

[Transcript] The Coldest Case In Laramie / Episode 7

Previously, on the coldest case in Laramie.

You're obviously in denial, Fred.

Oh, obviously.

You were denying.

I can tell you that.

I mean, if you handed me this case file on somebody else, I'd be right where you're at right now.

There was a thumbprint, like a bloody thumbprint on a match book, and they found that, but they didn't investigate him, and then they let him leave.

He had a cut on his hand, and he said, cut his hand.

I can't remember what he told them knocking on the door doing.

I can't remember how he got that.

But I know he went behind the building at one point, cut the whole phone line.

Obviously, we have blood evidence of Fred in that crime scene, which says a lot, really.

I mean, that's almost too much.

Well, I'm sure you have questions.

Oh, yeah.

We're shocked.

Yeah, absolutely in shock.

About a half hour after Fred was arrested, Robert Terry brought Fred's wife, Linda, into the police station.

Fred and Linda had been married for 34 years.

After they got together, Linda became a dispatcher for police in the sheriff's office.

She stayed there for decades, retired just months before her husband was arrested.

Terry and Linda knew each other a little from her time at the department, so this is a delicate conversation.

He told her that this whole thing was pretty uncomfortable for him.

After asking her a few questions about what she remembered from 1985, Terry ran her through the outlines of the case, eventually got down to the interrogation with Fred.

Terry laid out his evidence and theories for Linda.

He seemed to want to know what she made of him.

Oh, I still can't believe that Fred did this because that's not Fred.

Fred is, you know, gentle.

One time he lost his temper.

I had Ronnie up in the little, and she was a baby, little, those chairs they sit in and she was flopping her arms and jumping around while I was making dinner.

Then she went off and she was screaming bloody murder and he came upstairs and put his hand straight through both walls.

Oh, wow.

And he said, you should have known not to put her up there.

Well, yeah, I guess I should have, but you know, you know, but he could just snap and then he was fine.

And I think that's kind of what we concluded is that he has an episode, I guess that's the best way to.

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Blackout episodes where he's, he loses his mind and he gets violent.

It's a very violent, well, no, I mean, he was a seal.

They dropped those guys in there.

They had to exist for weeks.

They had to do all this covert shit.

And then if they made it, they got picked up.

And the only way you can deal with that shit is to put it out of your mind after you've got to do it.

So he could have even thought he was, I've had him think that he was back in mom.

Oh.

You know, when he's having an episode at night and he'll start flashing and you know, yelling and talking and Vietnamese and flailing his arms and when we were first married.

I mean, if he was having an episode, you just move, got out of the room because he'd kill you.

Does he remember those when he wakes up?

Nope.

No recollection of that.

Nope.

Somebody from the seal team called him the other night that they had made a pact.

There's five of them that if any of them was in trouble, they'd get together and the guy's going to be here Sunday to do stuff.

So I'm sure that's bringing all sorts of shit up that he's had buried that he doesn't even remember.

Right.

But you're sure it's him.

I just can't even fathom him doing anything like that.

Except if he was in his D-Mow, all that kind of shit flailing his arms like he did, like he does.

I guess I can see that because he is totally somewhere else when he's having those episodes. There's no way else you could put it.

He's not there.

I'll admit, I was surprised when I came across Linda's interview.

Mainly surprised because Linda herself didn't seem all that surprised.

She seemed to offer Detective Terry a pretty damning profile of her husband, a man who was prone to sudden rages and blackouts stemming from his time as a Navy SEAL.

Although on that Navy SEAL point, this wasn't the first time I'd heard it.

A few people who knew Fred and Laramie had that impression.

One former cop told me he thought Fred was an expert in knife work.

Fred had even mentioned his military service in previous interviews with police, referenced killing people in Vietnam as a reason why his polygraph was screwy.

But this was new.

Fred's time with the SEALs has an explanation for Shelley's murder.

