

# Ravensdale author pens update on Judith Mawson, ex-wife of the Green River Killer

Newly-updated book chronicles a triumph over the painful memories of Gary Ridgway

By ALEX BRUELL  
Reporter

Nearly 20 years ago, King County deputies arrested Gary Ridgway, the man who would go on to receive 49 life sentences after confessing to killing dozens of women and girls in the Puget Sound area.

Since then, many of the lawyers who prosecuted and defended the Green River Killer have passed away. Ridgway, 72, has spent the last 20 years of his life behind bars. New victims have been identified, bringing some measure of relief to their families.

But few have changed as much as Judith Mawson, the woman wed to Ridgway for 14 years - a time in which he led a double life, playing the role of the hardworking, stable husband while continuing his killing streak.

A lifetime of challenges and trauma have not managed to hold Mawson, 76, down. She found community through church, where she allowed herself to move on from Ridgway. She finds purpose and joy through gardening and her chihuahua, Precious Princess. Mawson even has a loving boyfriend.

"I am comfortable with my life now," Mawson said in a recent interview.

"I... get a little bit nervous sometimes when I hear things on the television (about Ridgway), and I don't really want to hear them again," she continued. "But I deal with it. I tell myself: 'Judith, go forward. Go do something positive, and enjoy life while you can.'"

Mawson's life - before, during and after Ridgway - is the focus of "She Married the Green River Serial Killer - The story of an Unsuspecting Housewife," a book by Ravensdale author Pennie Wood. It was first published in 2007 and re-released in March this year.

Wood spent six months reconnecting with Mawson to learn how she healed and learned to trust again for the second edition. The

two both spoke with the Courier-Herald about that journey.

"I try to be positive, and I want to go forward, not backwards," Mawson said. "Telling my story has really helped me with healing and releasing the poison from what was held within for years. (And) Penny has been wonderful. She's basically been by my side all these years."

## "THINGS THAT JUST BLEW MY MIND"

"She Married the Green River Killer" begins with Mawson's surprising life story before Ridgway.

"I was shocked, and then further shocked every time I met her," Wood said. "(Her story) just grew exponentially. She would start talking, and it would trigger some memories, and she would tell me some things that just blew my mind."

Judith Mawson was born two months early in August 1944 at a Chehalis hospital, after her pregnant mother slipped and fell over a rock and triggered an early labor. But Mawson thrived and grew.

An accident while playing with her stepfather left Mawson with debilitating seizures. Behavioral and neurological problems plagued her teenage years and ultimately led to a nearly year-long stay at Western State Hospital. Then, Mawson's first marriage fell apart when she became unable to keep her children safe at her Seattle home with an incompatible husband.

It was from that crucible of the first half of her life that in 1985, Mawson - 40 years old and single - met Gary Ridgway. Gentlemanly, calm and masculine, Ridgway immediately caught her attraction as the two danced at the now long-closed White Shutters Tavern on Highway 99.

Only two days later, unbeknownst to Mawson, Ridgway was being interviewed by Green River Killer Task Force detectives about his connections to sex workers on Highway 99.

After his 1988 marriage to Mawson, Ridgway's rate of killing appears to have slowed significantly. The couple's happy and busy years may have had a stabilizing effect on Ridgway's urge to kill. "Gary told me that. Judith told

me that," Wood said. "But he did do some killings. He couldn't completely cut it off. He told me he was addicted, like a man gets addicted to beer."

Wood's involvement in Mawson's life was "serendipity," Wood said. She was already friends with Jim and Linda Bailey, the best friends of Mawson and Gary when the two were married.

The Baileys knew that Wood could analyze handwriting, so in 2002, they asked her to analyze Gary's hand-written letters and see if she could help prove his innocence. They also asked her to meet Mawson, who Wood befriended quickly.

The Baileys, like Mawson, believed Ridgway to be innocent at the time. He'd already been arrested twice in connection with the investigation and released, and it seemed like the deputies had once again picked up the wrong guy.

## "WE'VE ALL BEEN DECEIVED"

What about serial killers draws public interest so intensely? Wood suspects it's a combination of the "little thrill" of learning about something so dangerous, and the desire - particularly for women - to analyze the story and wonder "What would I have done? Would I have found out the truth? Would I have gotten in that car?"

Wood's takeaway is that "we've all been deceived, or betrayed, or suffered some kind of a loss at some level." It's just that the deception Judith Mawson suffered would register as a 9 on the Richter scale.

