, families, and predictability.

By the mid-1980s, however, the city was changing faster than its institutions could keep up. Population growth surged. New residents arrived from all over the state. Police Chief Robert Dennett later reflected that the city had "taken on many of the problems of an urban city," noting that rapid growth left many residents feeling unmoored. As Lt. Jim Baker put it, "nobody has a feel for anything."

Violence, once rare, began to creep into the city's narrative. Between 1984 and 1986, Rohnert Park saw a murder-suicide, a contract killing, a child homicide, and a drug-related teen killing—an unprecedented cluster for a town that had recorded only nine murders in its first 23 years.

It was in this atmosphere that Nancy Brown was killed.

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### The Discovery: A Ransacked House and a Single Gunshot

Nancy Brown was supposed to start her night shift at Queen of the Valley Hospital in Napa on Sunday, August 18, 1985. When she didn't show, her employer called the police. Officers arrived at 4 a.m. Monday to find the front door unlocked, her red Datsun in the driveway, and her clothed body inside the home she shared with her ex-husband, George Brown.

She had been shot once in the head with a small-caliber weapon. The house was ransacked—nightstands overturned, drawers dumped—suggesting a burglary gone

wrong. But investigators quickly noticed something odd: there was no sign of forced entry.

Nancy had been last seen alive around 9 a.m. Sunday. She returned home from her shift around 7:30 a.m. the morning she was killed. Her ex-husband, George, an insurance salesman, was out of town on business and left what police later described as a "trail of paper" proving it.

At first, the case looked like a tragic but random act of violence. It wasn't.

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### A Father's Suspicion—and a Break in the Case

Nancy's father, William Whitehead, never believed the burglary theory. "I figured he didn't have the guts to do it himself," he said of his former son-in-law. He described George Brown as a "con artist," recalling that Brown once told the family he had married Nancy "for a living."

His instincts proved prescient.

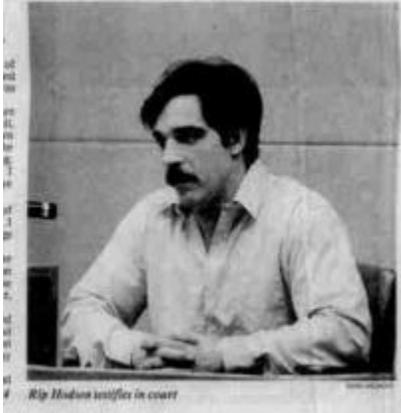


—Mary Carroll  
Robert Park police inspector Ted Giesige takes murder suspect George Brown to Sonoma County Jail

In March 1986—seven months after the killing—police arrested George Brown and a 24-year-old supermarket clerk named Rip Martin Hodson. Hodson had turned himself in, saying his conscience was troubling him. He told investigators that Brown had hired him to kill Nancy for \$10,000 and her red Datsun. He admitted to using a baked potato as a makeshift silencer and staging the burglary scene.

Brown was taken into custody when Inspector Terry Kramer spotted Brown's Cadillac parked outside the Avram Avenue office complex that once housed his Insurance business. He was arrested without incident in the waiting room of a psychological counseling service, Baker said. Brown's arrest came after the suspected triggerman, 24-year-old Rip Hodson, told investigators it was Brown who hired him to make the killing last Aug. 18 at the Camino Coronado home the divorced couple

shared. But Baker, who said Hudson, originally was to be paid \$10,000 and receive the victim's red Datsun sedan for her murder, only received partial payment, "a check by George (Brown) to the hitman (Hodson)." ( Baker declined to disclose the amount of the check but said it was less than \$5,000. It was paid a few weeks after the woman's death, Baker said.



Baker said Hodson confessed to the murder "when we showed him the case we had against him." Hodson fingered Brown in exchange for being charged with first-degree, premeditated murder without special circumstances. "He (Hodson) confessed he went to the house, he confessed he ransacked the house, he confessed he pulled the trigger, and he confessed to hiding the gun," Baker said.

