



First love, last love

BY ERIC LYTTLE

Mary Lapos-Altmiller was a well-liked Westerville librarian, a wife, mother, benefactor to stray cats. Friends and relatives were stunned when her long-ago childhood sweetheart reappeared and she walked out on her life to marry him. In March, he was charged with her murder.

From television footage at the crime scene; Mary's body was in the car at right.



It was a happy day, a proud day, a time-honored rite of passage in an all-American boy's life, when he's no longer relegated to a quick game of catch in the backyard at Dad's whim: the day when a boy is finally old enough for organized ball. In the summer of 1966, Dave Lapos was 9 years old and eligible for his first season of Little League. He was eager to become a member of a team with a real coach, a real uniform and a stick-it-on-the-fridge game schedule. He had jumped at the sign-ups and waited impatiently for the news.

On an early-summer afternoon, a giant of a kid, Clee Ridenour, more than twice Dave's size and two years his elder, walked up to the Laposes' door in Sheffield, just outside Lorain.

Mary Lapos was Dave's older sister, pretty in a plain sort of way and perpetually pleasant, one of eight kids in the disciplined Lapos home. Clee was the son of a Little League coach, coming to inform Dave he'd been picked to play for Clee's father's team. Mary answered the door.

That chance encounter would trigger a 12-year-old girl's first crush. The two hadn't been acquainted before that, with Mary attending Catholic school and Clee going to public school. But from that moment, Mary was infatuated. "Clee's house was about a block away from ours, and she was always volunteering to push the two younger sisters around in the stroller, or do everything she could to just kind of come around and see what us guys were doing," Dave remembers now. His parents, he says, didn't allow Mary to date. "But for the next few years, Clee was the man in her eye. She called him her big teddy bear, and she never had her eye on anyone else in Sheffield."

Her brothers may have sometimes wondered what their sister saw in Clee Ridenour. As Dave's teammate for the next few years, Clee earned a reputation as a poor sport and a bit of bully, mouthing off to umpires, throwing his glove, his bat. "Clee was the fat guy everybody made fun of, and then you'd run," says Dave. "He couldn't catch us, but when he got the opportunity to sneak up on us or something, we were done like dinner."

Not that any of her seven brothers and sisters paid a lot of attention to Mary's attraction to Clee. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was harmless.

Childhood first loves don't last, and Mary's seemed destined to fade to mere memory when the Lapos family moved to Westerville five years later. Clee and Mary

went their own ways: built separate lives, found other loves, settled down with spouses and kids. And had the story ended there, Mary might still be alive.

Three decades later, however, Clee Ridenour reentered Mary's life, finding her with a devoted husband of 15 years, a bright 10-year-old son, a comfortable home across from Hoover Reservoir and a long-time job at the Westerville Public Library, where she was a popular employee. That childhood infatuation was rekindled, and as the weeks went by, Mary grew less interested in her everyday life. She was excit-

brother Joe, who lives in Powell. "I mean, she was a librarian who took in stray cats. She had a caring husband and an adoring son. She wasn't living on the edge. If you'd make a list of possible victims, she'd be at the bottom."

As far as any family members knew, Clee had long been forgotten. Mary's infatuation, most probably would have assumed, ended when their father was transferred to a new job in Westerville in 1971. Mary graduated from Westerville High School a year later. She worked for the Westerville Parks and Recreation Department briefly, and umpired girls' softball games for a time. Then, two years out of high school, she took a job as a Westerville librarian in the audio/visual department. It was a job she would hold for the next 28 years, becoming a fixture in a department that once served primarily the teachers of Westerville with 16 mm films but grew into one of the library's hot spots, with a collection of more than 30,000 videocassettes, DVDs, audiocassettes, CDs and books on tape.

She dated sporadically. "A couple of the teachers who would come into the library asked her out," says Dave, who now lives in Myrtle Beach. "She even dated a couple of my own teachers. I'd come home and it'd be like, 'Holy mackerel. That's my English teacher.' But nothing was ever serious."

She also managed to see Clee on occasion. "I heard from some of my sisters, who kept pretty close tabs on things, that Mary had a couple of rendezvous with Clee after we moved," says Dave. "She was a very big Cleveland Indians fan, like we all were, and I heard she'd meet him up there when she'd go to a game."

The relationship seemed over for good in 1979, when Dave invited Clee to his wedding, and Clee showed up with his new wife, Debra. "Mary obviously didn't know he'd married," says Dave. "She'd had a few drinks that day, and got in his face, like, 'What are you doing coming to my brother's wedding with a wife?'"

Then Mary met Charlie Altmiller, whose sister also worked at the library. "We did the proverbial blind date," says Charlie. "It was nothing terribly romantic, but we started to kind of hang around together after that. It was really more of a friendship to start."

But the friendship grew into something more, and in August 1983, Mary and Charlie were married. Five years later, their son, Brian, was born. They bought a modest house from Charlie's parents on Sunbury Road across from Hoover Reser-



Clee Ridenour (back right) towers over the rest of his Little League teammates, including Dave Lapos (front row, middle).

ed by the prospect of a second chance at first love.