Wood was skeptical at first that Mawson couldn't have suspected Ridgway at some point. But she says she believes "100 percent" that Mawson really never knew what Ridgway was up to.

Their marriage was by all accounts perfect, Wood writes. The two were compatible physically, intellectually, financially and socially, and shared cute rituals and hobbies. The couple saved money and in 1997 bought their dream house in Auburn.

But in November 2001, Mawson learned along with the rest of the world that Ridgway was the prime suspect in the Green River killings



PHOTO BY ALEX BRUELL  
Penny Wood holds a copy of her book "She Married The Green River Serial Killer" on a trail near her Ravensdale home April 28.

when he was arrested for a third and final time.

That arrest sent Mawson spiraling into her darkest years, facing depression, anxiety and months of homelessness as she tried to sell the couple's expensive home to make up for the loss of Ridgway's income. The couple divorced in 2002.

Then, when Ridgway confessed: "That's when her world completely flipped upside down," Wood said.

Mawson self-medicated with wine and pills to slog through the days, Wood wrote. She spent most of the 2000s climbing out of her fear of being castigated as the wife of the Green River Killer.

Mawson closed all contact with Ridgway soon after his confession. Though she learned to let go and forgive Ridgway with the help of her Baptist pastor, she is determined to never speak to him, hear his voice, or read his correspondence ever again, Wood said.

She started going out to restaurants again. Cautiously, Mawson went back to church, where she met new friends who weren't offended by her history. She even made peace with her first husband.

And Mawson began receiving emails and messages from women all around the world who admired her ability to carry on. Others shared stories of abusive fathers or husbands leading double lives just like Ridgway.

It was these "baby steps" and

words of encouragement that allowed her to rebuild her life, Wood said.

In 2016, she met her now boyfriend "David," a pseudonym used in Wood's book to protect his identity. David was himself a widower, and over time Mawson allowed herself to trust him and build a relationship with him.

"It's the best," Mawson said. "We help each other out and comfort each other. We do things together. We work out in the yard together. I go to his house and help him clean up the yard. We go out to dinner. He's been by himself for about seven years ... and I've been on my own for 20 years. We built a trust in each other."

## WHERE THE SEARCH STANDS TODAY

Wood interviewed Ridgway for the first edition of her book, but he declined an interview for the 2021 update. A representative at Walla Walla State Penitentiary told Wood that Ridgway "doesn't really talk anymore."

In a guilty plea bargain to avoid the death penalty, Ridgway was convicted in 2003 of killing 48 women and girls between 1982 and 1998.

Ridgway admitted to killing far more, but investigators were only able to compile evidence linking

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# A look at Enumclaw: from the 1920s through the 1940s

During the 1920s to the 1940s, the population of Enumclaw hovered around 2,500. Today, its population is 12,888 and the city has grown 20.8 percent since the last census in 2010.

The major industries in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s were lumber and dairy farming. Coal mining ended in Franklin in 1919. Pacific Coast Mining sold its assets in the company town of Black Diamond in the late 1930s, disbanding the company town to save money. Coal mining ended in 1958 (historylink.com). Oil drove coal mining into extinction in the area. The town of Black Diamond was only incorporated in 1959 (ci.blackdiamond.wa.us).

The construction of Mud Mountain Dam to end flooding of the White and Puyallup Rivers was authorized by Congress in 1936. Construction began in 1939 but was delayed because of World War II. It was finished in 1948. Dam construction



**RICH ELFERS**  
HISTORY

provided temporary jobs during that time.

The closing of the Weyerhaeuser lumber mill east of town in 2002 brought between 235-350 jobs to an end. One former logger blames the spotted owl as the cause of its demise. Perhaps he's right. It did play a part.

In the interwar period, Enumclaw touted itself as the "Gateway to Naches Pass." It was an alternative to Snoqualmie Pass.

Today, Enumclaw is a bedroom community with the Enumclaw School District and Mutual of Enumclaw as its biggest employers. It is known for its many restaurants which appeal to tourists heading for Crystal Mountain resort and Mount Rainier National Park. Loggers can still be seen carrying their truckloads of timber through Enumclaw heading for the Port of Tacoma to be shipped to Asian markets. A few dairy farms still operate, mainly in the Osceola area west of town.

According to Jim Merritt in his historylink.com reminiscences, Enumclaw was a "walking town" from the 1920 to the 1940s. Those who had a car only had one. A two-car garage did not exist. Married women rarely worked outside the home until the labor shortage brought about by World War II. They had five jobs open to them: clerks, secretaries, teachers, nurses and telephone operators. Whatever their occupation, they were paid less than men.

