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Hustler unveils deadly intent

Defendant in two deaths tells dark tale of 'past business,' claims leaving trail of bodies

Steve Orr, Patrick Flanagan, Gary Craig and Greg Livadas
Staff writers

(November 13, 2005) — Sometime late in the day on Tuesday, Robert Bruce Spahalski scrawled his signature on a four-page statement in which he confessed to killing Charles Grande of Webster in the fall of 1991.

Toward the end of that statement, Spahalski expressed remorse for what he had done.

"I knew that coming forward is the best thing to do," the statement said. "I settled all of my past business today and want to put it all behind me."

The question today is, exactly what "past business" has Spahalski tried to lay to rest?

Spahalski, who is 50, was charged on Wednesday with killing Grande and Vivian Irizarry, a Rochester woman whom Spahalski told police he killed on Nov. 4. He made his admissions, and directed police to Irizarry's body, after he walked up to the front desk at police headquarters Tuesday morning.

Police say he also has implicated himself in two other slayings in Rochester in the early 1990s, and they are trying to determine whether he was involved in still more cases.

Spahalski, who was sent to jail in Elmira when he was 16 and had four stints in state prison, has hustled on Rochester's streets for several decades. He told police he has been a prostitute, and is said by people who know him to be a longtime drug user who is HIV positive.

Much of his time in Rochester was spent in neighborhoods where there were dozens of unsolved homicides, including the slaying of 20 or more women who, like Spahalski, lived on society's margin.

Several of those slain women lived in or near buildings where Spahalski dwelled at the time. Among them were Moraine Armstrong and Victoria Jobson, who were slain in the early 1990s, and Hortence Greathart, who was killed in 2003.

News of Spahalski's background and his admissions, and of the wide net that police are casting, has triggered worried inquiries from the families of women whose slayings have never been solved. The mother of 1991 homicide victim Damita Gibson, for instance, said Thursday she was contacting police after recognizing Spahalski as a man who spent time with her daughter shortly before she disappeared.

Media speculation has begun about the extent of Spahalski's possible crimes, and the phrase "serial killer" has been tossed about.

Police are tight-lipped about how they are proceeding, but privately, they indicate they are working diligently to separate fact from speculation and determine which additional crimes, if any, can be attributed to Spahalski.

"Just put yourself in the shoes of the police," said Michael McGrath, a local crime profiler and forensic psychiatrist.

Now, McGrath said, police must be examining other unsolved killings to look for crimes that seem similar to those slayings that authorities say Spahalski has confessed to.

An early life of crime

Robert Spahalski's first appearance in his hometown newspaper came in July 1971, when he was 16. He had been arrested driving a stolen car. Stories published in the *Elmira Star-Gazette* in the early 1970s, when Spahalski was a teen, show other arrests for arson at a school, unauthorized use of a motor vehicle and criminal trespass.

He began a two-year prison term for burglary in August 1973 when he was 18. By age 26, Spahalski had been imprisoned twice more for burglary charges in the Southern Tier.

Robert Spahalski's twin brother, Stephen, committed an even more notorious crime. Just before his 17th birthday, Stephen stabbed a store clerk to death in Elmira Heights. It was the first homicide there in at least four decades.

Stephen Spahalski was sentenced to prison for manslaughter in November 1972. He is in Attica Correctional Facility today on a parole violation.

The twins were the subject of an odd case that arose in 1978, when they both were inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility. One of them tried to escape, but prison authorities were unable, at least initially, to determine which brother was involved, according to the *Star-Gazette*.

Aside from their youthful crimes, little is known about the Spahalskis' days in Elmira. In a high school yearbook, Robert Spahalski is pictured as an athlete in gymnastics and track, said the *Star-Gazette*.

Stanley Spahalski, the twins' uncle, said Friday that he didn't know about Robert Spahalski's arrest this week. In fact, he had thought one of the twins had died years ago.

Stanley Spahalski, who lives in York, Pa., said he hadn't talked to the twins in decades. He said the boys' father, Bernard, died in Florida about four years ago, and he wasn't sure where their mother, Anita, was.

Neither Anita Spahalski nor other relatives could be located for comment.

When and why Robert Spahalski came to Rochester is not clear. City police say they believe he has lived here, off and on, since the 1970s.

The earliest listing of his name that could be found in publicly available records puts him in an Alexander Street apartment in the mid-1980s.

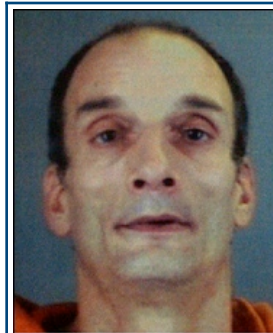
His other listed addresses were all in the Edgerton neighborhood on Rochester's west side.

