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Cold Blood: A Murder, a Book, a Legacy

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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 this 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 onto 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 daughter, 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.

Holcomb still deals with the pain and attention from Truman Capote’s novel

The book that changed a town

By Van Jensen
Cold Blood

It’s painful for you and it’s painful for them. When it comes to murder, wounds,” says Dennis Lauer, Holcomb’s minister, of the murders that has sold millions of copies in 45 years since Cowan passed her and her family’s funeral because all their relatives were killed. But what might be a blood stain still marks one basement wall. Forty-five years isn’t enough to wash away everything.

The book treats the murders as anything but...
The headstone of the Clutter family. Nancy and Kenyon Clutter are buried to the left and right under smaller headstones. (kris kolden photo)
Bobby Rupp was so deeply affected by the murders of his girlfriend, her brother and parents that he transferred to nearby Garden City High School to finish the 1959-1960 school year. He was interviewed only once by Truman Capote and photographed during that difficult time by Richard Avedon.

Bob Rupp, Nancy Clutter’s boyfriend, still farms in Holcomb less than a mile from the old Clutter farm. Rupp and his wife, Coleen, have raised four children and found peace in their 41 years of marriage.

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. “Oh, Bob,” she says. Then she stands and walks to the counter. “Well! I used to be thin!”

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

‘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 … ’

In Cold Blood, in which Rupp—the last person to see the Clutter family alive—is cast as a heartbroken young man who, in his grief, closes himself to all but one or two confidantes.

But he’s never forgotten, he adds in a voice that’s a hint thicker—the girl he so loved, the family he so loved.
adored. And now, Bob Rupp—husband, father of four, grandfather, Holcomb farmer all his life—is, for the first time, ready to share his story.

“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.”

“But it was a tough time. Really tough. Me and Nancy, we thought we had a whole year before we’d go to college. But the Lord had other plans.”

His strong jaw tightens.

“Well. No. I guess it wasn’t the Lord on this one.”

**THEIR FIRST RELATIONSHIP**

They’d met years earlier, but it wasn’t until they were 16 that they started making eyes at each other across the high school dance floor. They became better acquainted through 4-H, and soon, Bobby and Nancy started going steady.

And, oh, how they loved each other. There was 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 stare out 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 wall. A small, private smile pulls at his lips. He says he could go on “for hours and hours” about Nancy—what she was like, the things they liked in common.

And so the young suitor never left.

“Always,” he says, chuckling. And so the Suitor never left, willing to hear him out.

And in a way, Bobby was willing to learn from Herb, a man of strong spirit, who was a second father to the young man—sitting him down for a talk one night just a few months into the first relationship. “You and my daughter are so young,” Rupp remembers thinking frantically. “You read about this stuff. It doesn’t happen here. Not in Holcomb.”

**THEIR SPIRITS THROUGH YEARS of living with difficult memories**

The next day, the Rupp family was heading home from church when they spotted ambulances speeding 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, Bob Rupp 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 rifle, which the boys shared. The two liked to meet in the afternoon catching up on paperwork. Nancy greeted Larry, who’d joined him in his truck, as he left the house. Her brother, Harv, had come home from college and was picking 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.

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The boys were in shock. The elder vowed to drive to the Clutter farm right then and there. Elway advised against it. “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—her first, then Kenyon, Nancy, and Ronnie. Didn’t say what nobody yet knew—that below Nancy’s hand, hidden under a pillow, was a shot, she’d said, “Please don’t,” then turned to the wall when realized what was down there.

Bobby drove anyway. Larry accompanying—even if Cold Blood says the boys ran the three miles to the Clutter farm. It’s a discrepancy that still stands out to those close to Rupp: family friends, Colean, even Larry, who hasn’t read the book but knows where Capote erred.

When the boys pulled up, though, they couldn’t get close; emergency vehicles were swarming. The boys called Sue Kellwell, a classmate and Nancy’s best friend. Sue and Nancy were planning to roommates at Kansas State University the next year and study art. If something had happened, Bobby thought, Sue would know.

Her mother answered. She sobbed. It was true. 

That evening, Bobby, Larry and Sue went to Price & Sons Funeral Home in Garden City. The three approached the caskets. When Bobby saw Nancy, lying so still and wearing the red velvet dress she’d just finished sewing, he remembers feeling as though he’d been punched in the stomach. “This is real,” he thought. “Nancy’s gone.”

The isolation got so bad that Bobby decided to transfer to Garden City High School. Less a day, Bobby picked up and dropped off children throughout the neighborhood for viewing. Bobby was to be a pallbearer for Nancy at the funeral, and he remembers cupping Nancy’s hand in his. With Sue and Larry at either side, he wiped his body. Rupp says today that he couldn’t watch. He averted his eyes.

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The day after the murders, police officers drove up to the Rupp farm and ushered Bobby to their car. He and several classmates had stayed home from school that day, grieving.

“We heard about it the night before and we just wanted to ask you a few questions,” Rupp remembers the officers saying. He spent hours at the station, answering questions and taking a lie-detector test. He didn’t even own a shotgun, he kept saying.

He understands why he was questioned, he says with a slight shudder, and that Colleen made no mention of anything. After all, he was the last to see the Clatters alive.

What he doesn’t understand is why, even after he passed the lie-detector test, police went to Holcomb High School the next day and cleared out his locker—everything. He doesn’t understand why people around town started giving him strange looks. Why even some of his best friends turned on him.

