Cold Blood: A Murder, a Book, a Legacy

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cold blood

a murder, a book, a legacy

A University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Journalism & Mass Communications in-depth report on the anniversary of journalist Truman Capote's narrative endeavour, In Cold Blood

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This year marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, considered one of the 20th century’s great works of literature. It also was among the first books in which the reporting techniques of journalism were assembled with the flair of traditional fiction writing.

The book is set in the community of Holcomb in 1959, when four members of a prominent farming family were killed in a fruitless robbery. Herbert and Bonnie Clutter and their children Nancy, 16, and Kenyon, 15, were shot by Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. The book details the crime, the lives of the two criminals and law enforcement’s search and eventual capture of the men.

A class of seven reporting students, a photography student and four documentary film students at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln spent the fall of 2004 studying Capote’s work and its impact on literature and journalism, the community where the story unfolded and some of its principal characters.

The students obtained exclusive interviews from people who had refused to talk publicly about the crime or the book, including Nancy Clutter’s boyfriend, Bob Rupp, who was the last to see the family alive and was initially questioned about the murders; Walter Hickock, Richard Hickock’s younger brother, who describes for the first time the agony the family endured after the crime and publication of Capote’s book, and the family that lives in the former Clutter home as well as exclusive photographs from inside the house. The results were printed first in Kansas in the *Lawrence Journal-World*, then in this magazine.
Two suspects in the robbery and murder of a western Kansas farmer, his wife, and two children were taken from jail in Las Vegas in early 1960 by special agents of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation for return to Kansas to face trial. Left is Eugene Hickock, 28, followed by Agent Harold Nye. Right is Perry Edward Smith, 31, with Agent Alvin Dewey Jr. The book In Cold Blood by Truman Capote was based on the murder case. (corbis photo)
stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that
other Kansans call “out there.” Some seventy miles east of the Colorado
border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an
atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West.
For almost 40 years, those first words of the book in Cold Blood
have been most people’s introduction to a town that seems wholly
unremarkable on the surface.
On this chilly mid-November afternoon in 2004, Holcomb sits
mostly in silence. Every few minutes a vehicle cruises slowly along
Main Street, south past old homes with odds and ends piled on
yards of dead grass, across railroad tracks and—after about five
blocks—right back into the flat, brown plains.
It seems an ordinary town for western Kansas—except for what’s
down a little dirt lane on the southwest edge of town.
A day shy of 45 years ago, two released convicts made their way
here and changed the town irrevocably. It was a pheasant-hunting
weekend just like this one, the brisk wind faintly carrying the pop,
pop, pop, of distant shotgun blasts.
A day shy of 45 years later, and, other than this lane of elms and the
house at the end of it, little remains to signify the events of Nov. 15,
1959—the night this house witnessed, as Truman Capote wrote in
in Cold Blood: “Four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.”
A day shy of 45 years later, the tragedy lingers. It shows
prominently in the lives of those it touched most directly. For others,
it plays a subtle part. For the town, what happened that November
night at the house at the end of this dirt lane probably will be its
most notable aspect forever.
It was an event of unspeakable horror, the cold-blooded murder
of a respected farm family, the Clutters, Herb and Bonnie, their
dughter, Nancy, and son, Kenyon. It was something to forget, many
say now, because the pain cut so deeply. They want to stem the tide
of visitors, the questions and interest in Holcomb’s darkest chapter.
They say it doesn’t matter anymore, that it’s ancient history. It wasn’t
as big a deal as Capote and his book made it out to be.
Those closest to the victims still, almost a half-century later, will
barely talk about what happened that night.
The surviving daughters of Herb and Bonnie Clutter speak
publicly here for the first time. But they talk only about the good
aspects of their family, not the way they died.
Bob Rupp, Nancy Clutter’s boyfriend at the time of her death, also
speaks publicly for the first time about the crimes. He talks about
the murders, but only sparingly. It’s taken 45 years, a loving family
and faith to heal his wound.
The pain is so real that even now the Finney County Historical
Museum in nearby Garden City contains no mention of just this one
prominent farm family, the murders or the publicity the crimes have
brought to the area. And nowhere in Holcomb is the Clutter family
commemorated, no matter their accomplishments while living.
Robert Cousins delivers a sermon inspired by a passage in Isaiah. From a mostly doom-

A memorial would just open up the

A thousand people attended the Clutters'

... the Reverend Leonard Cowan said: ‘God

the Clutter daughters and others say.

The memories are still too raw; the

The Clutter family, which described the murders, the

The world’s translated from French—come

But, West says, Capote harmed the people

They also explained a quiet memorial to

The accomplishments of the Clutter family

The murders have been, for some time, a

If not in Cold Blood, the murderers

and killed each

Dr. Onslow West says he doesn’t understand why

A week earlier, she had given a

The words—translated from French—from

The Garden City Temple, on the eve of the

the Clutters — an enormous circle of stained

At the Odd Williams home in Lawrence, Kan., in 1966. To the right are

the Clutters...a cause for the crime. In brief, (Kansas Bureau of

the world doesn’t. Blame Capote’s best-selling book, which described the

the Clutters — a tragic event as a creative writing

‘It’s painful for you and it’s painful for them.

“Of all the people in all the world, the Clutters were

“… all their children, dead or alive,” Cowan

It has been 45 years after all, a long enough

Without that history, without those stories—produced useful information;

Jesus has never promised us we would not suffer

myself.”

a cause for the crime. in brief, (Kansas Bureau of

the Gravity Club. The answer, as the morning light stretches across

the Garden City northern edge, up on a small rise, Valley View Cemetery

the bodies of the Clutters, despondent and empty

the murders that will pass within hours, the Rev.

to forget. Holcomb, Garden City and In Cold Blood are

in Capote’s story, interest remains in the

in Cold Blood, Capote’s best-selling, which described the murders, the

A thousand people attended the Clutter’s

in Garden City. Divided into

in Capote’s story, interest remains in the

mercy on us. Holcomb, Garden City and In Cold Blood

We have to let the time heal, and to forget.

the Clutters — an enormous circle of stained

for their children who died, tied up the family of four and killed each

Maria Bolin, whom she married only days

the one she grew up on. She lives there with

Valley View Cemetery rests

But, as the morning light stretches across the

the country.

in another way. West and many others

in Garden City are to be remembered.

the Gravity Club. The answer, as the morning light stretches across

The murders have been, for some time, a

in their home in a ghost town that didn’t

We have to let the time heal, and to forget.

the.Clinchers — He who understands the

The Clutters...a cause for the crime. In brief, (Kansas Bureau of


Several years after the Clutters were

enjoyed the night’s work, the next day


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their hometown of Holcomb, but there is one

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was then a 45-year-old member of the Finney

A thousand people attended the Clutters’

He was there when Richard Hickock and

Seems to get us back to the

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The headstone of the Clutter family. Nancy and Kenyon Clutter are buried to the left and right under the inscription, "Bonnie Mae 1914–1959" and "Herbert W. 1911–1959."
Gently, without words, he props the picture frames on the kitchen countertop, so close they're touching. One contains a black-and-white photograph of a young man, with dark hair, a strong jaw and a full lower lip. The other photo shows a girl, smiling tentatively and brushing her smooth face with a white-gloved hand. It's his junior college picture, his wife's engagement portrait.

Standing at the counter, the man silently studies the photos as he sips water from a Dixie cup. The jaw is still strong, the lips still full. But he admits that 40 years have taken their toll. They've weakened his hearing, slowed his walk and loosened his face, creasing it with wrinkles.

Suddenly, Bob Rupp smiles. "See? I used to have hair," he jokes, rolling his eyes toward the thin, white patches that remain. He winks.

The teenage sweethearts fill their small Holcomb kitchen with unspoken memories as they nudge their thumbs along the wooden frames and smile.

“This was us,” he says, pointing to the couple’s senior-class portrait. "But it was a tough time. Really tough. Me and Nancy, we thought we had a whole year before we'd go on to college. But the Lord had other plans. Well, No … ‘
Cold Blood

October evening. “It’s not like that anymore.”

Bobby listened. He’d always believed he had
so much to learn from Herb, a man of strong
spirit. But the Lord had other plans.

The next day, the Rupp family was heading
home from church when they spotted ambulances
spending down the street. “Man, there must’ve been
a terrible accident,” Rupp remembers his father
saying. Rupp says he thought little of it as the family
arrived home and ate lunch.

Later that afternoon, Larry Rupp remembers,
Bobby and Larry headed out to their family’s
bunkhouse, a small building near the Rupp home
where the boys slept and showered. Bobby sat
on his bed cleaning his father’s gun, a .22-caliber
Browning he and his father used for rabbit hunting.

began, staring, it seems, at a place beyond his
reach. “No. No. This can’t happen,” Bob Rupp
maintains. He can’t be happening.

Had they kept their original plans, Nancy
probably wouldn’t have been in the sprawling Clutter
farmhouse when two recently released felons drove
up the lane and eased through the unlocked doors in
search of a rumored safe containing Herb Clutter’s
fortune. When Richard Hickock and Perry Smith
couldn’t find what they were looking for, they shot
each Clutter family member in the head, then fled
with only a pair of binoculars, a transistor radio and
about $40. More than six weeks passed before they
were caught.

Instead, on that Saturday night, Bobby visited
Nancy at home. Herb greeted him warmly, then
retrieved to his desk, where he spent most of the
evening Googling up on paperwork. Nancy greeted
Bobby wearing the I.D. bracelet he had given her
and the couple’s ring, which she’d taken off the
afternoon crossing Garden City. And then he drove
home. Hours later, Hickock and Smith pulled up.

For a few years, I thought about it every day,” he
says, seated with his wife at the kitchen table on an
October evening. “It’s not like that anymore.”

Bobby wearing the I.D. bracelet he had given her
and telling her he’d pick her up after church the next day so they could spend the
afternoon crossing Garden City. And then he drove
home. Hours later, Hickock and Smith pulled up.

The week before she was killed, Nancy and Bobby
made plans for the upcoming Saturday night to see
a midnight film. But, he recalls in a quiet, matter-
of-fact voice, Herb and Bonnie Clutter advised the
couple to catch the Friday showing instead. The
plan was about it.

When Richard Hickock and Perry Smith
seriously, but Bobby didn’t offer much more, so Larry
didn’t ask.

“All I know is, they were together all the time,”
says Larry Rupp, a 10-year-old mechanic living
in Garden City who still jones his big brother for
holiday dinners and summer fishing trips.

“You saw one, you saw the other,”
Bob Rupp recalls Herb Clutter, one of Holcomb’s
most respected men—and someone who was like
a second father to the young man—sitting him
down for a talk one night just a few months into the
relationship.

“You and my daughter are so young,” Rupp
remembers him saying. “Why don’t you slow down,
just something about her, Rupp remembers—the
way she smiled, the way she seemed to always have
time for everyone. The two liked to meet in the
evening and have a drink around ‘the square,’ a hangout
spot just outside Holcomb.

When he speaks of Nancy, Rupp looks straight
ahead, staring, it seems, at a place beyond his
kitchen. A small, private smile plays at his lips. He
says he could go on “for hours and hours” about
Nancy—what she was like, the things they liked
to do together—but he volunteers little, and even
when he’s prompted, he doesn’t give away much.

Back then, too, Bobby kept his romance private
even to those closest to him. Not even his brother
Larry, youngsters by just a year and his closest
confidante, could glean details. He knew they were
serious, but Bobby didn’t offer much more, so Larry
didn’t ask.

And, oh, how they loved each other. There
was just something about her, Rupp remembers—the
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date other people?”

Bobby listened. He’s always believed he had
so much to learn from Herb, a man of strong
connection with a family that was as close to perfect
as you could get. If Herb wanted to advise Bobby
and Nancy to see less of each other, Bobby was
willing to hear him out.

“No. No. This can’t happen,” Bob Rupp
maintains. He can’t be happening.

But he never kicked me out of the house,” Rupp
recalls hearing a knock at the bedroom
door. His father, flanked by Clarence Ewalt, a family
friend and the father of one of Nancy’s best friends,
appeared in the doorframe. Larry could see tears on
each man’s cheeks.

