

# Serial killer charged in connection to 1977 Wyoming cold case

- [Elise Schmelzer 307-266-0574, elise.schmelzer@trib.com](mailto:elise.schmelzer@trib.com)
- Updated Sep 23, 2016

Sweetwater County authorities charged an imprisoned serial killer with murder Tuesday in connection to the 1977 killing of a 28-year-old woman whose remains were found years later on public land in southwest Wyoming.

Rodney James Alcala, now 73, was charged with first-degree murder in connection to the death of Christine Ruth Thornton, court records show.

Investigators believe Alcala killed Thornton in Sweetwater County based on a photo that shows her on a motorcycle on what appears to be remote public land northeast of Granger. Her remains were found a short distance away, said Detective Joe Tomich of the Sweetwater Sheriff's Office. Authorities found the photo while searching Alcala's possessions during a previous investigation, according to court documents.

In a Sept. 6 interview with investigators, Alcala said he had been in the Granger area before, met Thornton and took the photo of her on the motorcycle. He told detectives that Thornton did not leave the area with him and said, "She was alive before I left her," according to court documents.

Alcala has been found guilty of killing six people in two states, though authorities estimate Alcala may have killed up to 130 victims across the U.S., authorities in Sweetwater County say. He is known as the "Dating Game" killer for appearing on the popular television program in the late 1970s.

Solving the case after more than 30 years "took a little luck," Tomich said.

A rancher found Thornton's unburied human remains near a two-track dirt road on the land in 1982, Tomich said. The road, identified as Lombard Road in court documents, is about 6 miles north of Interstate 80 and 1.5 miles east of U.S. Highway 30.

The remains couldn't be identified for decades, though it was determined they belonged to a homicide victim who was about six months pregnant when she died, court documents show. A gold ring and a small watch with a leather band were found near the body, which were similar to the ones Thornton wore in the photo.

Investigators submitted a tissue sample to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification for DNA analysis in 2013 and inclusion into a database of information on missing people, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

Thornton's family had searched for her since she disappeared from San Antonio, Texas, in 1977. In 2013, Thornton's sister happened to spot a photo of Thornton in a collection of Alcalá's photos that had been released to the public in 2010 in the hopes of identifying more of his victims. After contacting police, two of Thornton's sisters submitted DNA samples to the missing persons database.

The database alerted the Sweetwater County Sheriff's Office in July 2015 that Thornton's remains had a possible match. Detectives were later able to confirm the remains were Thornton's and contacted her family shortly after.

A sister told the detective that one of Thornton's former boyfriends had previously told her that the couple took a trip to Green River in 1977 to pan for gold, but the pair parted ways after a fight. The family had last seen Thornton when she visited her uncle in Biloxi, Mississippi, in June 1977, the documents state. She was "notably pregnant" at the time.

Alcalá was traveling the country during the summer of 1977 after his parole officer granted him permission to drive from California to the East Coast to visit family, court documents show. He left California on July 2 and returned on Aug. 6. He later traveled from California to Mexico from Aug. 11 to Aug. 20 that same summer.

Court documents do not state why Alcalá was on parole at the time.

Investigators reviewed the other photos found in Alcalá's possession and determined that the same motorcycle Thornton is pictured riding — a blue and white Kawasaki — was also present in the photos of Alcalá's other victims. During previous investigations, the motorcycle had been found disassembled in Alcalá's Seattle storage unit, according to the documents.

Alcalá is on death row at the Cocoran State Penitentiary in California for previous murder convictions. If convicted of the Wyoming charge, he could face additional charges of life imprisonment or death.

The California courts will determine whether Alcalá should be extradited to Wyoming to face the charge in person, Tomich said. It's unknown whether Alcalá will remain in California or be moved to a Wyoming prison if convicted of the murder charge.

Alcalá was convicted of murder in California in 1980 in the killing of Robin Samsøe and in 2010 for the killings of Jill Barcomb, Georgia Wixted, Charlotte Lamb and Jill Parenteau. In 2012, he was convicted of murder in New York for the killings of Cornelia Crilley and Ellen Hover in the 1970s.

Alcalá was known to approach victims by pretending to be a photographer and asking them to pose for him before physically assaulting and strangling them, documents show. All of his victims were female.

Source: [http://trib.com/news/local/serial-killer-charged-in-connection-to-wyoming-cold-case/article\\_4369c3e2-835d-57d2-831b-5c7be63b0a18.html](http://trib.com/news/local/serial-killer-charged-in-connection-to-wyoming-cold-case/article_4369c3e2-835d-57d2-831b-5c7be63b0a18.html)

Doe Network Case 1055UFWY