The isolation got so bad that Bobby decided to transfer to Garden City High School to finish his junior year. The kids were race there; they weren’t so close to the case. Still, because the transfer made him ineligible to play basketball or run track, he spent his days idly. Without questions from the police and everyone in the case had fizzled. So Bobby returned. But another transfer made him ineligible for sports yet again. To give him something to do, the school superintendent hired him as a bus driver.

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From that point on, Bobby kept his memories to himself. He’s shared these memories upon his return. He’s always taken it as an apology. He’s not mad at Capote; he says, “I’ve always treated him with respect.” But he has kept his memories to himself. He’s always taken it as an apology. He’s not mad at Capote; he says, “I’ve always treated him with respect.”

The turnaround was so striking the superintendent mentioned it in his keynote speech at graduation that year. Rupp initially refused an interview with Capote but relented after thinking about it. “He trusted me to do that, trusted me with the kids,” he says.

Rupp can’t remember what he was thinking. He’s not sure what he was thinking. He’s not sure what he was thinking. A day, Bobby says, he woke up in a cold sweat, heart pounding.

When he suited up and ran onto the court for the first time that year, he knew. He’d never forget the cheers that filled the room. At the memory, his speech slows and his voice lowers. His fingers run along his navy blue shirt and dark jeans. It seems he might cry. But he displays a small smile instead.

Does time heal all wounds? Rupp says so. Time and faith have healed even this, the deepest of scars, he says. Yet Bobby didn’t attend Hickock and Smith’s trial. He wanted nothing to do with them, he says, now, in a flat, steady voice. He knew all along they’d be convicted. But he didn’t care to be a part of it. Nothing to do with them, he says now, in a flat, steady voice. He knew all along they’d be convicted. But he didn’t care to be a part of it.

Life eased back to normal. The same students who had turned a cold shoulder to Bobby the year before elected him class president and Smith had been convicted, and the rumors about his involvement in the case had fizzled. So Bobby returned. But another transfer made him ineligible for sports yet again. To give him something to do, the school superintendent hired him as a bus driver.

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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)
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.”

In keeping with the family’s positive outlook, English would not go into the specifics of the criticisms. But Capote’s representations, of the family’s finances, of English’s wedding—and especially of his portrayal of Bonnie Clutter—upset the family and others in the community.

“She was not an invalid,” said Jean Hands, a family friend and Garden City First United Methodist Church member. “He picked her at her being mentally ill, and that was not it 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 descriptors of the Clutter home, impressive but not extravagant for the day, and the farmer’s orchard and fields, was the reality that the family had its own hard times and bills to pay, English and others say. “We were broke a lot of the time and had to do without and work hard to keep it in flying,” 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 reasoning 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 40th 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. Mosier, a retired schoolteacher, and her husband, Bill, a retired railroad worker, have three children and eight grandchildren. Both sisters now live in the Newton, Kan., area. Eveanna had lived in western Nebraska until 1970 when her first husband, Donald Jarcho, 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.” Eveanna said.

The family has moved on, carefully preserving its memories and quietly proud of other reminders of the Clutters’ impact on Kansas. Memorials to the family in Garden City and elsewhere in the state show a respect for the family’s legacy.

The First United Methodist church in Garden City dedicated a stained-glass window above its main entrance, an altar and furnishings in its youth room and received a contribution to the earlton maintenance trust fund, all in the family’s name.

Among other memorials are the Garden City Co-op building, dedicated to Herb Clutter’s memory, and a shelter honoring the family at the Kansas State 4-H camp at Rock Springs Ranch, near Junction City. When the Kansas Co-op Hall of Fame inducted their father in 2003 for his contribution to the development of agriculture in western Kansas, the sisters went to Hutchinson to accept the award. A plaque and photograph are on permanent display in the Pride of Kansas Building at the Kansas State Fair.

“We’ve had an adequate number of memorials, and they’ve been honored. I think, quite sufficiently,” English said.

Although they’ll talk about the memorials, the sisters stop short of digging up the past. Herb and Bonnie Clutter undoubtedly helped determine what their children became, and that’s what English and Mosier want to focus on now.

“We were just a very positive influence on our lives. They were excellent role models to us,” English said. “What you experience as a child is quite often what you carry on through life.”

With that in mind, the sisters try to pass their family’s legacy on to new generations. Since English completed the bulk of the scrapbooks in the late 1980s—they are an ongoing project, she said—the younger Clutter descendants have used them to learn about their grandparents. Several of the grandchildren have used the books for genealogical projects, Mosier said.

“I’m so glad we did it,” she said. “It was a healing thing for both of us. We had laughter with lots of things, and we had tears. But it was just a healing thing.”

The stories English has written, 15-page biographies, chronicle everything from personal traits and values to community service, hobbies and descriptions of everyday activities on a farm.

The result is a written record for her family of what kind of people Herb and Bonnie Clutter were—something Capote never accomplished.

“It’s their life I want to immortalize,” English said. “Not the way they died.”
Brother, friends object to portrayal of Bonnie Clutter

By Melissa Lee

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 also 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 townwide.

"If something happened in Holcomb, you pretty much knew Herb or Bonnie had something to do with it," says Mert Wilson, who, with his wife, Angell, 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 frail, 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

By Suzanna Adam

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 journalistic efforts of Truman Capote, who turned the small-town crime into the best-selling narrative, [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.

