

David Meirhofer as he appeared in in a high school yearbook photo that appeared in the Chronicle in 1974.



# Murderer most foul

## David Meirhofer's crimes still haunt the community after 25 years

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Marietta Jaeger says it feels like it all happened yesterday as she places flowers this past week in Bozeman on the grave of her murdered daughter Susan Jaeger. Susan was seven years old when she was kidnapped and killed 25 years ago by serial killer David Meirhofer.

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The last snapshot of Susan Jaeger isn't a good one. In typical 7-year-old fashion, she is distracted, marching hand-in-hand with her mother on the banks of the Missouri headwaters. Three major rivers pregnant with spring floodwaters merge behind them, giving birth to a new, inseparable channel. Given the chance to alter the picture, Marietta Jaeger might push back the long, brown hair swirling in front of Susie's face. The mother would perhaps stop the

Black Cats and Whistling Jupiters in 1973, the mother of four kids watched as the local sheriff's posse dragged the river for her youngest child. Whenever the barge dragging the silty headwaters would pause, Jaeger's heart would stop. She hoped Susie would return and promised to strangle the then-unknown killer, David Meirhofer, if he were captured. "I would have absolutely been capable of killing him myself with my bare hands if I had the chance," she said.

was one of the most unusual, intelligent serial killers they'd ever met. The Manhattan native who later confessed to killing four people had twice killed children before Susie Jaeger and gotten away with it. And he killed again, after Susie. The deaths were so unsimilar in nature detectives were hesitant to publicly call them serial killings. His ability to pass polygraph and truth serum tests prompted FBI agents to twice discard Meirhofer as a serious suspect in the Susie Jaeger case. The nation's top detective agency had to redesign the lie

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Meirhofer said yes. "Did you know he was dead?" asked Dunbar. Meirhofer: "I didn't know for sure." Meirhofer denied the attempted Girl Scout abduction, then admitted to stabbing Michael Raney, a Bozeman Boy Scout at the Headwaters State Park. Dunbar wrapped up the confession at 4:11 a.m., calling it a morning. Five hours later, after getting the county attorney to drop the death penalty, Meirhofer tied a bath towel to his cell bars and hanged himself.

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A coroner's jury faulted Sheriff Andy Anderson for not placing Meirhofer on a suicide watch. The mistake cost him his job. Anderson lost the general election to deputy Onstad, 9,164 votes to 3,874. Marietta Jaeger was never asked if she wanted Meirhofer to face the death penalty. She would have said no. It would have been the wrong way to memorialize Susie, she said. "The bottom line is there is no amount of retaliatory deaths that can compensate for our loved ones," Jaeger said. The death certificate of an executed inmate lists the cause of death as homicide, she said. To Jaeger, the act is no different. Jaeger has publicly told her message of forgiveness for almost 24 years, starting with a speech to a small women's group at a Farmington, Mich., church. People can be victims of resentment, of substance abuse, of their own prejudice if they can't forgive, and they can lose their lives, she said. Whenever she's asked to speak, Jaeger says she does.

Her story has taken her to India, where she spoke about forgiveness with a group of Catholic priests recovering from alcoholism. She's also featured in a Discovery Channel story titled "From Fury to Forgiveness." A book, "Lost Child," has also been published about her experience. The book is now out of print, but may be re-released. In the years following her daughter's abduction, Jaeger traveled to Montana, speaking against the execution of Duncan MacKenzie and contacting the survivors and investigators of the Meirhofer killings. Her travels include visits with members of David Meirhofer's family, who Jaeger believes are victims of the same tragedy. "I'll tell you, anyone who thinks forgiveness is easy hasn't tried it," Jaeger said. "It's work." Susie is still a part of her mother's life, a tributary of sorts. The current flowing from the child's tragedy, the work on forgiveness the mother does with others, is one Marietta Jaeger will not fight. "Something has just thrust me, however unwilling, into the the eyes of the public," Jaeger said. "Whenever I've tried to withdraw, I've been thrown back in."



