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Steve Lopez POINTS WEST

Another Dance With L.A.'s Black Dahlia Case

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All right, so I might have said on Friday that I was going to let it rest. But now I can see that's impossible. Once you step inside the cloud of mystery surrounding the Black Dahlia murder, there's no way out.

Moviemakers, amateur snoops, retired cops and a gaggle of others got in touch with me to weigh in on the most notorious unsolved murder in Los Angeles history. I began tracking new leads on the 1947 case even as retired LAPD homicide cop Steve Hodel's new book hit the shelves, fingering his father as a serial killer whose victims included the Black Dahlia -- Elizabeth Short.

I've now been told that Los Angeles police are attempting to match prints of Hodel's father, Dr. George Hodel, to material still on file from the 56-year-old case. Short, 22, was sliced in two, drained of blood, and left in a vacant lot in Leimert Park.

If you believe Steve Hodel's "Black Dahlia Avenger," his father, a trained surgeon, romanced Short and then killed her in a jealous rage because she dated other men.

When I read the book I thought, OK, George Hodel could have killed her. But his son, a highly regarded former cop who says he cleared 80% of his 300 murder investigations for the LAPD, hadn't proved it.

But while digging through a 50-year-old grand jury file neither Hodel nor any other reporter had seen, I saw a transcript from the bugging of Dr. Hodel's house in early 1950. At one point, Dr. Hodel said to an unidentified visitor:

"Supposin' I did kill the Black Dahlia. They couldn't prove it now. They can't talk to my secretary because she's dead."

It's possible Dr. Hodel knew his house was bugged, and he was taunting cops.

"Or," said Steve Hodel, offering another theory, "I'm right."

But who was the secretary? And who was the woman whose screams were recorded on the transcript after Dr. Hodel made that remark?

I can't explain the screams just yet. But as for the secretary, I've learned that the LAPD investigated a report that George Hodel might have poisoned a secretary who was writing about him in her diary. The secretary, whose name my source refused to divulge, died late in 1947 of an apparent poisoning, several months after the Black Dahlia murder.

According to my contact, an anonymous caller told police "Dr. Hodel was involved in a noted case in 1947 and had poisoned his secretary shortly thereafter because she knew of the crime." The caller claimed Hodel had buried something in the yard of his Los Feliz home.

The diary, perhaps?

The police report, which is part of a four-drawer Black Dahlia file at the LAPD Robbery-Homicide Division, says nothing was found in Hodel's yard. It's not clear from the record, according to my source, whatever came of the allegation that Hodel had killed his secretary.

Investigators at the time seemed to have stepped back to await the outcome of Dr. Hodel's December 1949 trial for molesting his 14-year-old daughter. Hodel ran a smear campaign against his daughter, calling her a tramp and a liar. He was acquitted, only to have his house bugged two months later by investigators who were still hot on his trail.

That brings us back to Hodel's, "Supposin' I did kill the Black Dahlia," and the remark about his dead secretary.

Tamar Hodel, the daughter in that 1949 case, tells a story that supports the notion that her physician father killed the secretary. Tamar says her father raped her when she was 14, and her stepmother encouraged her to run away before something worse happened to her at the hands of her father.

"She said, 'You've got to get out of here, it's gone too far,' " says Tamar, 68, "and she told me a story that scared me to death."

The story was about the dead employee. Tamar remembered her as a nurse, but Hodel ran a VD clinic in downtown L.A., so it's possible the employee performed clerical and medical duties.

According to Tamar, her stepmother said George Hodel urgently summoned her to an apartment late one night, and the stepmother found the doctor with a woman he claimed had overdosed. Tamar says that by her mother's account, the doctor handed her some books the woman had written (diaries?), and told her to destroy them.

The woman died a short while later, and the diaries never surfaced.

Did Dr. George Hodel kill his secretary, the Black Dahlia, and a total of up to 20 women in the 1940s and 1950s?

Steve Hodel is convinced of it. He began working on his book in 1999, when his father died at the age of 91, and Steve found photos in his belongings of a woman resembling the Black Dahlia.

Hodel argues that his father was never arrested because he had friends in high places and damaging information on police commanders, politicians, gangsters and Hollywood players.

I still can't buy such a grand conspiracy, but it's clear Dr. Hodel was up to no good, and it's clear he was trying to cover his tracks.

I leave you with one last excerpt I dug up from the 1950 bugging transcripts. On the same night that George Hodel said, "Supposin' I did kill the Black Dahlia," he said this to the unknown man with the German accent who was accompanying him:

"Any imperfections will be found. They will have to be made perfect. Don't confess ever. Two and two is not four." Much laughter [police notation]. "We're just a couple of smart boys." More laughter.

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