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...
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 faded, defeated eyes and rough hands” and his wife, Eunice, as “a plump woman with a soft round face unmarred by a lifetime of dawn-to-dark endeavor.”

Walter remembered his parents as being kind but firm. “If they would tell you something or try to get something through to you, they’d make it pretty plain that they were trying to tell you something, teach you something,” he said. “But I’m not sure if they were living in the way you’d usually say a family is loving.”

As for the Hickock boys, they “were very close,” Walter, the junior by six years, said he always looked up to Dick. “He was much more of a hero.” Walter said, “Dick was good at sports and would show me quite a few things, take me to ball games and things like that.”

They were friends, brothers and co-conspirators in mischief, trusting each other in a way only people who share those 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 family friend had given him, while his brother spent his time dating girls and playing sports, school becoming his new obsession.

In 1947, the Hickocks relocated from Kansas City, Kan., to a farm in Edgeton, a small community about four or five blocks square. Walter said, “I remember at age 19 five years after Dick married, then-18-year-old Walter had his. “I loved my brother very dearly,” Walter said. “We were close, very close.” It seemed the two had settled down to normal lives, following in their parents’ footsteps.

FOOTNOTE 1

Few understood what went wrong. The Hickocks later tried to make sense of the events that unfolded. Walter said, and presumed the road to prison began with a “plump woman with a soft round face unmarred by a lifetime of dawn-to-dark endeavor.”

“Dick’s mother visited Dick a few hours before the execution. Walter said he contacted Perry Smith with his robbery scheme.

“That friend of his. That’s what happened,” Dick’s mother said in the book. The Hickocks didn’t like Smith—the only day Walter saw him was when and his mother visited Dick a few hours before the execution. Walter said he believed Smith’s confession that he had committed all the murders.

According to the book, Perry did it all I can believe that,” he said. “I didn’t know Perry personally, but I know my brother, of course. It’s hard for me to believe my brother murdered anyone. I still cannot accept Dick doing that. I just wish they would never have met in jail, where all of it transpired.”

It appeared Dick had stepped into an abyss and unwittingly dragged his family along with him. The Hickocks were hurt and confused but still tried to support Dick. Their father fought cancer to testify at the trial and died soon after, Walter said. Eunice faced her own pain through the ordeal.

“Our mother was hurt big-time, of course,” Walter said. “I’m sure that wouldn’t be out of line for what a lot of parents would go through. It’s not very pretty sometimes.”

Eunice wondered if people blamed her for what Dick had done. To some extent she blamed herself. “Maybe I did do something wrong,” she said in the book. “Only I don’t know what it could have been, I get headaches trying to remember. We’re plain people, just country people, getting along the same as everybody else.”

During the years of appeals that followed, those plain country people made the hour-long trip to Lansing State Penitentiary many times.

Walter and his mother took their final trip to Lansing the day before Dick’s execution, though they didn’t stay too watch. “We didn’t go to the hanging,” he said. “We made that clear the trip or two before it took place.” Walter said, “Dick said he’d just as soon we didn’t go for it. That would’ve been bad, but that were the day it took place, of course.”

They said their goodbyes, knowing it would be their last moments together. “Time was short.”

She said in the book, “I really thought that she thought (Dick) had taken a life or anything like that,” Walter said. “Dick said, ‘That’s right.'”

Walter and his mother knew what time the hangings were scheduled to happen; later, they heard about them on the news, and a preacher who witnessed Dick’s death visited their home. But when Dick’s trials ended, Walter’s were just starting.

SOMETHING TO COME

Life as Walter knew it began to crumble, surrounding him with a cloud of uncertainty that partially remains to this day.

“One thing that’ll be a hangover, I guess for maybe as long as I live, is wanting to know if it was true (that Dick murdered that family or not),” he said.

Apart from caring for his mother, who died in about 1980, Walter’s struggle to come to grips with Dick’s crime led him into a tumultuous personal life with a series of broken marriages. The life he’d built with his wife, Nora, started to collapse, partly because of the stress of his brother’s crimes.

“It was a heckuva thing to go through, and it’s hard to explain,” he said. “I’ve never sat down and really thought about anything to put on paper or anything like that, until a point I’m trying not to dwell on what happened. I’ve heard so much about it, I’ve read so much thing to think about.”

“Questions about Dick’s crime) got to catch up with 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 the sorriest father there is. I had all this stuff going through my head and just took off on traveling jobs—I’m not the most wonderful person in the world.”

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

“I really thought that she thought (Dick) had something to do maybe with the killings of the people,” he said. “That didn’t set too good with me.”

Walter and Nora were married 12 years. Nora, currently has Walter regained contact with the children he left behind. When he spoke with them on the phone, one of their deepest regrets was why he left them. “It was difficult to answer,” he said. “Trying to explain why I left his lost cause, but I don’t blame any of them for not understanding. I had a lot of opportunities to go back and maybe check on them but I didn’t, sure didn’t. I don’t know what I’d get to in that area, didn’t know what they’d been told about me.”

Dick’s involvement in the Clutter murders rendered Walter painfully confused, the wake of that confusion, in the form of Walter’s perpetual flight, now envelops Walter’s children, who are left to wonder who their brother was, who their father was and how they came up with blaming the bad thing that had been done, but I don’t blame any of them for not understanding. I had a lot of opportunities to go back and maybe check on them but I didn’t, sure didn’t. I don’t know what I’d get to in that area, didn’t know what they’d been told about me.”