Activities centered around family and church. Most of the population were either Anglo-Saxons or Scandinavians. There were no blacks, according to Merritt. There were a few Asians (Japanese) who worked in lumbering. They kept to themselves except for their children who were generally accepted in the schools.

Any distance that required the use of a car was called "a trip." Trips to Seattle or Tacoma, 35 to 40 miles distant, were an all-day excursion. The roads between towns, though black-topped or paved, had frequent sharp

curves, usually in a series.

The Farmers' Picnic Grounds, about two miles out of town on the road to Auburn, was a central meeting place during the spring and summer. There were permanent picnic tables, a baseball diamond, and a covered but open-air place to dance with a small bandstand, and a permanent refreshment stand. There was a permanent fairway with booths for businesses and local organizations. A small carnival company set up their rides to attract paying riders.

On the Fourth of July, Judge Montgomery or a prominent speaker from either the state or county government would speak to the gathered crowd. Pony rides and a small merry-go-round catered to the children. Potlucks included casseroles or fried chicken and potato salad or slaws with bread and rolls for the celebrants. Some brought hand-turned ice cream freezers in different flavors to serve as dessert.

Parades began in the 1930s down Cole Street and continue to this day. The nine-hole golf

course was also built in the 1930s. Pete's Pool was created in 1935 west of the golf course. It was enlarged from a pond. It had a fountain and a grand log lodge, now called the Expo Center Field House. ("thenorthwest-past: Pete's Pool"). A baseball diamond was built in the 1930s. It's still there. You can see the concrete steps going up to the field. Pete's Pool was paved over and is now a park with a fountain for children to play in.

Milk was delivered in glass bottles each morning by milkmen. You could also get eggs or other dairy products. There were three dairy companies at the time: The Good Hope, the Naches, and the Enumclaw Dairy. Ice was delivered once or twice a week for family iceboxes.

This story of Enumclaw in the 1920s to the 1940s will be continued in next month's article.

*My thanks to Reid Peterson and the Enumclaw Plateau Historical Society museum at 1837 Marion St. for helping me find resources.*

## Book

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him to 48. At the time, deputies also could not verify the remains of four of those 48 victims.

Ridgway's confessed killings all conveniently took place within King County. That protected him from prosecution - and potentially the death penalty - in other counties, Wood said, whether he was lying or being truthful.

"I think Gary was smart enough to know that," Wood said. "He told me he probably killed over 100. He really lost track. But he only confessed to the (killings) in King County."

In 2011, Ridgway was convicted of his 49th count of murder after the remains

of Rebecca Marrero were discovered the previous year. Ridgway had already confessed to killing her, but prosecutors didn't have enough evidence prior to the discovery of her remains.

Two more of the original 48 victims have since been identified: 20-year-old Sandra Denise Major in 2012, and 14-year-old Wendy Stephens in January this year.

Only two of the victims Ridgway has been convicted of killing remain unidentified. The King County Sheriff's Office in April released a computer-generated photo of one of them based on recent analysis of her DNA.

Those with information that could aid the Green River investigation can call investigators at 206-263-2130 or e-mail [Greenrivertips@metrokc.gov](mailto:Greenrivertips@metrokc.gov).

## Grads

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### WHITE RIVER HIGH SCHOOL

Ceremonies for White River High graduates will stay on campus, planned for Arrow Lumber Stadium. Graduation is a four-part affair planned for Saturday, June 12.

Graduating seniors were given a choice of attending a ceremony at 10 a.m., 12:30 p.m., 3 p.m. or 5:30 a.m. Not as many chose the earliest time slot and the 5:30 option was the most popular, but reports are that student/parent desires were largely met.

The outdoor ceremony will have students on the athletic field and guests in the stands. Attendance will be limited, with each senior receiving a certain number of tickets. That number has not yet been decided.

Each of the four ceremonies will



PHOTO BY KEVIN HANSON

The class of 2020 celebrated their final year of high school at the Enumclaw Expo Center last year in order to comply with COVID-19 restrictions.

have the same format, presided over by Principal Cody Mothershead. As usual, there will be a class speaker and school board members in attendance. Music will be of the recorded variety rather than the school orchestra.

The ceremonies will be livestreamed for those who cannot or will not attend in person.

Many of the details are still being worked out and an email will be sent to student homes when decisions are finalized.

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