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The last snapshot of Susan Jaeger isn't a good one. In typical 7-year-old fashion, she is distracted, marching hand-in-hand with her mother on the banks of the Missouri headwaters. Three major rivers pregnant with spring floodwaters merge behind them, giving birth to a new, inseparable channel. Given the chance to alter the picture, Marietta Jaeger might push back the long, brown hair swirling in front of Susie's face. The mother would perhaps stop the wooden gym whistle swinging from her daughter's neck and compose the shot. But the girl in the photograph is undoubtedly her daughter, leading the Farmington, Mich., family up the trail, skipping, never walking, and as always, close to her mother. There's no chance for a second shot. Susie Jaeger is gone, her fate forever entwined with that of a local serial killer who kidnapped her 25 years ago last week — not far from where the snapshot was taken — and later killed himself. Marietta Jaeger, now 60, is a confluence of her daughter's tragedy, a voice against capital punishment and, after a lifetime of practice, forgiveness. She has not always held these thoughts. As the Gallatin Valley air crackled with

Black Cats and Whistling Jupiters in 1973, the mother of four kids watched as the local sheriff's posse dragged the river for her youngest child. Whenever the barge dragging the silty headwaters would pause, Jaeger's heart would stop: She hoped Susie would return and promised to strangle the then-unknown killer, David Meirhofer, if he were captured. "I would have absolutely been capable of killing him myself with my bare hands and a smile on my face," she said. But Susie wasn't on the river bottom. And Marietta Jaeger's Catholic upbringing was starting to work against her rage. By the time David Meirhofer began making ransom calls, Jaeger was praying for him, asking God to "let it be a nice day" for the kidnapper. "I couldn't say with any authenticity that I forgave him, so I put the ball in God's court and tried to cooperate," Jaeger said in an interview in Bozeman this week. "I reminded myself that in God's eyes he was just as precious as Susie."



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was one of the most unusual, intelligent serial killers they'd ever met. The Manhattan native who later confessed to killing four people had twice killed children before Susie Jaeger and gotten away with it. And he killed again, after Susie. The deaths were so unsimilar in nature detectives were hesitant to publicly call them serial killings. His ability to pass polygraph and truth serum tests prompted FBI agents to twice discard Meirhofer as a serious suspect in the Susie Jaeger case. The nation's top detective agency had to redesign the lie detector after Meirhofer beat it, according to Pete Dunbar, a former FBI Agent and top investigator in the Jaeger case. "For many years the (Meirhofer's case) had been used by behavioral science units at Quantico," Va., the nation's criminal investigation headquarters, Dunbar said. "David had a very high IQ, a complete lack of emotion and the ability to control emotion under the effects of a powerful (truth serum). David was a unique person. Never in any of my conversations with him was there some sign of sweating, eye contact, squirming in the chair, you know, basic body language. He was very nonchalant."

(More on **Meirhofer**, page 12)

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## Meirhofer/from page 1

But just as unusual was Jaeger's willingness to speak with Meirhofer again and again while FBI agents secretly listened in. Investigators had little to go on until Marietta Jaeger picked up the phone and began speaking to her daughter's killer. Investigators who have since moved on or retired say Meirhofer left few clues at the campground.

"Deputy Don Houghton and I were the first to respond to the Susie Jaeger kidnapping," said John Onstad, a young Gallatin County sheriff's deputy at the time. "When the sun rose that morning, there was a heavy dew and we could track some footprints to the road, but that was it. We had an L-shaped slit in a tent, some footprints and nothing else."

Sometime in the early hours of June 24, 1973, Meirhofer had slit a hole in the blue tent where Susie Jaeger slept with her three siblings. He pulled her out of the tent without a sound.

Detectives later learned that Meirhofer packed the 7-year-old to his truck parked several yards away, then vanished into the Horseshoe Hills. It wasn't until 12-year-old Heidi Jaeger awoke at 4 a.m. that anyone realized Susie was missing.

Onstad remembers how frantic the Jaeger family looked as he and Houghton arrived at the campsite and then left the rocky campground so they could call for help on their weak radios. The Jaegers thought the officers were leaving for good, he said.

The extensive search that followed the radio call produced nothing, though the county pulled together as a community for the search. A Michigan contingent of the Wally Byams, who were in Bozeman for a national rally, also joined the effort.

