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Pig farmer and pillar of community: alleged serial killer finally faces trial

Man charged with killing 26 women, mainly prostitutes, but true toll could be 65

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Across the road from a Costco superstore and within sight of a McDonald's in a drab corner of Port Coquitlam, the remains of Robert Pickton's pig farm offer clues to how events unfolded.

Mounds of earth can be seen where diggers started work in June 2002. By the time they had finished, a year and a half later, they had demolished all the farm buildings on the seven-hectare (17-acre) site 18 miles east of Vancouver, sifted 378,000 cubic metres of mud, and taken 200,000 DNA samples. In the wake of the disappearance of 65 women from Vancouver's downtown eastside, the findings confirmed the conclusion that the authorities had been avoiding for years: a serial killer was at work.

The evidence removed, including clothing and personal effects, suggested that the bodies of 30 women had been disposed of at the farm. Officials could not rule out the possibility that human remains were in the meat processed at the farm for human consumption.

Mr Pickton, 57, has been charged with the murder of 26 women. His trial on six of those charges starts on Monday, following a year of pre-trial hearings.

Kate Gibson sits in her office, next to a poster showing the faces of the missing women. Executive director of a drop-in centre for sex workers, Ms Gibson is concerned that the trial, with its media blitz, will add further strain to the women's already precarious lives.

"Everybody knows somebody," she says. "The women who live on the street, they live the same life as the women who died. Conditions haven't improved. They face fear every day. When all this was going on I think they were scared out of their minds. This is such a big thing, it brings up so much awfulness for them."

Most of the women who disappeared from the downtown eastside worked as prostitutes. Some did not. Most of them worked to finance drug habits, some did not. And some worked for pimps.

Outside Ms Gibson's office the eight blocks that make up the downtown eastside are alive with activity. Gaggles of youths, clad in the homeless uniform of cheap sports clothing, disappear down alleyways. There is constant movement as individuals and groups merge and divide, busying themselves with the daily chore of survival. The

smell of marijuana, alcohol and urine is all about.

At the centre of the eastside's squalor, the junction of east Hastings and Main, pawn shops, flophouses and cheque cashing offices abound. A notice at the entrance to a hotel declares: "Ladies and escorts only."

Two blocks away is the upmarket tourist haven of Gastown, home to delis, cafes, lofts and boutiques. Two blocks in the other direction is Chinatown. Guidebooks warn tourists not to attempt to walk around East Hastings.

Robert Pickton, known as Willie, used to drive in to the eastside to pick up prostitutes, who often attended wild parties at a barn he owned with his brother, less than a mile from his farm. The barn, known as Piggy's Palace, hosted two types of party: respectable functions for local dignitaries to partake of his farm-raised pork and help the charity Mr Pickton had set up; and debauched affairs with prostitutes and Mr Pickton's biker friends.

"This one could have been me," says Pauline VanKoll, studying one of 26 small oil paintings of Mr Pickton's alleged victims by artist Zoe Pawlak that hang in a gallery on a corner on East Hastings. The corner used to be home to Ms VanKoll. For 10 years she worked what she calls the "Stroll" to get money to feed her \$500 a day drug habit. Now 42, she has been off drugs for six years, recently married and is planning to move away from Vancouver. Ms VanKoll knew many of the disappeared women and is one of two former sex workers recruited to report on Mr Pickton's trial for a Vancouver website, www.orato.com. "They wanted a voice from somebody who has been there," she says. "I can record things a little differently to a reporter." "They wanted a voice from somebody who has been there," she says. "I can record things a little differently to a reporter."

The trial will be lengthy - probably more than a year - and harrowing. The judge warned jurors that it would be "as bad as a horror movie".

Although much evidence has been disclosed in pre-trial hearings, the judge has imposed a publication ban ahead of the trial. But rumours abound: remains are thought to have been put through a wood chipper; health services issued a warning about meat produced at his farm and served at parties; police are thought to have found two women's heads, hands and feet in a freezer.

At the end of a party, Mr Pickton is thought to have called at West Coast Reductions, an animal byproducts plant just off East Hastings. There, he is said to have handed over human remains mixed in with his pigs to be used in the manufacture of cosmetics.

For years police seemed determined to deny the possibility of a serial killer. An officer who advanced the theory was dismissed; police said the women were simply transients who had move on.

In 1998, after intense pressure from friends and relatives of the disappeared, aided by the media, a Vancouver police team was formed to investigate 40 unsolved disappearances in the area since 1971. The next year, a \$100,000 reward was offered. But the inquiry stalled and in 2001 a joint taskforce of the Vancouver and Royal Canadian Mounted Police was created. In February 2002, with the number of missing women being investigated at 50, police searched Mr Pickton's farm on a firearms warrant. Two weeks later, he was charged with two counts of murder, a number that has risen as the investigation has continued.

It was not the first time Mr Pickton had been arrested. In 1997 he was charged with confinement and aggravated assault after a sex worker named Wendy Lynn Eistetter escaped from his farm covered in blood. According to the

police report, Mr Pickton had stabbed her repeatedly. But charges were dropped. Mr Pickton was a wealthy pillar of the community while Eistetter was a prostitute. Between Mr Pickton's release in 1997 and his arrest in 2002, 30 more women went missing from the area.

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