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California

Author details father's alleged link to 'Black Dahlia' murder

Retired police detective says he has solved L.A.'s notorious 1947 slaying

BY LINDA DEUTSCH
LOS ANGELES — He carries it in his pocket as a talisman, a tiny 3-inch book of gray photos that he touches now and then as if reminding himself that the horror is real.

Steve Hodal, a retired LAPD homicide detective, is adding to the discovery of evidence including this little book, that he had given his late father, a respected Los Angeles detective, was the nature killer of Elizabeth Short, the so-called Black Dahlia. Hodal believes his father might have aided several other women, as well.

If he is correct, Hodal has cracked more than half-century-old murder case that is the oldest and most notorious of Los Angeles' unsolved "cold cases."

It also is one of the most sensational, a mystery replete with a beautiful victim, a grotesque murder, an insect trail and famous characters from the heyday of old Hollywood.

Hodal, 61, has written this gruesome tale in a book, "Black Dahlia Avenger."

"This is Hamzah Lecter meets LA Confidential in Chinatown," said Hodal, who now lives in Lake Arrowhead, a mountain town east of Los Angeles. "You couldn't make up a story like this."

"Even before this, people would say to me, 'Your family is so interesting, you should write a book,'" Hodal said in an interview. "But the fact that I would grow up to be a politician and then discover this, well..." His voice trails off in sadness.

In his book, Hodal paints his father, Dr. George Hodal, as a friend who returned and carved up a young woman and gave her body parts to his family and fled the United States.

"I loved my father and respected him," Hodal said. "His blood flows through my body. He gave me being. But now I have come to look at my father as the true Dr. Hodal, the man who killed Elizabeth Short in 1947 at the age of 31."

His following pages contained snapshots of some of George Hodal's 11 children from four marriages, including Steve and his mother, the ex-wife of doctor John Huston.

But what caught his eye were two carefully posed and framed photographs of a mystery woman with flowers in her hair. "It wasn't a good guess," he said. "I was in immediate recognition," the author recalls. "But I thought, 'Why



Harvester of sorrow: Steve Hodal displays two photographs of Elizabeth Short, known as 1947 as the 'Black Dahlia,' victim of a bizarre and brutal murder the same year, contained in a tiny book of gray photos given to him by his father's widow when the elder Hodal died in 1999.



Making the connection: Retired LAPD homicide detective Steve Hodal displays two photographs of Elizabeth Short, known as 1947 as the 'Black Dahlia,' victim of a bizarre and brutal murder the same year, contained in a tiny book of gray photos given to him by his father's widow when the elder Hodal died in 1999.

do I know this fact?"

He remembered a movie about the Black Dahlia case and began to do computer research, comparing the photos in the album with those of Elizabeth Short.

"Initially, I was sure there was some other explanation," Hodal said. "I did know a lot of beautiful women. I was in demand."

But as his research continued, his conviction became irrefragable.

Dr. George Hodal was a man with a genius IQ, who socialized with Hollywood legends such as Marlon Brando and photographer Hans Namuth and artist-photographer Frank Lloyd Wright's son Lloyd Wright, where the rich and famous parties.

The 1947 Black Dahlia killing is a Los Angeles legend. The body was severed at the waist, drained of blood and washed, then carefully posed in a vacant lot. Hodal said the pose was right out of a sculpture by the Hodal's famous friend, Miss Ray.

Contributing to the crime's enduring fascination were the beauty of the 25-year-old victim, who would die in her black hair, and the stories circulated at the time of her Hollywood ambitions.

"It's become synonymous with unsolved murders of beautiful women," said Sarah Gibbons, spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

Mystery writer Robert Craun, the author of "L.A. Requiem" and other books set in Los Angeles, said it was no ordinary crime.

"Certain things are part of the fabric of Los Angeles," he said, "and the Black Dahlia is one of them."

Elizabeth Short had come from Massachusetts in the 1940s in search of a better life. She died many years and her true love in a wartime plane crash. Records show that several witnesses identified Short as a girlfriend of Dr. George Hodal.

When District Attorney Steve Cooney decided recently to reinvestigate the long-quiet file on the case, Steve Hodal's theory gained substance. His father's photograph was in the file, along with transcripts of electronic surveillance on his home for three weeks in 1950.

The reports are fragile, typed on out-of-date paper that is yellowed and crumbling. But they make clear that Dr. Hodal was one of the prime suspects in the investigation of Short's murder.

He had been tried and acquitted on a charge of committing incest on his 14-year-old daughter in a sensational 1949 trial during which the Black Dahlia was mentioned.

Afterward, police electronically bugged his Hollywood mansion, a Midway-style office designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's son Lloyd Wright, where the rich and famous parties.

The transcripts of overheard conversations include a statement in Hodal's voice saying, "Suppose I did kill the Black Dahlia. They couldn't prove it now. They can't talk to my secretary anymore because she's dead."

Another print is captioned as saying, "Maybe I did kill my secretary."

The younger Hodal now believes that his father killed the victim to keep her from talking.

He also links Dr. Hodal to the so-called "Red IPeck murder" of Jeanne French, a woman found dead with a gunshot wound to the chest and an obscenity and the initials "J.D." scrawled on her nude body in red lipstick.

The author also said he recognizes his father and an alleged accomplice might also be linked to the murders of seven other women and suggests they were sexual killers.

Why didn't the police prosecute Hodal's father? The book offers a complicated theory involving police corruption and Hodal's position as the doctor who worked with the public health department in treating venereal diseases in Los Angeles.

His medical files might have included some famous names, Steve Hodal also suggests some authorities were bribed.

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