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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 on 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
A HOUSE WITH A HISTORY

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 crammed with six children into a smaller place on the main highway for years, Donna simply didn’t have enough stuff.

Possessions have a tendency to accumulate, thought, 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. Her snow village collection has colored ports of the living room, office and upstairs hallway. Pictures of their 15 grandchildren, some of whom often sleep over, hang everywhere.

Along 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 resent 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 lingering history. The Maders own parts of the living room, office and upstairs hallway. Pictures of their 15 grandchildren, some of whom often sleep over, hang everywhere.

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 1948 for $40,000.

Forty-five years later, the property shows signs of major change. Some are harsh: No stores her forks and knives in pre-partitioned corners, a floor chute ingeniously located behind a small metal door on one end of a cabinet. Other evidence points 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 groomed Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb.”

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 Kenyon might well have helped build.

Hurrying 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. Family tradition and several grandchildren keep the home full of life.

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.

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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)
“My thinking didn’t run on the same lines,” Donna says. However eccentric, most of the people their 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 Kansas 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.”

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 unwelcomed 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.
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 Monroe, Ala., where aunts and women cousins raised him while his mother, Lillie Mae “Nina” Faulk, flirted 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 remained in Cold Blood, which remained his best-selling narrative, people are still reading 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 Cappuchit,” 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, square 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, whom she called the high and talking the whole time, knocked on their house. “It seemed as if he was doing all the talking,” she said. Notable, from that world would turn on him, however, when he tried to top allowed him to fully assume the high-society lifestyle that he craved. Notables magazines, Capote never finished Atwater Papers, and In Cold Blood remained his most recognized achievement.

Author left mark on state

Book garnered Truman Capote the attention he so craved

By Crystal K. Wiebe

Abasha and others said he willingly paid for interviews. To grease his squeezy 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.

Thinking Lee and Capote probably didn’t have anywhere else to go for Christmas dinner in 1959, Dolores Hope and her husband, Clifford, the attorney for the murdered family, invited the writers to their home.

The Hopes said Capote arrived late, a bottle of Scotch in hand, his demeanor pleasant but demanding. True to his character, he gabbed for the whole evening and forced all attention on himself.

“He was always center stage. There wasn’t much (other) conversation,” Dolores Hope said, speaking of that night and nearly every other experience she had with Capote.

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 True, a book of his 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 Jonell, a housewife, were “hunker down” at the bottom of the stairs with Capote, whose “suddenness” brought Evan Williams recalls laughing and talking the whole time in his natural, self-important manner. “It seemed as if he was doing all the talking,” he said.

Williams’ older sister, Kimberly Kinkaid, recalled Capote “always had his boyfriends with him.” Whether that was his longtime partner, Jack Dumbuy, is not certain, but the knowledge of Capote’s sexuality kept the more conservative 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 Cappuchit.

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

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Sought by talk show hosts and reporters to expound upon his achievement, Capote basked, almost hedonistically, in the recognition, which he seemed to think he deserved for making literary history. Some critics, including a few principals represented in the book, attacked Capote for issues of accuracy or his apparent sympathy for the killers, but he did not allow any negative attention into his in Cold Blood 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: "By now a household word, Truman's name was associated no longer with the parochial distinctions of literary assessment but with the 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 surrender to 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."

 Always Wrong

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In the fall of 1965, the four issues of the New Yorker that featured a large part of Capote's manuscript of In Cold Blood hit newsstands. In his final years, Joanne Carson said, Capote had mellowed, focusing more energy on friendships than socializing. He preferred to spend time with the members of his ever-shrinking circle. "He became more reflective, a little deeper," she said. When the initial reaction to In Cold Blood was a slap in the face of the author, saying Capote that he had passed his peak and that he would never again match the success of In Cold Blood. "He was very frustrated, and he must have been feeling very desperate about almost everything — it is a Big Work, believe me, and I fail still will have succeeded," he said in Gerald Clarke's book, Capote. A Biography. From great success the road started downward. Garson 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 writer said, "I thought it was brilliant," she said. "He didn't write about anything that wasn't common knowledge." Now, she said, the relatives of the people who inspired him are proud to be remembered for the book. They didn't think the book gave them any money, she said. "They dropped their guard and would have told him the most incredible things." They didn't think the book gave them any money, she said. "They dropped their guard and would have told him the most incredible things."

In her biography, "Truman Capote: A Biography" (2005), Helen S. Garson blamed Schwartz, whose main interest is building his friend's reputation, for not addressing the difference she saw in Capote's life. "He was a different person," she said. "He was a different person." "I thought it was brilliant," she said. "He didn't write about anything that wasn't common knowledge." Now, she said, the relatives of the people who inspired him are proud to be remembered for the book. They didn't think the book gave them any money, she said. "They dropped their guard and would have told him the most incredible things." They didn't think the book gave them any money, she said. "They dropped their guard and would have told him the most incredible things."
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 persona.

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 researcher.” 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.

“She contributed 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 Clutter murders personally, prefer Lee’s book, is hardly a wonder.

“It is a story so uncomplicated in comparison to the Clutter murders, a story of 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.”

Madeleine Blais teaches Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood in journalism classes because it is compelling and beautiful, she said, a masterpiece. She uses the book to show her students at the University of Massachusetts what journalism can be, how it can reach past the ordinary.

