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Feb. 26, 2008

Frederick Phillip Hammer
New River Valley Regional Jail
P.O. Box 1067
Dublin, VA 24084

Dear Mr. Hammer,

Thank you for your letter. I appreciate your time and patience in answering my questions. The lines on the envelope seams were intact. In response to your inquiry about my connections to the police, I can promise you I am not in cahoots with the police. I am writing a story or series of stories about what has happened along this stretch of N.C. 16, where three people were killed at the Christmas tree farm, another man was killed at the bridge and another man disappeared. That's five people in less than five miles of this stretch of road. I am trying to understand and get at the truth of what happened here and to write about it. As part of the information-gathering process, I am talking to the police, researching public records, such as search warrants, and interviewing family members and others who may have information. I respect your right to a fair trial, and also to a fair representation in the newspaper. That involves trying to tell all sides of a story. While people like Mrs. Blevins and others have told me they suspect you were involved in Jimmy's disappearance, they have also said nice things about you. I did visit Cripple Creek. Mr. Porter told me you had built the fence there, as well as the (funny) outhouse. Mr. Porter said you had done most of the work on the place. I did notice that the picture of the trailer that was in the local newspaper was not your trailer. Mr. Porter showed me your trailer, and I shot some photographs of it from a distance. I didn't go on the property.

This past Friday, I retraced the path that Mrs. Blevins told me that you said you took with Jimmy Blevins on the last night he was seen. I turned left off the N.C. 16 bridge, right where Tim Shatley was killed, to come back under it and follow the river, then turned left on old N.C. 16, and on and on. It was about 16 miles, along curvy roads, over several narrow bridges, including the high bridge at Weaver's Ford. When I came back by the Riverside store, I stopped and went in. Laramie was sitting inside, and Mrs. Blevins was making him something to eat. (a sandwich? pizza?) He seemed well.

The police have told me there is little evidence in the Tim Shatley case. They started considering you in that case when Jimmy went missing, in part because Jimmy lived so close to where Tim was killed. The family thinks that Jimmy knew you were involved in Tim's death and had threatened to tell if you didn't pay him the money you owed him. Police say - and say it's just a theory - that you and Tim might have both been driving on that bridge, which was one-lane due to construction, and got into some sort of argument. They say you could have shot him, pulled off the road at Jimmy's a couple of hundred

yards away and been off the road within seconds of the shooting. Again, that's a scenario they're considering, among other theories.

I did have some more questions for you. In trying to tell your story, I would like to talk about what things are like for you there. (Like you described the rubbery pen they give you to write with.) Are you in a cell by yourself? Can you see outside? What is your daily routine? How are you treated?

Yesterday I interviewed the wife of John Miller Jr., the employee who was killed on the Hudler farm. He was 25. She said he was born in Lancaster County, Pa., and went to Oxford High School. I think that's near the area where you grew up and wondered if you went to that same high school? Am I right about that, is it near where you grew up?

It was very sad to talk to Mrs. Miller. Her husband left for work one day, and she never saw him again. He left behind a wife and a six-month-old daughter. His ashes are in an urn on the television. What would you say to her and to the little girl? Did you kill their husband and father? Did you kill Ron Hudler? Did you kill Fred Hudler? You had mentioned not being able to get information about what you are charged with so I am including a copy of a story we ran shortly after the murders. Is there anything in it that is inaccurate? I plan to contact the Hudlers soon. Is there anything you would like to say to them? Is there anything you'd like everyone to know about you?

Mr. Hammer, I am sorry to be so blunt, but I don't want to fool you into saying something or to trick you. I am trying to get at the truth. I do hope this letter has found you well. I am sorry about all that has happened. These have been terrible things for everyone involved.

Sincerely,

Monte Mitchell

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Killing details emerge **Bullet casings match caliber of missing guns**

By Monte Mitchell
JOURNAL REPORTER

JEFFERSON

Bullet casings found at the scene of a triple killing in Grayson County, Va., last week match the caliber of two guns missing from the home of a man charged with murder, according to an affidavit attached to a Virginia search warrant.

Investigators also found lenses and pieces of a broken rifle scope at the scene similar in size to one that would have fit an empty rifle-scope box found in the suspect's home in Crumpler.

Frederick Phillip Hammer, 48, was arrested over the weekend in Florida and charged with three counts of capital murder in connection with the deaths of Ronald Hudler, 74, a Christmas-tree-farm owner; his son Fred Hudler, 44; and employee John Miller Jr., 25, last Thursday morning.

A witness saw Hammer driving in the direction of the farm shortly before the killings, according to an affidavit attached to a search warrant. And at least one witness saw him driving away from the area sometime between 12:30 and 1:30 p.m. that day at a high rate of speed, according to the affidavit.

