

CRIME & COURTS

Highway serial killings in Iowa and US needlessly going unsolved, FBI author says

Some of the most notorious highway serial killers came from Iowa, including Clark Perry Baldwin, 'The Truck Stop Killer' and the 'I-65 Killer.' Tammy Jo Zywicki's death is among unsolved Iowa cases.



Lee Rood

Des Moines Register

Published 7:45 a.m. CT June 17, 2024 | Updated 7:45 a.m. CT June 17, 2024



Key Points

- Nearly 200 unsolved serial killings along highways remain active investigations in the U.S.
- The FBI has a database that could help solve those crimes, but law enforcement agencies often aren't aware of it.
- The criteria to enter information into the Highway Serial Killings Initiative database is simple: The victim must be a female "victim of opportunity," last seen alive and later found dead near a highway.

Nearly 200 unsolved serial killings along highways remain active investigations in the U.S., but law enforcement agencies, especially in rural areas, often aren't aware of a database that could help solve those crimes, according to a former top director at the FBI and author of a new book on the subject.

That's important to know in a state such as Iowa, home to several notorious serial killers and crossed by interstate highways such as I-35, I-80 and I-29 that are known as human trafficking hubs.

Long-haul trucking has been the No. 1 profession of serial killers by far, according to Frank Figliuzzi, a retired 25-year special agent who served as assistant director for counterintelligence at the FBI. Around 25 are in prison for multiple homicides related to highway killings, he said.

The author of “LONG HAUL: Hunting the Highway Serial Killers,” released last month, Figliuzzi said the FBI, using DNA evidence, has had luck finding some extraordinarily hard-to-catch serial killers who were long-haul truckers.

But the agency’s biggest challenge in solving the crimes is that law enforcement officials sometimes aren’t entering information about murders in a database created through the Highway Serial Killings Initiative.

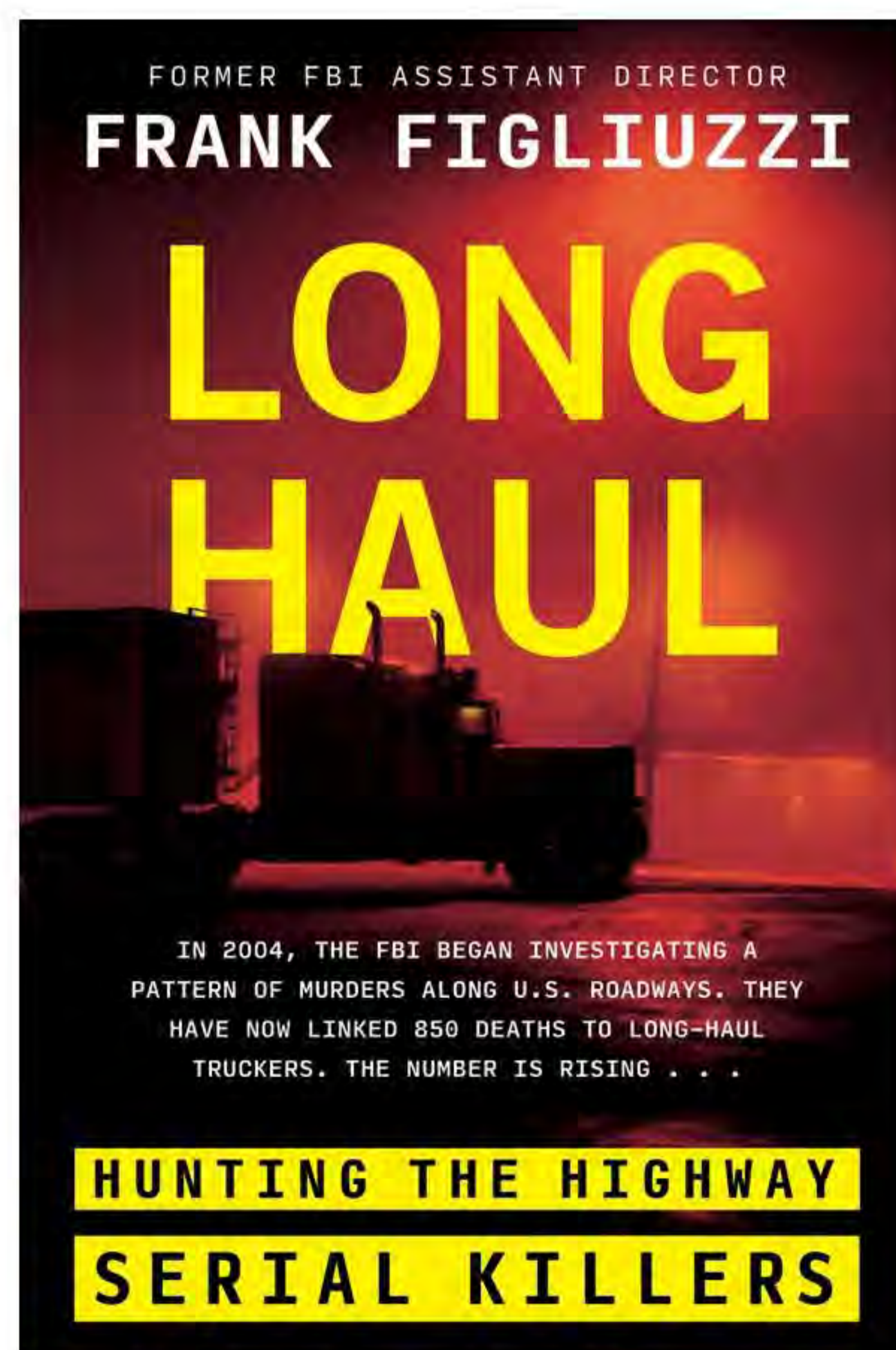
“This is the problem: Many don’t even know the database exists,” he said. “If the police department doesn’t know about it or they know but don’t have resources to fill out the forms, then we’ve got nothing.”