Then Meirhofer called the Denver FBI office four days after the kidnapping and told a night clerk he wanted \$25,000 ransom. Investigators say this call was a dodge, because the caller never gave a time or place for the money to be dropped.

Two days before the biggest holiday of the summer, the kidnapper made another call, this time to a sheriff's deputy in Three Forks. But the deputy wasn't home. His wife was. Meirhofer told the woman he was upping the ante to \$50,000.

He also identified Susie Jaeger by a birth defect known only to her family. The nails on Susie Jaeger's index fingers didn't grow outward, but built up like small tortoise shells.

"He called them her humpy fingernails," Marietta Jaeger said.

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Investigators never took Meirhofer's ransom calls seriously because his delivery instructions were incomplete.

"We had the money available to pay," Dunbar said. "A very generous individual offered to put up the money for the family.

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I had the money on hand, deposited in a bank in Bozeman."

When the kidnapper finally named a place for the ransom drop, he didn't give a time, then he stopped calling.

Meirhofer didn't call again until Sept. 24, when he called the Jaegers' Michigan home and asked Susie's oldest brother, Daniel, 16, if he wanted his sister back. The FBI recorded the call. The calls stopped again for nine months.

Then Meirhofer called on the first anniversary of Susie Jaeger's abduction. In the months leading up to the call he'd kidnapped 19-year-old Sandra Dykman Smallegan from a small apartment above a Manhattan farm machinery shop owned by Meirhofer's father.

Unlike Susie Jaeger, the petite brunette who worked at a local bowling alley was known to be dead. Her bone fragments were found that Feb. 19 in 1,200 cut and burnt pieces on an abandoned ranch 12 miles from Headwaters State Park. Detectives had not found a trace of Susie Jaeger.

Meirhofer called Marietta Jaeger after reading a newspaper article in which she said she'd forgiven her daughter's kidnapper and wanted to speak with him. Meirhofer obliged the request, timing his call to the minute Susie Jaeger's sister found her missing. It was June 24, 1974, the anniversary of the kidnapping — at 4 a.m.

Jaeger remembers Meirhofer opening the conversation, saying a few things, then she told him she forgave him and asked if she could do anything for him. Meirhofer began crying. The mother and kidnapper talked for two hours.

Eventually Jaeger would refer to the caller as David whenever they spoke, though the man on the phone never identified himself.

The FBI processed the recorded call with a sound spectrograph machine, which allowed them to make a voice match. The machine was as cutting edge then as DNA testing was early this decade. It had never been submitted as evidence in federal court.

The call couldn't be traced to Meirhofer's home. A Three Forks farmer later came forward when the Farmington, Mich., call appeared on his phone bill. Investigators suspected that Meirhofer, trained in communications by the U.S. Marines, tapped into the farmer's phone line.

The 25-year-old Vietnam War veteran was the FBI's man, but agents couldn't prove it, despite relying on the forensic technology of the day. Meirhofer had traveled to Warm Springs to undergo truth serum testing. He passed the test, and Dunbar believes Meirhofer attempted to strangle a Girl Scout at a nearby camp the same day. Meirhofer never admitted to the crime, but someone was caught bending over the girl tying a rope around her neck and choking her. The suspect fled when a

light came on, illuminating the girl's bunk.

In a later search of the Meirhofer's home, a map of the scout camp was found.

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Agents thought it would be best if Jaeger met with Meirhofer in person to identify his voice and possibly make him crack. But in person Meirhofer denied all knowledge of the killing.

"He'd said, 'I'm really sorry. I feel terrible about what happened to your little girl, but I don't know anything,'" Jaeger said. It was Sept. 19, 1974, at the office of Meirhofer's Bozeman attorney.

The law clamped down on Meirhofer eight days after he met with Jaeger. Investigators had compiled a half-dozen incidents that made Meirhofer's involvement in Susie Jaeger's kidnapping probable. Marietta Jaeger had picked out Meirhofer's voice from a phone lineup of suspects who called her and read from a transcript of her anniversary conversation with the kidnapper. Agents placed Meirhofer in the areas where at least two of the calls were made. And they found some of a little girl's vertebrae on the abandoned farm where Smallegan's remains were earlier found, linking the two kidnappings.