“There’s been a tragedy,” both Rupp brothers
remember Ewalt saying. “They’re dead. The
Clutters are dead. We found them…”

Bobby and Larry headed out to their family’s
bunkhouse, a small building near the Rupp home
where the boys slept and showered. Bobby sat
on his bed cleaning his father’s gun, a .22-caliber
Browning he and his father used for rabbit hunting.

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The boys were in shock. The elder vowed to drive to the Clutter farm right then and there. Ewol advised against it, saying, "They're not alive anymore, Bobby." He offered nothing else. Didn't say anything about the gruesome scene he, his daughter, and another girl had discovered that morning. Didn't say how each of the Clutters had been shot at point-blank range — Herb first, then Kenyon, Nancy and Norm. Didn't say what nobody yet knew — that before Nancy had been shot at point-blank range — Herb first, then Kenyon, Nancy

The isolation got so bad that Bobby decided to transfer to Garden High School. But he displays a small smile instead. "It felt good,"

And then there were the students he had been close friends with for two years, Bobby says, he woke up in a cold sweat, heart pounding. He'd get up, look outside to make sure nobody was there, and eventually fall asleep, trembling. "Colleen stopped those," he says quietly, looking across the table at his wife of 41 years. The two met during Rupp’s first year of college, when Colleen was still a senior at Garden City High School. Less than a year later, they married.

He spent hours at the station, answering questions and taking a lie-detector test. Police went to Holcomb High School the next day. The boys were in shock. The elder vowed to drive to the Clutter farm right then and there. Ewol advised against it, saying, "They're not alive anymore, Bobby." He offered nothing else. Didn’t say anything about the gruesome scene he, his daughter, and another girl had discovered that morning. Didn’t say how each of the Clutters had been shot at point-blank range — Herb first, then Kenyon, Nancy and Norm. Didn’t say what nobody yet knew — that before Nancy

It's something no child should ever have to go through," he says, "Life just turned to the serious. The reality of what the world is really like set in."
Donna Mader remembers and finds a picture of the year when the lane leading to her farmhouse was nearly buried by heavy snow.

*Kris Kolden photo*
Sisters honor family

Surviving Clutter daughters hope to preserve parents’ legacy

By Patrick Smith

The stained-glass window at the First United Methodist Church in Garden City stands as an unmarked memorial, posthumously dedicated to the memory of the Clutters, who were active members of the church. Herb and Bonnie Clutter were instrumental in raising funds for the construction of the current building.

(KRIS KOLDEN PHOTO)
Before In Cold Blood appeared, a series of articles that would become the book appeared in the New Yorker magazine in 1965. The sisters read the first article, which described their family.

In a letter the sisters often send to decline interview requests, they explained their reaction to that article and why they preferred to keep their family’s story to themselves.

“I am sure you understand our reservations in granting your request,” they wrote. “Truman Capote made a similar request to write an article for the New Yorker Magazine that he said would be a ‘tribute’ to the family. He also communicated to us that we (the daughters) would be given the opportunity to review the article before publication. Mr. Capote did not honor his agreement, nor did he talk to any family members or friends who could have provided accurate and reliable information about the family. The result was his sensational novel, which profited him and grossly misrepresented our family.”

“We want to remember our parents in a positive light,” English said, one of the family’s two surviving daughters, “not the negative.”

The positives come in the form of the scrapbooks, loving memories and a number of memorials throughout Kansas. The negatives are the brutal murders of Herb and Bonnie Clutter, their daughter, Nancy, 16, and son, Kenyon, 15, and, to make it all worse, what the daughters and others say are Capote’s inaccuracies in describing the Clutter family.

English and her sister, Eveanna Mosier, 68, have declined all interview requests through the years, and they still won’t talk about the killings. However, for the first time, the sisters in the fall of 2004 granted interviews and touched on their family’s portrayal in Capote’s book. They are determined to keep their parents’ legacy alive, although they prefer to do so within their family rather than publicly. Just as their parents did, they have shed away from the limelight.

“The only way I knew about it was through the newspaper,” English said, “and he didn’t want any credit for it.”

Part of the sisters’ reluctance to speak is that they feel betrayed and exploited by Capote and others in the media and scrapbooks tell the family’s true history.

Within three thick red binders are children’s photos, graduation announcements, tidbits of diaries, correspondence through the years and momentos of Herb and Bonnie Clutter’s family. Then there are the stories Beverly English, 65, has written about each of her parents—stories describing everything from what kind of music they enjoyed to how Bonnie would kill and pluck a chicken for dinner. The scrapbooks and stories portray the family the way no one else has—certainly not Truman Capote, whose book, In Cold Blood, told of the Clutter family murders in Holcomb, Kan., in November 1959.

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“She was not an invalid,” said Jean Hands, a family friend and Garden City First United Methodist Church member. “He kind of picked at her at being mentally ill, and that was not at all. She was a sharp, sharp lady. You could put her at the head of a committee, and she’d get it done.”

Although Herb-Clutter was a leader in the community and a successful farmer, he wasn’t as wealthy as the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, thought, or as well to-do as Capote made him out to be. Beyond the author’s descriptions of the Clutter home, impressive but not extravagant for the day, and the farm’s orchard and fields, was the reality that the family had its own hard times and bills to pay. English and others say, “He was wealthy of heart, kind and sensible to come in and kill him, thinking he had lots of wealth,” Hands said.

In the case of Beverly’s marriage to Vere English, held four days after the family’s funeral in November instead of its originally scheduled December date, Capote quoted the Garden City Telegram’s wedding announcement instead of talking to the surviving daughters. Beyond the newspaper’s reporting for having the wedding early—so many distant relatives gathered together—English said the wedding allowed the family to seek a shred of happiness in a time of overwhelming sadness.

English and her husband talk about that time now, just days before their 45th anniversary, with surprising straightforwardness. They have accepted it and moved on. They wonder why others can’t let it go.

Despite the stress from that tragedy a few days before they started their lives together, neither Beverly nor Vere, 71, appear worn. Their relatively short gray hair and glasses frame faces that have seen a lot, and taken more, from life. As they try to get beyond the painful memories, they have a cheerfulness and honesty about them. By all accounts, those are traits the whole Clutter family possessed.

“I think you could classify them as friendly and loving Christian people,” Joe Vanderweide, a Garden City architect and college friend of Eveanna Mosier, said.

English, a retired nurse, and her husband, who farms wheat, milo and alfalfa, have three children and 11 grandchildren.

Both sisters now live in the Newton, Kan., area. Eveanna had lived in western Nebraska until 1978 when her first husband, Donald Jarchow, died. In the wake of that loss, she moved to Newton, where English and her husband were farming his family’s land.

“It was a logical place to move, to Newton, with my three children,” English said. “It was a healing thing for me.”

Although Herb-Clutter was a leader in the community and a successful farmer, he wasn’t as wealthy as the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, thought, or as well to-do as Capote made him out to be. Beyond the author’s descriptions of the Clutter home, impressive but not extravagant for the day, and the farm’s orchard and fields, was the reality that the family had its own hard times and bills to pay. English and others say, “He was wealthy of heart, kind and sensible to come in and kill him, thinking he had lots of wealth,” Hands said.

In the case of Beverly’s marriage to Vere English, held four days after the family’s funeral in November instead of

“We want to remember our parents in a positive light, not the negative.”
It was his sister who they wrote about, don’t people understand that? It wasn’t some anonymous woman in an anonymous town who died an anonymous death. It was Howard Fox’s sister, Bonnie, older by three years, who loved playing with dolls as a child and studied nursing in college and became the most devoted mother he knew. It was his sister who was murdered at age 45 and then became a character in a nonfiction sensation.

But Howard Fox says his only sister’s legacy is forever tainted by the way Truman Capote painted her in *In Cold Blood*, the story of the 1959 killings of Bonnie Clutter, her husband, Herb, and their two teenaged children in the family’s Holcomb farmhouse.

“I won’t read the book. That was Bonnie who died,” says Fox, 88, a retired forester living in Oregon, Ill. “I know who she was. Other people don’t because of that book.”

Fox isn’t alone. Family and friends of Bonnie Clutter scoff at Capote’s description of the woman as an invalid who suffered from tension, withdrawal and depression. Bonnie is not a main character in the book, and readers might assume she was a mentally unstable woman who preferred to hide behind her husband’s notability in the tiny community.

But that’s not the whole story, say those close to Bonnie—including two surviving daughters so hurt by *In Cold Blood* they have refused interview requests for 45 years. Bonnie was a loving wife and mother, active in the church, a caring and compassionate woman. At the time of her death, she was dealing with depression, but she never let it get in the way of her family, they say.

“Capote didn’t get it right at all,” says Jean Hands, 78, who knew the Clutters through the First United Methodist Church in Garden City, which Bonnie attended every Sunday.

“She was a lovely, lovely lady. Very poised. She did not have a mental illness. Capote went a little overboard.”

Hands first met Bonnie about 10 years before the murders. Both were active in church goings-on, participating in dinners, children’s groups and choir. Both also had husbands in the Kansas Co-op, and when meetings took the families to Kansas City, the wives would go shopping or visit museums together. Bonnie didn’t like being away from Herb, Hands remembers, but she did her best to be in good spirits when the co-op wives got together for the afternoon.

“You couldn’t help but like her,” Hands says.

Bonnie was unwaveringly loyal to her husband, whom she’d married when she was just 20. She supported his involvement in the co-op, 4-H and other community activities, and often was active behind the scenes, assembling lists of phone numbers or mailing letters to the townships.

“If something happened in Holcomb, you pretty much knew Herb or Bonnie had something to do with it,” says Merl Wilson, who, with his wife, Argybrell, rotated with the Clutters in leading 4-H.

Still, in the later years, Bonnie’s friends and family could tell something was wrong. They could just see it when she walked into the room, a little too thin, shoulders slumped, Hands remembers. She could no longer help out with dinners—she just couldn’t handle so many hours in the kitchen. The other women could carry their own electric roasters; Bonnie would just watch, smiling delicately.

And they could just hear it in her voice when she called. Fox recalls—not all was well, although he could never put his finger on the problem. She mentioned once that she was on medications. A couple of times, she’d cry a little, about nothing in particular, as he remembers. Fox began to suspect it was the drugs that were making her feel depressed.

But he’s disgusted with Capote’s portrayal of his sister. According to the book, “She was ‘nervous,’ she suffered ‘little spells’—such were the sheltering expressions used by those close to her. Not that the truth concerning...
poor Bonnie’s afflictions were in the least a secret; everyone knew she had been an on-and-off psychiatric patient the last half-dozen years.”

Not so, Howard Fox insists. “He doesn’t know where Capote got his information. Maybe he fabricated it. Maybe he talked to the wrong people, chatted up town gossips who were jealous of the Clutters’ status and financial well-being. What Fox does know is that the Bonnie Clutter that Capote created is frustratingly one-dimensional. She was just not her normal self,” he says now of his sister’s struggles with her health. “But I could tell that underneath it all, she was happy. She loved her children. Family always came first.”

It’s a value that has always lived strong among the Foxes. The four Fox children—Bonnie, the second-oldest, was the only girl—were close growing up on their farm 11 miles northeast of Rozel, Kan. Their father, a carpenter, often had to go to California for work, so the family would head west in their Model T Ford, and the children would spend their summer days idling on the beach.

Bonnie loved the ocean, her brother recalls. At home, while the boys played croquet, Bonnie would stay inside and play quietly. “She definitely had her girly things,” Fox says. “She loved her dolls. She did everything with them.”

Bonnie was maternal with her children, too, attending all their 4-H events and school plays, he says. And though she didn’t pursue her nursing career after having children, nursing was a natural choice in college, Fox says. Even as a child, she spoke often of wanting to help people, and she’d always been compassionate, he says.

The two surviving Clutter daughters, Beverly and Eveanna, are both married and living in the Newton, Kan, area. By and large, neither will discuss their mother, the murders or In Cold Blood. One reason: They’re too hurt by the way Capote portrayed their family, specifically their mother. Perhaps that’s fitting, Howard Fox says. Maybe it’s no one else’s business. Those who truly knew Bonnie won’t believe the rubbish they read in In Cold Blood. Usually, that gives Fox peace.