Spahalski was convicted of his fourth felony while he lived in this area; in July 1987, he was sentenced to two to four years in prison on an attempted burglary rap in Monroe County.

He was paroled, and apparently returned here, in February 1989.

Life in the streets

Spahalski, who is a gaunt 6-foot-3 with thinning black hair, was a familiar figure on the streets of the neighborhood near the intersection of the road and the street.



enlarge... Provided photo
Robert Spahalski said coming forward was "the best thing to do" and that he wanted to "put it all behind me."
Day in Photos

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Timeline

July 1971: Robert Spahalski, 16, is charged with unauthorized use of a motor vehicle after being stopped by police in Elmira.

August 1971: Spahalski is charged with felony arson after police say he set fire to a stage curtain and flag at an Elmira school.

October 1971: Spahalski ordered to serve 15 weekends in jail after he pleads guilty to unauthorized use of the stolen vehicle in July.

December 1971: Spahalski pleads guilty to a criminal trespass charge after he returns to a business in Elmira when he knew he was not allowed on the premises.

July 1973: Spahalski, 19, is found guilty of taking about \$3,000 in cash and equipment from a music store in Elmira. He is sentenced to up to five years in prison.

September 1975: Spahalski released from prison.

July 1976: Spahalski, 21, is charged with third-degree burglary after breaking into a high school in Elmira. He is convicted and sentenced to two to five years at Auburn Correctional Facility.

July 1978: Prison officials at Auburn Correctional Facility foil an escape attempt but can't identify the culprit. Corrections officers can't tell whether it was Robert Spahalski or his identical twin brother, Stephen J. Spahalski, and the twins won't tell. One of the Spahalski brothers hid in the false bottom of an Army truck that was being sent to a government agency. Prison officials had reason to believe one of the twins was in the truck, but he evaded officers when he ran into a vocational auto body shop at the prison, where both brothers worked.

November 1979: Spahalski released from prison.

July 1981: Robert Spahalski, 26, is charged with theft after police say he and an accomplice, Roger E. Saxbury, 35, stole a coin collection valued at \$15,000.

August 1981: Spahalski pleads guilty to stealing the coin collection and is sentenced to two to five years at Attica Correctional Facility.

December 1984: Spahalski released from prison.

July 1987: Spahalski, convicted of attempted burglary in Monroe County, enters state prison.

February 1989: Spahalski released from prison.

September 1991: Spahalski and another man are arrested in Gates on charges they robbed a Salvation Army employee at gunpoint.

October 1991: According to his statement to police, Spahalski beats to death Charles Grande of Webster, then steals money and Grande's car. As he drives around Rochester that night in the company of a prostitute, he is stopped by police. He pretends he is Grande and is allowed to drive off.

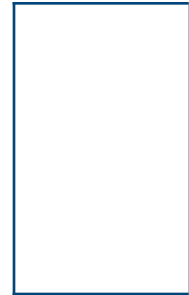
December 1991: The robbery-related charges are dismissed after a grand jury declines to indict Spahalski. Court records are sealed.

August 1992: Spahalski is acquitted at trial of criminal impersonation. Sometime subsequent to Grande's death, he had been identified as the man driving Grande's car and charged with impersonating him.

November 2005: Spahalski walks up to the front desk at the Rochester Public Safety Building and tells officers he has killed a woman. He is charged the next day with murder in connection with that slaying and one in 1991.

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His conspicuous features notwithstanding, Spahalski lived without attracting a great deal of attention to himself in a part of the city with one of the city's highest concentrations of drug use and prostitution.

Spahalski hung out with prostitutes, according to some who knew him, and claims to have run a "male escort service" himself in the early 1990s. "I was running the service by myself and had many customers," he said in his statement to police about the Webster killing. Spahalski told police he turned tricks himself; it was a dispute over payment for sex that led to Grande's slaying, the statement said.

If Spahalski ever held a reputable job in Rochester, there is no record of it.

There is no record that he ever married, either. He did have girlfriends, including one woman, Christine Gonzalez, who has been in a relationship with him for 10 years or more. Gonzalez, who was living with Spahalski in a Spencer Street apartment at the time of his arrest, has declined requests for interviews. Friends say she was planning to leave town.

Vivian Irizarry, whose unclothed body was found in the dank, unlighted basement at the Spencer Street house on Tuesday, knew Gonzalez and Spahalski well.

Carlos Rodriguez, 18, the youngest of Irizarry's three sons, said he saw Spahalski over the years when he dropped his mother off at Spahalski's apartment building.

He said Spahalski, who was known by his middle name, Bruce, told him he was HIV positive. One other acquaintance said he had heard the same thing.

"He was a nothing," Rodriguez said of Spahalski. "All he did was do drugs."

