

Jacob Wetterling Story

The Jacob Wetterling Foundation was established on January 22, 1990, four months after eleven year old Jacob Wetterling was abducted near his home in St. Joseph, Minnesota.

Jacob Wetterling was born on February 17, 1978. He grew up in St. Joseph, Minnesota with his parents, Patty and Jerry Wetterling, and his three siblings. On the evening of October 22, 1989, Jacob, his brother Trevor, and friend Aaron rode their bikes to a local convenience store to pick up a movie and snack. On the way back home, a man wearing a mask and carrying a gun stopped the boys. The gunman told the boys to throw their bikes into a nearby ditch and lay face down on the ground. He then asked each of the boys their age. After the boys responded, he instructed Trevor to run into the woods and told him not to look back or he would shoot him. Next, the gunman turned Aaron over, looked into his face, and told him to run into woods without looking back or he would shoot him. As Trevor and Aaron were running away, they glanced back to see the gunman grab Jacob's arm. When Aaron and Trevor reached the wooded area they turned around again and the gunman and Jacob were gone.

The local police were called to the scene of the abduction only minutes later and a search ensued that involved hundreds of volunteers, local law enforcement, FBI agents, and others. Jacob's case has resulted in over 50,000 leads and has been studied by staff and trainees at the FBI academy in Quantico, Virginia. The case is highly unusual in a number of ways. Rarely are children abducted, especially by non-family members or while playing in groups. There are only 115 cases of long-term, non-family abduction called stereotypical kidnappings each year.

To date, law enforcement and Jacob's family still do not know what happened to Jacob or his abductor or where they are now.

THE SEARCH FOR JACOB

By Steve Irsay
Court TV

All Jacob Wetterling wanted to do was rent a video. At age 11 he was savvy enough to know that if mom said no, dad just might say yes.

Jacob's parents, Jerry and Patty, had left their house in St. Joseph, Minn. to attend a dinner party nearby. Jacob stayed behind to watch over his two younger siblings, Trevor, 10, and Carmen, 8. Jacob's friend, Aaron Larsen, age 11, joined the group.

It was a warm and overcast Sunday night in St. Joseph, population 2,200. Trevor Wetterling was the first to telephone about getting permission to go rent a video from the Tom Thumb convenience store. Trevor figured he had a chance of getting mom's okay. The store was only a ten-minute bike ride away, and besides, it wasn't even a school night because of a teachers' conference the next day.

Trevor's pitch failed. Patty Wetterling was worried about drivers not being able to see the boys on the dark stretch of country road.

Jacob, left, with his older sister Amy, now 26.

Now it was Jacob's turn. He called his dad. The boys had revised their plan. Trevor would carry a flashlight and Aaron Larson would wear a white sweatshirt. Jake, as his family and friends sometimes called him, would wear his father's orange reflective jogging vest. And a 14-year-old neighbor would baby-sit for Carmen.

The plan seemed sound to Jerry. More important perhaps was that Jerry knew October 22, 1989 had been a tough one for Jake. His son had skated poorly at hockey tryouts for his youth league in nearby St. Cloud. Renting the comedy "Naked Gun" might be just the thing to lift Jacob's spirits. Jerry decided to allow Jacob and Trevor to ride to the Tom Thumb. It was the first time the two boys had permission to ride after sundown.

At about 9:15 p.m. Jacob, Trevor and Aaron were making their way back from the store, videotape in hand. The older boys were on bikes; Trevor was on a push scooter.

As they approached a particularly dark stretch of road, where a long gravel driveway led to a farm, the boys heard a low raspy voice call out. They were ordered to stop. Trevor was told to turn off his flashlight.

A man wearing a stocking mask stepped out from the darkness. He had a gun. Next the boys were commanded off their bikes and scooter and ordered into a roadside ditch. The man looked into Trevor's face and asked his age.

Hearing the reply, the man told the younger Wetterling to run away and not look back. If he disobeyed, he would be shot, the man said. He did the same with Aaron.

But as Aaron fled he saw the gunman grab Jacob by the arm of his red St. Cloud hockey jacket. Moments later, both boys looked back as they ran to Wetterling home. There was no sign of Jacob, the masked man, or any sound from a getaway vehicle.