A PTSD-induced blackout, a murder with no memory attached, a neat little package that explained it all.

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Lieutenant Kerry, how may I help you, sir?

Hi, Lieutenant Hedley.

This is Kim Barker called for the Times, from the Times.

Hi, Kim, how are you doing?

Good.

You talk so fast, I feel like I've got to match you.

Oh, sorry.

I'll stop.

No worries.

According to his military records, Fred Laram served in the Navy from 1967 to 1971.

He split his time between a naval cruiser and a logistic support base.

Neither location saw much action.

At both of these places, he officially spent his time as a lithographer, which is to say that he worked at the military equivalent of a Kinkos.

There is no record of Fred having been a Navy SEAL.

On the one hand, I took this to mean that Fred lied, and that he's capable of keeping a lie going for decades.

If he could do that, it seemed plausible that he could also lie about a murder and keep it to himself.

But on the other hand, the fact that Fred wasn't a SEAL, that punctured a hole in the argument that he was some highly trained vet who might have flown off the handle and murdered someone.

Without that story, what you're left with is a man with a bad back, a bum leg, and lousy hearing, who said he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to sleep off one too many jack and coax.

I'm Margaret Lyons.

I'm a TV critic for The New York Times and a writer for The Times newsletter called Watching.

To create this newsletter, my colleagues and I step through hundreds of movies and shows so we can help you find something you'll love.

Sign up and we'll email you our best recommendations four times a week so you can get a quick fix on TV tonight or binge all weekend.

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I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing something.

Some clue about Fred's behavior.

I decided to talk to as many of the cops who'd worked with Fred as I could.

The ones who'd investigated Shelley's case and the ones who hadn't.

I figured they might have some thoughts at least on whether the Fred they knew could have done this.

By this point, most of them had died or moved.

All of them had moved on from police work.

Lieutenant Gary Poles, the officer who'd interviewed Jake Weidman and Angelo Garcia, who'd been in charge of the investigation in its earliest days, actually still lived in Laramie.

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I stopped by his home.

His wife told me that I could find him at his gig at the old territorial prison which had been turned into a museum.

So I stopped by the gift shop.

Poles talked to me just long enough to tell me to go away.

He practically ran into a door marked staff only.

A few former cops did talk to me but didn't want to talk about Fred or the investigation.

I don't really want to go into that.

Like I said, this is an open case.

What did you think after you heard that he was charged with this?

You know, I probably don't want to keep that to myself too.

I asked the same question to another cop who was 24 at the time of Shelley's murder.

Still remember sitting with her body during the autopsy.

But the only thing I could see is I'm not surprised.

He left it at that.

I did manage to track down one person who knew the case, remembered Fred, and talked openly.

Detective Rob Graham did that first recorded interview with Fred back in 1985.

He was the one who awkwardly asked Fred about the blood on door number three and then seemingly

relieved by Fred's explanation.

Pretty quickly moved on.

Detective Graham worked for the Laramie Police Department for a decade.

He's now 75 years old, retired, and living in a small town in Missouri, but he has a solid recall of Shelley's case.

I worked on 23 true homicides.

Of 23, we solved 22.

You know, this is the one that's always hung in there.

And if I don't want to assume I blew it by not getting on the French case, but it'd be easy to say I did.

I talked with him, so therefore I may have caused the failure of this investigation.

But in the time, those are things I didn't do.

I did what I felt like I could at the time, and I have mixed emotions on whether or not Fred's a suspect, and I'm sorry, it's an unresolved issue.

Graham didn't have a whole lot to tell me that I didn't already know from the file, but he did mention something I hadn't come across, something he said he noticed when he first interviewed Fred.

Fred's hands were crisscrossed in small cuts, crossed both palms, so Fred, where did this come from?

He says, well, I was pulling weeds in my parents' house.

I thought, those are tough weeds, you know, why no gloves or something?

And so, I photographed these hands, actually, I think they were Polaroids, four or five.