What she got, however, was a quickie Vegas wedding, an abusive two-year marriage headed toward divorce and, ultimately, a bullet to the head that ended her life in March at age 46.

When Columbus police arrested Ridenour March 11, he was sitting in the front seat of Mary's teal blue 1993 Chevy Cavalier outside their Barrington Square apartment on Columbus's far north side. Mary was dead, her body slumped in the back seat. He now awaits an August trial for her murder. If convicted, Ridenour, 46, could face a life sentence. His attorney, David Niehoff, would not comment for this story, nor would he permit any contact with his client.

"If there was a way to put the death penalty on this, I would've loved to. But it doesn't qualify," says assistant prosecuting attorney Nancy Moore. "I probably feel as strongly about this case as any I've had."

No one could have predicted such a tragic fate for Mary Lapos. "You never, ever believe stuff like this could happen in your own family," says Mary's

voir, where they'd occasionally drift along on their pontoon boat. Charlie was the prototypical nice guy, a hard worker and devoted husband, while Mary was the traditional housewife, insisting on preparing home-cooked meals nightly and tending to ironing, dusting and making the beds. Neither socialized much, and both were attentive to Brian, who developed into an honor-roll student. They had little debt, and built up a comfortable cushion in savings.

Mary was equally devoted to her work. "That was her second family," says Char-

ters 12-year-old Mary would push in the stroller as she attempted to catch a glimpse of Clee. "She was caring, too caring—caring to a fault."

That became evident when Clee showed up suddenly in August 1998. Ridenour, a registered nurse, had accepted a temporary position at Riverside Hospital for in-service care, and he wasted little time looking up his old flame. "I remember the day he came in," says Sorg. "She was real excited. She gave him a big hug. All of us remember our first love."

Soon flowers began to appear at the li-

brary members and friends around Christmas 1998. By March 1999, when Mary and Charlie had filed for dissolution, she was living with Clee in an apartment on Columbus's northwest side. It hit the family hard. "I didn't know Clee had moved to Columbus until my sister was moving away from Charlie," says Dave. "She wrote all the family a letter, explaining something like, 'My Teddy Bear from 30 years ago has come back into my life. This is the guy I've always wanted. I lost him before, and now I have another chance. I'm not going to lose him again.'"



Mary Lapos-Altmiller (left), a conservative Westerville librarian for 28 years, gave up a marriage and custody of her son for Clee Ridenour (above). "This is the guy I've always wanted," she wrote in a letter to her family. "I lost him before, and now I have another chance. I'm not going to lose him again."

lie. She was a favorite of some of the library's handicapped patrons, including a large number of deaf people who would visit from the Columbus Colony, the assisted-living deaf community in Westerville. "She was the only member of our department who spoke in sign well," says co-worker Jacque Sorg. "There were a number of patrons who came in and asked for her. She was particularly patient with people with special needs."

Her other passion was her cats. She had five herself, and doted on all of them. She also volunteered at the Citizens for Humane Action animal shelter, where she and Brian would clean cages, change litter and feed the animals.

"We loved each other very much," says Charlie. "We were very compatible, and Mary was always happy—she always had that smile. In all the time I knew her, I only saw her get mad twice, and both times it was in defense of her cats. One, I remember, was when one of our cats was injured badly, and I didn't think we should spend the money. But there was no denying her when it came to her cats."

"She was an angel," says her younger sister, Ruth, of Centerburg—one of the sis-

ters 12-year-old Mary would push in the stroller as she attempted to catch a glimpse of Clee. "She was caring, too caring—caring to a fault."

They were right. "My son and I take walks together after school, and one day he told me she was on the phone every



"Ridenour, a registered nurse, had accepted a temporary position at Riverside Hospital for in-service care, and he wasted little time looking up his old flame."

morning, laughing and laughing," says Charlie. "When she came home that night, I asked her, 'What's up?' And that's when she told me, like *Ram!* out of nowhere, that she didn't love me anymore and she loved him. I didn't have any idea."

Mary broke the news to many of her

Most of our family really liked Charlie, and they were pretty upset."

Mary didn't help alleviate anyone's concerns. She readily told her co-workers about Clee's past problems; she seemed, in fact, drawn to him because of them. His marriage had ended in 1993, and he had four children of his own in Lorain. He drank a lot, smoked a lot. He liked to gamble, and ran up some big debts he couldn't pay, she told her co-workers. He also had a record. In 1988, while working for the postal service in Lorain, Ridenour was charged with stealing Social Security checks and cashing them—a federal charge. In exchange for his guilty plea to forging the endorsement of a U.S. Treasury check, federal marshals dropped the charge of theft of mail by a postal employee. He was sentenced to two years of probation.

"When she told us about his past, we were all concerned about his character," says a Westerville Public Library employee who asked not to be identified. "We wondered how long it could last. Mary even told us that Clee's mother had warned her about him. But she'd only reply, 'Oh, that's all in the past.' She kept saying she thought she could change him. She said that may-

he'd have turned out better if she hadn't left him the first time. So many people questioned her decision, but she wouldn't be dissuaded."

