

After five years, a smoking gun - Wisconsin man arrested in Lake Elmo murder case

(Created: Thursday, October 9, 2008 5:24 PM CDT)

The man police say shot a Lake Elmo woman in the face, stole the vehicle of woman who came to her aid and then robbed an armored car in Hudson, Wis., the following day is now behind bars, more than five years after the crimes sent shockwaves throughout the St. Croix Valley.

Zachary Wiegand, 31, of Polk County, Wis., was arrested Tuesday at his workplace at the St. Croix Falls Wal-Mart after the gun used in the crime was found and linked to him. The arrest provides a sigh of relief to authorities and the community after police had seen leads go dry since the crimes were committed in May 2003.

Soon after the crimes, police received "a significant" number of tips, according to Washington County Sheriff Bill Hutton. But for five long years, the crimes went unsolved. And as the years passed, leads dried up.

This past spring, however, things changed as the case took a dramatic change of course.

A break in the case

At a press conference Wednesday at the Washington County Sheriff's office, Hutton, flanked by a half dozen other law enforcement officials involved in the case, described a series of events that eventually led to Weigand's arrest and how they used technology and collaborative police efforts to solve the case.

Authorities received their big break in May after Minneapolis Police officers recovered a gun in a routine traffic stop. The gun, a 9mm Smith & Wesson, matched the gun involved in the Lake Elmo shooting. The gun was sent to the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network, where a forensic link was found. Police also determined the gun was registered to Wiegand.

"We did extensive research on the history of the weapon and it landed on him," Hutton said.

Hutton said the people caught with the gun are not believed to have any connection to the crime and he didn't know how, or why, the gun was in the car. Until police found the gun, Wiegand was not a suspect in the Lake Elmo case.

From there, dominos began to fall. Once it was learned the gun belonged to Wiegand, a search warrant was executed at his home in Dresser, Wis., where police collected more evidence. Police declined to elaborate on the type of evidence found at Wigand's residence.

"That information is not public yet," Hutton said.

In Washington County, Hutton said, Wiegand had no criminal background other than a gross misdemeanor warrant for his arrest in 1999 for employee theft from the Menards in Oak Park Heights. By all accounts, Wiegand fell off the radar after the crimes, living quietly with his wife and child.

Wiegand, who police say confessed to the crimes, now faces six charges in Washington County, including attempted first-degree murder, assault with a dangerous weapon, first-degree attempted aggravated robbery and theft of a motor vehicle. He is being held in Washington County Jail, and if convicted on all charges, could serve a maximum sentence of 69 years in prison and more than \$50,000 in fines.

Charges involving the armored robbery in Hudson are expected to be filed sometime next week.

"A small amount of money had been recovered during the search warrant but I am not going to say how much," Hudson Police Chief Marty Jense said.

However, he did say more than \$200,000 was taken during the robbery of the armored car.

The crimes

A criminal complaint against Weigand provides the following account and allegations:

The victim, Julie Bever, 42, was driving in Lake Elmo east on 15th Street, approaching Inwood Avenue around 9:30 p.m. on May 28, 2003, when she began slowing down for a stop sign.

As she slowed, Wiegand cut in front of her car, at which point she locked her car doors and attempted to drive away. Weigand then opened fire, shooting her in the lower torso, left arm and left shoulder, including a bullet that hit her in the face.

Janelyn Navarro was driving in the area when she heard "two pops." She looked in her rearview mirror and saw Bever's vehicle swerving across the lane. She proceeded to pull over to see if Bever had "run over something in the roadway."

Bever was able to drive her car toward Navarro and tell her she had been shot and was bleeding. Navarro reached to grab her cell phone to call police when Wiegand pointed a gun at her face.

"Get out, or I'll shoot you too," Wiegand allegedly told Navarro.

She let Wiegand take her vehicle, at which point he fled the scene.

The following day, Wiegand used Navarro's vehicle in an armored car robbery in Hudson, where he overpowered two workers, netting about \$200,000. Police later found Navarro's vehicle ablaze in an undeveloped area of Hudson.

Confession

In an interview, police said, Wiegand admitted to being the only participant in the shooting and that "he recalled pointing the gun at the driver and pulling the trigger."

"All she had to do was get out of the f--ing vehicle," he told police.

Police said he explained that he wanted to steal a car because he didn't want to use his own car in the armored car robbery he had planned.

All things considered, Hutton is pleased with the arrest and that a dangerous man is off the streets.

"It's damn good police work" Hutton said.