“In Cold Blood is something miraculous,” Blais said, “an alchemy that should not have been possible. Capote had indeed turned reality into a kind of fiction.”

This is half of the legacy of Capote’s great book. Published in 1965, it helped show journalists the possibility of using creative writing techniques while holding to the guidelines of journalism; something now commonly seen not only in books but also in magazines and newspapers—where many view the style as crucial to keeping readers.

But in writing the book, Capote blurred the line between truth and untruth, despite his claims...
of impeccable accuracy. His embellishments—which vary from almost negligible to monstrous—were not for the purpose of making composite characters to ending the book with a scene that never happened—have bred ill will from some in the book who felt falsely portrayed by the summary of learned readers who, upon learning of Capote's changes, are left to wonder where reality ends and fiction begins. 

And in today's media environment, in which Jayson Blair of The New York Times and Stephen Glass of the New Republic have come under fire in recent years for falsifying portions of stories, the challenges to In Cold Blood are all the more relevant, said Jack Hart, a managing editor and narrative expert at The Oreganian, Portland's daily newspaper.

But, with In Cold Blood about to turn 40 years old, those leading the movement once known as 'new journalism' agree that the book deserves to be remembered for its contributions to the genre as well as for its faults. "Certainly it's an important book," Hart said. "To demonstrate that the literary techniques of a novel could be demonstrated in nonfiction is a remarkable statement."

Capote believed he had written more than an important book. It was a completely new form of writing, he said. "It seemed to me that journalism, reporting, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the 'nonfiction novel,' " — Wolfe's term, coined in the mid-1960s, to describe a movement of creative writing in journalism.

Wolfe introduced his term in his 1966 introduction to his book Too Brief A Taste, he said that the five years he spent on In Cold Blood taxed him more than any writing he had ever done. "Every morning of my life I throw up the book in disgust, just to make it a better story." And, "I didn't minimize the horrible things that he'd done or try to sugarcoat them; I just tried to give it a shape and form;"

But not everyone agreed Capote could claim to have created the style. "I'll tell you something: every morning of my life I throw up the book in disgust, just to make it a better story." And, "I didn't minimize the horrible things that he'd done or try to sugarcoat them; I just tried to give it a shape and form;"

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"I always make note of the challenges to this book's truthfulness," 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 too fair as long as the writer lets the readers know what changes he or she makes."" Though Capote was careful to note in his 1966 introduction to his book "In Cold Blood," in the end, the book is a "true account" of the Clutter case — contended that they had been portrayed unjustly or misquoted.

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Because of so many visitors, the lane between rows of Chinese elms is posted with No Trespassing signs. Donna and Leonard Mader worry about private property.

(kris kolden photo)
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
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 Simons. “I gained a better insight into Hickock than Capote did,” McAtee said. Thad 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 validation and unfeathered letter-writer 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. Capote 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 research for In Cold Blood.

Not bad for a farm boy from Mehaska,” he said. Though access to the killers wasn’t discussed that night, Capote made fast friends with powerful people in the Kansas government, and a few weeks later, he received the access he desired. 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,
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-worn eyes.”

Composite character becomes hero

By Patrick Smith

ONE OF THE MOST SEASONED AND DECORATED LAWMEN IN KANSAS HISTORY, ALVIN DEWEY JR. ’IN COLD BLOOD.’
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 25th 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 Kansass 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 1975.

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 Duner West 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. “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 Is Bro a Treat. West said supplying those entries was ‘completely improper.’”

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.”

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, three literary reasons, beyond his friendship with the Deweys, are 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 I did but the fact is, the crime happened in my territory and I was in charge.

“The publicity most resented, I suppose, had to do 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.”
An outspoken critic

Former prosecutor says Capote misrepresented him

Dunne West is an outspoken and integral part of western Kansas. He has been Finney County’s attorney, a Garden City councilman and mayor. He is an important part of the community, and his contributions have made him a recognizable figure.

By Patrick Smith

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 1966 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, pory young man of twenty-eight who looks forty and sometimes fifty.”

Neuwirth from 1960 show that West was hardly poorly portrayed. And today, as many as 73 years. In 1990, he looked anything but middle-aged. The new work 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.”

West has theories about why Capote depicted the trial as he did. He wrote in a letter dated Sept. 26, 1964, that West keeps inside a copy of In Cold Blood, which chronicles the slayings of Herb, Bonnie, Nancy and Kerrey Clutter, is sparse.

“The morning the murders were discovered, Rohleder went to the Clutter home with his photography equipment and fingerprint kit and set to work. Grover Craig, who became Finney County undersheriff in 1965 and was sheriff from 1970 to 1997, praised Rohleder’s skills and determination. The assistant police chief was one of the smartest, sharpest detectives Craig said he ever met. Rohleder’s methodical detective work and determination paid off almost immediately, as an underexposed photograph of the crime scene revealed a dusty boot print. That print, along with a bloody boot print left by Smith, was the most significant evidence gathered from the Clutter house and the first inkling the police needed to look for more than one person.

Joseph Bascue, the assistant police chief in 1959, was hands-on and handy, so much so that someone the day after the murders. He was just doing his job.”

Rohleder at great length. Rohleder was proud of his work, Craig said, but, “He was not a good writer. He forgot to write down a lot of details.”

