

TL hotels were haven for Night Stalker

Coronado, West, Bristol among haunts during killing rampage

BY TOM CARTER

SERIAL killer Richard Ramirez stayed at the Coronado Hotel on Ellis Street two weeks before 9-year-old Mei Leung was raped and murdered in an apartment building basement four blocks away, police records from 1984 show.

And the satanic "Night Stalker" was staying in the Bristol Hotel on Mason Street Aug. 13, 1985, about two weeks before he was arrested in Los Angeles and later convicted of committing 13 Southern California murders.

"These are the only definitive (Tenderloin) addresses we have at this point in that time period," S.F. homicide Inspector Holly Pera told The Extra. She and Inspector Joseph Toomey make up the SFPD's cold case unit, where the Leung case remained unsolved for 25 years.

But on Oct. 22, police announced that Ramirez's DNA had been identified from substances collected from the crime scene at 765 O'Farrell St., where the child was slain. Other DNA evidence suggests Ramirez may have had an accomplice, police said.

Pera said the announcement was spur-of-the-moment damage control. The Ramirez DNA discovery had been leaked to the Chronicle, Pera said, "and it was going to print a story that had some inaccurate information. We hastily called a press conference to maintain the integrity of the information. I was notified a half-hour before the press conference."

Ramirez was an occasional Tenderloin resident in 1984 and 1985, a transient who divided his time between San Francisco and Los Angeles, where he was finally arrested Aug. 31, 1985. He was convicted four years later for murders he committed June 28, 1984, through Aug. 24, 1985. District Attorney Kamala Harris could try to establish that Ramirez's murderous activities began three months earlier, using his DNA evidence from the Leung case.

In San Francisco, he preferred to rest his head in the TL's fleabag SROs. Pera's files include a March 25, 1984, medical record on which Ramirez listed his address as 373 Ellis, the Coronado Hotel. The 300 block of Ellis has long been notorious for criminal activity, and the scuzzy Coronado has built a street reputation for a wildly active drug scene, while piling up building violations.

Mei Leung was killed April 10, 1984.

"In early May, (Ramirez) was back in Los Angeles," Pera said. "He stayed until August. We know, too, he was at the Bristol Hotel on Aug. 13, 1985, then at the end of August he was back in Los Angeles."

The Bristol is at 56 Mason St., next door to what is now the San Francisco Comedy Club.

Ramirez had another favorite SRO before he was taken out of circulation: the West Hotel, once an appalling dump before TNDC bought it in 2001. The renovated West reopened in February 2005. TNDC Project Engineer Nick Griffin told The Extra that Ramirez had stayed there, and an account on the Crime Library Website confirmed it.

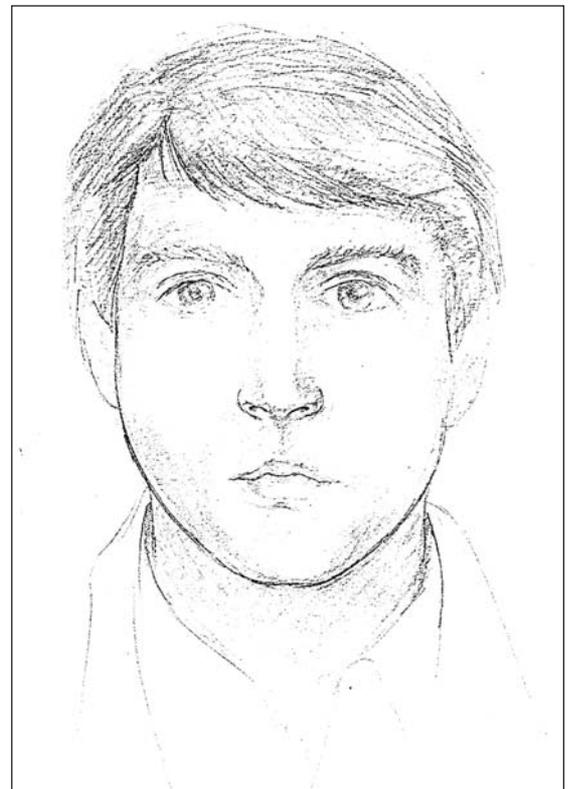
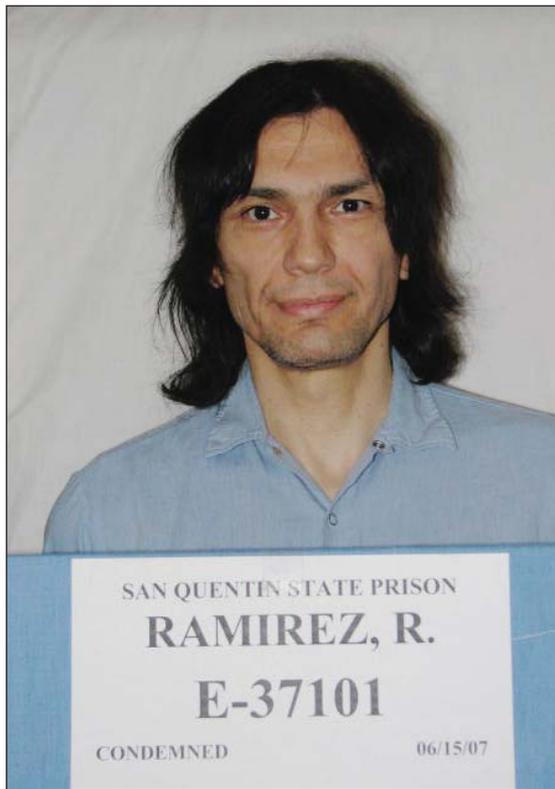
"The hotel had a reputation for being a murder hotel in the late '70s and early '80s," Griffin said in a 2005 interview with The Extra.

