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Patterns in murder main seminar topic

Series murders, in which several people are killed over weeks or even months; pose unusual problems for lawmen.

Called mass and multiple murders in the press, most of the typical cases involve a psychopathic killer — someone with psychological imbalances.

He kills, peace officers have learned, for illogical reasons or reasons known only to himself. Because the apparently motiveless killings are more difficult to solve, law enforcement personnel spend considerable time and effort investigating them.

Efforts at multiple agencies cooperation are made in hopes of increasing the chances of success. One of these, a Homicide Seminar currently under way at Texas A&M University, is focusing on series murders.

One facet of investigation, discussed Wednesday by J. Ray Sanders, centers on the killer's habitual practices of performing the deed. This is known to lawmen as the modus operandi, or M.O.

The tactic provides good chances of success, said Sanders, because human beings tend to be creatures of habit.

Why people do things the same way time after time is easily seen, he said, using mannequins as examples.

The repetition may "give a feeling of security, perhaps a comfortable feeling," said Sanders, manager of the Department of Public Safety's Criminal Analysis Service in Austin.

"It could give their confidence a lift, or that's the way they get their kicks," he explained. "In any event, things are done the same way because it's hard to argue with a winner. In the case of a series killer, he uses the same kind of rope and ties the victims hands the same way because it worked before." The M.O. may include a certain number of stab wounds on a particular part of the anatomy, use of an area with similar characteristics and other similarities.

Identification and apprehension of the killer depends on spotting the M.O.'s, their careful assessment, and being reported and compared to other cases in which additional information may have been obtained.

The latter two areas, Sanders said, are where the DPS Service can help most. It is organized and operated to help correlate information on cases from widely separated geographic points.

"We can't grind out flour," Sanders said, "unless someone sends in the meal, corn or whatever." He stressed that detailed reports based on careful investigation, particularly on what may be suspected as traveling cases, are vital to continuing investigation.

If we can get everybody contributing," he told lawmen attending the seminar from throughout Texas, "what the other guy sends in eventually may help you."

The seminar was sponsored by the Law Enforcement and Security Training Division of the Texas Engineering Extension Service.

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Living by the river, Gene Ash doesn't have all the modern conveniences, but he doesn't have utility bills yet either. The agricultural economics graduate student is enjoying his temporary makeshift facility until the water is connected in his home on the Brazos.

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