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Weapons and Violence Mark Trimble's Past, Present

By Kymberli Hagelberg, Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service

HEMPHILL, Texas – For the first time since a gun was held to her head in 2001, Susan McCoy feels safe enough in her own home to sleep through the night.

What keeps her awake now is the thought that the man she predicted would someday become a killer actually has.

From 1990 to 2003 McCoy was married to James Earl Trimble – the Brimfield Township man accused of the shooting rampage last weekend that engaged a small army of law enforcement officers and left three people dead.

The Portage County grand jury has yet to decide what to charge Trimble in the deaths of his girlfriend, Renee Bauer, 42; her 7-year-old son, Dakota; and 22-year-old Kent State student Sarah Positano. But Trimble was already indicted Thursday on 12 counts of attempted murder for shooting at police.

Last week, word of his arrest reached this rural East Texas community with a thud.

For even though his troubles seemed to start here, in retrospect, he wasn't seen as all that bad, and his sound and fury wasn't taken all that seriously.

After all, he was the American Legion commander, a volunteer firefighter, a churchgoer, an established handyman and a person noted for helping others.

He did boil over, though, on that afternoon in April 2001 after McCoy filed for divorce and a judge ordered him to appear in court to respond to a protection order she sought.

"They should have held him on attempted murder then," McCoy said. "I told the sheriff that if he didn't come back and kill me, he would find someone else.

"But I always thought it was me he would kill," she said.

According to McCoy, the 2001 incident followed years of abuse that she said began in Dallas the morning after their first date in 1987. She said she was straightening up his apartment when she found a girlie magazine and teased him about it.

“I joked and said, ‘Guess you won’t need this anymore now that you have me.’”

But McCoy said Trimble didn’t take it as a joke and responded by beating her for “snooping around.” And she said he told her, “If you call the law, I’ll kill you.”

Witness to Violence

Fourteen years later, outside the house she inherited from her mother in Hemphill, Texas, near the edge of the Sabine National Forest, McCoy said Trimble was holding her at gunpoint, furious that she had not returned a cache of weapons he had left with her.

Mark Dickerson, a fellow firefighter, was fishing with his brother that day on the pond on her 300-acre property.

Dickerson said he had heard rumors that Trimble abused McCoy, “but I never saw anything until that one day.”

It was a Saturday, Dickerson said, and Trimble was outside with McCoy.

“He had her by the hair up against the fence and held a gun to the back of her head,” Dickerson recalled. “He told me, ‘You take one step and I’ll blow your f---ing head off. And if you call the law and they’re man enough to come, I’ll kill every one of you and burn the house down.’”

Dickerson can’t recall what he said to Trimble, or how long they all stood there, but he said Trimble finally let McCoy go and ran into the woods carrying an M-1 rifle and a duffel bag of guns and ammo.

“I guess real time it was about five minutes, but feel time it was about three days,” Dickerson said. “When you’re looking down the barrel of a pistol, it feels like a while.”

Yet the episode apparently didn’t trigger a massive police response.

According to Dickerson, two deputies remained in contact with Trimble by cell phone at the edge of the woods and eventually convinced him to return and surrender.

“It wasn’t a standoff,” Dickerson said. “They knew he could hide there until he was ready to come out.”

Later that day, police photographed McCoy’s injuries, but compared to what she had been through, she said those wounds were insignificant.

“I thought, ‘These are just bruises. It don’t look like hardly nothing,’” McCoy said.

“I’d been beat much worse, handcuffed to the bed in just a slip and kept there without food for days,” she said. “I was hurt so bad he had to carry me to the bathroom. He told me, ‘I’m gonna leave you here until I can decide what to do.’”

McCoy said she knew what he was thinking.

“I knew that meant he was trying to figure out what to do with my dead body.”

In all the years they were together, though, McCoy said she never figured out how to keep from angering her husband. As for his alleged violence, McCoy blames it all on what she said was his love of drugs and guns.

She denies allegations of her infidelity.

“I was faithful to him, and I shared everything with that man,” McCoy said. “I loved him. I was always thinking we would work it out.

“I still wish someone would tell him, ‘That girl loved you. It’s a pity you didn’t realize it.’”