San Francisco police had published a description of a man they suspected of committing a half-dozen murders from February through August 1985.

A young hotel clerk at the West thought someone fitting the description was staying at the hotel and he contacted the police. They searched Ramirez's room and found a drawing of a pentagram — the telltale symbol he left at several crime scenes. Ramirez, however, had checked out hours before. He was never convicted of any San Francisco murders.

The Extra first reported on the Leung cold case in February 2008, when Inspector Toomey was invited to explain his and Pera's work at the Tenderloin police captain's community meeting. On their desk were 50 cold cases and 100 warmer ones they brought from homicide the year before when they became the department's cold case unit. Mei Leung was one of four Tenderloin cases they were pursuing, and DNA was expected to play an important role.

Pera later said the Leung case was special to her. She had once helped a group of young Vietnamese pedestrians locate their destination in the Tenderloin. The Vietnamese girl's murder had burned in her memory.



Richard Ramirez, the "Night Stalker," now lives on Death Row. At right, a sketch of the person of interest in Mei Leung's 1984 murder. She was 9 years old.

Leung had left her 8-year-old brother in the building lobby to go to the basement to look for a lost dollar bill. Her bloodied body was later found partially clothed and draped over a basement pipe. The police circulated a sketch of a person of interest who was seen in the building's elevator about the time of the murder.

Another cold case that's high on Pera's priority list is a 1999 murder that occurred in room 228 at the Seneca Hotel on Sixth Street. The body of Brandy Toms, a 45-year-old African American prostitute, was found beaten and repeatedly stabbed. Pera said much DNA and many broken bottles were found at the crime scene.

"She had no family and no one in her life," Pera said. "We had to be her advocate. And we like that case — I hold it dear."

After leaving the Bristol in August 1985, Ramirez didn't go straight back to Los Angeles. He arrived there Aug. 31 on a Greyhound bus after visiting his brother in Tucson, according to Wikipedia. He was by then a hunted man known as the Night Stalker, and his face appeared for the first time in newspapers and on television. Almost immediately after Ramirez got off the bus a storeowner recognized him and raised an alarm. Ramirez ran and was pursued in a long, frantic foot race that ended when a man clubbed him to the ground. Three others held him until the police arrived. Ramirez was 25.

On Sept. 20, 1989, he was convicted on 13 counts of murder, five attempted murders, 11 sexual assaults and 14 burglaries. Ramirez is now on San Quentin's Death Row. He is 49.

Although the DNA in the Leung case was sent to the district attorney, she is unlikely to pursue it because it would give an already condemned man an opportunity to extend his life through appeals. The crime scene DNA, however, may yield another match and a second suspect.

At the very least, the DNA match suggests that Mei Leung's heretofore unknown killer was probably the Night Stalker. ■



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