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Rohleder was not an educated man, Craig wrote his undergraduate history thesis at Washburn University in Topeka, “The Kansas Bureau of Investigation. The assistant police chief was one of the smartest, sharpest detectives Craig said he ever met. Rohleder’s methodical detective work and determination paid off almost immediately, as an underexposed photograph of the crime scene revealed a dusty boot print. That print, along with a bloody boot print left by Smith, was the most significant evidence gathered from the Clutter house and the first inkling the police needed to look for more than one person.

West said Rohleder’s testy knowledge of fingerprint matching was self-taught, and he even built his own functional lie-detector machine.
might have helped solve crime faster

By Michael Bruntz

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

"I think about it sometimes," 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 self-incriminating statements, could have changed the way the confessions were gathered from Smith and Hickock.

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 his Cold Blood. (2005 color photo)
Prior to that they didn’t warn criminals about anything,” Gardner said. “I guess the main reason was the possibility of lawyers present if people asserted their rights. If lawyers were there or not, they might get hats off. It was probably pretty rare,” Gardner said of investigators making suspects aware of their rights before investigators interrogated him. “If they knew they don’t have to make any statement, they won’t talk.” Bascue said the substitutions made it clear how they were obtained and how they were obtained were also a little fishy.

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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 ony Jewell was sitting in church one Sunday morning in November 1959 when he got a call from KGCX Radio Station, where he worked. “I was a rookie,” he said. “I heard that something had happened.” Jewell, a longtime Garden City resident, arrived at the Clutter family home in Holcomb, Kansas, to find four people shot to death. It was the first case Jewell worked on as a reporter. The Clutter family had been murdered by two convicts, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, on Nov. 15, 1959. Hickock and Smith were later convicted and executed.

The Clutter murders in 1959 were among the first cases in which the media played a significant role. The media were granted complete coverage of the investigation and trial, and the public was kept informed of the latest developments. The Clutter murders set a precedent for media coverage of crime scenes, and the media were granted access to a wide range of information, including evidence and confidential communications.

In the past, the police and the media had a different relationship. The police were primarily responsible for investigating crimes and bringing the perpetrators to justice. The media were more focused on crime stories and the emotional impact they had on the public. The police and the media sometimes had conflicting interests, as the police were concerned with maintaining order and the media were interested in uncovering the truth.

As the role of the media in crime reporting evolved, so did the relationship between the police and the media. Today, the police and the media work together to ensure that the public is informed of the latest developments and that the truth is uncovered. The police have learned to communicate effectively with the media, and the media have learned to respect the importance of confidentiality and the need to maintain a level of respect for the police and the victims of crime.

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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. 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
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, reinstated in 1875, again repealed in 1972 and finally reinstated in 1994. The method of execution until 1994 was electrocution. After that it became lethal injection.

Since the law was reinstated, seven men have been sentenced to death but have not yet been executed. 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 during the sentencing phase of a capital murder trial.

The dilemma was serious enough that one juror said he thought several potential jurors lied about their position on the death penalty that day. Another juror said he felt that the criminals weren’t apprehended for about six weeks.

Others, however, didn’t think ending the culprits’ lives would help them move on with their lives. “Let us not feel this way. The deed is done, and taking another life cannot change it,” Fox wrote.

“Let us forgive as God would have us do . . . Years haven’t changed Fox’s feeling.

“Recognizing that the Christian faith is a predomination of a local tragedy. ‘The quicker they go to the Garden City

I have even heard on more than one occasion that the man, murder of 

A letter from a man who had known Hickock as a boy to the governor the men were too dangerous to live. "They were always losers. But I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger myself," he said. And for Perry I had a tremendous amount of sympathy," Capote said. It may be difficult to understand today the alarm Holcomb residents felt. “I looked up and saw the gallows with two ropes hanging down, and I thought, ‘What an awful thing I’m watching,’ ” he said.

A member of the family that lived near the Clutter family said, “They felt if home’s not safe, others will have a stomach for executions. For many in western Kansas, the death penalty wasn’t just about killing murderers of four local people. It became a matter of public safety.

“Otherwise, you can’t live with yourself. (The criminals) can’t be let off the hook. ‘Let them be hanged from the nearest tree,’ ” Fox wrote.

For many of Holcomb’s residents feel secure while the two still breathed Kansas air. Even today, many of the characters who remember the Clutter killings say that they still think about what the criminals met the justice they deserved.

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 1963.

Beyond the opinions of people affected by the murders is Capote’s message about the death penalty. Various questions were raised whether Capote was too sympathetic toward such cold-blooded murderers.

The hangings provided closure for the book, but some wonder whether Capote went beyond the tidy ending he needed. Of the four section-narrators, one section, “The Corner”, is almost completely devoted to investigations and execution.

But most who wrote the governor wanted the killers to pay the ultimate price and made their opinions known as the execution date was repeatedly postponed during the appeal process. “It was so random . . . the criminals were apprehended for about six weeks. But the appeal was allowed to proceed. It may be difficult to understand today the alarm Holcomb residents felt. “I looked up and saw the gallows with two ropes hanging down, and I thought, ‘What an awful thing I’m watching,’ ” he said.

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Killers 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)
Holcomb has changed much from the time Capote wrote his book.

By Amber Brozek

Holcomb has changed much from the time Capote wrote his book.
migrants, 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 visited the community are diametrically opposite to what could be measured in small, but unmistakable. Scholars and captivated readers of Capote’s book from as far as Europe and Japan have come to see the family—what he called “the Clutter family.” They have asked to see the Clutter graves. “In small towns, there is an abiding, almost religious dedication to the dead and what is left behind,” said Mr. Sherry. “Sixty miles from here, Dodge City used to be an outlaw town, a lawless place. And it still is.”