Charlie Grafft's pager went off just as he was sitting down to watch the 10 o'clock news. A boy had been abducted. The crime scene was a mere four miles from the Stearns County Sheriff's house. When Grafft arrived, the sheriff was struck by the discarded bikes and the scooter laying in the ditch.

"I looked everything over and said, 'Oh boy, this is going to be a job,'" said Grafft.

Grafft and his deputies searched with flashlights for three hours and only found a faint tire print.

As news of the disappearance spread, St. Joseph, a town dotted with porch swings, stone churches and candy-stripped barber poles, swarmed with FBI agents and National Guard troops. Helicopters sliced the sky. Bloodhounds barked. In all, 36 square miles of farmland, woods and quarries were searched. All the activity yielded absolutely nothing.

The Early Investigation

The absence of the trail was clearly frustrating. A little more than a year after the crime, Grafft retired — in part because of his inability to solve it.

Those who inherited the case from Grafft have felt the same frustration. A lead looks promising, and then it vanishes. Another tantalizing lead arrives and falls apart. Hope surges and then it is extinguished.

Police have posted at least five different sketches of suspects. None of the renderings have worked.

Early on, it did not look like it would be too hard to find the criminal. Days after Jacob's disappearance, police began looking for a red Chevette. Ten people said that they saw the car at the Tom Thumb moments before the kidnapping. In a town where everyone pretty much knew the vehicle of choice of everyone else, the Chevette was unfamiliar.

Jacob in his hockey gear. He was a star goalie and also played soccer, baseball and football.

It turned out that the mystery car probably belonged to an art student. He called police told them that he had been in the area looking for things to sketch. His story was verified, and police moved on.

Then a 19-year-old motorist came forward. The driver said that he had seen a man grab a boy and force him into a car at gunpoint. This car was spotted in southern Minn., a logical distance from St. Joseph. What happened next, according to the witness, added to the suspicion. The white car with the abducted boy ran a stop sign and sped off.

It was a plausible story. Even the police were excited. They consulted with designers at General Motors to better determine the make and model of the white car. They even hypnotized the tipster to coax out more details.

But doubts surfaced about the tipster's account and the lead fell apart.

A few days later authorities thought they had another break. Witnesses claimed they saw an unusual man in his 50s in two St. Joseph convenience stores the day Jacob went missing, including at the Tom Thumb. The man, described as 6 feet tall with a large build and receding white hair, had silently glared at customers and did not buy anything. An alert was issued, as was a sketch. No results.

The Wetterling family (L to R) Trevor, Jerry, Jacob (seated), Patty (holding Carmen) and Amy. Shortly after Jacob's abduction, Jerry and Patty started the missing kids foundation bearing his name.

Another suspect surfaced two months later. He was the "prime suspect", police said. The M.O. certainly fit. Earlier in the year, a 12-year-old boy had been pulled into a car and molested. The boy had just finished ice skating with friends and was walking home alone. When the man dumped the boy out of the car, he was told to run. If he didn't, he would be shot. Not only did the methodology fit, but so did the geography. This crime happened about 10 miles from where Jacob had disappeared.

The inevitable sketch was issued. Like all the others, it led nowhere.

Saddest of all are the lengths to which the Wetterlings have gone to find their missing son. In 1990 they dispatched a private investigator to Amsterdam. There was a report that a man and a boy resembling Jacob had been spotted at the

airport. The investigator came back empty-handed.

Theories

So who caught up with the boys on the dark road that night and grabbed Jacob? And why him, and him alone?

From the start the FBI and child abduction experts believed the circumstances were highly unusual.

The vast majority of child abductions are done by family members. They usually stem from some sort of custody dispute. Since stranger abductions are so rare, the first people scrutinized are those closest to the child.

Jacob in his fifth-grade school photo. The image adorned flyers sent coast to coast. Patty and Jerry Wetterling were quickly eliminated as suspects.

Jerry, who is white, was the president of the local chapter of the NAACP. Investigators wondered if the kidnapping was a hate crime.

There were even early rumors that Jerry, a chiropractor, was himself involved. Authorities believe this rumor was fueled by people's unfamiliarity with Jerry's religion. He is a Bahai. (Central to this religion is the belief that all people are of one race. They must unite to defeat prejudice and bring about world peace.)

Then there was the problem of child witnesses and the gun.

"What was unique about it was that we never had a kidnapping where there were witnesses and someone at gunpoint took the child in front of other children," said Paul McCabe, a Minnesota FBI agent.

