

Few clues 13 years after man's disappearance



Israel Smith

BY JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

The month of March marked several painful anniversaries for the family of Israel Ray Smith —the last time anyone saw or spoke to him, the initial call from his employer asking police to check on his well-being, the day he was officially reported missing.

Thirteen years after the 28-year-old's 2008 disappearance, Wytheville investigators still consider Smith's the most bizarre and mysterious case they've encountered. They have received no new leads in several years and have never been any closer to finding out what happened to him.

"I still, today, get asked, 'whatever become of the

Israel Smith case?' It's sort of become the one that got away, that we never did catch," said Wytheville Deputy Chief Gary Davenport. A detective in 2008, Davenport led the investigation into Smith's disappearance.

The Disappearance

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SUBMITTED
PHOTO
Israel Ray
Smith
and his
mother,
Debbie
Sexton, at
Smith's
21st
birthday
celebra-
tion.

and clean. Even as a child, she said, he was sure to put everything in its place. He also never left his doors unlocked, she said. Even when he stayed overnight at her house out in the countryside of Wythe County, he would lock his car door. Davenport said there was nothing to indicate Smith would have had reason to suddenly leave on his own.

"Israel pretty much led a straightforward, regular, boring life, I guess you could say," he said. "He lived at home, seen his son on weekends he could see him and worked a short time at Radio Shack. There was nothing that you would consider strange or bizarre about his past that would cause him to just up and disappear."

Sexton described her son as a quiet, caring person, who kept to himself and fiercely loved his family. He had a great relationship with his son, who lived with his mother in Smyth County, and visited with him every chance he got.

The only change Sexton said she knew of to her son's life was that he'd recently mentioned he was thinking of breaking it off with a woman he'd briefly been seeing.

Smith told his mother that another man who'd recently been released from jail had moved in with the girl at her mother's home in Pulaski. Smith wasn't comfortable with that idea, she said.

But, Davenport said in interviews and a polygraph test led police to rule out any connection there.

Several weeks after Smith's disappearance, Davenport received reports that Smith had been sighted at a local gas station the weekend after he was last seen. A cashier at the station Smith left the store and got into his vehicle.

Another report said he was accompanied by another man while leaving the gas station.

After several weeks of investigating, those sightings could not be confirmed, Davenport said.

From there, leads and tips in the investigation spiraled off in different directions, some of which required assistance from other local agencies, like the Wythe and Smyth county sheriff's offices and the Virginia State Police, or federal agencies such as the FBI and the U.S. Marshals Service.

Through numerous interviews and a few other polygraph tests, police one-by-one ruled out each lead that came in.

Investigators also ruled out a few instances of human remains being found in surrounding areas as belonging to Smith.

Among the more promising tips was a hit on the National Crime Information Center's database after an officer in Nashville, Tennessee, ran a man's information which closely matched Smith's.

The NCIC database alerts law enforcement if the subject of an inquiry is either a fugitive or missing person, so they can in turn either detain the person or alert the investigating agency that they've made contact with them.

Police in Nashville, however, determined that hit to be an error in entering the man's information.

Davenport also used Smith's Social Security number to see if it had been used for employment, but he said the week Smith went missing was the last week it had been used.

In addition to being listed in the NCIC database, Smith was also listed on the National Missing and Unidentified Person System (NamUs), a database which seeks to connect the remains of unidentified people to missing persons.

As part of the investigation, Davenport also collected Smith's cell phone and bank records.

Smith's case highlights the advances in technology that police now use in their investigative arsenal that weren't there in the 2000s. In 2008, cell phone technology was nowhere near as conclusive as it is today.

Davenport was able to tell from the records that Smith's cell phone had not been in use since his disappearance, but providers were not able to track locations like they can today.

Text messaging was also less prevalent in those days. Phone records showed all activity leading up to Smith's disappearance were incoming and outgoing calls, some of which were not accurately detailed in the records, Davenport said.

Likewise, bank records proved just as unhelpful. Though they were available in 2008, the use of debit cards wasn't as common back then and Smith didn't have any recent credit card transactions to help track him if he was still around.

An analysis of Smith's desktop computer by the state's Department of Forensic Science also yielded no useful results. According to previous reports, Smith had a MySpace account, but it hadn't been logged into since the day he was last seen.

Searching for Answers

Since the first few years after Smith's disappearance, the police department has had no new leads in the investigation. A private investigator hired by Smith's grandparents in the weeks before police launched the official investigation into his disappearance, also found nothing of note during his brief time working the case.

Thirteen years to the day Smith was reported missing, Davenport sat behind his desk with stacks of binders filled with phone and bank records, interview notes and other documents he's compiled over the years.

