

1996 DISAPPEARANCE: Case Goes To Trial Today

MAN CHARGED IN CONNECTION WITH DEATH OF EX-MOTHER-IN-LAW

By [Chris Freiberg](#)

Monday, August 15, 2011

FAYETTEVILLE — After 15 years of police interviews, often fruitless searches and litigation, a man charged in connection with the death of his former mother-in-law will stand trial starting today.

Prosecutors said Raymond Douglas and his wife back in 1996, Reta Flowers, had a simple motive for killing Flowers' mother, Goldie Thornsberry. It was the money.

Douglas and Flowers pleaded guilty back then to forging Thornsberry's checks a few months after Thornsberry went missing. Though Douglas claimed Thornsberry gave him permission to cash the checks before her disappearance, police had long believed something about the couple's story didn't add up.

TIMELINE

Goldie Thornberry Case

Jan. 15, 1996: Goldie Thornsberry's last documented sighting by police at the Ralsh Medical Clinic in Fayetteville

March 7, 1996: Thornsberry's family files a missing persons report

March 8, 1996: Police initiate investigation after discovering unusual bank transactions on Thornsberry's bank account

March 22, 1996: Family members report Thornsberry's freezer missing

April 7, 1996: Police locate Thornsberry's Pontiac LeMans in the employee parking lot of Walmart on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Fayetteville

Sept. 5, 1996: Reta Flowers and Raymond Douglas plead guilty to second-degree forgery

July 20, 2000: Remains of elderly woman found in Little Rock well

March 25, 2010: Little Rock police broadcast information on a central Arkansas TV station about the remains

May 25, 2010: Thornsberry's former neighbor recognizes missing woman's composite on TV and notifies police

June 15, 2010: Police identify Thornsberry's remains through DNA confirmation

"I think what makes this unique is that these two were always the prime suspects; we just didn't have the information needed to make the arrests," said Sgt. Craig Stout, public information officer for the Fayetteville Police Department.

In fact, it took police 14 years to get the final piece of evidence they needed to charge the pair with first-degree murder. That piece of evidence was the identification of Thornsberry's body.

The Investigation

Police received the first report that something was amiss Feb. 8, 1996, when employees of what was then McIlroy Bank told officers Thornsberry's checking account had been suspiciously overdrawn.

Thornsberry's only source of income was Social Security, and despite the fact that she didn't drink, her checks were being written to liquor stores and gasoline stations.

The 65-year-old had been sharing her South Lewis Street home with Douglas, Flowers and Flowers' 8-year-old daughter for a year. When police spoke with Flowers a month after receiving the report from the bank, she said her mother had gone to Clinton to visit a family member recovering from surgery.

She said she had not spoken with her mother in more than a month, but neither Douglas nor Flowers had reported her missing.

Fayetteville police officially opened the investigation into

June 22, 2010: Douglas and Flowers are arrested

Aug. 15, 2011: Douglas goes on trial on charge of first-degree murder in connection with Thornsberry's death

Source: Staff Report

Thornsberry's disappearance on March 7, 1996, when another of her daughters, Debbie McClure, told officers she was concerned and neither Douglas nor Flowers would let her or other relatives into the South Lewis Street home.

The next day, police searched the house. They found all of Thornsberry's belongings and no evidence of blood or any kind of violence. They also determined Thornsberry had not been seen since January of that year, according to an arrest affidavit filed in Washington County Circuit Court.

There was also no sign of her car, a Pontiac LeMans.

Another of Thornsberry's daughters, Barbie Carnes, told police she had tried to visit her mother in February 1996. Flowers would not let her into the house but she forced her way in, she said. Carnes believed Flowers was hiding something,

In late March, Tim Franklin, then a detective with the Fayetteville Police Department, sat down with Flowers and Douglas for individual interviews.

Flowers reiterated Thornsberry had left town to care for a sick relative, but added that her mother had been upset about Carnes' recent arrest. According to the arrest affidavit filed last year, she also said her mother was using drugs.