The FBI knows that many serial killers who are long-haul truckers remain on the loose, he said. About 450 suspects have been identified in the national database, which includes about 850 victims, and bodies often are dumped in rural areas.

If there is one takeaway from his research, Figliuzzi said, it is that families of missing, suspected victims can be instrumental in persuading local law enforcement officials to enter information in the national database so that analysts can discover links between crimes and how they were committed.

One example, he noted: There are generally two kinds of serial killers — those who kill quickly and those who want to prolong their control of their eventual victims. Knowing how someone was killed can help reduce a suspect pool.

“A crime scene,” Figliuzzi said, “can have a dead victim tell us who killed her. Which is why the database is so essential. Part of my goal with this book is to champion the cause of these victims who can’t speak for themselves.”



“LONG HAUL: Hunting the Highway Serial Killers,” by Frank Figliuzzi, a retired FBI special agent, recounts the agency’s efforts to track down long-haul truckers turned serial killers. *Provided By Frank Figliuzzi*

The criteria to enter information into the Highway Serial Killings Initiative database is simple: The victim must be a female “victim of opportunity,” last seen alive and later found dead near a highway, he said.

More: [From John Wayne Gacy to the 'I-65 Killer,' how these 11 serial killers are connected to Iowa](#)

Trucker Clark Perry Baldwin charged in 2020 with killing 3 women

DNA evidence was key in helping authorities nab Clark Perry Baldwin, then 58, in Waterloo in 2020 for the killings of three women in Wyoming and Tennessee in the 1990s, including two who were pregnant.

Baldwin had graduated from Nashua-Plainfield High School in 1979 and worked most his career as an over-the-road trucker, living in Nashua and Waterloo in Iowa and in Springfield, Missouri.

In 1991, he was charged with raping a 21-year-old hitchhiker at gunpoint in Wheeler County, Texas. But the charges were dismissed after the state couldn't find the victim, court documents show.

In 1997, Baldwin and two female associates were indicted on counterfeiting charges. Baldwin was sentenced to 18 months in prison and released in 1999.



Clark Perry Baldwin, 59, shown in an undated mugshot provided by the attorney general for the 22nd Judicial District in Tennessee. *Provided By Attorney General For The 22nd Judicial District In Tennessee*

Tennessee reopened another case in April 2019, and using DNA recovered from the crime scene, authorities were able to create a DNA profile of the suspect. When put into a national database, the DNA came back as a match for a suspect in the two unsolved homicides in Wyoming.

Tennessee investigators used DNA that had come back as a match from the Wyoming killings to lead them to Baldwin through a close match with a relative who'd submitted DNA to a genealogy business.

Baldwin was subsequently charged with two counts of murder in the 1991 killing of 32-year-old Pamela Rose McCall and her unborn fetus. McCall was found in woods off Interstate 65 in Spring Hill, Tennessee, in March of that year.

McCall was last seen at a Tennessee truck stop days before her killing. An autopsy determined McCall died of strangulation.

In Wyoming, Baldwin also was charged in the deaths of two women whose bodies were found in 1992 roughly 400 miles apart. The women, who were never identified, were referred to as "Bitter Creek Betty" and "I-90 Jane Doe."

