

Death Sentence

The Inside Story of the John List Murders

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It is one of the curiosities of the modern human condition that serial killers, cult slayers, wild-eyed assassins, homicidal goons and other wanton murderers who commit atrocities that are sufficiently heinous to attract intense public interest manage also to attract what might be called, in the context of the rock-n-roll era that John List so despised, groupies.

Popular psychology has assiduously spent a half-century inventing labels for just about anything that can be monetized for therapeutic intervention of one sort or another, so I refer here to a term, “hybristophilia,” which is generally employed to describe a stranger’s intense attraction, typically sexual and most often in cases of females, to an infamous, imprisoned criminal of the worst sort imaginable.

By way of example, note that dozens of women over the decades have pledged eternal love for Charles Manson as the vile old killer languishes in prison. One of the most active of

them was a young female groupie to whom Manson became engaged when he was eighty and she was twenty-six. The happy couple even obtained a marriage license in 2014, but Manson later called the nuptials off, according to the *National Enquirer*, which follows these things, after the his perky fiancée was seen cavorting in public with another Manson groupie and would-be disciple, a 65-year-old man. It further transpired, according to the tabloids, that the love-struck fiancée, who also operated websites devoted to Manson and his cult, had hoped to ultimately exercise a widow's claim on Manson's corpse and put it on display in a glass case, Lenin-like, in a posthumous Charles Manson traveling exhibit. Alas, her plan came to naught.

I know that Wanda Flanery, the self-described “old busybody” and avid reader who fingered her oddball neighbor Bob Clarke as John List, after seeing his old photo in a 1987 story about the List murders in the *Weekly World News*, would have relished reading about Charles Manson's enterprising fiancée in the *National Enquirer*, which was one of the weekly supermarket tabloids she regularly purchased merely for sheer entertainment value. I think Wanda, who had welcomed me into her home in Denver in 1990, would have loved reading that Manson's 26-year-old fiancée allegedly had a business plan to encase the cult leader's body in glass and profitably haul the corpse on a display tour.

I always regarded Wanda as an unsung heroine without whose “nosiness” (I myself think of it as “situational awareness”), John List might have continued to evade justice for the rest of his wretched days.

Wanda died in 1997, aged 65. Till the end, she continued to be a consumer of the declining number of supermarket weekly tabloids. The *Weekly World News* died a year after she did.

Like all of truly hideous and notorious criminals, but unlike those with the perverse and intense theatricality radiated by the likes of Manson, List had a few deluded followers who wrote admiringly to him or sometimes even visited him in prison. One admirer, a man whom one would expect to have known better, stands out because he befriended the killer and helped him write a self-pitying, excuse-riddled, sad-sack, typo-ridden, rambling, self-published, moral cesspool manifesto in 2006 which had the atrocious title “*Collateral Damage: The John List Story, by John List with Austin Goodrich.*”

The unlikely groupie in this case was Goodrich, and the remarkable thing about Goodrich, aside from his being a fellow Michigan native, a fellow World War II veteran who was the same age as John List, and a fellow member of the Missouri Synod, was his swashbuckling background. Throughout the Cold War, Goodrich had been an undercover agent for the Central Intelligence Agency, and later posed for decades as a freelance journalist whose work, sanctioned by the CIA, was used briefly during the 1950s by CBS News (which fired him when his bosses learned of his CIA subterfuge), and later by newspapers and radio stations in the Midwest.

Shortly after List was convicted of five counts of murder and sent to prison in 1990, while publicity about the case was still in the air, Goodrich took it upon himself to visit List behind bars in Trenton, New Jersey. Then retired, Goodrich explained to List the similarities in their backgrounds. Both men were born in 1925 in Michigan “into solid, middle class, church-going families,” as their vanity collaboration would put it. Both were in the Army during World War II and both were assigned late in the war to the 86th Infantry Division, which had been deployed to Germany in April, 1945, the final month of the war in Europe.

Until he met his new friend Goodrich (who died in 2013), John List had not considered that that he might be able to use the very fact of his monstrous crimes as diagnostic evidence to backdate a claim of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a claim based on his brief exposure, forty-five years earlier, to some artillery shelling as the German army collapsed along the western bank of the Rhine a few weeks before the German surrender.

Official records show List's assertion of combat duty to be as spurious as the pitiful other justifications he offers for massacring his family on that day in 1971. Military records show that the 86th Infantry Division, 15,000 infantrymen spread out over a large area, recorded a total of 34 days in what are defined as "combat conditions" in 1945 – not 44 days, as claimed by List and his admiring co-author. After the war, the division as a whole was awarded Combat Infantryman's badges, which in turn became qualification for Bronze Star medals, which List applied for and was routinely granted years later, in 1952.

List claimed to have had a "brief stint" as a prisoner of war, the assertion based on an incident, described without a trace of irony in "*Collateral Damage*," in which he and several other soldiers encountered some fleeing German soldiers and were held at gunpoint in a field by the Germans -- till fellow Americans wandered along *a few hours later*, freed their countrymen, and took the Germans in turn into custody.

