

MURDER ON THE NORTH FORK

A night of terror nearly 36 years ago took the life of a beloved father and Flathead resident, and left survivors to grapple with the memories

BY MYERS REECE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIDO VIZZUTTI

IN NORTHWEST MONTANA, an April midnight means darkness and mud in quiet woods. But in 1979, three Oklahoma fugitives shattered the calm with unspeakable bloodshed, and one man's midnight never turned to morning.

J.R. Fletcher, his wife Teresa Fletcher, and Ronald White, all in their 20s, had fled their home

state and were aiming for the Canadian border. They drove fast and rested rarely, their heads pulsing with alcohol and a cacophony of drugs: heroin, cocaine, speed, marijuana, LSD. They stole cars and burglarized homes across the West. When they hit Montana, they were strung out and wild eyed. They had been awake for seven straight days.

In the earliest, darkest hours of April 7, they scrambled north on the rutted road that takes travelers along the North Fork Flathead River on the western border of Glacier National Park, past the tiny community of Polebridge and into Canada, weather permitting, though spring is rarely gentle in that rugged country.

As the fugitives pushed onward, with no ID, in a stolen truck, they realized the border station might pose problems. So they hatched a plan to steal horses and ride through the backcountry.

When they spotted horses milling around in a corral, J.R. Fletcher steered their yellow Ford pickup, stolen in

Carol Huggins holds a photograph of her mother and father, Adelaide and Roy Cooper, taken on their 50th wedding anniversary. Roy Cooper was murdered in his home in Polebridge in April 1979.





“I was fortunate,
very fortunate, to
end up with him.”

— Carol Huggins,
adopted daughter of Roy Cooper

eastern Montana, into the driveway. But after a stint of outrunning the law, they discovered they couldn't outsmart the thaw. The pickup immediately mired in mud.

White trudged up the driveway to a trailer to ask for help. Roy Cooper, a 72-year-old rancher, answered the door. Then Cooper did what many Montanans would do: he helped. The generous act would be his last. By dawn, northwest Montana had lost a beloved native son.

CAROL HUGGINS, one of Cooper's two daughters and the only one still alive at 79, finds evidence of her father's kind heart even at his grisly murder scene. When investigators examined his body, his billfold contained three checks. Neighbors had given them to Cooper, a respected and knowledgeable horseman, to purchase three horses. The checks were signed but blank. They trusted him to find the best deal and fill in the amounts.

“He was an honest man,” Huggins says. “He was a wonderful man.”

A lot of people thought Cooper was wonderful. His funeral was among the largest ever held in Flathead County, with close to 400 people in the funeral home, and more huddled on the sidewalk outside. Farmers, loggers,

hairstylists, bartenders, bankers, restaurant owners, out-of-state snowbirds, police, politicians, off-the-grid rednecks and off-the-rail hippies all mourned together.

“Everybody knew him and liked him,” Huggins says. “I've always thought that it was lucky that Mom took care of the purse strings, because he would've given everything away. That's just how he was.”

Cooper was born in Creston, near Kalispell, on Nov. 14, 1906. Growing up, he was as serious about work on the farm as he was about mischief off it, a big-hearted approach to life that never wavered through adulthood. In sixth grade, he and a few other boys were suspended for smoking cigarettes. He enjoyed the time off so much that, when the suspension ended, he stayed home. He never went to school again.

“He wasn't very educated but he was smarter than a lot of people with college educations, especially in math,” Huggins says.

As a young man, Cooper met Adelaide Taylor, who had just earned a teaching degree from the college in Dillon, though the education gap wasn't wide enough to keep the lovebirds apart. They married on February 3, 1927, and had a daughter, Nora Grace.

Cooper worked awhile as a logger, including a stint as the foreman of tree-clearing operations for the Hungry



Carol Huggins, now 79, is the last surviving child of Roy and Adelaide Cooper. She was adopted as an infant.

Horse Dam. When he heard that a coworker's wife had died and he was sending his kids to a children's home, Cooper volunteered to take in the youngest because the facility wouldn't accept infants. That baby was Carol Huggins.

"That tells you a lot about the kind of a man he was," Huggins says. "I was fortunate, very fortunate, to end up with him."

The Coopers farmed near Bigfork where Huggins and her father spent long days on horseback. Cooper earned extra money on the trading floor of a livestock yard, thanks to his quick-witted charm and his honesty. At the time, it was customary for a livestock buyer to name a cow after the seller's wife. Ranchers joked that damn near every cow in Montana was named Adelaide.