As an unofficial tour guide for the curious, Finney County Sheriff Kevin Fausey knows well the interest the book has sparked in the community. “People have asked to see Clutter’s house for years now,” he said. “You’d think we’d be used to it by now.”

Every year, Fausey says, law enforcement personnel drop in to the courthouse, where the local history is kept. Sometimes the inquiries stem from school groups—high school and community college students come to take field trips to the courthouse, where they can see the books of police records about the Clutter case; high schools and middle schools also ask to take Bascue’s tour of the town to see the old Clutter house, which is now owned and operated by the Finney County Historical Society.

When the Clutters lived at River Valley Farm, it was a half-mile from their house to the nearest bar. Now a man-made water park and houses have grown right up to the edge of the farm. It is still a meeting place for family and friends, but the social and ethnic scene has changed. Mark Jarmer, a history, speech and philosophy professor at Fort Hays State University, said, “The Clutter family was made up of more than one ethnicity. I don’t think it’s possible to separate them, to say that everyone was of more than one ethnicity.”

Jarmer traces the lack of integration to fear created by the 1950s civil rights movement, when the race for desegregation threatened to disrupt the old integration of the two primary cultures, white and Latino, that had been a vital part of the Garden City community. “As an influx of migrant workers—mostly Latinos and Asians — arrived seeking jobs in the new industries, they faced opposition from whites who were afraid of the changes. But really, it was fear that kept them apart.”

The nearby trees are larger and more mature, and the cemetery has a more orderly feel. The river is now gone — both victims of scarce water. The stone window of the Clutter house has been turned to the memories of the Clutter family. “I know that they had a picnic there,” said Mr. Sherry. “Picnic baskets had been carted, hamburgers eaten, clowns and picnics and laughter that are now gone.”

The river was full of water, and the Clutters would spend time by the water’s edge, and where 16-year-old Nancy Clutter picked flowers. “They really enjoyed nature,” said Mr. Sherry. “They really enjoyed the outdoors.”

The nearby town of Garden City has a population of 28,000, retains its historic downtown but has sprawled out into new residential, commercial, and retail areas. Just off Main Street, on which Capote described the “once-splendid Wonderland Hotel,” which still stands, is the Finney County Courthouse, where Smith and Hickock stood trial for the murders. About a half mile north on Main Street, where it intersects the old Highway 50, now East Main, the Arkansas River passes under the First United Methodist Church, where more than 1,000 people in a town of 28,000 would gather for the funeral of the Clutter family. The church has not grown with the city, though, and has a congregation of only 1,123 compared to the 1,700 in 1959.

About a mile and a half north on Main Street is Valley View Cemetery. In the northwest corner—four rows from the north row and four rows from the east row—lies the Clutter family. It is a serene spot, as it was in 1959 when the graves were filled. The family members are perhaps the only things that have not changed since then. The gravestones stand tall and alone, and the community has grown around them. But, other well-known names from the Clutter case can be seen among the gravestones: Arlen Dewey Jr., the talent scout; and Arthur Fleming, the court-appointed attorney for Perry Smith, and his second wife, Liz; and John Mader, a childhood friend, Susan Kidwell, discovered the bodies of the Clutter family on the morning after the murders.

Although traffic is generally sparse in the center of Holcomb, it has one remarkably lively and crowded feature. The immense and modern Holcomb High School was built on the north side of town in 1982 with an addition in 2002. A new middle school stands nearby. One of the benefits of having huge industry in the community is a large tax base for education. In 1999, Capote observed “… the Holcomb school, a good-looking school. I was interested to see that out of the appearance of the community otherwise camouflages: that the parents, the teachers, the staff, and the high school system are performing their functions with total enrollment of 1,077. It’s the pride of Holcomb and the envy of the neighboring towns.”

“Sixty miles from here, Dodge City used to be an outlaw town, a lawless place. And it still is.”
...and the legacy will come from the book," said Tony Jewell, a retired local radio broadcaster. "Readers from around the world. And as Capote described them.

Insight into the impact the book still has on readers and the community, says Hahn, who might have a better idea of the way the Clutter family and the community are perceived by outsiders who read *In Cold Blood*.

"It is likely that visitors will continue to make pilgrimage to the tiny corner of southwest Kansas where it all happened. Visiting the Clutter graves will always be remembered, but the legacy will come from the book," said Tony Jewell, a Garden City resident and former radio reporter who was the first journalist at the scene of the murders.

"It will always be there." III

Retired local radio broadcaster Tony Jewell was the first journalist on the scene the day the bodies of Herb, Bonnie, Kenneth and Nancy Clutter were discovered in November, 1959. Jewell breaks the news to the area, and he credits those reports for instigating regular newscasts to local station KULI's daily schedule. (Note below excerpt)

...n the 25th anniversary of the crimes, Dewey wrote that he wasn’t among the many people who still had bad feelings about Capote’s book.

"For hundreds of letters I received over the past 25 years from all over the nation and around the world — from people of all generations. I think I have a pretty good idea of the way 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 befell the Clutter family. He also wrote that he didn’t think those who read the book perceived the area and its residents as Capote’s book described them.

