

New Evidence

DNA testing could exonerate trio convicted in child murders

It was one of the most heinous crimes in Arkansas history.

On May 5, 1993, three West Memphis boys—Stevie Branch, Michael Moore and Christopher Byers—were reported missing. They were last seen about 6 p.m. by a neighbor in the Robin Hood Hills area of the city.

The next day, searchers made a grisly discovery. The bodies of the three boys were found in a ditch. They had been stripped naked and tied up with their own shoelaces. The killer or killers had mutilated the bodies.

The crime terrified the community and made headlines across the country. The mutilation of the bodies also spurred rumors that the crime was connected to Satanic cult activity.

Police quickly zeroed in on their prime suspect. Damien Echols, 18, was a high-school dropout with a taste for black clothing and the occult. He and two friends, Jessie Misskelley Jr., 17, and Jason Baldwin, 16, were arrested and charged with the murders.

Echols and Baldwin were tried together. Echols got death and Baldwin was sentenced to life.

Misskelley was tried separately and got life as well. He was reportedly borderline mentally retarded and had confessed after a grueling interrogation. He later recanted that confession.

Almost immediately, the investigation and subsequent trials came under scrutiny. Among the many charges were the crime scene was contaminated, evidence mishandled and police failed to properly investigate other suspects. There were allegations of juror misconduct as well.

Two documentaries were made about the case, and numerous books written. Experts got involved. And the consensus seemed to be the case against the West Memphis Three, as they came to be called, wasn't very strong at all.

In 2007, DNA collected from the crime scene was tested. There was no match to the three men imprisoned for the murders. But the test did link the DNA to the stepfather of one of the victims.

The original trial judge refused to consider the new evidence, and the state said it stood behind the convictions. But in November 2010, the Arkansas Supreme Court ordered a new evidentiary hearing. That hearing is set for December of this year.

And there will be more evidence to consider. More DNA evidence has been tested, and none matches Echols, Baldwin or Misskelley.

We don't know what will happen.



There should

Distance learning is one of the national rallying cries of Republican politicians and state education officials seeking cheap ways to graduate more students attending public colleges. Community colleges, the old doormats of postsecondary learning that were founded on the sensible notion that anybody who wants an education should be able to get one, are major players in this Web-based instruction movement.

Economists and social scientists know that if the United States intends to remain an economic leader internationally, a much larger portion of the work force must be educated, including citizens who traditionally have been shunned by colleges: low-income students, working adults, select minorities and those who need remediation before they can tackle college-level work.

Here is where community colleges come in. They enroll more students than their four-year counterparts. As such, many politicians, with the support of community college presidents and state officials, see these schools as ideal, cost-effective places to boost online learning.

Besides saving the colleges money, online courses reduce scheduling conflicts for stu-

A debt solution

WASHINGTON—From Capitol Hill to the White House

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We don't know who killed those three young boys back in 1993. We don't know if the West Memphis Three are innocent or guilty.

But it does look like this case was mishandled from the start. There are just too many unanswered questions. Too many contradictions.

These three men have spent nearly 20 years in prison. With all the new evidence, they deserve a fair hearing. And if the evidence is compelling enough, they deserve a new trial at the least.

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Letter to the Editor

County squabble

TO THE EDITOR:

Observation: Dr. Larry Sullivan is to Texarkana Water Utilities as Judge Sterling Lacy is to Bowie County Commissioner's Court. Both entities seemed to be working OK until these two individuals got involved. At least I don't remember this much discord at any time in the past.

I do not think the taxpayers of Bowie County should be responsible for the attorney's fees for the law firm Judge Lacy has hired out of Austin. (No qualified attorneys in all of Texarkana or Bowie County?) I feel this is a personal squabble between the judge and the county clerk and each should be respon-

sible for their attorney fees, if any.

We see enough of dysfunctional government at the national level, we don't need it at the county and local level.

I will admit that I voted for both the judge and clerk. Had I known that their present actions were all they had to offer, rest assured, I would not have voted for either of them. If they don't quit this "contest" or "power struggle," settle this without attorney involvement and get on with the people's business-which they were elected to do, I and I am sure many others will not vote for them in the next election.

Ray Johnston
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