Cooper had a taste for beer and a wild side, too. He was a champion bullshitter with an extensive lineup of jokes, and he wasn't picky about conversation partners. Despite his active social life he remained a country boy, and sometimes it was clear that he understood mountains and horses better than bars and cars.

"One night he ran off the road," recalls granddaughter Linda McMannamy. "When he came home, he said, 'I'm trading that son of a bitch in. I don't have any use for a truck that can't find its way home.'"

The Coopers sold the farm in the 1960s and moved into a house in Kalispell, but Roy wasn't built for

retirement or town life. So he rented a trailer near Polebridge, which proved to be the ideal base camp for a restless mountain man.

Cooper would spend days on end there, returning to his Kalispell home periodically to be with his wife and stock up on her premade meals. He volunteered to bale neighbors' hay, fix their machines, and tend their livestock, while working his own horses and cattle. He hunted and fished. He told jokes at the Polebridge saloon.

Cooper's nephew, Birch, stayed with him in the North Fork as a teenager, following his every move much like Jim, a grandson, had done as a boy. McMannamy called Jim her grandfather's "shadow," although all the grandchildren adored Cooper, and he loved all his little shadows.

"We were everything to him," McMannamy says. "He was there every holiday, at all of our plays. He was always there for us."

As with everywhere he went, Cooper befriended North Forkers of all stripes, even the mystifying hippie transplants. He liked to tease them about their long hair and beards, and he playfully threatened to introduce them to scissors and razors.

At the funeral, Huggins saw a group of men she didn't recognize. She pointed them out to a relative, who did a double take. It was the hippies. Their hair was short and their beards were gone.

GROGGY FROM THE LATE-NIGHT INTRUSION, Cooper ambled out to his tractor, fired it up and drove it down his driveway. He yanked the strangers' pickup out of the muck. The job was done.

The Fletchers and White have spun different stories about what happened next. The version that investigators and prosecutors pieced together, and to which the suspects admitted on the witness stand and pleaded guilty, begins with the night's first turn of violence, when White swung a rifle butt at Cooper as J.R. Fletcher pointed another rifle at him.

It's not clear whether the abrupt aggression was the start of a robbery or a response to Cooper noticing items in the pickup that had been stolen from neighbors' houses. What is clear is that Cooper's night was descending into terror.

For the next few hours, the fugitives held Cooper on his couch at gunpoint. They ate his food and drank his booze. At one point, they directed him outside to saddle three horses in the corral. They knocked out windows in

The Daily Inter Lake
 KALISPELL, MONTANA SUNDAY, APRIL 15, 1979 35 CENTS

Murder suspects return

Two Oklahoma prison escapees were returned to Flathead County Friday evening to face charges of deliberate homicide in the stabbing death of Roy Cooper. His body was found in his North Fork trailer home April 7 by neighbors. Charged with the death are J.R. Fletcher, 26, Minco, Okla. (pictured at left with Lt. Warren Sible), being helped out of the aircraft is Ronald White, 21, El Reno, Okla. Flanking him are Dennis Updegraff (back to the camera) and Tom Trahey while Lt. Sible observes. Both defendants, under \$200,000 bond, face an initial appearance Monday before Justice of the Peace Mary Riedel. Fletcher's wife, Teresa, 25, charged with burglary, was returned to Kalispell Saturday to face arraignment. She is detained under \$100,000 bond. The Fletchers, White, and two other men, Bret Van Horn, 19, Lowell, Idaho, and Lon Orcutt, 19, Sundland, Calif., were arrested last Sunday after an exchange of gunfire with sheriff's deputies near Grangeville, Idaho. Van Horn and Orcutt face charges of attempted murder and will be prosecuted in Idaho. Flathead Sheriff Al Riersen said articles taken from trailer homes near Polebridge proved the link to White and the Fletchers to warrant filing the deliberate homicide charges.

Photos by Mary Pickett

Newspapers in 1979 covered the murder and its aftermath.

Sordid tale of murder unfolds

DEFIANT TO THE LAST convicted murderer J.R. Fletcher, shouting obscenities, is led handcuffed into a Lockheed Aviaton plane by Flathead County sheriff's deputies as Sheriff Al Riersen (left) watches. Under close guard Fletcher left Kalispell City Airport at 5 p.m. Friday for a one-way trip to Montana State Prison at Deer Lodge.