Comforting, too, is the way Bonnie was found after the murders. She lay on her back on her bed, eyes staring straight upward, hands clasped as if in prayer. Howard Fox knows his sister. He knew she was doing just that.
Man lives a painful life in the shadow of his brother’s crime

What people notice about 67-year-old Walter Hickock isn’t his comfortable drawl, his arthritis-pained hands or the reflective way he sometimes seems to withdraw. People remark about Walter’s last name because they’ve heard about his brother, Dick, a notorious murderer.

Because of a horrific, bloody act his brother committed years ago, Walter has learned to retreat from inquiries into his life like a hand recoiling from a flame. Even after 45 years, he isn’t much closer to coming to grips with the fact that his brother was executed for a brutal crime.

In 1959, Richard Hickock and a friend from prison, Perry Smith, slaughtered four members of the Herb Clutter family in Holcomb, Kan. after a fruitless robbery attempt. The incident gained the two men and the town international attention through the journalist efforts of Truman Capote, who turned the small-town crime into the best-selling narrative, In Cold Blood, which chronicled the crimes, the killers’ lives and their 1965 hanging.

Although Walter and Dick had similar DNA and shared childhoods—the deadly shotgun used in the murders had been Walter’s youthful hunting purchase—they aren’t the same person. Walter, however, says that he and his family were declared guilty the same day Dick was, their verdict accompanied by a punishment of a subtler sort. The remaining Hickocks were left alone to survive the bruises of public scorn and private confusion.

Deeply affected, Walter has only begun to acknowledge and sort out the nagging uncertainties of his past, leaving unanswered many questions about the deepest emotions he experienced. Although Walter believes his brother didn’t pull the shotgun’s trigger, he said he can never know for sure. Such doubts and deep emotions, although extreme, aren’t unusual for families of criminals, experts say.

Walter’s life was not untouched by the actions of the older brother he called the “hero” of his youth. While Dick faced a series of judges, Walter’s struggle to understand the harsh truth of his brother’s crime helped derail three marriages and contributed to his breaking ties with his children. While Capote grew famous, Walter received hate mail, and potential employers denied him jobs, he says, because of his brother’s actions.

“I don’t know what (the public) would know about me in the first place—the only time my name was ever mentioned in that book was that I was a brother, nothing good or bad,” said Walter, who in January 2005 became the only person from either killer’s family to speak publicly about
HICKOCK

Walter and Dick were born into the chaos of the Great Depression, two kids who loved the outdoors. The boys' father, Walter Sr., had been a migratory worker who followed the wheat harvest in his younger days. In his narrative, Capote described Walter Sr. as "a man with fiendish, defeated eyes and rough hands." He said, "I used to say a family is loving. "But I'm not sure if they were loving in the way you usually say a family is loving."

As for the Hickocks boys, they were "very close." Walter, the junior by six years, said he always looked up to Dick.

"He was more of a hero," Walter said. "Dick was good at sports and would show me a few tricks, playing nights and games and things like that."

They were friends, brothers and co-conspirators in mischief, trusting each other in a way only people who share bonds can.

"My brother was probably the greatest rifle shot I've ever seen with a .22 rifle," Walter said with a deep chuckle. "I used to set a Gerber baby food can on the top of my head and let Dick shoot it off."

As the two grew older, they gravitated toward different interests. Walter turned his attention to riding and caring for a horse; a hobby that became his passion. He became a good rider and spent his time dating girls and playing sports, school being a low priority.

In 1947, the Hickocks relocated from Kansas City, Kan., to a farm in Edgerton, a small town in eastern Kansas "about four or five blocks square," Walter said. Dick, meanwhile, was about 13 years old.

In August 1959, Dick emerged from 17 months in prison, divorced from Nora, Walter married two more times, the decade following his divorce from Nora, Walter married two more times, fathering two more children and became a stepfather to two others. Even though one of the marriages lasted only five years, eventually both ended up the same as the first—one that family or not," he said.

"Trying to explain why is a lost cause, but I don't blame any of them for not trying it again," he said. "I really thought that she thought (Dick) was that wonderful person in the world."

"(Questions about Dick's crime) got to eating me in a bad way, and I left my first wife," he said. "A lot of the things I did I know I didn't do right—I'd have to say I'm not the most wonderful person in the world."

"I suspected Nora of secretly blaming Dick, his hero, for the murders."

"I'm about his experiences. "But people would write them mean letters and such, and you know they would think (the murders were) a bad thing that had been done, but I don't see how they come up with blaming the families, too."
Life goes on

away from Kansas and still see people reading In Cold Blood. He’d face suspicious looks and personal questions.

“Some look at me kind of strange. I’m sure some of them think, like some I’d heard from right after it happened, that I knew more about it than I ever said,” Walter said. “You can see it in their eyes, they would love to ask about it. I guess they’re just holding back or whatever.”

For the brave souls who do question him, Walter refuses to try pretending the past away.

“It’s something that happened — I’m very sorry that happened, yes, I most certainly am,” Walter said. “But to have to deny that I knew my brother, I’ve never even thought about doing that. If anybody to this day would collect the names, I’d have to tell them who I was. What am I gonna change after 50 years?”

But such an association doesn’t mean merely enduring sometimes painful questions; the stakes are occasionally much higher. Years ago, Walter applied for a truck-driving job in Kansas City, Mo. En route to the interview, Walter passed a newspaper stand displaying a front-page story about the release of the In Cold Blood movie.

“(The interviewer) put things together and asked me if it was true (that I was Dick’s brother), and then he said he was sorry but the job had been taken that morning,” Walter said. “(The same kind of thing) happened in other places, but a lot of them wouldn’t come out and say why they wouldn’t hire me. But you can read between the lines on a lot of that stuff.”

But experts say it’s not uncommon for criminals’ families to face such troubles.

“There’s a stigma attached—the family must have done something wrong to contribute to this result,” said Mark Mauer of “The Sentencing Project,” a national think-tank on sentencing in Washington, D.C.

“Forgotten victims” is an accurate term,” Mauer said. “There is very little focus on the criminal’s family and its needs...they suffer in ways no one pays very much attention to.”

Even as a first-hand witness of such a situation, Walter said he doesn’t know how to help the families of criminals—sympathy usually is saved for the families of victims.

“I think maybe some people on the face of this earth would like to know what happens to (criminals’) family members, but I don’t know what I could do about it,” he said.

“I really truly believe that the world should know how some people are treated for a sad situation that they had nothing to do with and had no idea this carrying on was going to happen—to go through what I’ve gone through and hear what I’ve heard.”

Although his family’s story is forever bound between the covers of a book of international fame, Walter is still putting the pieces together in his own mind. Even with the ties that remain for him in Kansas, the Walter Hickock of today no longer is trapped there. He can be found greeting those who enter the Jennings Wal-Mart, spending time with his Louisiana family or waking up to a daily battle against arthritis. Life goes on.

“To me, that’s a thing of the past, at least I hope it is,” Walter says to those who inquire about his brother’s crimes. “That’s about what it amounts to. It’s in the past, and that’s where I’d like to leave it.”
A rust-ridden 1956 Chevrolet sits in a neighborhood in the outskirts of Holcomb, Kan. The town has grown ten-fold since 1959. (Kris Kolden photo)
In the end, just a home

By Crystal K. Wiebe
Possessions have a tendency to accumulate, though, and over time, Donna and her husband Leonard, a retired farmer with a broad face, have managed to settle in. His vitamin bottles have gathered in the corner where Kenyon Clutter was found dead on the morning of November 15, 1959. (top) Donna Mader cuts and presses homemade dough for noodles with her young assistant, Bryce Druessel, the son of her son's fiancé. Family tradition and several grandchildren keep the home full of life. (above) Bryce Druessel plays tag with his sister, Mariah, in the basement of the former Clutter home. They’re playing in the corner where Kermy Clutter was found dead on the morning of November 15, 1959. (top) Donna Mader looks at the Clutter legacy, pointing out. "Situated at the end of a long, lanelike driveway shaded by rows of Chinese elms, the handsome white house, standing on an ample lawn of grooved Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb." Space is one of the things Donna Mader likes best about her house. So much in fact, that when she moved there in 1990, she hardly knew how to fill it all. Having been cramped with six children into a smaller place on the main highway for years, Donna simply didn’t have enough stuff.

"Situated at the end of a long, lanelike driveway shaded by rows of Chinese elms, the handsome white house, standing on an ample lawn of grooved Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb." Space is one of the things Donna Mader likes best about her house. So much in fact, that when she moved there in 1990, she hardly knew how to fill it all. Having been cramped with six children into a smaller place on the main highway for years, Donna simply didn’t have enough stuff.

In his 1965 book, In Cold Blood, Truman Capote described the house Donna and Leonard Mader now live in as "a place people pointed out." "Situated at the end of a long, lanelike driveway shaded by rows of Chinese elms, the handsome white house, standing on an ample lawn of grooved Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb," Capote wrote. Still an impressive structure by the town’s standards, the two-story farmhouse was an architectural anomaly on the plains of southwestern Kansas when it was built in 1914 for $40,000.

Forty-five years later, the property shows signs of major change. Some are harsh: No Trepassing marked along the lane, proud elms withered by a prolonged drought, behind farm equipment sheds, another original structure sits. The Stoecklein house, named after the resident hired hand who didn’t hear the gunshots the night the Clutters were killed, decays into the ground, a favorite target of local graffiti artists. Other evidence of time’s passage is more benign: the white house re-sided in mauve, a trailer moved next to it and painted to match. Sitting on a huge expanse of grass, the Maders’ spacious home appears dwarfed from the outside: But Herb Clutter’s highly personalized design features 14 rooms, including two bathrooms, an excess unheard of at a time when not everyone in the area had running water, Donna says.

In the office, she begins a tour she’s given hundreds of times, noting the absence of a safe then and now. The idea of a safe is what brought two killers into the house in 1959. Hardly seeming the serious place of business Capote described, the room still contains a desk and chair. Dozens of glowing school photos of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren hang framed on the walls.

Passing back through the living room, by one of the home’s two wood-burning fireplaces, Donna heads for the master bathroom and Herb Clutter’s, now her, bedroom. Especially elegant, the bathroom is original, Donna boasts. Pink tiles line the walls, white and brown ones alternate along the floor. A translucent blue tile divider separates the tub and toilet.

Donna goes next to the basement, where two murders occurred, casually drawing attention to a rusty stain on the wall, near where Herb Clutter’s body was found.

"This is supposed to be blood," Donna says. Once a meeting place for 4-H clubs and a space for a boy’s carpentry projects, the main area of the basement is still a playroom, now for tots and teens. The floor has been littered with toys and sleeping bags. Mader grandchildren romping in the same spot Kenyon Clutter was killed, sitting at the Clutters’ picnic table, which Kermy might well have helped build.

Hurling the procession along, Donna climbs back into the kitchen and the heart of the house, where she pauses long to marvel. Her reverence for Clutter’s personal design shines through most here, where she believes he had his wife and three daughters in mind. Her snow village collection has colonized the hallway. Pictures of her 15 grandchildren, some of whom often sleep over, hang everywhere.

With the extra closets and bedrooms in this house came something else, a lingering history. The Maders own the house on Holcomb’s southwestern edge, at the end of a long drive lined with dying Chinese elm trees, but the place will always be synonymous with another name: Clutter.

The story of a family killed there 45 years ago draws strangers to the doorstep, driveway and telephone, constantly reminding the Maders that their home will never be only theirs.

The couple looks at the Clutter legacy with ambivalence. Although they revere their ever-violated privacy, they speak glowingly of the interesting people they’ve met because of it. In one instant, they talk of turning the house into a bed and breakfast; in another, of a long drive lined with dying Chinese elm trees, but the place will always be synonymous with another name: Clutter.

