

The Legend of the Applegate Cucumber Assassin

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Placer's Unsolved Mysteries Part I, by Bill Wilson

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It will be 34 years in August when Matthew Alexander Bosek was executed gangland style in an isolated garden near Applegate. His killer has never been apprehended, although Placer County sheriff's detectives continue to keep the case open. It is in the cold case files. Bosek was on his knees holding two cucumbers he had picked from the vegetable garden located on the rim of the American Canyon when he was shot down from behind and left dying.

The 79-year-old Russian emigrant had picked a box of peppers and a box of tomatoes when his assailant walked up behind him and put three .38-cal pistol slugs into his head in 1973. The murderer was so close to him that powder marks were left on the back of his head, indicating the assailant was two to three feet behind Bosek when he was killed.

Placer County sheriff's investigators Arthur Ables and William Shelton found four empty shell casings nearby, and an autopsy discovered three pistol slugs in Bosek's brain. After being shot, Bosek fell face down in the dirt in the garden located a third of a mile from the Esoteric Fraternity, a quasi-monastic organization in the wooded, reclusive area. Bosek had been a caretaker, handyman and printer at the fraternity for 51 years.

Fred Peterson, president of the fraternity at the time, notified authorities at 7:55 p.m. on a warm summer evening when shots were heard coming from the garden. Robert Silverstri, a fraternity resident, ran to the garden to find Bosek dead. Bosek's pet dog had scampered back to the Esoteric headquarters and his pickup was parked nearby.

Ables and Shelton, both now deceased, spent weeks and weeks searching for evidence and interviewing persons. Several individuals came under suspicion, but not one was ever arrested or charged with the murder. A motive for the murder also remains unclear.

Bosek fled Russia during the Bolshevik revolution after his parents had been murdered, traveling across Siberia to Vladivostok and then on the reach San Francisco on a tramp steamer. He left his native country with a small amount of personal belongings, eventually arriving in California and taking a job at the Esoteric Fraternity in 1922.

The settlement of older religious men and women is located off of Boole Road, overlooking the North Fork of the American River. A quarter-mile country road leading to the fraternity's main building passes by a dilapidated printing plant.

At the time of the slaying, Sheriff William Scott referred to the murder as "one of the most wanton" his department had ever investigated. "I certainly hope that anyone with any knowledge of the crime, or any reasonable hunches for that matter, get in touch with us."

An aura of fear spread among fraternity member following the slaying at the isolated commune, and two armed guards were hired to patrol the area. A \$10,000 reward for information and the arrest and conviction of Bosek's assailant was offered, but no claims for the reward were ever made.

Despite an all-out investigation of the killing, investigators could not come up with a suspect. They interviewed dozens of persons who may have had contact with the victim, but the case remains unsolved.

Sheriff's Detective Bill Summers, and two other detectives in his office, keep the Bosek case in review, hoping to find information that would lead to solving the Bosek murder. Summers said there are more than 30 unsolved homicides in the department's files going back some four decades.

Bosek was described as a popular person with no known enemies. Those who knew him said he was easily met and friendly to outsiders.

Hiram Erastus Butler founded the fraternity in Boston and established the commune at Applegate in 1898. The organization's philosophy was based on a combination of astrology, metaphysical and religious teachings, including the Book of Revelations in the Bible.

Butler wrote more than 10 books, some of them based on talks he made to members of the Society for Esoteric Culture in Boston. His books, including "Solar Biology", "Seven Creative Principles", and "The Law of Association of Men and Women" are still being sold on the Internet. Butler, who died in 1916, distributed the books mostly by mail back then.

There were four fraternity members living in the two-story building at the time Bosek was murdered. The three at the fraternity told sheriff's deputies they heard some six shots fired in an almost rhythmic fashion a short time before Bosek's body was found.

The members spent their time meditating, publishing books and growing fruits and vegetables. When Butler was the decision-maker at the fraternity there were several dozen residents, but the membership declined rapidly when the printing operation was shut down.

Russian Orthodox Catholic funeral services were held for Bosek, and he was buried in the Newcastle District Cemetery a few feet from a cactus garden. There were few mourners at his gravesite. The flat marker only has his name and his birth and death dates. Persons with any information that could lead to Bosek's killer can contact Summers at 530-889-7843 or 550-889-7800.

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