These Polaroids are not in the file.

Graham knows that.

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He says a Laramie detective called him a few years ago about the Shelley Wiley case. The detective was shocked when Graham mentioned the pictures. Graham thinks they must have gotten lost at some point, slipped through the cracks in the file cabinet at the station.

What's confusing to me is that it's not just that the pictures aren't in the file. There's also no mention of these Polaroids or crisscrossed cuts on Fred's hands or anything like it in any of Graham's write-ups from the time.

In his notes, Graham does acknowledge the broken-up and scab on Fred's knuckle, but he never mentions the hand cuts or the pulling weed story.

I don't really know what to make of that.

I do think I know why the charges against Fred were dropped, and why they've never been refiled.

After his arrest, Fred hired Vaughn as his lawyer and bonded out.

As part of discovery, Vaughn soon got all the evidence that he later handed over to me.

Here's what I saw.

From early in the case, the police were focused on the two types of blood found at the crime scene.

The first was Type O, which met Shelley.

The other was Type A, which police assumed belonged to the killer.

There was relatively little of it compared to Shelley's Type O. Just a few samples.

In 2001, the Wyoming State Crime Lab sent those samples off to DNA experts.

Most samples were faint and degraded, but the tests would show that some of the samples had Shelley's DNA on them, and small amounts of unknown DNA.

The best of those samples, the ones that were obviously not Shelley's, were found on the door of apartment number three and pieces of a broken vase.

Eventually, the blood on the door would come back as a match for Fred.

That one was clear.

The unknown sample on the vase was more complicated.

It likely matched a tech at the state crime lab, probably an error in handling the samples.

In any case, Fred was arrested.

More tests were done.

I think Terry had high hopes for these.

Some compared DNA from Fred and Shelley with a slew of blood samples from the sidewalk and walls of the building.

These seemed like a Hail Mary to see if more advanced tests would pick up trace amounts of Fred.

But they didn't.

Other DNA results were also a bit of a wash.

There was nothing conclusive that could be drawn from them, and they were the kind of science that would be argued over in any trial with qualified experts on both sides, leaving the jury unsure of what to make of anything.

I've talked to several of the country's top DNA experts, and here's about all I'm comfortable with saying.

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Other than the blood found on the door of apartment number three, there is no other DNA evidence found at the scene that implicates any suspect, including Fred. This is not one of those cases that science will solve, not now at least. So without any other DNA evidence to lean on, the prosecutors would have to contend with the biggest hurdle in their case, the matchbook. Found in the dirt 350 feet away from Shelley's apartment, next to footprints and tire tracks, we know it was part of the crime because it was covered in Shelley's blood. The matchbook also had what appeared to be a thumbprint on it. Police later figured that the print wasn't from a thumb, but another part of the hand. So Detective Terry tried to match it to Fred. The search warrant allowed police to take prints from all over Fred's hands, but Terry never got a match. Test comparing the Polaroids of Fred's boots with the footprints found next to the matchbook were also not a match. So even if you could figure out a motive for Fred killing Shelley, even if you do raise an eyebrow or two at a story of how his blood got on the door of apartment number three, you'd still have to explain why a matchbook with Shelley's blood was found more than a football field away from where Fred spent the night and why nothing from that matchbook came back to Fred. Really, the only thing Terry had on Fred, a DNA match on the tiny bit of blood on the door of apartment number three and the shaky story of how it got there, which Fred had volunteered all the way back in 1985. Five months after Fred's arrest, the prosecutor, Peggy Trent, dropped the charges. Neither Trent nor the man who's taken over for her would elaborate on why they never refiled. So I can only offer this educated guess. They never refiled the charges against Fred, because there just isn't much of a case against Fred. Okay, moving on from physical evidence, what about the witness statements? What about the people I talked with who are absolutely certain that Fred killed Shelley? People who had clear memories of Fred's behavior, who had strong suspicions that he had avoided a hard look because he was law enforcement. Hi Pat, it's Kim Barker calling. How are you? Good. How are you? Good. I actually didn't call. We're actually here, so I forgot to call as we were approaching. Michael Iney was the second person police recorded an interview with, along with his elk hunting buddy, Dan. I found audio of that original interview, which took place in the evening after Shelley was murdered. I wanted to play it for Pat.