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The old Clutter family farmhouse today is a substantial home enlivened by a family with children and grandchildren. The house, which is owned by Donna and Leonard Mader, still draws visitors from around the world. (Kris Kolden photo)

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“My thinking didn’t run on the same lines,” Donna says. However eccentric, most of the people the house has drawn into their lives haven’t been dangerous. In sharing the stories heard from visitors from 30 countries, the Maders seem almost proud. “We’ve met a lot of nice people,” Donna says.

That list includes a police investigator from Los Angeles (“a person from Dragnet” as Leonard says), an old, rich Dutch woman, cross-country bicyclists and Sam Neill, the New Zealand actor who stopped by to pick up a local accent for his role as Kamus Bureau of Investigation Agent Alvin Dewey Jr. in the 1996 television version of *In Cold Blood*.

“He wanted to talk like Leonard talks,” Donna says.

Even the psychic woman, who eventually returned, wasn’t the wicked witch she initially seemed. She sent members of the family birthday cards for years. The realization that none have come lately seems to worry Donna. “Something must have happened to her,” she says.

It’s in part because the structure’s history was beginning to overshadow their own lives that the Maders began giving paid tours in the early 1990s. The short-lived idea to charge $5 per head for a walk-through came about as a way to compensate themselves for their involuntary posts as historians. They stopped the tours after just a few months due to resistance from those connected with the Clutter case and the personal stress of having to keep a constantly tidy house, Donna says.

During that time, she says, she fielded accusations, mostly anonymous, of trying to profit off the Clutters’ misfortune. A look of mischief crosses her face when she mentions the mail condemning her to hell.

“I had lots of letters telling me how horrible I was,” Donna chuckles. While she is able to brush aside religious fanaticism, Donna has a harder time accepting the reservations of the surviving Clutters. Her soft face grows stern when she talks about Herb Clutter’s living daughters, who she’s convinced made money from—or at least gave their blessing to—the book and films that have kept interest in the story alive.

“I have to put up with all the people,” she says. “I didn’t write the book or make the movie, but I have to deal with all the people.”

**IN THE END, JUST A HOME**

The Maders’ previous house on the main highway was also host to some strange and unwelcome visitors. Donna remembers at least two different men sneaking in while she was home, as well as finding a hobo at the door once. She says she looked forward to more privacy, not less, in the more secluded home, a notion that makes her laugh now. “I thought, I’ll finally be off the beaten path.”

Perhaps it’s those run-ins with unwelcome guests that have helped the Maders cope with the unique experience of living in the Clutter house, without letting it interfere too much with their own sense of home.

While Leonard’s gone to run an errand, Donna surmises that his acquaintanceship with Herb Clutter is the real reason he’s so reluctant to recover the breakfast nook or tear down the badly vandalized house where Clutter’s hired man used to live. It’s for the same reason, she believes, that it was harder for him to adjust to living there.

Big enough for two family histories, the house has been the Maders’ now for more time than it was the Clutters’.

Donna stands in the dim light of the upstairs hallway, outside the door to a room where the youngest Clutter spent his last night of life almost 45 years ago to the day.

Still masculine in décor, the room is no one’s in particular now; a guest room.

As many others in this rural community would point out, life must go on. Even on its anniversary weekend, Donna Mader can’t afford to waste energy agonizing about a 45-year-old mass killing. Not when she’s got a card game to prepare for and three beaming grandchildren coming through her kitchen, one begging Grandma for a kiss.

(above) Donna Mader loves showing off the custom-built kitchen, complete with a counter through which food could be passed to a breakfast nook, in her home. (Kris Kolden photo)

(right) Truman Capote’s effort to write a book about the murders in southwest Kansas generated enough of a stir that Life magazine ran a story about his efforts in January 1966, a week before *In Cold Blood* was published. Famed photographer Richard Avedon, who had collaborated with Capote in some earlier work, went to Kansas and provided this photo of Capote on a rural Kansas road in 1960.

(Cold Blood | 2005)
In many ways, Capote was denied the attention that he craved from an early age. Born Sept. 30, 1924, he spent his formative years in Monroeville, Ala., where aunts and women cousins raised him while his mother, Lillie Mae ‘Nina’ Faulk, flitted about with and without her son’s salesman father, Arch Persons, whom she eventually divorced. Capote got his name from Joseph Garcia Capote, the businessman stepfather Faulk made a home with in New York City.

Capote turned to writing when he was very young for comfort and occasional attention. By the time he arrived in Kansas at age 35, Capote had experienced some success. He was a regular contributor to the New Yorker magazine. His books, Other Voices, Other Rooms and Breakfast at Tiffany’s, were both critically acclaimed, and Breakfast at Tiffany’s later was made into a movie starring Audrey Hepburn.

In Cold Blood was his attempt at creating a new form of writing—the nonfiction novel, a blend of journalistic accuracy with the narrative style of fiction. No matter how renowned he was on the East Coast, to residents of rural Kansas, Capote was hardly a household name, much less one the Kansans could pronounce, when he showed up on their doorsteps in 1959. But that would soon change, as Capote began to ingratiate himself with the locals, and they, in turn, sought acceptance from him. ‘I don’t think too many people knew much about him. Various people called him Cappuchi,’ said Dolores Hope, a former reporter for the Garden City Telegram. Garden City, the seat and social center of Finney County, was where the Clutters’ murderers would be tried.

Capote’s flamboyant style was just a small part of what set him apart in Kansas. His 5-foot-4-inch frame, squeaky voice and shock of white hair attracted stares everywhere. And, in the conservative heart of the country, he didn’t hide his homosexuality.

In the paranoid atmosphere brought on by the murders, Capote could even be frightening. Bob Ashida, whose family lived near the Clutters, said his mother was afraid to open the door when Capote, a stranger, came knocking for an interview:

Evan Williams recalls laughing at the time, talked about late-night flights when Capote arrived immediately after flying in from New York City. Evan’s parents, Odd, an influential businessman, and Josett, a housewife, invited the writers to their home.

Some of the friendships Capote made in Kansas lasted the rest of his life. His correspondence with the family of Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent Alvin Dewey Jr. is charted in The Boy’s Tree, a book of letters, edited by Gerald Clarke, that was released last October.

In Lawrence, Kan., Capote met the Williams family, who also were friends of the Deweys. Evan Williams, who was in elementary school at the time, talked about late nights when Capote arrived immediately after flying in from New York City. Evan’s parents, Odd, an influential businessman, and Josett, a housewife, held a ‘sunker down’ at the bottom of the stairs with Capote, whose name was written on the wall:

In Cold Blood was not the only work that was critically acclaimed, and Breakfast at Tiffany’s was made into a movie starring Audrey Hepburn. Other voices, Other rooms was a regular contributor to the New Yorker magazine.

The hope of Capote’s sexuality kept the more conservative guests at an elite party Capote threw in New York years later, on guard. Yet it didn’t stop Odd or his wife, who would be among a handful of Kansas guests at an elite party Capote threw in New York years later, from developing a friendship with him.

Despite his tendency to dominate discussions and his general quirkiness, Capote could have a charming effect. And, in an interview setting, his refusal to take notes, even on a tape recorder, said his longtime partner, Jack Dunphy, is not certain, but the knowledge of Capote’s sexuality kept the more conservative guests at an elite party Capote threw in New York years later, from developing a friendship with him.

‘She wouldn’t let him in the house until she called the high school and asked who he was.’

Ashida and others said he willingly paid for interviews. To grease his squeaky wheel, Capote used his childhood pal, Nelle Harper Lee, the author of To Kill a Mockingbird, to relax interview subjects who could more easily relate to her mild-mannered and unassuming presence. Today, many residents of Holcomb and Garden City remember Lee more fondly than they do Capote.

‘I don’t think too many people knew much about him. Various people called him Cappuchi.’

In Cold Blood, the nonfiction novel, a blend of journalistic accuracy with the narrative style of fiction. No matter how renowned he was on the East Coast, to residents of rural Kansas, Capote was hardly a household name, much less one the Kansans could pronounce, when he showed up on their doorsteps in 1959. But that would soon change, as Capote began to ingratiate himself with the locals, and they, in turn, sought acceptance from him. ‘I don’t think too many people knew much about him. Various people called him Cappuchi,’ said Dolores Hope, a former reporter for the Garden City Telegram. Garden City, the seat and social center of Finney County, was where the Clutters’ murderers would be tried.

Capote’s flamboyant style was just a small part of what set him apart in Kansas. His 5-foot-4-inch frame, squeaky voice and shock of white hair attracted stares everywhere. And, in the conservative heart of the country, he didn’t hide his homosexuality.

In the paranoid atmosphere brought on by the murders, Capote could even be frightening. Bob Ashida, whose family lived near the Clutters, said his mother was afraid to open the door when Capote, a stranger, came knocking for an interview:

Evan Williams recalls laughing at the time, talked about late-night flights when Capote arrived immediately after flying in from New York City. Evan’s parents, Odd, an influential businessman, and Josett, a housewife, invited the writers to their home.

Some of the friendships Capote made in Kansas lasted the rest of his life. His correspondence with the family of Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent Alvin Dewey Jr. is charted in The Boy’s Tree, a book of letters, edited by Gerald Clarke, that was released last October.

In Lawrence, Kan., Capote met the Williams family, who also were friends of the Deweys. Evan Williams, who was in elementary school at the time, talked about late nights when Capote arrived immediately after flying in from New York City. Evan’s parents, Odd, an influential businessman, and Josett, a housewife, invited the writers to their home.

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capote

Sought by talk show hosts and reporters to expound upon his achievement, Capote barked, almost belligerently, in the recognition, which he seemed to think he deserved for making a serialization of in Cold Blood

According to biographer John Malcolm Brinnin, Capote used to talk about the success his book brought him, saying, “I would have driven straight into an image that floated, like a Macy’s balloon on Thanksgiving Day, over the watching multitude, and to lose sight of the man I knew.”

In Cold Blood, the most incredible things.

To write again

She said. “They dropped their guard about almost everything — it is a Big Work, believe me, and if I fail I still will have succeeded,” he said in Gerald Clarke’s book Capote: A Biography.

From great success the road started downward.

Garrison reports that Capote consumed increasing amounts of tranquilizers with alcohol in the years after In Cold Blood. By the mid-1970s, she continued, “He was doing almost no writing.”

Capote was maintaining his status as a celebrity, though, and a wise one who could do or say anything. He made headlines when he fell off a stage drunk during a speaking engagement at Towson University in Maryland in 1977.

On the topic of Capote’s overserving style of self, Brinnin wrote: “By now a household word, Truman’s name was associated no longer with the parochial distinctions of literary assessment but with the hard glint of success and, soon enough, the careless bravado of self-exploitation. Observing the public figure as it grew ever more into a caricature of itself, I began to sour on an image that floated, like a Macy’s balloon on Thanksgiving Day, over the watching multitude, and to lose sight of the man I knew.”

When Capote did write, he primarily produced short stories and journalistic profiles rather than more involved projects. “I don’t think he wanted to go back into something like that again because [In Cold Blood] just took over his life,” Joanne Carson said.

Brinnin wrote: “Supposedly a trailing off into new territory that was to be his, the book was actually both the high point and dead end of his career. Thereafter, collected pieces of ephemera, provided with titles and contained between covers, would do no more than mark the time until he was ready to deliver the most reflective, a little deeper,” she said.

During a particularly reflective moment with friends in 1975 reported by Garson, Capote answered Prayers wouldn’t do no more than mark the time until he was ready to deliver the most reflective, a little deeper,” she said.

“Toward Again

After his high hopes for that book were destroyed by the cold reception to the excerpt in Esquire, Capote failed to finish the book, retreating to a quieter life.

The early high society characters he depicted in Answered Prayers were blatantly based on some of his socialite friends. Their conversations and mannerisms were recreated and thinly veiled as fiction. Like some of the characters of In Cold Blood, not everyone whose image showed up in Answered Prayers was satisfied with Capote’s frank portrayal. In fact, they felt betrayed.

Joanne Carson was one of the few friends who stood by Capote to the end. She said that the most incredible thing was that she said. “They dropped their guard about almost everything — it is a Big Work, believe me, and if I fail I still will have succeeded,” he said in Gerald Clarke’s book Capote: A Biography.