Court documents filed in Virginia and in North Carolina also offer more details about the killings. When authorities arrived at Hudler's farm in Mouth of Wilson, Va., they found Fred Hudler dead in the driveway from a gunshot wound. They found Miller in the garage, dead from multiple gunshot wounds. They found Ronald Hudler inside his home, dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

Sheriff Richard Vaughan of Grayson County has said that Hudler kept large amounts of money in a gun safe in the garage. The safe had been broken into and an undisclosed amount of cash stolen. Investigators say they believe that Fred Hudler and Miller were killed when they came upon the robbery. They believe that Ronald Hudler heard the gunshots, came out to investigate, was forced back inside his home and killed in his living room.

Authorities first questioned Hammer around midnight on the day of the killings.

He told them he was in Todd working for someone at the time of the crimes, but his alibi didn't check out. He also told authorities that he had hauled a large gun safe from Detroit to Hudler's house, and that he had seen Hudler open the safe before and knew that it required two keys.

Hammer was questioned by authorities at midnight Thursday and left for Florida some time Friday afternoon. A task force of U.S. marshals kept him under surveillance in Florida, where he was staying at the home of his stepfather. Hammer was taken into custody at 6:30 p.m. Saturday.

Authorities searched Hammer's home on Old N.C. 16 at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, according to a North Carolina search warrant. Investigators seized 10 firearms, along with the box to a gun scope, according to an inventory of the search. They also seized a soil sample near a trailer in the sawmill yard and a box of .25-caliber bullets, which had 11 rounds missing.

At Hammer's home, a relative told investigators that the scope went with a .22-magnum rifle, which was missing. According to court papers, investigators found .22-caliber casings at the

scene of the killings. A .25-caliber Beretta automatic pistol, part of a pair, was also missing. Investigators found .25-caliber casings at the death scene.

All three victims had a wound consistent with a small caliber such as a .25, according to an affidavit filed by investigators. One victim was wounded with a larger caliber bullet, possibly a .38.

About 4 p.m. Saturday, investigators found Hammer's truck at a West Jefferson house belonging to his stepfather, who also lives in Florida. At 8 p.m. Saturday and again at 3:46 a.m. Sunday, investigators searched the West Jefferson house, seizing the truck's license plate, as well as some clothing.

Authorities returned to search Hammer's home in Crumpler at 7 p.m. Sunday. They seized jackets, shoes, a jar of moonshine, ashes from a barrel and other items.

Authorities said they believe that immediately after the killings Thursday, he went to a camper that he uses in Cripple Creek, Va., in Wythe County. Investigators searched the camp area for a .25-caliber and a .38-caliber handgun, and a .22 rifle with a damaged scope. They also hoped to find money and jewelry belonging to Ronald Hudler, including a watch.

Those items are not listed on an inventory of items seized at the camper. Investigators found fresh water in the shower at the camper, and suspect that someone had recently showered. And they seized partially burned clothing that appeared to have been set on fire with kerosene in a fire pit.

Two days before the killings, on Jan. 22, Hammer came by the office of Hudler Carolina Tree Farms, according to an affidavit. He told an employee that he owed money to Bill Hudler, one of Ronald Hudler's sons, and wanted to know where Bill was. He also asked where Ronald Hudler was. He was told that Ronald Hudler had been out of town and was expected back toward the end of the week.

Hudler returned early from a trade show. He arrived home Wednesday night. Authorities believe that he had been at his house for about 12 hours when his son and Miller came upon the robbery.

Also two days before the killings, Hammer stopped by the Ashe County Sheriff's Office. Sheriff James Williams was not there, but he said he was told that Hammer was irate about an area loan company. Williams said that Hammer stopped occasionally at the sheriff's office and was sometimes agitated.

Hammer is a suspect in the disappearance nearly a year ago of Jimmy Blevins. Blevins, his nephew by marriage, worked off and on at Freddie P's Firewood, Hammer's business.

Hammer was the last one seen with Blevins before he disappeared, and Hammer owed Blevins \$1,605 in unpaid wages. After his family reported Blevins missing, deputies arrived at Blevins' home to find food cooking in the crock pot. The lights were on and so was the television.

Last summer, investigators dug deep into a burn pit behind Hammer's home looking for Blevins' remains. They have searched by air and had dive teams in the North Fork of the New River, near Blevins' home. They have pursued theories that Hammer may have fed Blevins' body through a wood chipper or weighted it down in the river, Williams said.

But they have not found any trace of Blevins.

Hammer had complained that all the attention was ruining his firewood business, and he wanted his name cleared. But the sheriff's office still considers him a suspect in Blevins' disappearance, the sheriff said.

"We'll take it a step at a time, but at the appropriate time, we will be speaking to him about the Blevins case," Williams said. "That may be some time down the road."