Photo by Mary Pickett

Murder trio enters guilty plea

As state judges... (text partially obscured)

Suspects sought in brutal murder of Polebridge man

By MARY PICKETT
 Inner Lake Staff driver
 Suspects here being sought today

ropes, blankets, kitchen utensils and guns of the following values: 22 Glock, 30.06 and .357 Magnum.

Murderer Fletcher gets 100-year term

photos and... (text partially obscured)

neighboring houses, unoccupied so early in the season, and stole items for their pack trip: sleeping bags, canned food, kitchen utensils, guns, and lots of alcohol. Teresa and White took turns guarding Cooper at riflepoint.

Four months later, in Flathead County District Court, J.R. Fletcher testified that he entered the trailer to find a sleep-deprived Teresa nodding off and Cooper making a play for the rifle, though Cooper's family doubts this scenario. Fletcher grabbed a large knife from the kitchen and slashed at Cooper's throat. He couldn't remember in court how many times he stabbed him in the neck.

Prosecutors say Fletcher then ordered Teresa to stab Cooper so she would also be culpable for the murder. The attacks severed his spinal cord and nearly decapitated him.

Before departing, J.R. placed Cooper's cowboy hat on his head and positioned his body upright on the couch, as if he were dozing. Then the trio hopped in their pickup and continued north before abruptly turning back south, their Wild West border crossing plans nixed by some combination of bad roads and impulsive violence and

general madness. The horses neighed in the corral, still saddled, as daylight broke over the eastern mountains.

Neighbors found Cooper's body later that day. Detectives arrived soon after. Authorities put out a wire for murder suspects traveling with stolen goods.

The criminals darted over to Idaho, stopping to sell guns and camping gear at the Lumberjack Saloon in Lolo. They checked into a motel in Lowell, Idaho, a small river community 100 miles west of Lolo and nearly 300 miles southwest of Polebridge. It was still Saturday, not yet a day removed from the murder.

In Lowell, they met two men interested in purchasing guns. The prospective buyers wanted to test the weapons first, so White and Fletcher, leaving Teresa at the motel, traveled with the men to a spot in the woods.

Sheriff's deputies received reports of gunfire. When they neared the scene, a yellow pickup zoomed past them going the opposite direction. In the chase that followed, gunshots rained down on pursuing deputies, and the fugitives disappeared into the night.

At first light Sunday morning, deputies tracked down the pickup on a mountain road, and White and J.R. Fletcher finally gave themselves up as ammunition ran out. No deputies were injured but their cars were riddled with bullet holes. Newspapers reported at least 50 shots fired altogether. Teresa was rounded up later.

The story of the shootout and capture played out on front pages, though details of the murder wouldn't crystallize until courtroom hearings in August. The three suspects all initially pleaded not guilty to the same charges: burglary, aggravated kidnapping and deliberate homicide. But they changed their pleas as part of a pretrial agreement in exchange for reduced sentences.

The homicide charge was dropped for Ronald White, who pleaded guilty to aggravated kidnapping and received a 75-year sentence. Teresa Fletcher pleaded guilty to "mitigated" deliberate homicide because prosecutors concluded that she was a follower, not a leader, and was forced by her husband to wield the knife after the victim had already been repeatedly stabbed. She got 40 years.

J.R. Fletcher, identified as the ringleader and primary

murderer, pleaded guilty to deliberate homicide and was sentenced to 100 years in Montana State Prison.

At their hearings, the Oklahomans showed no remorse, according to witness accounts and newspaper reports. Teresa smiled and laughed through her questioning. White shrugged off the judge's suggestion that he was treating the ordeal like a "picnic." J.R. flipped off cameras and swore at the crowd.

George Ostrom observed the courtroom drama as both a newsman and neighbor. Ostrom was covering the case for the *Kalispell News*, a newspaper he founded. He also owned a ranch in the North Fork, not too far from Cooper's trailer. He had teenagers who lived and worked there, and 35 years later he still shudders thinking how close the killers came to his property.

A hard-nosed Army veteran, Ostrom says Teresa "had the most foul mouth I've ever heard, and I've been around the world a time or two." But J.R. gave him chills.

"I kept staring him in the eye and I could see he was evil," Ostrom says. "You could see it. He was an evil man."



