

Did a serial killer really live near Thurman, Iowa? Sheriff, townspeople don't count it out

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Des Moines Register

THURMAN—In a corner of southwest Iowa where locals have long avoided venturing too far up into the wooded hollow north of town, the news that a possible serial killer had lived there for decades made some shudder.

But longtime residents of this tiny hamlet nestled at the base of the Loess Hills also said they were not surprised to hear that the local recluse, who died almost a decade ago, has been accused by his own daughter of killing scores of people.

Rumors of bodies being dumped in a well near Donald “Don” Dean Studey’s trailer had preceded the most recent claims by his daughter, Lucy Studey McKiddy, 53, for decades. And in a place that no longer has a single café, tavern or local cop, some said, a cantankerous and sometimes violent man was largely free to do as he pleased.



Previously: Investigation underway into daughter’s allegation Iowa man was prolific serial killer

“Guns up in these parts are mandatory; knives are optional,” said Max Johnson, a former rodeo clown and cowboy who lives in town.

Chief Deputy Timothy Bothwell of the Fremont County Sheriff’s Office said law enforcement officials learned long ago not to go alone up Green Hollow Road, a sparsely populated area subject to occasional reports of gunshots at night, domestic violence, fires and other incidents involving an erratic and occasionally suicidal Studey.

“Even in 1996, when I first got here, a call to Green Hollow was a two-car call,” Bothwell said.

But when McKiddy shared her story in a Newsweek article published online Oct. 22, the horrible scope of her allegations triggered international media attention. McKiddy told Newsweek reporters her father could have been responsible for 50 to 70 deaths over 45 years before he died in 2013 at age 75. If her claims were to prove true, the article said, Studey would rank as one of America’s most prolific serial killers.

Daughter said her allegations about killings were long ignored

McKiddy, who has not responded to interview requests by the Des Moines Register, told Newsweek her previous attempts to report her father’s killings over the years had been ignored by teachers, counselors, clergy and law enforcement officials in both Iowa and nearby Nebraska.

Interviewed this week, Bothwell said the sheriff’s office’s first heard the allegations in 2007, when McKiddy’s father claimed she had stolen \$16,000 from him. McKiddy, Bothwell said, denied she took the money but alleged her father had buried bodies in a disused well behind the family’s property, on the former site of a county-run home for the poor.

Bothwell said he was unable to find the well she described, and the investigation stalled.

Speaking in 2021 with another deputy, McKiddy claimed a second time that her father had killed several people and that she believed he disposed of their bodies in the well. Last week, she went to the site with Newsweek and pointed out the well. Two cadaver dogs, on the site with deputies, zeroed in on specific areas, including the well, suggesting human remains may be nearby.

Another of Studey’s four children, Susan Studey, has since told Newsweek that McKiddy was not telling the truth. Susan Studey said her father was strict but not a serial killer, and she wants to restore his name. A brother, Gary Studey, died in 2004. The Register could not immediately locate a third Studey daughter.

Southwestern Iowa sheriff: ‘I’m not going to let it die’



This is the home of the late Donald Dean Studey, in an isolated hollow near the village of Thurman in Iowa’s Loess Hills. According to his daughter, Studey was a prolific serial killer who buried the women’s bodies in and around a since-sealed well on the property. Cadaver dogs brought to the site Oct. 21 zeroed in on locations on the property, indicating the possible presence of bodies, Fremont County sheriff’s officials say.

Kevin Aistrope, sheriff for 14 years in Fremont County, said this week that the FBI also had talked to McKiddy in 2021 and looked into the case more than a year ago.

He said the FBI had “backed away in the last couple of weeks” for reasons he would not elaborate.

“So we stepped forward again,” he said. “I’m not going to let it die. I’m just not gonna let that happen.”

Aistrope said he has no choice, especially after the reactions of the cadaver dogs supported McKiddy’s claims.

The FBI declined to comment on the case.

"We have no information to provide at this time," Wade Greening, a spokesperson for the FBI's Omaha, Nebraska, office, said in an email.

Bothwell said Studey also approached a neighbor years ago who had been covering old wells at the former poor farm, about a quarter mile behind the Studey property. At the time, Studey reportedly told the neighbor he wanted a pipe from one of the wells. Studey also suggested to the neighbor that he might see bones in the well, but he insisted they were from cows, Bothwell said.

Both Bothwell and Aistrophe said some parts of McKiddy's story have changed, but others have remained consistent. Last week, she also walked right to the site of the well in question, one of the places the cadaver dogs "hit" for human remains.

"We've got to go with Lucy," Aistrophe said. "No matter if they say it's not true, or say she's crazy or whatever they can say, we have to look into it. We have no other choice."