Several other people who knew him, or recognized his face from photographs in the news, said last week that he was known to use crack cocaine.

Kassem Saleh, who owns a grocery store on Lyell Avenue near Spencer Street, said he saw Spahalski buy crack from young men who loiter on Lyell Avenue.

Several people who knew him said Spahalski was enrolled in some sort of day treatment program. His landlord, Kevin Turner, said Spahalski's rent was paid by a nonprofit agency that provides treatment for both drug addiction and mental health problems.

Police got very close to Spahalski near the time of the October 1991 slaying of Grande in Webster.

Spahalski and another man were arrested in Gates in September of that year, accused of robbing a Salvation Army employee at gunpoint. Those charges were dropped after a grand jury declined to indict him.

He also was charged in Rochester after he was stopped by police just hours after he had allegedly beaten Grande to death with a hammer in his home. Spahalski was driving Grande's car, and flashed the dead man's license to the officer.

Some time later, police learned it had been Spahalski behind the wheel that morning. He was charged with criminal impersonation but was acquitted at a trial in August 1992.

Spahalski once had a driver's license of his own, and had several cars, but he had lost his driving privileges by 1991.

In recent years, he was often seen riding his bike in the neighborhood.

Known as quiet, polite

Until this summer, when he and Gonzalez moved to Spencer Street, Spahalski had lived for several years in an apartment at 345 Lake Ave. Susan Servati, who also lives in that building, described Spahalski as a quiet, polite neighbor who didn't appear capable of the kind of violence police said that he admitted committing.

"I'm just in a state of shock," Servati said. "I'm just totally blown away. I've been in his apartment."

She said she would see Spahalski feed nuts to squirrels in the back yard and the two used to chat about things going on in the apartment building. Servati said she suspected Spahalski was addicted to crack cocaine, or "on the pipe," but she was equally surprised to learn he told police he worked as a male prostitute. "I never seen him jump into cars or anything," she said.

Servati said the closest Spahalski ever came to exhibiting a violent side was one day when she told him he should be careful to keep his bike locked when he went inside a nearby grocery store.

"He said 'If anybody touches my bike, I'll kill them. People don't know me. I'll kill them.' But you don't expect to believe something like that."

Servati said if Spahalski is guilty of the crimes he's been charged with, she doesn't think he fits the profile of a prototypical serial killer who preys on targets to fulfill some desire to kill.

"If he did commit these murders, he must have been provoked," she said.

Kassem Saleh, the grocer, said Spahalski was a frequent customer who bought ham and cheese sandwiches and Lotto tickets. Saleh has owned the Lyell 1 Deli for about six months and is awaiting an alcohol permit. He recalled that Spahalski used to encourage him to hurry up and start selling beer, even though Spahalski said he didn't drink beer.

"He said he bought beer for the ladies," Saleh said. "He kept telling me to get beer, and he'll get me more business."

Jamil Shaibi, owner of S&S Mini Mart, also knew Spahalski as a regular customer who bought Midnight Special roll-up cigarette tobacco.

"His knuckles were yellow from the tobacco," Shaibi said.

As a customer, he was often pushy, Shaibi said. He would demand the things he purchased, and he would get frustrated when they weren't available.

"He did get upset a couple of times, like when I don't have matches," Shaibi said. "He was very insistent." Shaibi added that Spahalski used to clench his jaw a lot and walked with his head thrust forward.

"He just looked weird," he said.

Spahalski and Gonzalez were put out of their apartment at 345 Lake Ave. this past summer because his unit was filthy and cockroach-infested, two residents said. One resident, who did not want to be named, helped clean it up and said the cramped unit was trashed with food and cigarette butts on the floor and a splash of what appeared to be spaghetti sauce on the wall.

Turner, who was the landlord at the Spencer Street apartment house, said Spahalski told him that he left the Lake Avenue apartments because he had problems with other residents there. Turner said he called the landlord and was told Spahalski was no trouble.

The Lake Avenue landlord refused to comment.

In contrast to their prior residence, Spahalski and his girlfriend kept the Spencer Street apartment "impeccable," Turner said. "He kept it really clean," he said.

Turner was only hours from selling his four-apartment house at 202 Spencer St. when firefighters discovered Irizarry's corpse in the basement.

Turner was visiting one of the apartments Tuesday afternoon, shortly before he was scheduled to close on the sale, when he looked out a window and spotted firefighters and paramedics preparing to break in a basement window.

"I said, "You've got to be joking."

Turner then unlocked the basement door for firefighters and followed them down the stairs. "There's not a lot of light in there," he recalled. "I told them, "I'm the only one that's got a key so I know there's no body down there."

Before he could reach the bottom steps, firefighters sent Turner back outside. On the basement floor they had found Irizarry's body.

"Then," said Turner, "the circus began."

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