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I wanted him to hear what he said about interacting with Fred back in 1985.
Okay, now when you arouse this guy in apartment number three, what did you tell him?
He just told him to call the fire department, and he went in and said his phone was dead.
Okay.
And then as soon as he said that, I ran in and grabbed a towel out of his bathroom and soaked it, and I was going to go back and try it one more time.
I think the police drove up right when we were at that guy's doorway.
Did you ever see any blood?
Yes.
Okay, would you explain what your observation was?
It seemed like this guy came out and he told us that he said, look at the blood.
I mean, Dan looked down and we hadn't even seen it.
It seems like he's the one that brought it to our attention.
And Dad, we just looked at it and we just couldn't believe it because we knew right off the bat what had happened there because you could just see where.
You didn't actually see the blood until it was pointed out to you?
I don't know.
I'm pretty sure he's the one that brought it to our attention.
While you were trying to get in the doorway, do you remember any blood on the door?
That was it.
Pat never said anything about Fred being suspicious or seeming guilty as hell.
Certainly nothing where the cops say, oh, he's a cop.
Don't worry about him.
I checked whether there was any record of Pat saying anything else about Fred to a detective, either at the scene or before or after the recorded interview.
There's no record of anything.
If there's anything that you think of, write it down and give me a call or whatever.
Okay.
Sure.
As far as that goes through.
All right.
That's all the questions I have will terminate the interview at 5.40 p.m.
Wow, that is...
I can't imagine when that was that they told me not to worry about it.
There's no way I dreamt that up.
No way.
I know they told me that don't worry about him and I just, that was one of the most things I remember about anything is how upset I was about him not helping me.
It just makes me wonder if my, because that's what is so vivid in my mind was being so upset with him staying in the apartment and then later finding out he was a police officer and where would I come up with that?
Don't worry about him.
He's a police officer.
I can't imagine my mind.

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I know they told me that at the interview.

I know they did.

Because if he says he was out and on the sidewalk is like, wow, man, I swore he never came out of the apartment and that's why I was so sure that he was.

Knowing that he's a cop and that he didn't even come out to even check on anything was just so plain that he had something to do with it that I couldn't.

I just feel like I'm so unreliable that everything I remember that morning is like, what the heck?

Pat was shaken.

He joked about needing a drink, even though it was early on a Saturday afternoon.

I texted him the next day to check in on him.

I'm okay, but just keep going over everything and still beating myself up, he wrote back.

I know I have a bad memory, but not that bad.

Michelle Gilbert had only lived with Shelley for a few months over the summer and fall before Shelley's murder, but the trauma of the whole ordeal has stayed with her for the last 37 years.

Of all the people I spoke with, Michelle's memories were the most specific, most visceral, the most present.

A year after meeting Michelle on Zoom, my producer Alvin and I flew to Colorado to talk to her about what we'd learned.

We were greeted by Sadie, a white powder puff of a dog, who sat down near the home's welcome mat as if to highlight its message, Sadie is in charge, we just live here.

Michelle's husband, Rick, invited us into the kitchen.

He told us that Michelle was running late, she was still at the gym.

Rick's a retired cop and a little protective of her, Michelle.

When she got back, he sat down at the table with us for the interview, pen and notebook in hand.

I came to Colorado to ask Michelle about something she had told me the year before, a threatening card she remembered receiving shortly after Shelley's murder.

The card was slipped into an apartment she'd escaped to, where almost nobody knew she was.

The card had a few \$20 bills in it and a message telling her to get out of town.