The FBI had secretly collected DNA from Baldwin's trash in Waterloo and a shopping cart he used at Walmart. When put into a national database, his DNA came back as a match in connection with the two unsolved homicides in Wyoming.

Figliuzzi said about two-dozen slayings nationally fit Baldwin's pattern of killing. One involved Rhonda Knutson, a 22-year-old truck stop convenience store clerk in northern Iowa who was bludgeoned to death during an overnight shift in 1992. She was not sexually assaulted, and robbery was not considered a motive at the time.

Knutson had lived in nearby Nashua, where Baldwin also had lived.

Two truckers whom witnesses reportedly saw in the convenience store the morning Knutson was killed were sought for questioning but never found. Both men were described as heavysset with dark hair and ages 35 to 45.

Was Grinnell College student Tammy Jo Zywicki killed by an ex-con trucker?

Another possible victim could have been [Tammy Jo Zywicki](#), who was murdered a month earlier the same year.

A native of New Jersey who grew up in South Carolina, Zywicki dropped off her brother at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, then vanished in central Illinois on Aug. 23, 1992, after her car broke down on Interstate 80 as she was driving to Grinnell College to begin her senior year.

Zywicki's petite body was found nine days after her disappearance, about 500 miles away in a ditch off a stretch of Interstate 44 between Springfield and Joplin in Missouri. She had been stabbed eight times, raped and rolled up in a red blanket, sealed on both ends with duct tape.

The 21-year-old's murder made international news.

Figliuzzi said Zywicki's abduction and murder were very likely committed by someone who had killed before because it was a risky move. The way the crime played out on a busy interstate, the way her body had been bound with duct tape, suggested the person responsible was emboldened by past crimes, he said.

suggested the person responsible was emboldened by past crimes, he said.

Several other suspected highway serial killers also have been raised as possible suspects in the Zywicki case over the years, including Lonnie Bierbrodt, an ex-con trucker with ties to both Illinois and Missouri who died in 2002.

In 2014, an investigator who was on the first task force assembled after Zywicki's death, retired Illinois State Police Master Sgt. [Marty McCarthy](#), told [Watchdog](#) that Bierbrodt should be suspect No. 1.

The retiree said law enforcement appeared to give up on Bierbrodt after Bierbrodt's ex-wife — a nurse who had shown off a musical watch similar to one belonging to Zywicki and went missing after her abduction — refused to talk to investigators.

Bierbrodt lived in Missouri, close to the stretch of highway where Zywicki's body was discovered. He drove a Kenworth truck, according to news reports, and the red blanket in which Zywicki's body was found had a Kenworth logo.

Bierbrodt, a LaSalle County native, also confirmed to investigators that he'd been near the spot on I-80 where Zywicki was last seen on the day of the abduction. His brothers and mother lived in the Peru, Illinois, area, and he'd been trying to get a job there.

'The Truck Stop Killer' suspected in up to 50 murders

With DNA evidence, the FBI can link suspects with crimes no one has unraveled.

Experts have said Council Bluffs native Robert Ben Rhoades — a gruesome killer who tortured and photographed victims — may have murdered as many as 50 people, though he was convicted in court of only three.

Rhoades became known as “The Truck Stop Killer” because police discovered him assaulting a woman who had been handcuffed and chained to bars he had installed in the sleeper compartment of his truck.

Rhoades was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a 14-year-old Illinois girl whose skeleton was discovered in a barn in 1990. At the time, he was already serving a six-year prison sentence in Arizona for the attempted kidnapping of a woman police found him torturing.

Rhoades was later put on trial for the 1990 kidnapping and murder of a newlywed couple in Texas, for which he narrowly escaped the death penalty and instead received two further life sentences.

'I-65 Killer' led life of crime, but wasn't charged with murders

Dubbed the “I-65 Killer,” Harry Edward Greenwell wasn’t identified until nine years after his death.

Though he spent a significant amount of time in prison for crimes from burglary to sodomy, he died while living in northeast Iowa without ever being charged for murder.

DNA evidence tied him to the murder of at least three female victims, and the sexual assault of at least one more, in Indiana and Kentucky from 1987 to 1989.

Greenwell’s victims, Vicki Heath, Margaret “Peggy” Gill and Jeanne Gilbert, all worked as motel clerks along the I-65 corridor at the time of their deaths. Greenwell assaulted each of his victims and then shot them to death, according to investigators.

The investigation into Greenwell’s crimes spanned more than 30 years.

The Key Points at the top of this article were created with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and reviewed by a journalist before publication. No other parts of the article were generated using AI. [Learn more.](#)



Harry Edward Greenwell Provided By The Indiana State Police

