

19940227 Marc Perrusquia, *Damien Echols may be troubled but he's not killer, some say*, COMMERCIAL APPEAL (Memphis), Feb. 27, 1994, at 1.

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Body

The legend of Damien Echols blows through the trailer parks and flatlands around this Delta town like a brisk winter wind, chilling listeners with tales of vampires, satanism and ritual murder.

Rumors have run wild since police found the nude bodies of three 8-year-old West Memphis boys last May in a water-filled ditch. From the start, authorities received tips the murders were occult killings.

Echols, a quiet teenager who often wore a black trench coat and talked about worshipping the devil, became a prime suspect within days.

A jury in Jonesboro, Ark., will try to separate fact from fiction this week, when testimony begins Monday in the triple-murder trial of Echols, 19, and Charles Jason Baldwin, 16.

A third defendant, Jessie Lloyd Misskelley Jr., 18, was convicted earlier this month.

Prosecutors suggest Echols was a member of a cult that held sex orgies and ate the hind legs of dogs.

Some people close to Echols agree he has a history of mental and family troubles, but they dismiss sensational claims of satanism and cult involvement.

"He liked vampire movies and vampire books, but I do too so what?" said Dian Teer, 44, whose teenage daughter, Domini, had a baby last year with Echols. "What really scares me is the one who really

(killed the boys) is still out there, and the cops are sitting there patting themselves on the back."

To some, Echols was just a shy, moody kid from the wrong part of town.

"He was the quietest, most polite kid you ever saw," said Anna Mettler, attendant at the Holiday Plaza Lanes bowling alley in West Memphis, where Echols often shot pool and played video games.

Echols also enjoyed skateboarding and chasing girls. He spray-painted graffiti under viaducts, got in his share of fights and enjoyed heavy-metal rock music.

Yet rumor and mystery surrounded Echols even before the May 5 murders of West Memphis second-graders Christopher Byers, Michael Moore and Steve Branch.

Echols left Marion public schools in the fall of 1992 and departed on an extended family trip to the Portland, Ore., area.

When he returned to the trailer parks of Marion and nearby West Memphis a few months later, Echols bounced between his father's home and the trash-strewn Teer trailer in the Lakeshore Estate mobile home park south of Marion.

Echols told some teens a satanic priestess had followed him from Oregon to murder him or pull him back into a cult.

"It's the misconceptions of an ill mind," said West Memphis teenager Murray Farris, who said he discussed the occult at times with Echols.

Others noticed that the polite, well-behaved boy they once knew as Michael Wayne Hutchison now was Damien Echols. Records indicate he legally changed his name in 1990 when he was adopted by his stepfather, Jack Echols of Marion, but it's disputed why he took the name Damien.

Classmates said the name is patterned after the anti-christ figure in The Omen movies. But family members said Echols, who attended classes at St. Michael's in West Memphis a few years ago and considered joining the Catholic faith, took the name from a 19th Century Belgian Roman Catholic missionary named Father Damien.

At the Teer trailer, Echols slept on a mattress in a room with a homemade Ouija board and a red light bulb hanging from the ceiling, said friends who visited the trailer. He worked when he could, and often was seen in his black trench coat walking along local roads during daylight hours and at night.

"He wore that coat down to his knees if it was 90 degrees," said Lakeshore resident Anita Brewer.

The Teers turned heads too. After the murders, a reporter found an underground magazine outside their trailer called the Secret Order of the Undead, or SOUND. The amateurish magazine, published by Domini's cousin, Tammy Jo Teer, 23, of Upland, Calif., is aimed at teens and young adults interested in vampires, tales of ghoulish murders, macabre poetry and artwork, horror fantasy and other phenomenon.

Echols and Domini Teer, 17, last year had a son, Seth, out of wedlock. Echols missed the boy's birth last September because he was in jail.

"They were going to get married before all this started," Dian Teer said. "As far as I'm concerned, he's already had his punishment by not being able to see his baby."

According to Teer, Echols left for Oregon after he and her daughter received treatment at Charter Lakeside hospital in Little Rock for mental health reasons. Teer declined to discuss specifics, but others have hinted that Echols has had a history of mental problems.

Echols apparently attempted suicide in jail days after his June arrest by taking an overdose of the prescription antidepressant Amitriptyline, officials said.