"I sift through it every once in a while just to see if there's something I missed," Davenport said. "You just never know, something might hit you different. But, all it's ever done is just confirm or reconfirm everything I've already tried and it's not taken me anywhere."

Though he wouldn't divulge any in particular, Davenport said theories of

what happened to Smith abound among those at the Wytheville PD and in the community.

"There's a lot of theories," he said. "You could probably ask everyone in this department, 'do you have a theory,' and everyone's got one."

But at the end of the day, theories remain just theories without any evidence to back them up. And, at this point, no one theory seems any more plausible than the next, he said.

When asked if he thought Smith was abducted from his home, Davenport said, "That's one theory. But, maybe he's sitting on Miami Beach drinking margaritas, listening to Jimmy Buffett. We don't know."

But Davenport believes Smith has long been dead.

"There's no doubt in my mind that he's dead and has been for many years," he said. "It's just bizarre—someone knows something. He didn't just fall off the face of the earth, although it certainly appears that way."

Neither Davenport nor Sexton buy that Smith would have intentionally left his family behind, especially his 7-year-old son.

"His little boy, Isaiah, was his world," Sexton said. "There's no way he would have left his son or his family. That wasn't Israel."

Smith's disappearance has taken a toll on Sexton

and her family.

"There's not a day that goes by I don't miss him," she said through sobs in a late-March interview. "There was a long time I would go to pick up the phone to call him and then I'd have to remember, oh yeah, you can't do that, he's not here. We were so close. I miss him with all my heart."

She described her feeling of helplessness explaining to her grandson his father's absence. At his 8th birthday party, she said, he didn't understand why his father wasn't there to celebrate with him.

"He was 8 years old, Israel's son was. The whole thing didn't make any sense to me and how am I supposed to explain where his dad's at to my grandson?"

For a long time after his disappearance, Sexton had nightmares of her son distressed as a child.

"I had nightmares of him calling out, 'mommy, mommy, help me,'" Sexton said. "It just feels helpless."

She also described her mindset in the first few years after Smith went missing. Landmarks and bridges became places where her son's body could be hiding. She recalled going fishing on Claytor Lake with her former husband.

"I never told my husband, but I remember thinking we could be fish-

ing right over top of where my son's body is. I mean, somebody could have been driving over that bridge and just threw him over the side."

She pleaded to anyone who might have information to come forward.

"I just wish someone would give me some answers," she said. "All I have is a big hole in my life now and it will never be the same."

Without new information, the investigation will likely remain at a standstill, Davenport said.

Retirement isn't on his mind yet, he said, "but I would like to at least have some sort of closure for the family before I do retire. So, I don't give up on it and by carrying it forward every year onto the case screening, that just keeps it alive."

Davenport urged the community to keep Smith's family, especially his son, in their thoughts and prayers.

"Always keep it in mind and if there's someone out there who knows something, please come forward to let us know so we can give final closure to his family, to his son."

Anyone with information is asked to call Davenport at 276-223-3300 or email wpdtips@wytheville.org. Tips can remain anonymous.

Contact Jasmine Franks at jfranks@wytheville.com.



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Long-missing Marion woman located

BY JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

Police say Pakacki found safe, happy and well

The nearly four-year search for a Marion woman who went missing in May 2017 came to an end late Tuesday evening when Marion investigators made long-awaited contact with her.

Tuesday afternoon, the Marion Police Department received information from another regional

law enforcement agency that now 27-year-old Jami Megan La-Beth Pakacki was alive and well.

Marion Police Chief John Clair, Lt. Rusty Hamm and Det. Sgt. Wes Thomas were able to drive out and meet with Pakacki in person this evening.

“I would describe this evening as miraculous and I know that

everyone at the Marion Police Department agrees,” Clair said. “I think often cases like these don’t necessarily have happy endings and we’re extremely pleased that this one has.”

The Marion PD got the notification after Pakacki had a non-criminal encounter with the other agency, Clair said. When

that agency ran her name and date of birth and discovered she was considered missing and endangered, they reached out to Marion law enforcement.

Clair did not disclose many details, but said Pakacki appears to have left on her own accord.



Pakacki

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Missing

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“We have interviewed her, we have confirmed that she is safe, she is happy and she is well,” Clair said.

At her request and out of respect for the family, Clair said the police department is not releasing her location or any details about her disappearance at this time.

She and her family are currently in the reunification process, he said.

On Wednesday Pakacki’s mother, Lori Haynes, said she felt tremendous relief and happiness.

“The only thing Meg and I keep saying is that God is so good. . . Anyone who

doesn’t have faith should have been with us tonight. She is safe and doing great.”

In a Facebook post posted later that day, Haynes thanked those who prayed for her daughters return, saying “We have a special community.”