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Opinions vary about Truman Capote and his book, but another writer, who published a novel in the same time period, receives almost universal praise in Holcomb and Garden City for her talent and her presence.

Nelle Harper Lee, author of To Kill a Mockingbird and Capote’s childhood friend, accompanied him to Kansas in 1959, in his words as “an assistant researchist.” Lee and Capote have a history of showing up in each other’s literature. She inspired a character in his first novel, Other Voices, Other Rooms. He was the basis for one in To Kill a Mockingbird and is thought to have helped significantly during the writing process.

The contribution she made to In Cold Blood was less direct.

More than for her writing ability, Capote brought Lee along for her personality.

“In the end, I did not go alone,” Capote told George Plimpton in 1966 for a New York Times article. “I went with a lifelong friend, Harper Lee. She is a gifted woman, courageous and with a warmth that instantly kindles most people, however suspicious or dour.”

Clearly, Capote understood that her approachable demeanor could temper his flamboyance.

He was right.

During her two months with him, Lee helped Capote make important alliances within the region.

“She was extremely helpful in the beginning, when we weren’t making much headway with the townspeople, by making friends with the wives of the people I wanted to meet,” he told Plimpton.

Even those who never took a shine to Capote could appreciate Lee.

In Plimpton’s 1997 book, Trumans Capote, Kansas Bureau of Investigation Agent Harold Nye attacks Capote for his attitude and tendency to wear feminine clothes, yet describes Lee as an “absolutely fantastic lady.”

“I really liked her very much,” he went on.

Dolores Hope, a former reporter for the Garden City Telegram, got to know Lee and Capote when she and her husband, attorney Clifford Hope Jr., invited the authors for Christmas dinner in 1959. They have maintained a loose relationship with Lee through the years and visited her in Monroeville, Ala., in the 1990s.

Dolores Hope described Lee’s motherly attitude toward Capote in Kansas as “almost like if you have a child who doesn’t behave well.

Lee’s only novel was published in 1960. She won a Pulitzer Prize for it in 1961.

To Kill a Mockingbird continues to be widely read, especially in schools, for its depiction of southern racism.

That many Finney County residents, particularly those who remember the Chutter murders personally, prefer Lee’s book, is hardly a wonder.

To Kill a Mockingbird is an inspirational work of fiction set in a world far removed from their own, not the haunting retelling of a local tragedy.

Considered something of a recluse, Lee, 78, reportedly divides her time between New York and her hometown of Monroeville.

As she has many times before, Lee turned down a request in November 2004 for an interview regarding her In Cold Blood experience, saying in a handwritten letter, “I don’t care to go over again what’s been gone over again and again for 40 years.”
of impeccable accuracy. His embellishments—which vary from author to author depending on the genre and the personality of the author—serve to end the book with a scene that never happened—have bred ill will from some in the book who felt falsely portrayed. Embellishments, said Kramer, are part of the art of narrative journalism. Critics and scholars have come to realize that a number of changes added to the book artistically but compromised its accuracy, something he said he had trained himself to do by memorizing names in phone books and passages of books.

Kramer pointed out that much of the book’s success is owed to the writing of this final scene of the book, in which he visits the graves of the Clutter family and talks with Nancy Clutter’s friend Susan Kabell, who did not attend the trial. And people who appear in the book—such as Duane West, the former Finney County prosecutor who tried the case—contended that they had been portrayed untruthfully or misquoted. As time passed, more instances of Capote’s fictionalization came to light. The Rev. James Post, who served as chaplain of the Kansas State Penitentiary when killers Richard Hickock and Perry Smith were there, said in an interview with George Plimpton that he had met with Hickock’s son a few years before Capote’s death in the prison cell. “I didn’t minimize the horrible things that he’d done or anything like that,” Post said. “But I said his dad treated the sex friend that Capote tried to make him out of ... like trying to rape the Clutter girl before he killed her ... it didn’t happen. And other things. They lied just to make it a better story.”

Dewey, who other people close to the case said Capote had made into a composite literary law enforcement character, later said the final scene of the book, in which he visits the graves of the Clutter family and talks with Nancy Clutter’s friend Susan Kabell, did not happen. “Although Capote never publicly addressed any changes he made,” Kramer said, “in a letter from Too Brief a Treat to Smith’s friend Northwest College, Capote admitted whether he could use Cullison to represent himself in a scene detailing a conversation between the author and the killer in Smith’s prison cell.”

Capote’s changes were not without impact. In his Jan. 16, 1966, review of In Cold Blood in The New York Times, Conrad Knechtrocke called the book, “a remarkable, tensely exciting, moving, superbly written true account. Beyond Knechtrocke’s praise, notice the quotation marks around ‘true account.’”

Critics also have challenged Capote’s reporting technique. He never took notes during interviews for the book. He claimed he could memorize what people said and recall it with 95 percent accuracy, something he said he had trained himself to do by memorizing names in phone books and passages of books.

If written today, In Cold Blood would not be published without significant changes, Blais, from the University of Massachusetts, said. “One of the ways in which literary journalism has evolved is that the book would not get published without some kind of elaborate acknowledgment of his sources and his information techniques,” she said. “Transparency,” as many in media now call it, has become one of the most crucial elements of mixing creative writing with journalism. At The Oregonian, Hart said: “We attribute anything we didn’t observe directly, how we know what we know. A lot of editors have pushed for strict guidelines. ‘My opinion is, everything’s fair as long as the writer lets the readers know what changes he or she makes.’

Although newspapers and magazines are typically strict about accuracy, Hart said, narrative journalism in book form is often lax on books. “Books are all over the map,” he said. “Publishers don’t even care.”

But, leaders in the genre said, readers still expect the same honest reporting and writing. At the University of Massachusetts and other universities, such as Northwestern, students study narrative journalism. “It’s a very different kind of writing,” Kramer said. “In journalism classes such as those Blais teaches, students will learn about a writing style that reaches beyond standard information techniques,” she said. “Some students see it as a way to push the boundaries, to try to do something new and different.”

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Because of so many visitors, the lane between two rows of Chinese elms is posted with No Trespassing signs. Donna and Leonard Mader say they sometimes see 20 cars a month come slowly rolling into the lane, stop near the house, and just as quietly back away (risky business).
witness to execution

prison director Charles McAtee recalls killers

By Michael Bruntz
Charles McAtee’s phone rang about 2 p.m. It was April 13, 1965, and Truman Capote was calling to say he wouldn’t be visiting condemned killers Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith on the eve of their executions.

Capote had spent the past four years documenting the brutal murders of a rural Kansas family and the lives of the killers for what would become the book In Cold Blood. He said the emotional buildup to the execution would be too much to bear.

The next 10 hours would change McAtee’s life. He would spend every minute with the killers, getting a rare glimpse into their personalities in their most vulnerable moments—scenes that never made it into Capote’s book.

“I got to know them as human beings,” McAtee said, “And I got to know them as people who committed an absolutely horrendous, horrific crime that killed four innocent, beautiful people who had a great deal to contribute to their community and this state.”

McAtee’s position as director of Kansas state penal institutions required him to be at the Kansas state penitentiary at Lansing the day of the executions. Capote’s absence leaves him as one of few witnesses to the killers’ final hours.

For the past 40 years, McAtee’s public identity has been defined by that moment in time. Rather than just lawyer Charles McAtee, he became the man who “oversaw the hangings of the Clutter family killers.” But unlike many affiliated with the case who refuse to relive the past, McAtee, who died April 8 at age 76, accepts that the case changed his life and made him a living link to history, an experience he feels obligated to share.

When he was asked to do so, McAtee pulled out a white storage box inside his home near Topeka. Among the items are telegrams Capote sent while he was writing the book and postcards the author later sent from his winter home in Switzerland.

He also has photos of sea scenes Smith painted from Death Row on bed sheets with water colors and gave to prison chaplain James Post.

Each time he opened the box, memories flooded back, memories not of characters in Capote’s book, but of real people he came to know and experiences he had in the first half of the 1960s.

McAtee’s position as a pardon and parole attorney and special assistant to the governor, and later director of penal institutions, allowed him to receive and send uncensored letters to the killers on Death Row.

From the spring of 1961 until their execution in April 1965, Hickock and Smith frequently wrote to him because he was one of the few people who saw their uncensored letters. Letters the killers wrote to the governor crossed McAtee’s desk.

Once he became director of penal institutions in early 1965, the letters went directly to McAtee. The killers wrote together at first but then started sending individual letters. Hickock often denied that he’d killed the Clutters. Sometimes they just wrote to complain about the food. McAtee said many of the letters are stored at the Kansas Historical Society in Topeka. One of the more memorable ones came just weeks before the
experiences. The killers wrote to McAtee asking for radios in their cells. Although prison officials initially refused the request, McAtee OCR'd transistor radios and headphones to help break the tension and isolation on Death Row.

“They let their real hit me,” McAtee said. “I couldn’t live without music, and the thought occurred to me that these guys had been over there since the early ‘60s, and to have never heard music?”

McAtee was a casual acquaintance of one of Hickock’s childhood friends, a common point of discussion when he saw Hickock on Death Row.

His memories of the afternoon before the executions include Hickock’s visitors and what both killers talked about. The two men had very different demeanors in those final hours. Hickock was more jovial and talkative, telling stories about his childhood; Smith thought deeply about the meaning of life. Hickock told of a 1960 Packard he and some friends covered with purple house paint. When they hit 60 mph on the highway, the paint started to peel off the car.

McAtee saw Hickock say goodbye to his ex-wife, who had come to pay her respects and apologize for a sharply worded letter she’d sent weeks before. Hickock told her to tell his children goodbye. After she left, McAtee said, Hickock was aware of the pain his crimes had caused.

“Not bad for a farm boy from Mehaska,” he said. “I’m still trying to practice law, though I don’t make it to the office often,” he said in March 2006.

McAtee’s recollection of Smith—as the more intelligent, sensitive killer—mirrors Capote’s descriptions of him in the book. Capote saw Hickock, though, as crude and uneducated, while McAtee said he developed a different view of Hickock because of their common acquaintance, Don Simmons.

“I gained a better insight into Hickock than Capote did,” McAtee said. That Capote and McAtee held somewhat similar views of the killers should come as no surprise. They corresponded frequently while the case threaded its way through the courts.

McAtee first met Capote in 1961 as the author was trying to gain visitation and unfettered letter-writing privileges with Hickock and Smith—rights usually reserved for family members and significant others. Capote had been Rebuffed in his first attempts and called a few weeks later to take McAtee out to dinner to discuss the issue. They met for dinner at the Buccaneer Club, a restaurant in the basement of the Holiday Inn South in Topeka known at the time for its atmosphere and steak.

Hickock didn’t come alone. With him was close friend Harper Lee, who had just won a Pulitzer Prize for To Kill a Mockingbird. McAtee spent the evening discussing the book with Lee, who had helped Capote with his initial research for In Cold Blood.

“Perry Smith was a very bright guy and had a lot to offer; he had some innate talent or ability and a depth of soul that he never really had an opportunity to work through,” McAtee said. “The poem doesn’t read like the prose of a man convicted of brutally murdering a family of four. His lines are filled with the introspection of a man coming to terms with his imminent death—each alternating rhyme written in perfect script on the yellowing page.

McAtee’s relationship with the author is one reason journalists continued to seek him out. McAtee, author George Plimpton and others appeared on Larry King Live about six years ago to discuss Plimpton’s book about Capote titled Truman Capote, In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career.

He has also been featured in several magazine articles through the years because of his experiences with Capote. The two interacted frequently, and Capote listed McAtee in the acknowledgements in the front of In Cold Blood.

Although many have disputed the truth of some of Capote’s book, McAtee said he thought Capote’s version of the Clutter case closely mirrored the actual events. His insight made McAtee a popular public speaker about the book and cause. Because he didn’t know the family, he said, it’s easier for him to talk about the case.

“It was a part of my life and part of my career,” McAtee said. “It was just part of my official duties, and I became personally acquainted with Smith and Hickock.”

