



BYRON HETZLER, THE SOUTHERN

Ladonna Cooper's grave in Rose Hill Cemetery in Marion.

35-year mystery

QUESTIONS STILL UNANSWERED IN 1987 LADONNA COOPER HOMICIDE

SHAWN ANGLIN | The Southern

Key sites in Cooper investigation

Thirty-five years after Marion resident Ladonna Cooper was murdered, her children still don't know who took their mother's life or why she was killed.

Cooper's oldest daughter, Kelli Cooper-Bathon was 10 years old when her mother, then 32, was killed in 1987. She said the question she has been asked the most is 'What is it like to continue through life without a mom?'

"My response has been different with each decade that has passed," Cooper-Bathon said. "I rejoice in the fact that God has given me many 'helpers' along the way to fill in the gaps that were created by such unimaginable loss. I can look back now and see how He has carried me this entire time so that, 35 years later, I am still here."

Cooper, a married mother of three, was an assistant manager at the Bonanza Family Restaurant, which was located on Illinois 13 just east of Interstate 57 in Marion. The same building that once housed Bonanza is currently Tequilas Mexican Restaurant.

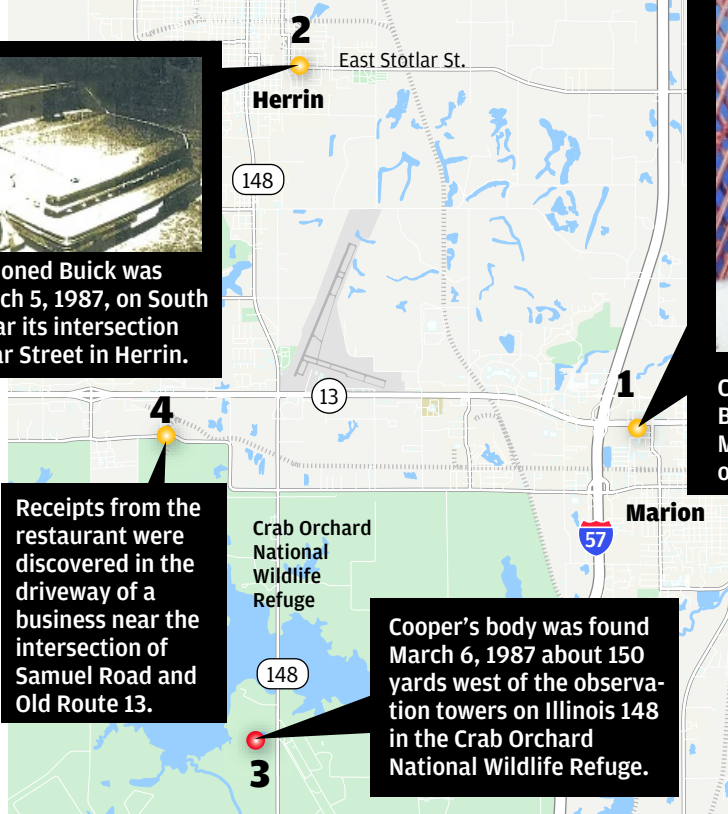
About 8 p.m. Wednesday, March 4, 1987, Cooper's two daughters and husband, Bobby, went to the restaurant to visit her while she ate dinner on her break. They had no idea it would be their last meal together.

"March has always had a certain dark and heavy feeling for me," said Jodi Cooper-Kelly, Cooper's youngest daughter who was 7 years old at the time her mother was killed. "Part of me still feels like that 7-year-old girl whose life was turned upside



Cooper's abandoned Buick was discovered March 5, 1987, on South Sixth Street near its intersection with East Stotlar Street in Herrin.

THE SOUTHERN FILE PHOTO



Ladonna Cooper is pictured with her youngest daughter Jodi. PROVIDED

down and whose childhood was no longer. The 7-year-old whose head is spinning, still struggling to understand what has happened and why, and trying to fig-

ure out where to go from here."

Cooper was in charge of closing the business that evening. Her duties included ensuring the night's receipts were prop-



Cooper was abducted from Bonanza Family Restaurant in Marion after closing the business on March 4, 1987.

▲ Ladonna Cooper is pictured in a family photo from 1986.

erly documented and making a bank deposit.

The restaurant had a significant amount of business that day and the evening shift employees had to stay later than normal. Cooper was the last of those employees to leave. She called her husband, Bobby, about 11:45 p.m. to tell him she would be leaving in about 10 minutes.

When Cooper didn't make it home by about 12:15 a.m. Thursday, her husband became concerned and attempted to call the restaurant. No one answered, so he drove from their home on Goodall Street in Marion to Bonanza. When he found no trace of his wife or her light blue 1986 Buick Century, he drove back home thinking she would be there when he arrived. She still wasn't home, so he called Bonanza management.

Managers found the business had all the appearances of being closed for the night when they arrived. However, Cooper, her car, the night's receipts and currency used to open the restaurant the next day were all missing. These findings were then reported to the Marion Police Department.

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ZEIGLER-ROYALTON

Teacher claims he was fired for reporting bullying

MAKAYLA HOLDER
The Southern

ZEIGLER — A Zeigler-Royalton Junior High teacher says he was fired as retaliation for reporting another teacher who allegedly bullied a student.

Jonathon Walters, a STEM and math teacher, was told at a school board meeting Monday night he would no longer be working at the school following the completion of the year.

Walters said he believes his job loss was retaliation for reporting of bullying made in good faith.

He described the circumstances behind his firing in an interview with The Southern and in a 24-page document.

Following several reports made by Walters to the principal about various bullying incidents between teachers and students, he was asked into a meeting with the principal and Superintendent Quent Hamilton.

The principal had told Walters he could have his union representative present but he declined, assuming the meeting was about bullying, Walters said.

In the meeting, Walters said they told him they would not be renewing his contract for the following year and he should resign at the board meeting.

When Walters asked why, Hamilton said he didn't like when new teachers accuse veteran teachers of bullying

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ILLINOIS

Masks still required in some places

MARILYN HALSTEAD
The Southern

On Monday, Gov. J.B. Pritzker's mask mandate was lifted for most locations.

That means Illinoisans can shop, eat at a restaurant or work in offices without wearing a mask — or does it?

According to a press release about lifting the mandate, masks are still required in some places, including: places where masks are federally mandated, such as public transportation and in high-risk settings like healthcare facilities and congregated care; and in daycare settings. The state also intends to continue masking requirements in preschool through high school, subject to pending litigation.

Businesses can require mitigation stricter than the state, which could include masks.

Carbondale had a mask requirement that expired with the state's lifting of mandates. Schnucks issued a press release Monday saying seven of its locations, including the Carbondale store, are still requiring masks, so it's a little confusing.

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