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The word *evil* repeatedly comes up in conversations about Fletcher and in court documents. He did nothing to refute the label when he shouted at Cooper's family in the courtroom, threatening to kill them if he ever got out of prison. He was still yelling at anybody who would listen when he boarded a small plane to be transported to the state penitentiary in Deer Lodge.

The Kalispell *Daily Inter Lake* ran a front-page photo of Fletcher being escorted onto the plane by sheriff's deputies. He's standing with his chest puffed and face turned toward the camera. The caption proclaims that he remained "defiant to the last," shouting obscenities until the hatch closed and he could no longer be heard.

SITTING IN A PRISON DORMITORY CONFERENCE ROOM in late January, 2015, J.R. Fletcher is no longer shouting. He's been incarcerated in Deer Lodge since 1979. He looks nothing like the wiry young man with wavy dark hair in the *Inter Lake* photo. At 64, his face and body are swollen from age and poor health.

He talks steadily, without emotion. It's the first time he's spoken with a reporter in 35 years.

Fletcher calmly suggests that he's not evil, nor is he even violent. In fact, he's now saying he never committed the murder.

Over the course of nearly two hours, Fletcher makes a case for innocence that is as full of complex specifics as it is blatantly full of holes, though not without a string of correlations and bizarre twists that often blur the line between fact and fabrication.

Fletcher presents a version of events far different than the one he admitted to in 1979. He offers a stack of documents, including two "affidavits," to support his story. The affidavits bear no official markings and are riddled with elementary-school grammatical errors. In November, 2014, he gave the same documents to the parole board, which denied him for a second time.

In his alternate depiction of April 7, 1979, Fletcher paints a picture of a peaceful evening, undone only by his wife's sudden violence. He says he had negotiated to buy Cooper's horses, not steal them, and was preparing the



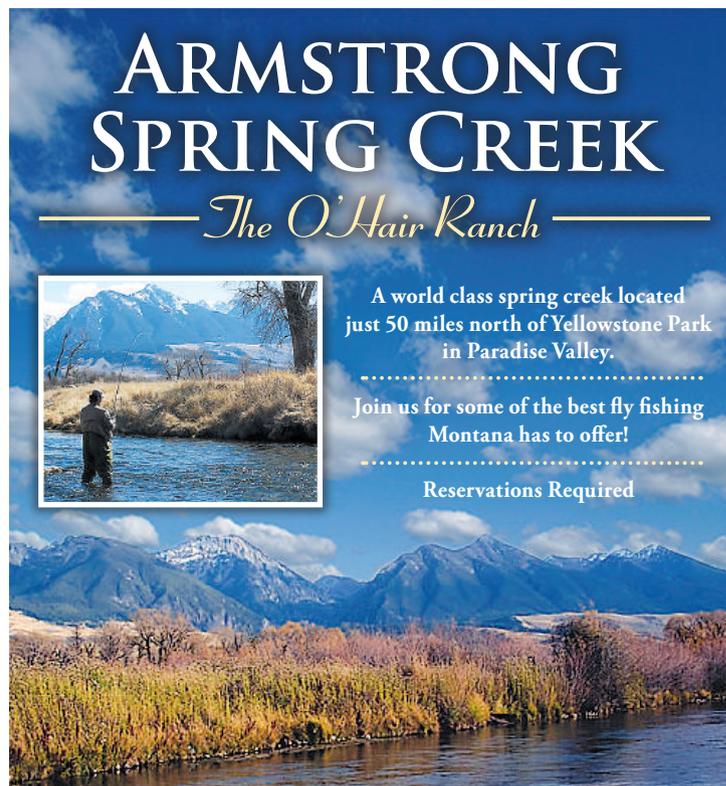
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J.R. Fletcher sits on the edge of his bed in his room at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge. Fletcher is serving a 100-year sentence for the murder of Roy Cooper. In his first interview in 35 years, Fletcher maintained that he didn't commit the crime.



“He’s the one who did it. It was a cold-blooded event and he had a history.”

horses with White when they heard a gunshot. Teresa then emerged from the trailer, dragging a .30-06 at her side.

Fletcher says Teresa later admitted she “killed him just to see what it’s like to kill somebody.”

One of the purported affidavits is a confession signed by Teresa on June 10, 1982, in which she takes full responsibility for the murder and explains that she initially lied to receive a shorter sentence, for the good of her family. J.R. is portrayed as a martyr who fell on the sword to facilitate an early reunion between Teresa and her kids, one of whom was his. Though they had married four years before Cooper’s murder, the Fletchers had spent barely two months together because J.R. was in prison for car theft and other crimes.

