

Smoke and Mirrors

The morning of October 28, 2011, I received an email from John Foltz stating, “What’s up with this?” He had included an email that had been sent to him from “The Vine Service” containing the following information:

10/28/2011

This is an e-mail from the Illinois Automated Victim Notification System. The offender for whom you have registered to receive notification, Russell Smrekar, with offender number C71016, has had a change in custody status as of 10/26/2011. This is not an emergency. The offender has not been released.

For more information, please contact the Victim Services Unit of the Illinois Department of Corrections, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Central Time, Monday through Friday [a toll-free number was provided].

I was as confused as John. I replied to him at 6:07 that same evening with the following:

John: I checked with the IL Dept. of Corrections (as you may have also done), and there's no information on Smrekar. What's up with this is right. Since you received this notice, and I did not, could you please phone the toll-free number and find out what's going on. I'd feel better if you did, and I really want to know what's happening. Could he have died? Let me know, Bonnie.

A couple hours later, I learned that Russell Smrekar was reportedly *dead*. I'd found numerous news articles on the Internet announcing that he'd made a "deathbed confession" to killing both Mansfield and Martin before he expired. My immediate thought was *why would Russell have confessed?* A confession seemed to oppose what he'd written to me in his January 2007 letter. He had vowed in regard to Mansfield and Martin, "Everybody likes a good 'Whodunnit,' and reality is that they are and will remain unto eternity — unsolved." Because of that statement, I had a hard time believing he'd confessed. Had he suddenly gotten religion? Russell just wasn't that nice or spiritual, and he had broadcasted in '76 that he'd sold his soul to the Devil.



Russell Albin Smrekar (IDOC, 2011)

The *Courier* was the first to report on the news in an article released on October 28, 2011, "Dying Smrekar confesses to Ruth Martin's murder—Lincoln couple's killer dies in Menard prison." The article opened with, "A monster from Logan County's past has died in prison." The Lincoln Police Department told the *Courier* they'd been informed of Smrekar's "deteriorating condition" in September of 2011. Smrekar's particular illness was not disclosed, but his condition was said to be "terminal." Upon notification of his looming death, PD detectives from Lincoln and Rolling Meadows traveled to Menard to interview Smrekar. During the interview, Smrekar had confessed to killing Michael Mansfield and Ruth Martin, and he'd admitted to burying Martin's body under the construction of Interstate 55, which was taking place at the time of her disappearance.

With the cooperation of the Illinois Department of Corrections, Smrekar was released from Menard and taken to Lincoln to "pinpoint the location of Martin's makeshift grave."

Lincoln PD Detective Sgt. Paul Adams told the *Courier*, "Due to the time that had elapsed since the murder and the fact that the burial took place at night, Smrekar was unable to give detectives a precise location of the body of Ruth Martin." He elaborated on what Smrekar had done with Martin's body, "This was done late at night on the day of her disappearance. Smrekar then dropped the vehicle of Ruth Martin at the Holiday Inn in Bloomington. Smrekar then proceeded back to Joliet, where he resided at the time."

The article did not include an account of how Smrekar had killed Mansfield or what he done with his body.

I detected a red flag in the statements made by Sgt. Adams. The information he relayed conflicted with documented facts gathered in '76. A McLean County police report filed on 6/05/76 by investigating detectives Patton, Ryan, Hoeniges and Commanding Officer Sgt. Gibson had reported the following:

"After arriving at the scene where Ruth Martin's auto was found, two black male subjects came out of the [Bloomington Holiday] Inn and started loading the auto next to the Martin's auto. Reporting officers identified themselves and asked them for some identification. The subjects' addresses are listed below. They stated that both of them had come to Bloomington to work at State Farm [Insurance Company]. Mr. Wright stated that they checked in the Inn around 6:00 PM on Wednesday, 6/02/76. Mr. Wright was asked if the Pontiac was there at the time, and he stated, "yes". Both Mr. Wright and Mr. Alexander are now living at **** E. Washington Street, building #1, apt. **, Bloomington, Illinois. Their phone number is ***-****. Mr. Wright believes that the right front tire was flat when he first saw it Wednesday [June 2, 1976].

"Officers called for barricades which were furnished by the Engineering Dept. and rope which was furnished by the Fire Dept. The area was blocked off for Lincoln Police Dept."

Additional information provided at the bottom of this McLean County police report gave the full names of subjects Wright and Alexander, their dates of birth, and their previous addresses outside Illinois. Included on the second page of this same report, was the following information provided by Detectives Ryan and Patton concerning additional eyewitness reports of the Martin Pontiac Catalina:

"At approx. 8:30 AM on June 5, 1976, Dets Ryan and Patton went to the Holiday Inn in an attempt to locate anyone that may have seen the auto in question pull into the lot, or have any other information that could help in the investigation. Due to the auto being parked about ten feet away from the maids' room located on the west side of the motel, the maids and maintenance men were contacted in the matter. Only two of the employees stated that they had noticed the auto being parked at that location, and they were Betty Davidson, who is a maid on the second floor, and Norman Jenkins, maintenance man. Mrs. Davidson stated she noticed the car around 9:30 a.m. Friday, June 4, 1976, and could remember it, since the car had a flat tire. She saw no one around the auto at any time. Mr. Jenkins stated that he also noticed the auto parked in the lot on the same day, but did not recall the exact time.

"Dets also talked to Mr. Melvin Davis, who is employed at State Farm Ins. Co. and was staying at the motel. The officers from Lincoln City Police Dept. had talked to him on the night the auto was located [Friday, June 4, '76], and Mr. Davis gave them the same information, that he had seen the auto at about 6:30 PM on Wednesday, June 2, 1976, with a flat tire, parked in the same location that it was found.

"At the time of this report, no other persons have been located that might have seen the auto in question."