The motive for the paid killing, Baker said, was Nancy Brown's life insurance policy, a policy he said was worth between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Baker said Nancy Brown switched beneficiaries in December 1984, naming her ex-husband as the beneficiary to replace her parents. "According to a handwriting expert," Baker said, "it's her handwriting." Baker said it was George Brown who wrote the policy." Baker declined to say whether there were any other motives for the killing. The break in the case came Thursday when a 24-year-old man, who police have in protective custody, came to police "because of his conscience" to tell them he accompanied Hodson to the Brown house the day of the murder.

The man accused of the murder-for-hire slaying of Nancy Brown was just getting ready to leave for Alaska, according to his neighbors. But police said Rip Hodson's trip was cut short when a guilt-ridden accomplice confessed Thursday that he accompanied Hodson on the fatal trip to Brown's Camino Coronado home last Aug. 18. The contract killing was proposed by George Brown, who shared the home with his ex-wife, according to police. Police said Brown died of a single shot to the head from a .22 caliber rifle.

The informant told police Hodson took a baked potato to the home and used it as a makeshift silencer while killing the woman with her own .22 caliber rifle. She was shot at 7:30 a.m. when she arrived home from her job as a laboratory technician at Queen of the Valley Hospital in Napa. The gun and some jewelry taken during the killing have been recovered from the Airport Boulevard site, where the informant said he and Hodson buried the items the day of the killing, Baker said. Brown was on a business trip to San Diego and Las Vegas on Sunday morning when his ex-wife was killed. He left a "trail of paper transactions" to support his story that he didn't commit the murder, Baker said.

Hodson's arrest in Petaluma came as a shock to both his employer and neighbors of the Ava Avenue home where Hodson had been renting a room for the past three to four months. Steve Reed, owner of Brown Cow Farms Yogurt in Petaluma, where Hodson was employed as a part-time sanitation worker, said he "was shocked when a mechanic said our sanitation guy got arrested for being a hit man." Reed said Hodson, hired approximately four months ago, was a happy-go-lucky guy always willing to help out when asked. "He was very friendly and very reliable," Reed said, adding, "He

was one of the best workers I had." Neighbors of Hodson said they heard talk that he was planning a trip to Alaska with a roommate in the near future. But neighbor Dale Omundson said he wasn't sure when the two were supposed to leave.

A traffic citation issued to Hodson driving Brown's Cadillac a month before the shooting, and the check to Hodson are two of the ties that Baker said make this "a concrete case." Kramer said Brown, who waived his rights and spoke with Kramer for 20 minutes after his arrest, acknowledged knowing Hodson but only as a bowling partner. "He denied any involvement," Kramer said. Deputy District Attorney Michael Mullins called the case "an unusual one for Sonoma County." "I guess it's a sign of the times, murder for hire," he said. Baker said he feared Brown might flee when news of Hodson's arrest became public Sunday. When arrested, Brown was carrying \$1,400 in cash, police said.

Omundson, a self-employed boat builder, said, "He (Hodson) seemed too mellow and low-key to do something like that." Except for a few chats on the lawn, however, Omundson had few conversations with the accused killer. "It's kind of mind-boggling to think there's a possibility our next-door neighbor did somebody in," he said. Another next-door neighbor, Lawrence Esparza, whose wife offers day care in their home, said they knew little about the "five or six guys coming in and out of the house" the past few months. "They looked like blue-collar types, hardworking people, and they always waved to us," he said. For a while, Esparza thought the place "was a halfway house" used for therapy by a psychologist he believes owns the house. Except for a few too many cars parked in the area, Esparza said, "They never bothered us." No one has been at the house the past few days, Omundson said.

## VII. The Legacy of a Life Cut Short

Nancy Brown was a daughter, a sister, and a dedicated hospital lab technician. She had worked the night shift for years, commuting from Rohnert Park to Napa. Her life ended not at the hands of a stranger but through a calculated plot orchestrated by someone she once trusted enough to marry.

Her father's grief was sharpened by vindication. "I knew all along," he said when the arrests were made.

The case remains one of the most chilling in Rohnert Park's history—not just for its brutality, but for the way it pierced the illusion of suburban safety at a moment when the city was struggling to define itself.