This card that was left, can you refresh my memory and what you remember about the card?

The card that was sent to me, that was a huge memory, real specific, I can see it, I can see where I was in my basement apartment, I don't know why that stuck with me.

I think it scared the hell out of me and two, it felt like a lot of money because I didn't have a thing at that point, my money burnt down, my money burnt in the apartment, my clothes burnt, I didn't have anything and so \$100 was a lot of money and one, I was afraid the police were going to take it from me because I needed it and two, it scared me because basically that card said to leave town.

Right, and it's coming to your, the way you remember it, it's coming to your new apartment.

This is not the way I remember it, it's a fact, it came to my new apartment because that lady brought it to me from upstairs and I didn't, nobody really knew I was at that apartment, that was quick.

And then you reported that to the police.

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Oh, right away because I was scared and that's what kind of, it was like a fleeting thought for a second because I thought they were going to take that money from me and I wanted it and then, but I was also scared.

Yeah, and they gave it back to you, right?

Yeah, I think so.

So I want to show you something that might ease your mind when it comes to the card because we were able to get a lot of the evidence in the case.

Really?

Yeah.

So we actually have the police report about the card.

Oh, wow.

We have all of it.

I just have to call this up.

Okay.

So this is like nine pages, so I just want you to read it and if you can feel free to read it out loud or if Rick wants to like go around the back.

Would you please deliver this card?

So is that it?

I mean, you can go through the pages, like it has a picture of the money, it has a picture of the cards.

If you want to scroll down, I can show you how to scroll down.

Okay.

Oh, she scrolled all the way down?

Oh, she scrolled all the way down?

Where's the written part inside of the card?

It just sort of says Merry Christmas.

There's no mention of there being like this written part that like was threatening.

In the case file, the card was inside an envelope with Michelle's name on it.

It was sent to the house of Lee Stinson, Michelle's boss at Foster's.

Lee, would you please deliver this card?

And note inside said, that's not, that's not, that's not the card.

That's not.

There was something written inside.

That's not how I remember that.

Because why would I be afraid of, why would I be afraid of \$20 bills in a Christmas card?

That's not how I, this came to my house though.

That, wow, that's not how I remember that.

Like.

Do you think it's possible, like, and I'm just asking this, Rick, Rick knows this.

Like, do you think it's like the whole idea that your memory can betray you a little bit?

Really?

Sure.

Sure.

But that's just almost mind boggling to me.

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I just don't, how could for the past 37 years, I was afraid of this card.

I don't, I just, my mind is blown right now.

I just don't, there was something written inside.

It wasn't Merry Christmas.

It wasn't, it wasn't that.

I just don't, I feel like there's another card, like there was another one.

I, I don't know what to say.

And is it blowing your mind because the memory is so vivid?

Yeah, yeah, because I feel like I remember that.

And I, and Lee and I were so close.

I went to be afraid of Lee handing me something.

I don't feel like I remember it that way.

You know, could there have been two cards?

I don't know.

But I, I kind of felt like I will sometimes remember things in a way that's like different than what my, you know, different, especially when you're young and especially when something, this formative happens when you're young.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Um, it doesn't surprise me that, that my mind thought that and, and now, now that I'm sitting with it a little bit, I believe you, I believe you, I'm, I believe what you showed me, that there wasn't two cards and that my scared brain was so traumatized and felt like that I just, I don't know, maybe I felt like I needed an excuse to go home, that I had to allow myself an excuse to go home and maybe telling my dad that I got a card and now I have to go home.

I'm not sure what I'm trying to figure out now.

It'll take me a while to figure out why I, why I believe that, um, I think somebody just wanted you to have some money.

I think so, it would just be a nice, yeah, I think you're right.

I walked Michelle through the physical evidence in the police files and now some of the things she and others told me originally didn't quite line up like Fred's truck was never actually seen near the matchbook where Michelle thought it was found.

Fred's thumbprint wasn't found on the matchbook either.