“Thank you form my family to yours,” she wrote. “God bless each who prayed with us, cried with us and those who never left me thru [sic] this all. With tear filled eyes and a smile the devil himself cannot wipe off our faces...thank you!”

She said she never gave up hope.

“I got my daughter back and my family is whole. I am whole.”

Judge urges defendant to make better choices with life

BY JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

In pronouncing sentence to a New Jersey man who pleaded guilty to shooting into a Marion hotel room in May 2020, a Smyth County judge told the man to do better with his life.

Circuit Court Judge Deanis Simmons told 36-year-old Andrew Thomas Wyble that it breaks her heart when she sees young people in her courtroom going in and out of jail. She said Wyble seemed to be a strong and intelligent person who was capable of making better decisions and deserved

to make better choices for himself.

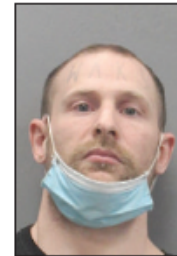
“You don’t need to spend the rest of your life in and out of jail,” she told him.

The last of three suspects arrested in connection to the shooting, Wyble was taken into custody at a hotel in New Jersey about a week after shots were fired into the Royal Inn ho-

tel room. No one was injured in the shooting.

The case was originally slated for a three-day trial, however Wyble opted instead to take a plea agreement in which the commonwealth dropped

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Wyble

Judge

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four of his five charges and amended a remaining charge of maliciously shooting into a dwelling to a lesser charge of unlawfully shooting into a dwelling. As per the agreement, Wyble was given an active sentence of one year and seven months in jail with time served. He has been in custody since June 2020.

Deputy Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Keith Blankenship proffered that the prosecution had circumstantial evidence that Wyble traveled to Marion from New Jersey to collect a minor drug debt.

During a March preliminary hearing, one of Wyble's co-defendants,

26-year-old Charles Michael Funk, testified that Wyble and another co-defendant, 20-year-old Steven Nathaniel Anderson came to his house asking about a man who Funk said owed Wyble about \$700 for pills.

During the investigation, Funk told Marion detectives that the trio parked a vehicle at Flowers Bakery Store, just down the road from the Royal Inn, and he and Wyble walked to the hotel looking for the man. Outside the room, he told police, another man told them the man they were looking for was not there, so the pair began walking back to their vehicle.

Funk testified in March that as he was headed back to the vehicle, he heard shots behind him. He said he only heard the gunfire

and didn't see the incident, but later saw Wyble and Anderson putting a black handgun under a seat in the vehicle.

Det. Sgt. West Thomas testified at that same hearing that he found two 9 mm shell casings and one live round on the ground outside behind the hotel room. He said the bullets had gone through a back window of the room, one of them lodging into the wall and another passing through the room's front wall and lodging into the back seat of a Dodge Caravan parked in front of the room. A person who was inside the room was unharmed, Thomas said, and the man the trio had been looking for had been hiding in an outside linen closet between that hotel room and another.

Although police found a handgun inside the New Jersey hotel room where Wyble was arrested, Thomas said that firearm did not match the shell casings found at the scene. That gun, he said, was never located.

At the plea hearing on Tuesday, Blankenship acknowledged that neither Funk nor Anderson saw Wyble shoot into the hotel room. He also said that Anderson was "scared to death" to testify and that the commonwealth had only had "sporadic" contact with the man Wyble was looking for that day. Additionally, Blankenship said that while Funk had testimony of value to the commonwealth's case, he also had information that the defense could gain

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Judge

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traction with.

Although sentencing guidelines called for an active sentence of one year and nine months, Blankenship said the slight deviation from the guidelines was based both on the evidence and on the fact that Wyble waived his extradition from New Jersey without knowing what the outcome of the case against him would be, which Blankenship said showed a certain level of responsibility.

Wyble's defense attorney, Robert Galumbeck, noted that his client had asked to be extradited as soon as possible. He also made note of a message to Wyble from one of his co-defendants that said something like "We're in big trouble. We've got to figure out a way to get out of this."

After Wyble's sentence was handed down, Galumbeck also spoke of Wyble's potential and

intelligence, saying that he was better at legal research than some attorneys.

Simmons said Wyble deserved better than the choices he had made and suggested that his capabilities could be put to good use.

"It seems like you've got the ability to make a huge turnaround," she told him.

In addition to his jail sentence, Wyble's agreement also requires him to be on good behavior for two years "for so long as he remains without the Commonwealth." If he should return to Virginia following his release from jail, he will be subject to two years of active probation. Wyble is also barred from the Royal Inn or from having any contact with Anderson or the man he was searching for at the hotel. Restitution in the amount of \$1,100 was also paid to the Royal Inn after Wyble's sentencing.

Funk and Anderson are scheduled for their own plea hearings on July 26.