What Trevor Wetterling and Aaron Larsen described — a mask, a gun and a selection process — spawned a variety of theories.

Jacob holding new-born brother Trevor. Jacob often slept with his arm around his younger brother. The use of a mask suggested to some that the kidnapper might have been known in the community and was trying to shield his identity. Perhaps the boys even knew him.

But the boys were in close physical proximity to the kidnapper, and heard his voice several times. They never identified the criminal as someone in particular.

Investigators also could not recall an instance of a stranger child kidnapping in which a gun was involved. When pedophiles take children, it is for sex. They do not want to harm them physically. The gun suggests that violence was perhaps the kidnapper's motive.

Another theory is that the abductor stalked Jacob. The secluded crime scene suggests that the abductor did not just stumble upon the scene. And the reports of a suspicious man at the Tom Thumb store appear to back that up.

Later, Jerry Wetterling recalled a moment from earlier on the day of the abduction that could also lend support to the stalker theory.

That afternoon, Jerry and his two sons were skating at a hockey tryout. There were about 20 spectators. Suddenly, Jacob slipped out of sight.

"It was very strange but very real," Jerry remembered. "I had this sense of danger for Jacob. I can almost point to the spot on the ice where it happened to this day."

After relocating his son, Jerry's feeling subsided. He thought nothing of it until a few days after the abduction.

"It prompted me to wonder if possibly the abductor had been in the ice arena at that time, in a sense looking at Jacob or stalking him," Jerry said.

Also baffling was the kidnapper's selection process. Abductors are generally not so picky. Presumably, the kidnapper knew a bit about what he was getting if he had stalked the boys.

"In the Wetterling case the first conclusion was that it was a sexual abduction," said Prof. Paula Fass, who discusses the case in her book, *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*. "The conclusion has been that when that type of selection takes place there is a preference being expressed for a certain age." But Fass added that the age selection is not necessarily for a sexual purpose.

Jim Rothstein, a retired New York Police Department detective currently researching the disappearance, goes so far as

to suggest that Jacob was captured by a pedophile ring. These rings, Rothstein asserts, procure and trade boys.

But case investigators say they have no evidence to support his theory.

Recent Investigation

Operating under the sex offender theory, and with few fresh leads, police spend most of their time reviewing the records of local child sex investigations.

Jacob, left, and Trevor, who is now a 22-year-old student at Colorado State University.

"We still have leads mostly when someone gets arrested for another crime," said Patty Wetterling, who still speaks with investigators weekly. "We've been lucky to have law enforcement involvement for at least 13 years."

While the kidnapping's notoriety keeps the tips flowing, most of them aren't useful.

"A lot of them are people who always had suspicions that a family member might have been a pedophile and they think we should look at that person for the Wetterling case," said sheriff's Det. Pam Jenson, who's been assigned to the matter for the past two years.

"The other calls are people who think they see a 12-year-old boy who looks like Jacob," Jenson adds. "A lot of them don't understand that Jacob would be a man now."

Remarkably, some of the most veteran investigators remain optimistic.

"It's been quite a while but there is always the possibility that someone will have a dose of conscience and may talk before their death," said Patrol Lt. Dave Nohner, who worked the Wetterling case for 11 years. "There was a huge amount of emotion that ran with this case and whoever did this has to be carrying huge amounts of baggage."

Could It Be Him?

One of the last pictures of Jacob, on a day trip two months before he was kidnapped, wearing the same blue mesh shirt he wore the night he vanished.

Patty and Jerry Wetterling have spent more years looking for their son than they spent raising him. Patty still looks for Jacob every time she sees a group of young men. He would be 24 now. Brown hair, blue eyes, about six feet tall. Could it be him?

"I used to teach high school math and I know statistics and I know the statistics are not good but I also know that some of these kids are still alive," said Patty. "The phone rings, and I wonder. I get a letter with no return address, and I wonder. Until I know for sure, there is still a chance."

The family has endured daily drives past the spot where Jacob was snatched and years of prank calls like the answering machine message with a young man's voice whispering, "This is Jacob Wetterling and I want you to know I'm still alive."

But the Wetterlings refuse to change their phone number or move from the four-bedroom home that Jacob biked away from 13 years ago.

"What if he came home?" Patty asks.