"*Collateral Damage*" is underpinned by List's johnny-come-lately PTSD excuses, which are an insult to veterans of military service, me included, and especially to our comrades who do suffer from traumatic physical and emotional injuries as a result of actual combat, most notably in the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the preface to “PTSD: Diagnosis and Identity in Post-Empire America,” a landmark study, the sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke writes that “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has traced a meteoric trajectory” from the days after the Vietnam War, when movies “molded a traumatized Vietnam War veteran out of stock WWI shell-shock imagery and their own imaginations.” During the 1970s, Lembcke writes, the combat “flashback” narrative “achieved legitimacy as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” and was certified as such with its inclusion in the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association.

In “*Collateral Damage*,” List and his geriatric fanboy Goodrich reproduce reports from prison psychiatrists and psychologists attesting to List’s purported PTSD, the disorder being a therapeutic growth industry in prison medical clinics. List – never a stickler for consistency -- concedes that he had no memory of actually *being* in combat during his few weeks in Germany as the war wound down. “I was told we came under artillery fire, but I don’t remember it,” he writes. “I must have suffered a form of temporary amnesia.”

He and Goodrich then assert, as if citing Scripture rather than the code-book for diagnosis and just as importantly insurance-billing that is the DSM, that “inability to recall traumatic experiences in combat (disassociation and psychogenic amnesia) is accepted as one of the six symptoms of the disorder.”

In a television interview in prison as he and Goodrich were promoting their odious apologia in 2006, List casually recounted that he made himself dinner in the kitchen of the family home after massacring his wife, mother and three teenaged children, one by one. It was, he said, similar to the World War II combat that he had belatedly come to believe he had

experienced, and forgotten till prison therapists entered the picture and helped his faulty memory along a half-century later.

“Having been in combat we were out killing and fighting and then we’d come in and have something to eat. That was what allowed me to eat peacefully in the room where I killed my family,” he told his credulous television interviewer.

In another part of this astonishing television interview, List explained why he chose Denver for starting his new life in late 1971, having just murdered his family in New Jersey: “I just thought I would like to see the mountains and relax a little because I had been under a lot of stress.”

Throughout “*Collateral Damage*,” List exhibits invincible audacity. While making excuses for himself as a decent, god-fearing man impelled by outside forces to cause the “tragedy” (the noun that he and Goodrich choose to describe the massacre of the family), List continues to settle scores and cast blame on his victims.

On Helen and their marriage in 1951: “Only later did it occur to me that Helen may have fabricated a notional pregnancy to trick me into making a commitment to marriage without revealing her plan to anyone, not even to her sister. If that were the case, the web of deceit she wove certainly had tragic consequences.”

On Helen’s wifely misfeasance as List was fired from job to job over the years because of his inability to adapt to changing workplace challenges: “Helen kept me from doing better at my jobs.”

Referring to his daughter Pat, he recalls an incident in which his children raised a ruckus, causing him to rush into the kitchen of the New Jersey home and discover a small snake, undoubtedly a harmless garter snake, on a counter. Terrified of snakes, List was still angry about the prank nearly forty years after he had murdered those children in the same kitchen. “I can’t believe that all three of the children just happened to be in the kitchen when I discovered the reptile,” he fumes. “I have a hunch that Pat was at the bottom of the plot and had alerted the boys to come watch for possible fireworks. In any case the stage was set for the tragedy that followed.”

On Pat, as a teenaged dabbler in the occult: “One day I discovered Pat and some of her friends had been playing with an Ouija board. I asked them not to get involved in this sort of activity, which I had read could release destructive forces.”

Again on Pat, by way of explaining, in a letter to his minister, why he had murdered her and the rest of his family on November 9, 1971 (which he described as “My Day of Infamy” in a chapter heading in “*Collateral Damage*.”) “...with Pat so determined to get into acting, I was also fearful as to what this might do to her continuing to be a Christian.”

On his personal emotional distress leading up to the “tragedy” he and Goodrich write, “This downward spiral led to the rejection of all options except that offered by murder. Could it be my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder played a role in this reasoning? Or is it possible that my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder stemming from World War II combat influenced my fateful decision?”

On the inconveniences of incarceration: “As much as I miss freedom of movement, I miss at least as much its corollary, the opportunity to get together with relatives and close friends.”

Describing his feelings after “preparing for the coming tragedy” and then spending a day administering death sentences to his wife, children and mother, as he sat down to compose his vile manifesto to his pastor: “I felt spent. Sated. Something like the empty feeling left after sex.”

On that pathetic note, over a quarter-century after I began it, I end my account of John List, a man I considered then and now to be a manifestation of nothing more and nothing less than calculated evil.

Consigning List finally to the past, I recall Moms Mabley, the pioneering African American standup comedian who came up through the Chitlin Circuit and died in 1975, an inspiration to a generation of female comedians. Moms famously said this after the death of a man she loathed: “They say you shouldn't say nothin' about the dead unless it's good. He's dead. Good!”

John List died in prison on March 21, 2008. Nobody came forward to claim the body.

Good.

-- THE END --