Instead of the attempted murder charge McCoy said she urged, Trimble was charged with assault and pleaded guilty. Because of weapons violations, he served 23 months in state and federal prison.

In the county jail, though, he earned special privileges as a trustee while he awaited sentencing.

Trimble’s Community

It was known that Trimble beat his wife, yet friends and customers of his handyman business and members of his church and even the local sheriff asked the judge for leniency.

In fact, in a letter to the judge from Sheriff Tom Maddox pointed out that Trimble was a model prisoner.

“He made a bad mistake in judgment on his domestic problems,” Maddox wrote, “but I do believe he recognizes the fact.”

Some in Hemphill believe Trimble’s abuse of McCoy was because of his reported bipolar disorder or an aberration because their relationship was bad.

Billy Holder, Hank Lavigne, Tony Alexander and many of the other veterans and families who meet on Thursdays at the VFW on the outskirts of town have trouble reconciling the Jim Trimble they knew with the man who fled into the pine and dense briars of the Sabine Forest.

It’s the same place they hunted for deer and boar, the same place where two years ago they searched with neighbors and strangers – with pants torn and legs bloodied – until they found the remains of the seven Columbia Shuttle astronauts.

Folks in the town served thousands of meals at their own expense to the Columbia search and recovery teams and members of the media that poured into the area of the debris field from around the world. And when Trimble needed help, Hemphill was just as ready to stand behind him.

So, Alexander visited Trimble in jail and paid for his cigarettes and new underclothes. After all, he remembered the work Trimble did hanging flags along Main Street when the Legion's old-timers couldn't manage it, and he hadn't forgotten the tile floor in the restroom and the new light over the pool table he installed at the VFW.

Trimble told Alexander he was an Air Force veteran who served in Grenada. But Alexander, the current Legion adjutant, said Thursday his organization has no record to verify his friend's service.

"He was a churchgoing, very nice man who took care of people whether he could afford it or not," Alexander said, "and when Jim got his medication in jail, he settled right out."

Alexander has been following news accounts of Trimble's arrest on the Internet.

"It killed me to hear that woman had 17 or 18 bullets in her. That's anger. And she must have been standing between Jim and her boy.

"I bet you anything Jim took his medication until he thought he didn't need it anymore, then he stopped taking it and got in trouble," Alexander said. "He left here full of ambition to make a new life for himself and to help his mom.

"He wrote me a letter from the prison that said, 'I'll probably find somebody new sometime – maybe I'll have better luck.'"

Yet not everyone in Hemphill sided with Trimble.

Trimble Skeptics

Dickerson hunted and fished with Trimble while the two were firefighters. He knew him as a polite guy who was always ready to help out, but he had heard rumors and seen things that disturbed him.

"I knew he went berserk once in a while," Dickerson said. "Strange things, like if the dog didn't fetch a ball right, he'd get mad. And one time one of their cows went off into the woods to have a calf – which is natural for them – but he was really mad for two or three days until that cow and calf came out of the thicket."

Jeff Cox is the justice of the peace who issued the protection order against Trimble.

“I know a lot of people thought a lot of him,” Cox said, “but I’m always leery when I hear these tales, and I’ve seen so many times what men can do to women.

“The state of Texas says you can’t whup your wife,” Cox explained.

“I’ve had to tell friends of mine that in court, and we haven’t spoken to this day.”

Cox’s protection orders are generally for 60 days, and they don’t have an option for the abused person to drop the order.

“In three days, they’re generally on the phone telling you how much they love him,” Cox said.

“They can still love him in 60 days, or maybe they’ll open their eyes.”

Battered Women

McCoy’s thoughts are tortured by her memories of her past with Trimble and what his girlfriend, Renee Bauer, might have suffered at his hands.

McCoy knows some people will always wonder why she never ran away.

“I know because I stayed in it people thought it couldn’t be that bad,” she recalled. “I used to sleep in my clothes thinking, ‘I’ll just go,’ but I couldn’t . . .

“My heart goes out to those families,” McCoy said.

“I didn’t have family after my mother died. Jim banked on that, and every day I thought we would work it out.

“I wish someone would have listened,” she said, “and I wish someone would have healed him.”

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