More:After 35 years, here's how police identified 'I-65 Killer' Harry Edward Greenwell, who lived in Iowa at the time of his death

He said representatives of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, plan to sit down in person within the next two weeks to decide how to move forward. That could include taking soil samples, using radar or drilling for core samples with the help of forensic experts. Excavating the now-covered well where McKiddy said her father dumped bodies would be difficult before winter, and Bothwell said archaeologists are needed to collect and identify any bones.

Though Aistrophe said he wants to work as quickly as feasible on behalf of families of any potential victims, there is no immediate pressure to harness all available law enforcement personnel since Studey died in March 2013. Uncovering evidence from the now-private land near Studey's former home will take considerable planning, he said.

"It'd be different if we had him out there today, but we don't," Aistrophe said. "Right now, all we have is her story. We don't even have a bone. I just want to figure it out."

Aistrophe acknowledged that the last murder case he handled in the county took five years to prosecute, so the Studey investigation could continue long after he retires.

Bothwell said Wednesday the FBI would take the lead in any criminal probe.

Sheriff's office incident reports show Donald Studey was troubled



Donald Dean Studey's grave near Thurman. Studey, who died in 2013, is now at the center of an investigation of claims by one of his daughters that he was a prolific serial killer.

Nearly 20 incident reports the Register obtained this week from the sheriff's office, dating to the late 1990s, show Studey was a source of concern for his family and could be violent.

One from 2005 said he threatened to kill the son of his last wife, Anna Tordoff Studey, and another, from 2012, said he shot himself in one of several reported suicidal episodes. Aistrophe said deputies were on the scene when Donald Studey shot himself in the arm.

Dan Tordoff, Anna Tordoff Studey's son, told the Register he called deputies in 2005 after Studey threatened both his life and hers. Tordoff said his mother was afraid of Studey, and

he often was afraid for her safety before she died in 2006.

While Studey's behavior could be erratic, so have been some of McKiddy's assertions about the killings. A McKiddy account in an incident report obtained by the Register, written by Deputy Mike Wake after a 2021 phone interview, was sharply different in some ways from the story portrayed in the interview with Newsweek.

More:Woman who lived with suspected Iowa serial killer struggles to reconcile 'gentle giant' she knew with murders he's accused of committing

For example, McKiddy told Newsweek her father killed up to 70 people, including prostitutes and transients from the Omaha area. The article also quoted her as saying Studey sometimes forced his children to help with burials.

But in the 2021 interview with Wake, McKiddy said she knew of only five bodies in the well by her father's home, but she'd "heard stories that there could be up to 15 bodies." She also alleged to the deputy that she was sometimes with her father before and after he'd killed people.

Specifics in the 2021 account were horrific. She told Wake that in 1976 or 1977, she saw her father go outside with a .22 rifle and come back in the house and put the rifle up. Later, she said, she saw her dad and two other men take a body out of the trunk of a car and haul it by wheelbarrow to the 90-foot-deep well.

Not long after, in the late 1970s or 1980, McKiddy said, she was with her father in his car when he picked up a 15-year-old girl on Interstate 29 at the Pacific Junction exit, the incident report states. She said her father convinced the girl it was safe to go with them because he was a single dad with four kids, but McKiddy said she believed he raped and murdered her. The girl was gone the next morning, the incident report says.

McKiddy also said she awoke one night to the screaming of a homeless woman; her father was beating the woman and dragging her by her hair in the living room. The next morning, she said, her father told her the woman had left, "but she figured she was in the well."

McKiddy said she saw a dead body by an old cellar on the family property one day around 1979, and her dad loaded it onto the wheelbarrow and took it to the well. Around the same time, she said, her father took two bags of lye to the well, where she saw that body and another of a man in his 20s lying facedown.

"She said that her dad told her they were putting the lye on the bodies to help deteriorate them faster," Wake wrote in the incident report.

Afterward, McKiddy said, they went mushroom hunting.

In the report, Wake mentions that he had heard that Studey killed a man named Doug Semore "and put his body in a well but we could never get any information on when or where. I believe the last time I saw Doug was in 1988."

He wrote that McKiddy thought Semore had been a witness to a local stabbing in which her dad was involved.

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Whispers about Green Hollow, but no answers

In Thurman, a shrinking wisp of a town where a few families, including the Studeys, go back to the 1800s, many adults, including the mayor, still recall being told as children never to go to Green Hollow.

"There were always stories about Green Hollow," said Bill Reeves, who was elected mayor in the town of fewer than 170 a year ago. "You just didn't go up there. Even when my dad was a boy."

Some, like Johnson, remember children teasing each other about the "Green Holler Mauler," a fabled monster that roamed the woods near where Studey lived with one wife and later another, both long dead.

Now, everybody wonders if the truth will turn out to be stranger than fiction — and that there really was a monster up there to be feared.

"Who knows what could happen up in them woods?" asked Johnson, the former rodeo performer. "I'm not surprised."