The other affidavit is signed by Ronald White and dated 1987. It gives a lengthy description of the night at Cooper’s house. It also pins the blame solely on Teresa, stating that she shot Cooper. But Teresa’s confession says that she stabbed him. It’s as if the trio could never quite get on the same page, and even nuggets of truth are disguised by a shape-shifting carousel of distortions.

White had earlier presented Teresa’s alleged confession as evidence in a request to change his plea. District Judge James M. Salansky said the documents lacked credibility. In his 1983 ruling, Salansky wrote that the three accomplices “repeatedly changed their accounts” and noted that White’s lawyer said Teresa recanted her affidavit over the phone.

“[White] and his accomplices are playing games and making a mockery of the judicial system,” the judge concluded.

Further convoluting matters, courtroom testimony raised the possibility of a rifle accidentally going off in Teresa’s lap, though detectives never found a bullet hole on Cooper’s body or in his trailer. On Cooper’s death certificate, the coroner determined cause of death to be “stab wounds, head and neck area.”

Fletcher now denies that he ever admitted to killing Cooper. He remains unfazed by facts. Instead, he claims he’s a victim of a sprawling conspiracy that reaches untold corners of a government bent on destroying him.

“It didn’t matter what the crime was. It was all about burying me.”

But Ted Lympus, the county attorney who prosecuted the case, says it’s not that complicated.

“He’s the one who did it,” says Lympus, now a district judge. “It was a cold-blooded event and he had a history. This is a classic case [in which] he definitely deserves permanent incarceration.”

While most of the trio’s wild inconsistencies stem from conscious manipulation, others are likely byproducts of their lengthy drug and alcohol binge. White and Teresa have both admitted to fuzzy memories, with periods of blackness, even if J.R. Fletcher has revised his autobiography today to exclude drug use.

Fletcher has made a lot of revisions to his story. There’s not much else to do in prison, especially if you’re staying out of trouble, which Fletcher has been doing for 10 years. As a reward for his decade without a write-up, he was transferred from the regular prison into a dormitory, where he sweeps and mops the hallway and lobby floors.

But sanitizing the past can’t eliminate it. Fletcher tries hard these days to present himself as nonviolent. He concedes to a life of crime leading up to Cooper’s murder, though he describes himself as a country bumpkin from Oklahoma who got caught up in car theft but never hurt anybody. While it’s true that car theft was the primary reason he spent his 20s locked up, violence is the reason he spent the next 35 years in prison.



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Count the parole board among the many who believe he's dangerous and untruthful. In a December 2014 disposition, the parole board dismissed Teresa's 1982 affidavit as further evidence that Fletcher refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. The board also cited the "evil nature of the horrific crime."

Teresa Fletcher and Ronald White have been paroled and released from prison. But at that last November parole hearing, Flathead County Attorney Ed Corrigan insisted that he should never again taste freedom.

"This man is a waste of space and organic molecules," Corrigan said, standing a few feet from Fletcher. "He committed a horrific crime. He is an evil man. There is no place in society for this individual."

RELATIVES BELIEVE COOPER HAD AT LEAST TWO MORE decades of good living. The family has a history of thriving into its 90s, and Cooper looked poised to carry on the tradition. He had lost only one tooth, despite a lifetime of chewing tobacco. His mind was sharp.

He was still learning new jokes and breaking new horses.

"J.R. Fletcher took 20 years of fun times away from us," Huggins says. "He stole that from us."

Cooper's legacy endures through a family tree that sprawls across western Montana. Nora Grace passed away last year, leaving behind five daughters and an army of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Jim passed away two years ago.

Unlike her sister, Huggins hasn't added any branches to the family tree. She has never married and has no kids, maintaining fierce independence in a world that couldn't be trusted to protect a good man like Roy Cooper. As she nears 80, her appetite for college football and dark beer hasn't waned. She's sharp-tongued and tough and immensely likeable. She is her father's daughter.

But neither time nor toughness can fully erase grief, and her eyes moisten when she holds a photo of him, pointing it away from herself to show a visitor the can of chewing tobacco in his shirt pocket. Her finger covers his torso, as if wrapped around him. For a moment, it seems like she's holding more than a photo. ■

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