Franklin noted in his arrest affidavit Flowers "showed no concern or compassion about her mother at all."

Douglas gave a similar story. He said he had an agreement to deposit money in Thornsberry's account when he cashed her checks. He told Franklin he had no idea where she had gone.

Both interviews ended when Flowers and Douglas requested attorneys.

About a week after those interviews, officers, who had been directed to keep an eye out for Thornsberry or her vehicle, located her Pontiac LeMans in the parking lot of the Walmart store on West 6th Street. The windshield was covered with fliers, many faded from the weather, indicating it had been there for some time.

"Obviously, we knew something had happened to her. We just didn't know what," Stout said.

Douglas and Flowers moved to Little Rock soon after Thornsberry's disappearance. They divorced in 1999.

The Trail Grows Cold

After officers found Thornsberry's car, the case went dormant for years.

They received occasional inquiries from friends and family members about Thornsberry's whereabouts, but there was little new information to give them.

DNA samples from Carnes and McClure, Thornsberry's daughters, were taken to make a profile for their mother, should remains ever turn up that could be identified.

Police continued to try and solve the case by bringing attention to it in the media, but didn't catch any breaks until May 2010.

"Give a lot of credit to Franklin. He put a lot of passion into this," Stout said. "It was very close to him because he was never able to finally put the case file away."

On May 25, 2010, the Little Rock Police Department broadcast information on a central Arkansas news program about remains found in a Little Rock well in 2000. They had found an unidentified woman with both hands and one leg cut off. A cord was fastened around the woman's neck and a Washington Regional Medical Center bag was also found with the remains. The medical examiner determined the death was a homicide.

Using the skull they found, police had a clay animation made to show what they believed the elderly woman looked like when she was alive.

Thornsberry's neighbor in 1996, Mike McAvoy, saw that broadcast and told police the model looked a lot like Thornsberry. On June 15, 2010, DNA confirmed with a 92 million to 1 likelihood that the remains were Thornsberry's.

Douglas and Flowers were arrested one week later and charged with first-degree murder. They pleaded not guilty.

An Unusual Trial

John Threet, Washington County prosecuting attorney, declined to discuss the Douglas case at length before it has been resolved, but said he could not recall any other cases in the county taken to trial so long after a crime was committed.

"Time never improves a case," he said.

Legal experts said that more than a decade passing since the crime could only help a defendant with a jury.

"There's no confession, but the biggest hurdle moving forward is going to be witness memory," said Brian Gallini, an associate professor of law at the University of Arkansas.

Gallini said it will be easy for Douglas' attorney to impeach the memories of witnesses who may not have a good recollection of what they saw or heard in 1996.

Ronald Davis Jr., the Little Rock attorney representing Douglas, has already gone down that road. Earlier this month he tried unsuccessfully to have much of the testimony of Franklin, the detective, thrown out, because Franklin has no recording or transcript of his 1996 interview with Douglas.

Laurent Sacharoff, an assistant law professor at the University of Arkansas, agreed that having so much time between the crime and the trial is likely to only help the defendant.

"He could imply that it took so long because there was some kind of problem," Scharoff said.

Gallini said prosecutors will have a tough time convincing a jury that Thornsberry was killed only for money, and their case will be much stronger if they can prove there had been previous altercations in the home before Thornsberry went missing.

Davis, who did not return a call left with his office Friday, has also said he may challenge prosecutors to prove Thornsberry was killed in Washington County. Gallini said that strategy will only result in an inevitable trial in another jurisdiction, though.

With two defendants, there is also the chance that one would testify against the other, and that could also affect the case, Sacharoff said. Prosecutors plan to call Flowers as a witness this week, though Douglas' attorney has filed a motion to exclude comments Douglas made to her while they were married.

Threet would not say if Flowers is testifying as part of a plea agreement. No date has been set for her trial.