"That small-town feel was gone. Starkweather’s crimes had taken a piece of the city’s innocence. The wide-open spaces of wheat and cornfields in the Midwest were thought to provide a natural buffer against the Communist threat. It was a place where neighbors trusted neighbors and doors were rarely locked at night—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."

The murders in Lincoln were random, not isolated to just one part of town. Fugate’s parents and sister were killed in Belmont, 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. Laurer Ward, his wife, Clara, and their maid.

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.

A 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.

Just a year before, Lincolnites had slept with shotguns and the constant fear that the person knocking at their door might be Charles Starkweather.

The short, redheaded Starkweather, 19, was a James Dean look-alike who along with his girlfriend, Carl Fugate, terrorized the state for five months in early 1959. They killed at random, entering homes and stealing cars—and they left no witnesses. In those 10 days, police and residents began locking doors and Nebraska Gov. Victor E. Anderson called out the National Guard to aid police in the search.

Starkweather and Fugate claimed 11 victims, including Fugate’s parents and younger sister. The random nature of the murders only further fueled the fear in Lincoln and elsewhere. Although Lincoln, with just more than 150,000 people, was significantly larger than Holcomb, with 270 people, the reaction was 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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They pull up to the lane bordered by Chinese elms that leads to the house where the Clutters were killed in Holcomb. They come to a stop in front of the house on South 24th Street in Lincoln where three of Starkweather’s better-known victims were murdered. They visit the graves of the victims and, in Lincoln, talk to people who lived then.

The attention garnered by the homes is just one sign of the crimes’ notoriety after nearly 50 years, thanks to constant references in songs, movies and books. In addition to the book In Cold Blood by Truman Capote, the Clutter murders were made into a 1967 movie of the same name starring Robert Blake, as well as a TV remake of the movie and an A&E documentary on the crimes. The Starkweather murders inspired movies like 1973’s Badlands, starring Martin Sheen and Lea Thompson, and the title track from Bruce Springsteen’s 1982 album “Nebraska.” In fall 2004 the Wyuka Cemetery opened its “Rest in Peace marijuana field” near the Starkweather’s grave, which sits underneath a large spruce tree near the west side of the cemetery. The simple headstone bears the words “Rest in peace” surrounded by etched roses. Pinecones and dangerous. "I think that helps them in some ways overcome serious troubles. I think it can help them make their way into popular culture thanks to the story’s portrayal of the threatening world in which Starkweather and Fugate’s crimes took place.

After experiencing the most violent crimes their areas had ever known, stark things in Holcomb and Lincoln couldn’t be the same. In Holcomb, many wanted to remember the Clutter family and forget the “grim and frightening” crimes that were occurring. In law enforcement conducted a thorough and effective investigation. The killing of the Clutter family was not just a one-time event, and it sparks a lot of curiosity and interest.”

Gilbert Savery, who served as news editor at the Lincoln Journal at the time of the killings, said the newspapers in Lincoln often received letters from people who were interested in the anniversary of the Starkweather murders. “If something that sinister happened to them, could it happen to us? Have we learned anything? That’s 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.”

The town is trying to forget,” said John Stalder, Lincoln Journal and Star, “The Lincoln Police Department matured as a result of the Starkweather murders, Savery, formerly of the Lincoln Journal, said, “I think the fact of the Starkweather murders was one of the elements that could be pointed to for bringing about a more sophisticated approach to solving crime.”

"In fall 2004 the Wyuka Cemetery opened its “Rest in Peace” marijuana field near the Starkweather’s grave, which sits underneath a large spruce tree near the west side of the cemetery. The simple headstone bears the words “Rest in peace” surrounded by etched roses. Pinecones and black and white.”

"The obsession is that we all looked to them as how we associate our house with everything that happened, even though other murders took place elsewhere.”

Starkweather’s grave sits underneath a large spruce tree near the west side of the cemetery. The simple headstone bears the words “Rest in peace” surrounded by etched roses. Pinecones and
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 pages for publication in the Lawrence journal and this magazine.

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

The Reporters

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

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

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

Tom Gemelle, of G辰h, Minn., is a graduate broadcast student. He graduated in 2009 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 Nebusker and will intern at the Pacific City this summer.

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

Melina Lee, of Lincoln, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major and the editor-in-chief of the Daily Nebusker. She worked as an intern at the Journal Star, Billing 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 Greenville, Penn., has worked and interned in radio and television with Cumulus Broadcasting in Youngstown, Ohio, KOLN/KGIN in Lincoln. Patrick Smith, of Brunwick, Md., graduated in December from UNL, where he worked for four years at the Daily Nebusker. 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 Los Angeles Times; The Times of Northwest Indiana; The Gazette of Colorado Springs, Colo.; and the Scripps Howard Foundation News Wire in Washington, D.C.

The Editors

Michele Brown, of Rutheglen, Va., is a sophomore news-editorial and international studies major who is a copy editor for the Daily Nebusker.

Sara Connolly, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, is a senior news-editorial major who will intern this summer at the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

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

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

Rob Hunter, from Omaha, Neb., who was the designer for the project, is a freshman news-editorial and advertising major. He has worked as a newspaper designer at both the Lincoln Journal-Star and the Daily Nebusker, and as a designer at the University of Nebraska Press. This summer he will intern at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

Brian Lehmann of Lincoln is a senior news-editorial major who works at the Daily Nebusker and has interned for three years with National Geographic photographer Joel Sartore.
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.