What Echols was doing in Oregon is not clear. Echols rode there with several relatives, including his young half-brother, Timothy Hutchison, and their father, Eddie Joe Hutchison, who worked at several gas stations in the Portland area.

Eddie Joe Hutchison, who lived off-and-on in Oregon for about three years, married there twice, records show. Marriage licenses show Hutchison remarried Damien's natural mother, Pamela, in Portland in February 1993.

Eddie Joe and Pamela first married in 1973 when they eloped to New Mexico as teenagers, records show. Eddie Joe, 37, has been married at

least four times; Pamela, 35, has been married three times, records show.

After a few months, Echols returned to Arkansas following some unknown trouble in Oregon. Timothy, now 8 years old, and the rest of the family returned in March 1993, said Timothy's mother, Mary Esther Hutchison, 30, who divorced Eddie Joe in 1988.

"What scares me is, it wasn't two months after I got my son back that these other kids the same age show up dead," she said.

Rumors roared through Marion and West Memphis the day Echols was arrested. He sacrificed babies, neighbors said. He covered one of his girlfriends in blood and made love to her, others claimed.

"I've heard stories about him drinking Domini's blood and (co-defendant) Jason's blood," Dian Teer said. "I've heard so many stories," most untrue, she said.

"This is one of the biggest nightmares in the world."

Yet facts presented by authorities at times appear to be the stranger than any rumor.

Among testimony at the Misskelley trial, Crittenden County chief juvenile officer Jerry Driver said he saw Echols, Baldwin and Misskelley one night in November 1992 at Lakeshore dressed in black and carrying "staffs." West Memphis police Det. Mike Allen testified that Misskelley told him he saw a fight in which Damien "wiped blood off his nose and licked the blood."

But witness Victoria Hutcheson painted an even darker picture. She testified she attended an eerie outdoor cult meeting at night with Echols and Misskelley in the weeks between the May 5 murders and the June 3 arrests.

Hutcheson said she played detective and tried to gain Echols's confidence by luring him with library books on the occult. Hutcheson first met the pale teenager with slicked-back hair and dark, piercing eyes in her home over a coffee table littered with books on witchcraft, demons and black magic, she said after the trial.

"He was mysterious very mysterious, very scary," she said. "I asked him, 'How do you become a witch?' He just said, 'All in time, Victoria. All in time.' "

But, like other details on Echols, Hutcheson's account seems to raise more questions than answers.

She provided few details about the satanic "esbat" meeting because Judge David Burnett limited her testimony. After the trial, Hutcheson said she couldn't identify anyone else at the meeting because it was dark and some people were painted black. She said she left when people started having sex.

Hutcheson also testified it's the voice of her 8-year-old son, Aaron, that says "Nobody knows what happened but me" on a tape-recording police used to spark a confession from Misskelley. It is widely speculated that Aaron, who was friends with the three slain boys, narrowly escaped death that day.

Police said Aaron identified Echols, Misskelley and Baldwin as suspects.

But Misskelley attorney Dan Stidham suggested a \$ 45,000 reward and intense pressure to make arrests resulted in the charges against the three teens.

"They had Damien Echols picked out as responsible for this crime from day one," Stidham told jurors.

Under cross-examination, Stidham got Det. Bryn Ridge to say police were unable to confirm that any names among a list of cult members provided by Misskelley actually were in a cult because "they all deny it."

Stidham suggested the supposed cult might just be teens out partying.

Driver has said in interviews he's noticed an increase in teen interest in the occult in Crittenden County over the past few years. Evidence includes charred remains of bonfires, gutted animals and graffiti with occult themes.

Several teens also have mentioned a mysterious ring leader known only as Lucifer. "I've been looking for Lucifer for 2 years," Driver said, but hasn't found him.

Crittenden County librarian Nelda Antonetti also has said she's noticed more youths checking out books on satanism, the occult and magic. One book checked out by Echols, Cotton Mather on Witchcraft, had a dog-eared page that listed human fat in a recipe for a potion

enabling witches to fly and also mentioned the heart of an unbaptized baby as a delicacy following a black mass.

The night of the arrests, police confiscated a book from Echols' home, *Never On A Broomstick* by Frank Donovan.

Police, school and church officials, as well as family members, declined to discuss Echols.

Anyone looking for what might be haunting Echols could start with graffiti under a viaduct near Lakeshore:

"I'm Damien. Who are You?" And across the railroad tracks, in the same blue spray-paint: "Planet earth sucks: I want off."