After McAtee left his job with the Kansas Penal System in 1989, he became a successful attorney and in some ways is better known in Kansas for his work in the courtroom than the murder case.

For years he was associated with one of Kansas’ oldest and most respected law firms, Eidson, Lewis, Porter & Haynes. In 2002, he ran an unsuccessful grassroots campaign for Kansas attorney general while also continuing to practice law.

McAtee was diagnosed with leukemia almost two years earlier and the disease and treatments took their toll. He lost 42 pounds and underwent more than 40 blood transfusions before he died.

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But he who thinks can seek
Descended if pride he fears.
Has not the depth of soul to share
Through all its range;
Perhaps his eye shall never reach
The light of Freedom’s abode.
But freedom’s hope will give him
To keep his Kansas free.

“And with that,” McAtee said, “an hour later, we took him to the Kansas gallows and hanged him.”

J. 59

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COLD BLOOD

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In the book, Dewey, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation’s lead detective on the Clutter family murder case, gets much of the credit for an investigative effort that involved law enforcement agents from Washington, D.C., to Nevada.

But 45 years after the Clutter murders in Holcomb, it’s difficult to separate where Dewey’s involvement in the case ends and other lawmen’s begins. Furthermore, for all Dewey’s experience, some Garden City, Kan., residents are critical of his relationship with Capote and how that affected what ended up in the book.

There’s no doubt that Al and Marie Dewey got along with Capote. “He thinks we are genuine, sincere people,” Marie Dewey said of Capote in a 1975 Kansas City Times story about her husband’s retirement. “He likes us for what we are. He became well-acquainted and fond of us over the years.”

Included in too Brief a Treat, a book published last fall that contained many of Capote’s letters, are dozens to the Deweys between 1960 and 1967. Within them Capote writes about everything from buying holiday gifts for the family to asking Al for information that would later be used in In Cold Blood. Capote sometimes referred to the Deweys as “precious ones” or “honey hearts” in his letters’ salutations, and even once wrote that he felt as though the Dewey children, Alvin III and Paul, were his own nephews. By 1964, Capote was coaching the younger Al’s writing through the mail.

“Truman became friends with Mom and Dad, and later with my brother and me. There was an affinity right off between my mother and Truman since they were both from the South,” Paul wrote in an e-mail in response to questions.

Paul, an Oregon lawyer handling environmental and Native American issues, would briefly answer only a few questions through e-mail. Al III, a real estate agent on the Oregon coast, declined to speak about his parents or the case. The brothers were 12 and 9, respectively, at the time of the investigation.

“They don’t want to talk to anyone about it,” said Dolores Hope, a longtime Garden City Telegram reporter and friend of the Deweys. “My impression of it is that those were bad times in their lives.”

In one scene in In Cold Blood, set in the week after the murders, Capote wrote about Paul’s problems dealing with case. “(Marie) heard, from the nearby room where her sons slept, sobs, a small boy crying,” Capote wrote. “... Ordinarily, Paul was neither troubled nor troublesome—not a whiner, ever... But at breakfast this morning he’d burst into tears. His mother had not needed to ask him why, she knew that although he understood only hazily the reasons for the uproar round him, he felt endangered by it—by the harassing telephone, the strangers at the door, and his father’s worry-wearied eyes.”
When asked about the case’s impact on the family, Paul wrote only that “we were already security-conscious but probably became more so. The case was stressful for Dad—with the pressures to solve it, and for Mom with all the publicity.”

In a 1984 supplement in the Garden City Telegram on the 21st anniversary of the murders, Al Dewey, who died in 1987, described the case’s effect.

“The work on it went on far beyond five years between the crime and the execution,” he said. “The strain on my family was considerable, and it caught up with me, too. In February 1963, I was hospitalized with a heart attack brought on by stress and tension.”

Dewey, on paper, was the perfect man to lead the case investigation.

After graduating from Garden City Community College, Dewey took a job as a police dispatcher in town. He later went back to school, studying police administration at San Jose State (Calif.) College, then working for the Kansa Highway Patrol for two years. He spent five years at the Federal Bureau of Investigation before serving as Finney County Sheriff for eight years. He joined the KBI in 1959.

In 40 years of police work, Dewey investigated 200 murder cases, helping to solve 14 of 16 he worked on in 1974, the year before his retirement. Despite that experience, Grover Craig, a former Finney County sheriff, said he believed other lawmen on the case, like Rich Rohleder, Garden City assistant police chief, and Harold Nye, a KBI detective, didn’t think much of Dewey.

“Standing on the outside and looking in, I don’t think the guys in the KBI had much respect for him,” Craig said. “But they didn’t tell me that.”

Furthermore, some Garden City residents, such as then-County Attorney Duane West and Craig, say Dewey’s relationship with Capote, not his work, led to his favorable portrayal in the book.

“He was giving Capote stuff because, hell, Capote invited him back to New York many times—big parties and shindigs,” Craig said.

Indeed, in addition to supplying even the tiniest details Capote requested—such as the mileage between Garden City and the Colorado border, or when the Clutter home was built—Dewey also sent Capote entries from Nancy Clutter’s diary, according to one Capote letter requesting the entries and another thanking Dewey for them in 1960. In a 1960 letter to David O. Selznick and Jennifer Jones, Capote wrote, “Speaking of the book, the ‘hero’ of it is coming to Los Angeles in July. His name is Alvin Dewey, and he is an agent for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation; the man who was in charge of the case and the person chiefly responsible for solving it.”

Capote seems to be alone in his belief that Dewey was the case’s hero. In the Times story, Dewey himself says he didn’t solve the case alone. Others, like West and Craig, point to Rohleder as the man whose detective work was most important in securing the convictions of the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock.

Although Capote might have pegged the case’s hero incorrectly, there’s literary reason, beyond his friendship with the Deweys, for Al Dewey’s prominent role, according to Charlie Armentrout, a former Garden City police officer who still follows the case’s legacy.

“I think, honestly, Capote’s writing of the story made it what it is today,” Armentrout said. “He needed a primary character. You can’t have a book with six or seven main characters.

“It was probably one of the better cooperative efforts of law enforcement at the time. I think that’s probably what Mr. Dewey would tell you.”

Said Dewey in the 1984 Garden City Telegram story: “The case brought some resentment within the KBI. Many others worked on the case, and some felt I received more than my share of credit and publicity. I think Dad but the fact is, the crime happened in my territory and I was in charge.

“The publicity most resented, I suppose, had to deal with Capote’s book and the movie made of it. Some of us local folks came off better than others in his book, he was kinder to those he liked and to those who liked him. Some descriptions fit too close to be comfortable. I was the luckiest. I came off bigger and better than life. Capote used me, because I coordinated the investigation, as a central figure… maybe a hero. Often I was the spokesman who carried his story. Many of the words weren’t mine but the messages they imparted were correct enough.”

After In Cold Blood was published and became a bestseller, Dewey became world-renowned as the hero of the case. The 1975 Kansas City Times story written when Dewey retired mentions an estimated 1,000 letters he had received from admirers.

There’s evidence that Capote either intended to paint Dewey as the hero or believed he truly was. In a 1960 letter to David O. Selznick and Jennifer Jones, Capote wrote, “Speaking of the book, the ‘hero’ of it is coming to Los Angeles in July. His name is Alvin Dewey, and he is an agent for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation; the man who was in charge of the case and the person chiefly responsible for solving it.”
By Patrick Smith  

An outspoken critic

Former prosecutor says Capote misrepresented him

Beyond his solid 6-foot-4 frame, Duane West is a looming figure in Garden City.

The 73-year-old has been a visible fixture of the community for nearly a half-century, from his appointment as Finney County attorney in 1956 to serving as the city’s mayor in 1978 and 1981. He also was a city commissioner for 12 years, wrote a weekly column for The Garden City Telegram, represents an unknown but talented artist, owns numerous properties in Finney County and is writing a musical about a Garden City founder, C.J. “Buffalo” Jones.

But for all his involvement in the community, West might be best known outside Garden City for a case early in his law career—his prosecution of Perry Smith and Richard Hickock for the 1959 murders of the Clutter family in Holcomb. West is among a number of key people who made important contributions to the case, only to be grievously underrepresented in Truman Capote’s book, In Cold Blood.

West was the lead prosecutor, but Capote painted Logan Green, a veteran attorney who helped prosecute Smith and Hickock, as solely responsible for the case.

“I was here. I know what happened. I could give a flying continental about what (Capote) thought,” he said. “I’m one who would rather be looking at where I’m going than where I’ve been.”

West is outspoken and fiercely opinionated. Love him or hate him, people rarely forget him.

“I’m an opinionated person, and I don’t make any apologies for that,” he said. “I think everyone should have an opinion, but it should be an informed opinion.”

And West isn’t shy about sharing his thoughts about Capote or In Cold Blood. His biggest complaint is that Capote portrayed him as playing...
second fiddle to Green. Although Capote wrote, and many believe, that the state brought Green in to assist the younger and less experienced prosecutor, West insists it was he who appointed Green and that he was qualified to handle the case alone.

“I had previously tried a first-degree murder case,” West said. “So that was nothing new to me.”

In his book, Capote described West as “an ambitious, portly young man of twenty-eight who looks forty and sometimes fifty.”

Newseum’s 1969 show that West was hardly portly, and in 1990 he looked anything but middle-aged. The newseum also show a younger version of a man who retains his nimble mind and gift for oration.

Though the court scenes in the book aren’t particularly detailed as to who did what, Green is included in the examination of Floyd Wells, the prison inmate who told Hickock of the Clutter farm and later went to authorities to claim a reward. Green shows up again in the state’s closing argument to the jury. The only mention of West after the trial’s start is a comment he made to Green after his closing argument: “That was masterly, sir.”

In a letter dated Sept. 26, 1964, that West keeps on a shelf in his office, he wrote Capote: “I am now half-way through the book, and have never mentioned Duane West’s name. Of course, I don’t have to—it comes to the trial.” Capote wrote on May 22, 1964. Then on May 23, 1964, Capote wrote, “I spent
Technology

It’s late afternoon, and Finney County Sheriff Kevin Bascue guides his red Dodge Intrepid along a newly paved street in Holcomb, Kan. It’s been nearly 45 years since law enforcement agents descended on the Clutter family farm there on a chilly November morning in 1959.

Sunday morning with a quadruple homicide on their hands.

The investigators had little evidence, even fewer leads, and the trail was growing colder with each passing minute.

“They think it was something,” Bascue said, driving over the Arkansas River, “what we would’ve done if this had happened today.”

He’s not the only one. Investigators from around the country use vacation time and detour trips to visit Bascue’s office in Garden City to sift through seven blue binders filled with the fruits of the investigation.

One book is filled with the statements Perry Smith and Richard Hickock made to police after their capture. Another is stuffed with crime scene photos, including two of boot prints that were among the few pieces of evidence gleaned from the crime scene that November morning in 1959.

The success of crime investigation TV shows such as “CSI” and “Cold Case” has brought the crime-solving possibilities of forensic science to the public. Though it’s unlikely the outcome of the Clutter case would have been different had the crimes occurred today, investigators probably could have solved it more quickly, thanks to advances in technology, police procedures and changes in the law.

Equipped with today’s technology, investigators might have obtained hair samples and run them through a DNA database of known fugitives or parolees. Today’s investigators still marvel at the detective work that broke the case.

Other law enforcement developments, such as the advent of Miranda rights in 1966, which required police to make criminals aware of their right to an attorney and the danger of confessing were gathered from Smith and Hickock.

The big break in the case came midway through the investigation when Floyd Wells, a former hired hand on the Clutter farm, recalled conversations he’d had with Hickock while they were cellmates at the Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing. Wells, who was still in prison, told police that Hickock said he was going to rob the Clutter house and leave no witnesses.

