

## PART I: MURDER IN THE FISHPOND COMMUNITY



*Alford's Grocery the evening of Mrs. Alford's murder, July 20, 1978*

Gene Harris remembered the time as a few minutes before 5:30 p.m. when he turned off Fishpond Road into Alford's Grocery parking lot. It was the summer of 1978, and Harris was running for Road Commissioner in Coosa County, Alabama. He planned to spend the late Thursday afternoon driving from house to house, introducing himself and asking the rural residents for votes in the upcoming election. Harris saw no vehicles around Alford's other than the owner's car, which was parked under the overhang between the gas pumps and the store.

As Harris mounted the steps at the store, he was surprised to find the front door open. The lights were on inside, and a window fan hummed. He turned, looked into the store and noticed the back door was also open. "I yelled to see if anyone would answer, but nobody did." Harris later said he thought that whoever operated the store must be out back, so he decided to enter the grocery, help himself to a soda and wait for the person to come inside.

Stepping into the doorway, Harris' eyes were drawn to the floor. A woman lay face-down between the checkout counter and a soft drink cooler. She was nude except for shoes and knee-high stockings rolled down to the ankles. Her head pointed toward the open doorway. "Blood was bright red running out and off of her shoulder and back of her neck," Harris said. "The blood was just running out; it wasn't spurting."

Harris ran to his vehicle and drove some 250 yards up the highway in the direction from which he had come and stopped at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Spivey. Harris had left their home minutes earlier. Mrs. Spivey called the highway patrol station and handed the phone to Harris. "I found a woman dead with blood all over the floor," he blurted out. The highway patrol dispatch recorded the call at 5:29 p.m.

Gene Harris and Alan Spivey immediately returned to Alford's Grocery. Coosa County Deputy Joe Neighbors, Jr., the first officer at the scene, stated he arrived at 5:36 p.m. The deputy testified that upon his arrival, several members of the community were already at the store waiting, having been alerted to the tragedy by Mrs. Spivey. According to Harris, no one disturbed the crime scene other than Alan Spivey, who stepped to the front door and looked inside.

The victim, Avis Alford, a sixty-eight year old grandmother, lived with her husband, Onis, in a white wood-framed home they owned about 250 yards down the highway from the store. For several years Mrs. Alford had operated the grocery store and rented the building from Linnie Neighbors, an eighty-five year old widow who lived next door to the store.

Mrs. Bessie Parrish, a regular customer at Alford's, stopped on her way home from work the day of the murder. Mrs. Parrish estimated the time at between 4:30 and 4:45 p.m. Mrs. Parrish remembers mentioning that Thursday was visitation night with her church, and to save time they were having hot dogs for supper.

"That sounds good," Mrs. Alford said. "I may fix that myself." The Alfords attended Friendship Methodist Church, and the congregation was in the middle of a week-long revival.

"There was nobody else there," Bessie Parrish said, "because Mrs. Alford was working on a quilt she was making for one of her daughters or grandchildren. She was showing it to me." Mrs. Parrish is the last known person to see Mrs. Alford alive.

Blood splatters covered the store fixtures near the body. Coroner Jimmy Bailey wiped blood from the victim's back to view the wounds. Few splatters were visible on the body below the waist. Dr. Joseph Embry, the pathologist who performed the autopsy, described the assailant as sitting on, squatting over or straddling the victim's waist as she lay face-down. From over the body, the attacker delivered 17 stab wounds into the left shoulder within an area 5 by 4 inches. The wounds punctured the left lung 10 times and opened a  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch slit in the aorta. From the perspective above the prone body, Embry described the wounds as directed downward, forward and to the right.

A pool of blood surrounded the victim. When the sheriff and coroner turned over the body, they found a brassiere clutched in one hand and a bloody tissue in the other. Beside the body lay an overturned can of Castleberry brand Brunswick stew. The stew was stocked on a shelf near the rear of the store.

The victim's pants and underpants lay crumpled behind her feet. What appeared to be blood splatters could be seen on the clothing. Several feet toward the rear of the store, Mrs. Alford's upper garment was carefully laid on the floor. The sleeveless top was turned inside out and remained buttoned.

At the checkout counter, the cash till was opened and contained only a few coins. Several coins lay scattered across the floor.

The day following the murder, State Trooper Ronnie Cribbs used a metal detector to search an area through a gate and inside a cow lot across the highway from Alford's Grocery. The search produced an aluminum-handled steak knife. The knife contained a blood stain identified as Type A, the same as Mrs. Alford's, and a possible smeared and unidentifiable fingerprint. The knife blade measured 4 and 7/8 inches in length and was bent at a 30 degree angle. The autopsy noted: There is a stab wound through the seventh rib...." The knife was believed to be the murder weapon.

Forensic analysis detected semen inside the victim's rectum. Semen can be tested for blood type, but the forensic scientist performing the examination never attempted the test. In 1978, DNA comparison did not exist.

At a hearing five days after the murder, Deputy Joe Neighbors, Jr., testified that when he entered Alford's Grocery the back door was closed and locked from the inside by means of a 2 by 4 placed through metal slots.



*Bloodstains covered store fixtures around the victim.*



*An overturned can of Castleberry brand Brunswick stew was found beside the victim.*



*The victim's pants and underpants lay crumpled at her feet. Apparent blood splatters are noted.*



*Near the rear of the store, the victim's upper garment was carefully laid out. The garment was turned inside-out and remained buttoned.*



*The cash till at the front of the store was open. There were a few coins in the till, no paper money present, and coins scattered across the floor.*



*The day following the murder, the above knife was found in a cow lot across the highway from the store. It is believed to be the murder weapon.*



*When police arrived at the store, the back door was locked from the inside with a 2 by 4 placed through metal slots.*

Gene Harris' trial testimony may be [read here](#).

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