And there's no evidence that he cut the phone lines.

There were other smaller things too, like the window screens.

Michelle remembered that Fred would offer to put her and Shelly's window screens back in when they fell out.

She figured he was the one taking them out in the first place.

There's no evidence of that in her original interview or in the case file.

But the police did hear from another man, not Fred, who told them that he remembered helping Shelly and Michelle with their screens.

Then there was Michelle's memory of Fred leering at the women when they were sunbathing.

The case file shows Fred did notice the young women trying to get tan.

He told Terry as much in 2009 and in 2016, but Michelle didn't remember much about Fred

until his arrest.

It seems possible that talking to Terry is what jogged that sunbathing memory loose. That in a more general way, talking to Terry when he had his sights set on Fred might have refashioned Michelle's memories, retrofit them around the idea of his guilt.

But you can sort of see the leaps that people are making here to explain away evidence, to have it pointed Fred no matter what.

And you can see what an offense attorney would do with that.

So a lot of these tests that I'm telling you about, they came back after Fred was charged. And I think that there was a real hope that all this stuff is, you know what, you know what the hope was.

Yeah.

Hope's a bitch.

No, it doesn't, it doesn't fan out always.

That makes a lot of sense.

Wow.

But couldn't, could it even, could it have not done it?

We think he might not have.

Wow.

I don't know what to say about that, it's really odd.

It's interesting and I appreciate all the work you've done.

That's really helpful to, to me personally.

And we also don't understand why they ruled out certain people.

Really?

Yeah, we don't.

And like we're not saying we can't say for certain Fred didn't do it.

Yeah.

But that's what the evidence is.

But Terry for certain feels like Terry really wants them to charge Fred, really wants to move ahead with the case.

But I think that that's what we've just told you about is the explanation of why they haven't.

I have a lot of respect for Robert Terry and I think he's very smart.

That makes me happy that he still believes it because the last thing I want to feel like is there's somebody else still out there.

For some reason, for me personally, it felt comforting is not a great word, but happy that at least Robert thinks he still did it, you know, for the good part of my young adult life and to be an adult raising children.

I was always very scared and just very, I never felt complete.

I never felt satisfied.

I never felt like I just always felt some big pit hole in my being that was just empty.

In the day that I got a call from somebody in there, me to tell me that Fred Lam was charged, it was like this weight came off of my back that I couldn't even describe.

I couldn't, I just, I felt so good and so happy that somebody was going to be held responsible and that that Shelley's mom and dad would finally be able to put everything to rest and that I wouldn't have to be scared anymore, you know, because I exercise one or two hours

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every day just to make myself feel strong and so that I can protect myself and my kids and even know now, you know, I'm happily married and I have, you know, ironically, I marry a cop.

Is that ironic?

Is it, you know, is it really or, you know, luckily, I don't know.

I don't know why I chose what I chose, but I felt comfortable finally that he couldn't hurt me or anybody and then to think that maybe it's not him, it's not good.

It's not, I just wish, I wish he would just tell me, you know, I would honestly almost could almost say that I wouldn't tell anybody or I wouldn't, you know, I just want to know, want to feel peace again.

I sympathized with Michelle here, how she wanted peace and how she felt talking to Fred might give that to her.

She needed an answer still 37 years later to the question of who killed her closest friend, the story at least to help explain it.

I felt slightly guilty on that last point.

I pushed so hard on her memories, I could feel myself collapsing the careful scaffolding she'd built over the years.

It felt a little cruel, even though my facts were right, even though I felt justified in the doubt I was introducing, maybe it's because I couldn't offer her much in the way of a replacement for her certainty about Fred.

In any case, it didn't seem like Fred wanted to say anything.

I'd asked over and over again in the time I'd been reporting this story, and I'd mostly gotten radio silence.

And then when I'd all but given up hope, I got a text message from Vaughn, his lawyer. Finally, Fred was ready to talk.