The day detectives arrested Meirhofer, Manhattan was busy going through the motions of normal small-town life. There had been a parade. A football game was scheduled at the local gridiron later on. However, life in the town of 900 had stopped being normal. As Gallatin County Sheriff Bill Slaughter remembers it, the police had become omnipresent in the community. People were scared and upset.

"It was kind of an interesting thing. The whole town was police supportive. They had every reason to be angry with us, but they weren't," said Slaughter, who was just cutting his teeth as a deputy in 1974. "We were always there. We were in their houses. We were talking to their kids. When Sandra Smallegan disappeared, we did a house-to-house search."

Slaughter describes his own involvement in the case as minuscule. Being a rookie did allow him to hang out on the perimeter of the investigation, to sit in as senior detectives interviewed Meirhofer over lunch at the D and H Cafe.

"He had two personalities. The David Meirhofer typical-Manhattan guy, very talented mechanic who knew everybody and was very friendly, that was one side," Slaughter said. "He offered to help search for the victim and actually went on the original search for the Smallegan girl. The other side was a killer."

Detectives arrested Meirhofer as he exited a Manhattan store Sept. 27, 1974. He said nothing.

Then Gallatin County Attorney Thomas Olson, now a District Judge, told reporters

the arrest was a rush job. In Meirhofer's last call to Marietta Jaeger, a child could be heard in the background saying, "He's really a nice man." Detectives worried he was about to strike again, but eventually officials concluded the voice was a recording.

Detectives searched Meirhofer's home, where they found bags of human tissue and a woman's hand with fingernails bitten to the quick, a habit Smallegan had. They also found a meticulous paper trail of Meirhofer's whereabouts, receipts and maps outlining his travels.

After reviewing the evidence found at the Meirhofer's Manhattan triplex, defense attorney Douglas Dasinger went to the county jail in Bozeman, where his client was being held, and told Meirhofer to bargain for his life.

The Manhattan handyman and carpenter talked only after Olson agreed not to seek the death penalty. Meirhofer in turn agreed not to plead innocent by reason of insanity.

At 3:20 in the morning Sept. 29, Meirhofer met with Dunbar, Dasinger and Olson at the jail and confessed.

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Meirhofer told how he kidnapped Susie Jaeger then drove her to the abandoned Lockhart ranch in the Horseshoe Hills. When he undressed her and attempted to feel her body, she squirmed and he choked her, he said. Meirhofer explained matter-of-factly how he cut up and burned Susie Jaeger's body, then dumped her head in a nearby outhouse.

He admitted kidnapping Sandra Dykman Smallegan while she slept Feb. 9 of that year. Meirhofer dated Smallegan once; she refused his advances afterward. He said he tied her up and sealed her mouth with tape, then began packing her clothes in her car.

"While I was putting some of the clothes and stuff in the car she evidently died," Meirhofer said. "She couldn't get any air through the tape."

He took her to the Lockhart ranch, hid her car in the barn and cut up her body. Smallegan's remains were burnt in a hot bonfire of wood shingles.

Dunbar then asked the former Marine if he had shot Bernard Poelman, 13, from the Nixon Bridge near Manhattan in March of 1967. Meirhofer said yes.

"Well, I had been up in the hills and came down past the bridge and two boys were - I seen them playing there. And I went down the road and parked about 100 yards, 150 yards and walked out around with my rifle, .22-caliber, into the bushes on the other side of the river," Meirhofer said. "And then I saw Bernie Poelman, playing on the - climbing up the pillar of the bridge and then I shot him."

"Did you see him fall into the river?" Dunbar asked.

Meirhofer said yes.

"Did you know he was dead?" asked Dunbar.

Meirhofer: "I didn't know for sure." Meirhofer denied the attempted Girl Scout abduction, then admitted to stabbing Michael Raney, a Bozeman Boy Scout at the Headwaters State Park.

Dunbar wrapped up the confession at 4:11 a.m., calling it a morning. Five hours later, after getting the county attorney to drop the death penalty, Meirhofer tied a bath towel to his cell bars and hanged himself.

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