Wells’ intentions weren’t totally charitable when he implicated Smith and Hickock as suspects. The Hutchinson News had offered $1,000 for information leading to the apprehension of the killers. Wells was initially scared to talk because his life wouldn’t be worth a dead coyote,” he is quoted as saying in the book. A fellow inmate convinced Wells to divulge Hickock’s

Kevin Bascue, the current Finney County sheriff, has become an unofficial tour guide for school groups, police and curious visitors who want to see scrapbooks, evidence and landmarks described by Truman Capote in “Cold Blood.” (Kris Kolden photo)

Things might have been different, but it’s difficult to second-guess the work on a case that is considered by many to be the most significant in the history of Kansas law enforcement.

“For the KBI, we call it our landmark case that put us on the map,” said Larry Thomas, a Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent. “It’s the rung on the ladder we all strive for.”

The case was founded in 1939, and at the time of the Clutter murders still was a relatively young organization with little experience working multiple murders. But agents like Alvin Dewey Jr., Clarence Dunst and others quickly got their feet wet in the investigation.

“In the days after the murders nearly every person in town passed through the investigation’s crosshairs. Dewey and others watched as leads and their case continued to dry up. Things didn’t make sense. If robbery were a motive, then it had to be somebody from outside Holcomb because everybody in town knew Herb Clutter didn’t keep large amounts of cash in his house.

What investigators lacked in technology, they more than made up for with thoroughness and old-fashioned detective work. Bascue said police investigated each lead or tip, no matter how ridiculous it might have been—a long and tedious process.

One such lead involved Kenyon Clutter’s radio and binoculars, which police knew were missing from the crime scene. After Las Vegas police caught Hickock and Smith, the duo said in their confessions that they’d fled to Mexico City, where they pawned the items. As the trial approached, police knew they could bolster the prosecution’s case and validate Smith and Hickock’s statements if they found the stolen goods, so KBI agent Harold Nye went to Mexico City. He eventually found both the radio and binoculars in a pawnshop there.

“Once confirmed and corroborated the story (Hickock and Smith) were telling,” Thomas said. “If it’s what the defendant tells you, that’s fine, but they may change the story, so it’s always good to go the extra step in case they start backing out of it.”

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confession and later challenged his conviction saying he had not
Supreme Court in 1966 decided in favor of a suspect who signed a
had more difficulty coaxing confessions out of the criminals.
caught and started talking.
the bloody boot prints, the captured fugitives knew they were
matched the boot prints found at the crime scene, erasing their
murders, said, "Whoa, prodded about the
Hickock was the first
did give in. He just wouldn't let him have it."
The bigger question was whether to choose the death penalty. Since Kansas statutes offered no possibility of a life sentence without parole, the choice was simple for McClung. Recalling the jury’s deliberation on the death penalty, McClung likened Smith and Hickock to cancer. Doctors wouldn’t try to preserve cancer within a patient, he said.

“They were a couple of losers. They were always losers,” he said without wavering. “What do you do with someone like that? … We better just eliminate this cancer from society.”

When Shearmire looks back, though, things don’t seem so clear-cut. They certainly weren’t for a 25-year-old bowling alley manager who was raised on a farm. Shearmire said he doesn’t believe a jury should have the right to choose death for the convicted. Making the decision, he said, was painful.

“The biggest thing is, it made me grow up quick,” Shearmire said. “It made you think in a way you hadn’t thought before. I never had decisions to make like that. It’s not good.”

He talks about his jury duty with care, pausing frequently, taking deep breaths and backtracking mid-sentence several times. He said he doesn’t think about the case much any more, only when reporters and students come calling. Thinking about it now, he’s visibly shaken, stiffening his lips at times and almost tearing up. He seems to be wrestling with his role in the case.

“The day of the verdict wasn’t good. I don’t care how many times you go through it. You can believe wholeheartedly that you’re doing right, but you always have that, ‘Am I prejudiced?’”

They were two men among 12, sending two others to their deaths, each with his own perspective on the decision.
Relations between media and law enforcement have changed since 1959

By Amber Brozek

T

omy Jewell was sitting in church one Sunday morning in November 1959 when he got a call from KELL Radio Station, where he worked.

Jewell had already reported at the Clutter farm in Holcomb,

“Then it was my duty to hustle back to the station and deliver the information to listeners.”

Je

But when he arrived at River Valley Farm, he found the driveway blocked and the door locked. He waited on the porch until the Clutter family arrived, and only then was he allowed to go inside.

Unlike Jewell’s experience in the Clutter case, reporters today usually have access to crime scenes because of the sophistication of technology that can gather evidence.

But still, Collins said, the relationship on both sides depends on the history between the media and the police and the people involved.

It usually depended on the circumstances,” she said. “Some reporters were able to get information from the police, and the accused.

But today those relationships are not as strong. In some cases that information or writing critical stories about the police, the relationship is strained, although it’s unlawful to reveal certain details to the media, to the police.”

Collins, who developed a Media Relations Training Program at the National Academy in Virginia that covered the relationship between the media and law enforcement, and he tries to use the training in his office.

In our office, we try to embrace media and get to know them on a friendly basis,” he said. “We both realize we both have jobs to do.”

But still, Collins said, the relationship is still fragile. “The average officer and reporter are getting along fairly well,” she said. “The media and law enforcement are both looking for ways to improve the relationship.”

That, Collins said, is exactly what the relationship is all about: trusting each other and building that trust.

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In the days when the West was being won, frontier justice often was meted with a rope at the nearest tree, eliminating the complexities of judge and jury.

But as the nation matured, so did debate about the morality of capital punishment. By the late 1960s, the country had an unofficial moratorium on the process, which culminated in the 1972 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that said capital punishment laws were, as written at the time, unconstitutional under the Eighth (against cruel and unusual punishment) and Fourteenth (due process) amendments.

In time, many states would resume the practice under the court’s guidelines, but the debate about its morality would continue. For even when someone slaughters beloved members of a community for no apparent reason, questions still arise about the taking of “an eye for an eye.”

The tiny town of Holcomb, Kan., proved a case study in the debate about...
capital punishment after two parole violators in search of money. The Clutters weren't aware of the crimes, but the criminals met the justice they deserved.

“Two men are entitled to the hanging,” said Dunn West, 73, Finney County prosecutor in the trial. “But I would’ve been more than happy to go up there and pull the lever both times. I’m still a strong supporter of capital punishment.”

West’s reflects one of many such opinions, but the issue also divided the community into those who opposed the death penalty and those who supported it for the crimes committed.

Since its beginning, the state of Kansas has swung back and forth in its support of the death penalty. In 1849, when Kansas was still a territory, it passed its first death penalty law. The law was done away with in 1867, reinstalled in 1871, again repealed in 1912 and finally reinstated in 1944. The method of execution until 1949 was hanging, but after that it became lethal injection.

Despite the change, reinstated seven men have been sentenced to death in Kansas, but there have been no executions. Their death sentences were thrown in double in December 2004, when the Kansas Supreme Court overturned the state’s death penalty statute because of problems with how juries consider evidence.

The Kansas Supreme Court struck down the state’s death penalty in 1965. The law was still a territory, it passed its first death penalty law. The law was done away with in 1867, reinstalled in 1871, again repealed in 1912 and finally reinstated in 1944. The method of execution until 1949 was hanging, but after that it became lethal injection.

As the law was reinstated, seven men have been sentenced to death, but there have been no executions. Their death sentences were thrown out in December 2004, when the Kansas Supreme Court overturned the state’s death penalty statute because of problems with how juries consider evidence during the sentencing phase of a capital murder trial.

The Kansas Supreme Court overturned the state Supreme Court ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, which hasn’t announced whether it will review the case.

When Hickock and Smith went on trial in 1960, life without parole was not yet an option, and, after numerous appeals, the two were hanged in 1964.

Before the sentence was carried out, however, the death penalty debate shifted even closer to the edge of what the Clutter murderers.

Arthur Clutter wanted a swift end to the lives of the “animals” who had killed his brother, Herb; Herb’s wife, Bonnie; and Nancy and Darlene Clutter, his two sisters. An article on the front page of the Jan. 9, 1960, edition of The Garden City Telegram quoted Arthur Clutter saying, “The quicker you go to trial, the sooner they can be swinging on Death Row.” My family can feel the same way about it.”

So did Nancy and her mother,中国, who had visited Nancy at the Clutter house the night of the murders and was the last to see the family alive. “I’m a religious man,” Rupp, now 61, who in October 2004 spoke publicly about the murders for the first time in 45 years.

“But if it had been me up there (during the hangings), I’m not sure I wouldn’t have pulled the lever on myself.”

Others, however, didn’t think ending the culprits’ lives would help the Clutter family. “The only thing that would would be a finality on justice,” read a letter to Avery from Charles Spencer of Tonganoxie, Kan.

“Of course I’m threatened to pull political support if Avery pardoned Hickock and Smith. I have been a loyal supporter of yours,” wrote Roy Downman of Topeka, Kan. “But if you do one thing to help the murderers the Clutter family escape the gallows, you will lose not only my respect but my future support in your political career.”

Even among self-determined opponents of the death penalty, mercy was rare.

“People here are conservative; the facts were cut and dried,” said juror Ralph West, who had to decide whether to push for life sentences or execution. “Local youths such as Tedrow were forced to stare mortality in the face. I don’t believe it had its impact on the community.”

The scary thing about the murders was that they were absolutely senseless, especially when you consider the lives that were affected—siblings, parents, grandparents and even the community as a whole.

“Let us not feel this way. The deed is done, and taking another life cannot change it. Instead, let us forgive as God would have us do …”

West, who had to decide whether to push for life sentences or execution.

Before the sentence was carried out, however, the death penalty debate shifted even closer to the edge of what the Clutter murderers.

The Clutters were some very influential people. There’s still stuff happening this day and age that makes people go haywire and kill people. Sometimes I think (the death penalty) is what they deserve. I have mixed feelings about it — I can see both sides.”

Beyond family and friends, the debate about the fates of Hickock and Smith divided the state, community and even jurors.

For many in western Kansas, the death penalty wasn’t just about the murders of four local people. It became a matter of public safety.

Sometimes the closure capital punishment brings can help a community come to terms with the terror city has experienced. The Clutters’ tenets of forgiveness.

The dilemma was serious enough that one juror said he thought several potential jurors lied about their position on the death penalty to avoid the trial. Even during the trial, jurors faced the strain of a heavy decision.

As the trial reached its conclusion, Hickock and Smith were imprisoned petty criminals and later divided the state, community and even jurors.

Michael A. Bonnen is a reporter for The Wichita Eagle. He has written for The Kansas City Star and The Topeka Capital-Journal. He received a B.A. in journalism and political science from the University of Kansas. He is the author of the book “Beyond the Blood: A Mother of Public Debate.”

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Killer Richard Hickock, foreground, and Perry Smith, in suit, walk down a hallway at the federal court house in Topeka in this 1963 photo taken by Bill Snead of the Lawrence Journal World, who was then a photographer for the Topeka Capital Journal. (bill snead photo)
By Amber Brozek

Holcomb has changed much from the time Capote wrote his book

In the opening paragraphs of In Cold Blood, Truman Capote wrote: “Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb.”

Forty-five years later, Holcomb is widely known for the brutal killings of a local family only because of the book the crimes inspired Capote to write. In fact, some readers are more than familiar with the book—some seem almost obsessed.

A handful of people featured in the book still remain in the southwest Kansas community where Herbert Clutter, his wife, Bonnie, their daughter Nancy and son, Kenyon, were murdered one night in November 1959. Overnight the crimes forever changed the lives of residents who had always lived with doors unlocked in a community where everyone knew everyone else and always felt secure.

Once the killers were brought to justice, people gradually resumed their routines. Today, if asked, many area residents say the
murders, the book and two films based on it haven’t made a difference in their lives. Certainly the impact of those events and the publicity that visitation created did make an impact, albeit a small one, according to the librarian who saw a spike in tourist activity after the book was published.

The Clutter family lived, is run down by vandalism but still stands. A smaller house about 100 yards southwest of the Clutter home is the Maders’ house, which was shallow here and strewn with islands — midstream islands...
news of four murders in Holcomb, Kan., began appearing in newspapers across the country in November 1959, people living in Lincoln, Neb., understood the fear of suspected killers running wild.

In just a year before, Lincolnesites had slept with shotguns and the constant fear that the person knocking on doors was the Clutter family and the community are perceived by outsiders who read In Cold Blood, Dewey said. He said he believed people who read the book genuinely cared and were deeply affected by the crimes that brought the Clutter family. He also wrote that he didn’t think those who read the book perceived the area and its residents as Capote described them.

The murder in Lincoln was random, not isolated to just one part of town. Fugate’s parents and sister were killed in Belmot, which at the time was a lower-income area of town. Later, Starkweather and Fugate broke into the upscale part of town near the Country Club of Lincoln, killing C. Lauer Ward, his wife, Clara, and their maid.

In its place was a world where certain young people of the United States, and it’s an area of under 10,000 people. That’s how much lessened their grip in subsequent years. Law enforcement officers still use vacation time to examine the Clutter case and its methodical investigation. People visiting Lincoln for Nebraska football games often stop at Wyuka Cemetery to see where Starkweather is buried, just to say — until Starkweather, Smith and Hickock shattered the calm of the respective communities.

Where could one truly be safe in America?” asked Mark Jarmer, a Garden City Community College professor. “It’s so much worse that it happened in Holcomb. This is the dead center of the United States, and it’s an area of under 10,000 people. That had such a terrifying impact on people as a culture.”

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At the time of the Starkweather murders, Lincoln still had all the qualities of a small town. Although there had been occasional murders, no single homicide approached the widespread fear that gripped the city as Starkweather and Fugate evaded authorities. An editorial in the Lincoln Star on Feb. 20, 1958, declared that Starkweather's crimes had taken a piece of the city's innocence. That small-town feel was gone.

“Lincoln now lacks something that a smaller community has — a sense of belonging, a sense of being recognized, accepted or disapproved,” the editorial read.

While police searched for Starkweather, panic gripped Lincoln. Roadblocks were set up, and police searched from house to house looking for the killers.

The Clutter murders reminiscent of Starkweather crimes

By Michael Bruntz

As news of four murders in Holcomb, Kan., began appearing in newspapers across the country in November 1959, people living in Lincoln, Neb., understood the fear of suspected killers running wild.

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While police searched for Starkweather, panic gripped Lincoln. Roadblocks were set up, and police searched from house to house looking for the killers.
They pull up to the lane bordered by Chinese elms that leads to the house where the Clutter brothers were killed in Holcomb. They come from every direction: once the home's newest owners, family and friends, and neighbors who visited the house years ago, most having made their peace with events. Some care more about whether the house looks the way they pictured it. "The obsession is that we all looked to them as how we should be," Jarmer said of the Clutter case and Capote's book. It's something that sinners happened to, it could happen to us? There's a tactile attachment to actually being at the site. It's like you're completing the journey you've started in the pages of that novel. Truman gets us closer, but actually in the house gets us closer. This is a way to personalize our experience with that violence.

The current residents of both houses have managed to accept the occasional intrusion as a small price for living where they do. Leon and Donna Mader, who live in the former Clutter house, and John and Kristin Bergmeyer, who live in the Ward house, still get visits from strangers who come looking at a piece of Lincoln's history. "Why they want to wallow in this is a hard question," Knoll said. "I think it has something to do with a search for black-and-white answers, and a black-and-white world when the world isn't black and white."}

Starkweather’s grave site is surrounded by a large spruce tree near the west side of the cemetery. The simple headstone bears the words ‘In Memory of Robert Starkweather. Pisemotes and needles that fall from the spruce often cover it.

They're usually gone before nightfall. In Cold Blood references in songs, movies and books. In addition to the book the crimes' notoriety after nearly 50 years, thanks to constant investigations ever since. It has become a popular destination for those passing through, high school students or others interested in the case.

"There’s an interest because it was one of the state's first mass murders," said Dale Satter, a family service representative at Wyuka. "To me, it’s a lot like the Kennedy assassination. It’s a one-time event, and it sparks a lot of curiosity and interest." Jarmer said many in Garden City want to remember the Clutter house, and Kristin and John Bergmeyer, who live in the Ward house, and the Clutter crimes. And they’re not alone. They want to see whether the house looks the way they pictured it. They don’t want to hear Smith and Hickock’s footsteps as they climb the stairs. Many want to see whether the house looks the way they pictured it.

The Bergmeyers have lived in their house for nearly 2 ½ years and were aware of the home’s famous history before they bought it. About two years ago the Bergmeyers were approached by a group doing a book of historic houses in Lincoln that wanted to feature the Ward house, but the Bergmeyers declined. Kristin Bergmeyer said her family understands the significance of the house but turns down anyone who asks to see inside.

"At that time, there weren’t murders like there are now," she said. "People hadn’t seen anything like that, and that’s why people still think about our house. They associate our house with everything that happened, even though other murders took place elsewhere."

After experiencing the most violent crimes their areas had ever known, starkly different. In Holcomb, many wanted to remember the Clutter family and forget about the killers. In Lincoln, the killers were outstanding, and law enforcement conducted a thorough and effective investigation. Over time, the story has become a no visible permanent changes.

In Lincoln, however, things were radically different. The community looked hard at law enforcement and other social services. Residents wanted to know how one of their own could have fallen through the cracks in school, and they said the city needed to do a better job of recognizing troubled children.

"The Clutter crimes really forced the Lincoln Police Department to take a closer look at itself after the agency was heavily criticized for not reacting quickly and efficiently in the euphemism of the inhibitors of the investigation who was often indicted by classmates because of his red hair and bowed legs. As a teenager named Elton, standing behind him, he was also involved in several fights before dropping out of school.

Before his execution on June 25, 1959, Starkweather wrote his story, which was later published in Parade magazine. He described himself as an outcast who was often ridiculed by classmates because of his red hair and bowed legs. As a teenager named Elton, standing behind him, he was also involved in several fights before dropping out of school.

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By Truman Capote, the Clutter murders were made into a 1967 movie of the same name starring Robert Blake, as well as a special investigator found that the police department showed "no laxity" in the investigation of Starkweather's first murder, that of Patricia Linder, an 18-year-old bank robber's daughter, or the handling of police calls to Fugate's home in Belmont.

After police in Wyoming finally caught Starkweather and Fugate in 1958, the city council launched an investigation to determine whether local police had done an adequate job and whether the police department showed "no laxity" in the investigation of Starkweather's first murder, that of Patricia Linder, an 18-year-old bank robber's daughter, or the handling of police calls to Fugate's home in Belmont.

That healing process seems to be the common thread between recent events like Lincoln and Holcomb. Those interested in the crimes couldn't possibly know or begin to imagine what it was like when the crimes occurred. They're usually gone before nightfall. In Cold Blood references in songs, movies and books. In addition to the book the crimes' notoriety after nearly 50 years, thanks to constant investigations ever since. It has become a popular destination for those passing through, high school students or others interested in the case.

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Who are we?

Depth reporting courses have been a staple of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications for years. Students get experience in project reporting as each tackles a story within a larger topic. Some past projects have explored obesity, security after Sept. 11, 2001, and Cuba.

In the fall of 2004, a course led by Susan Gage and Jerry Sass studied Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood as a work of journalism and literature. The goal of the class was to assess the impact of Capote’s self-described work of “narrative nonfiction” through research and interviews with people in Holcomb and Garden City — both those who lived there at the time of the murders and those who live there now.

The class traveled to Holcomb and Garden City in October 2004; smaller groups of students returned several times in the following months. Beginning in January, a class of experienced editors and page designers took over the project, writing headlines and designing the pages for publication in the Lawrence Journal-World and this magazine.

Students in both classes are primarily news-editorial majors at UNL.

THE EDITORS

Michele Brown, of Ruther Glen, Va., is a sophomore news-editorial and international studies major who is a copy editor for the Daily Neb.Neb. Sara Connelly, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, is a senior news-editorial major who will intern this summer at The St. Paul Pioneer Press.

Sara Gibbons, from Kearney, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major who has been a reporter for the Daily Neb.Neb. and for Global Information Network.

Steve Hermann, originally from the Twin Cities, is a news-editorial graduate student. He has worked at the St. Cloud Times, the Omaha World-Herald and at papers in Wisconsin, Brooksings, Ore., and Storm Lake, Iowa.

Kris Kolden is a senior news-editorial major. He has worked as a newspage designer at both the Lincoln Journal-Star and the Lincoln Journal-Star. Crystal K. Wiebe, of Beatrice, Neb., is a senior news-editorial and advertising major. He has worked at the Pioneer Press.

Sara Connolly, from Omaha, Neb., was the designer for the project. Chris Bainebridge, left, and Jerry Walholm, back row, from left, are copy editors for The Lincoln Journal-Star.

OTHERS

Suzanna Adam, of Wilcox, Neb., a senior news-editorial and English major, has interned at the Courier-Hub and worked at the Daily Neb.Neb., UNL’s campus newspaper.

Chris Bainebridge is a graduate student pursuing a master’s degree in journalism. This documentary is his first, and he is currently working on his second and third.

Amber Bond, a senior news-editorial major from Plainview, Neb., who has worked for the Daily Neb.Neb., Times Publishing in Papillion, Neb., and for CNN, as a correspondent for the 2004 presidential election.

Michael Brunete, of Omaha, Neb., is a senior news-editorial and history major from Omaha who is sports editor at the Daily Neb.Neb. He has interned at the Lincoln Journal Star and will be an intern at the Omaha World-Herald this summer.

Tom Gemelle, of Ghent, Minn., is a graduate broadcast student. He graduated in 2000 from UNL and worked as a play-by-play announcer before returning to school.

Kris Kolden is a senior news-editorial major from Plattsmouth, Neb., who was the photographer for the project. He is the photo editor of the Daily Neb.Neb. and will intern at the Pacific Church this summer.

Van Jensen, of Lowell, Neb., graduated from UNL in December and now works as a staff writer at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette in Little Rock. He worked as an intern at the Democrat-Gazette and at newspapers in Vicksburg, Miss., and Ogallala, Neb.

Melina Lee, of Lincoln, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major and the editor-in-chief of the Daily Neb.Neb. She worked as an intern at the Journal Star, Belling Gazette and the Minneapolis Star Tribune, where she will intern this summer in the newspaper’s Washington, D.C., bureau.

Dustin Schilling, a senior broadcast major from Greenwood, Penn., has worked and interned in radio and television with Cumulus Broadcasting in Youngstown, Ohio, KOLN/KGIN in Lincoln.

Patrick Smith, of Brunswick, Md., graduated in December from UNL, where he worked for four years at the Daily Neb.Neb. He interned at The New York Times Service and The Frederick News-Post in Frederick, Md. He now works as a copy editor for The Des Moines Register.

Jerry Widhelm is a senior broadcasting major from Dodge, Neb. He interned at Sony Pictures Television last summer. He has worked for ABC Sports at Nebraska home football games.

Crystal K. Wiebe, of Beatrice, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major who has interned at the Lincoln Journal-Star; The Times of Northwest Indiana; The Gazette of Colorado Springs, Colo.; and the Scripps Howard Foundation News Wire in Washington, D.C.

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THE REPORTERS

Susan Gage, originally of Lawrence, Kan., graduated from the University of Kansas in May 1989 with a degree in journalism. She worked at the Iowa City Press-Citizen, then moved to The Oregonian in Portland, where as an editor she led the paper’s coverage of crime and justice issues and a series of stories investigating the state’s mental health system, then worked as deputy sports editor. She has taught reporting courses at UNL since January 2004.

Jerry Sass graduated from the University of Oregon in 1977 with an English degree and from ku in 1984 with a master’s degree in journalism. He worked at newspapers in Boise, Idaho, and Salem, Ore., and was copy desk chief of The Oregonian. He is an associate professor at UNL, teaching editing courses since January 2004.

WHO ARE WE
To order the magazine send a $10 check or money order — payable to UNL — to the College of Journalism, 147 Andersen Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588–0443, attention Cold Blood. For more information call (402) 472-3041 or e-mail jyeck1@unl.edu. (Fee includes shipping, handling and sales tax.) © 2005 the College of Journalism and Mass Communication.