But Clee had tried to turn his life around after his conviction. He enrolled at Lorain County Community College, and earned his two-year associate's degree in nursing in March 1990, and then six months later passed his licensure exam with the Ohio Board of Nursing to become a registered nurse.

"Mary saw Clee as the victimized kid who was always picked on, and she saw it as her goal to help," says her brother Joe. "Clee was a larger version of her stray cats."

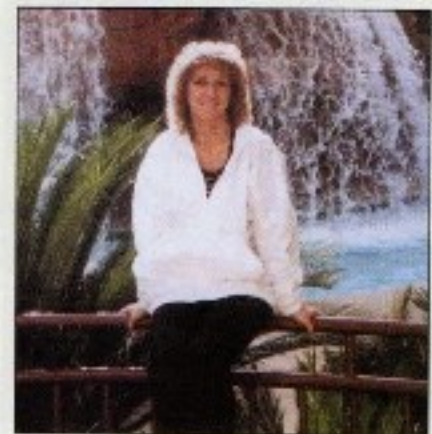
Family members' concerns grew when they learned—after the fact—that Clee and Mary had been married in Las Vegas, one of Ridenour's favorite haunts. They were wed May 4, 1999—exactly one week after Mary and Charlie's dissolution was granted. The honeymoon was brief. While Mary continued to see only the victimized kid, others began to see the bully.

Just three months after Mary's marriage, her parents celebrated their 50th anniversary; there was a big party at Joe's house. Clee didn't show. He got upset, says Ruth, because Charlie had gotten an anniversary card and given it to Mary to deliver. "He was very jealous of Charlie and Brian," says Ruth. "He just dropped my sister off and told her to find her own way home."

Dave, Clee's old teammate, called him at home and yelled at him. "I said, 'This is an important thing for this family, and you're supposed to be part of it. There are people here who want to meet you, and I haven't seen you for a long time. I was hoping to drink some beers with you and play some volleyball.' And I remember, he just said, 'I've got beer here.' And that's how it ended. Lots of my family already resented him for breaking up Mary and Charlie, and this didn't help. My parents never forgot it. The rest of us never forgot it."

But things only escalated, as Mary attempted to maintain a relationship with her son, and thus, also with Charlie. "I honestly think she felt she could take care of both families," says Joe. "And she tried."

Because Charlie had to be at work very early, Mary got up every morning and drove over to Charlie's house to fix breakfast for her son and help him get ready for school. After he caught the bus, she would sometimes clean up Charlie's house, or do a couple loads of laundry. She even somehow convinced Clee they should move from their Dublin-area apartment to an apartment at Barrington Square, near Sharon Woods Metro Park, so she could be closer to Brian. "She did it every morning until the day she died," says Ruth.



Mary, in family snapshots. "She was an angel," says her younger sister, Ruth. "She was caring, too caring—caring to a fault."



"I never saw anybody as scared as she was the day we moved her out," says Ruth. "We had the apartment complex on-site security on alert, and I was walking around the apartment with a crowbar."

During Mary's scheduled visitations, Brian stayed with her and Clee. "He knew what was going on before anyone," says Charlie. "He saw how Clee yelled at her, and berated her in front of him. It got to the point where Mary tried to schedule her visitations around the times he was gone. Brian hated Clee from Day One. He belittled Brian, bullied him, just like he did Mary, this 6-4, 280-pound man, picking on a 12-year-old and a tiny woman."

More stories began leaking out—stories that prompted further concern from her family and co-workers. Clee's rage was growing. "He was constantly berating her about what she cooked," says Dave. "We'd hear how he'd throw food at the wall, or throw it all—food, plates, glasses, pots and

pans—out the back door."

He was drinking a lot, says Dave, and constantly jealous of the time Mary spent with Brian. Initially she never outwardly showed any signs of concern for her safety, and often played off the emotional abuse around others, repeating a handful of by-now familiar phrases like, "He'd never hurt me," or, "That's just Clee." After a year of marriage, however, the strain was becoming painfully obvious. "Mary wasn't Mary anymore," says Ruth. "She still had that smile, but I could tell things weren't right. She looked tired. And you could tell she was losing weight. You'd hug her and just feel the bones."

By last fall, however, it seemed friends and family finally had convinced her that her attempts to revive a first love had turned into a full-blown case study in domestic violence. Charlie noticed she was carrying around a copy of a book called *When Men Batter Women*. She also began attending private therapy sessions through her work's health plan, as well as attending a Wednesday-night support group at Choices, a counseling center and shelter for abused women. It seemed to help. She began at least to acknowledge the fact that the relationship was troubled.

"Thanksgiving last year, she spoke to the four or five of us there at my mom's about some of the problems," says Joe. "Being typically opinionated, we did our best to listen, having already exploited our position and realizing it hadn't worked. Then Christmas, they had another blow-up. At that point, I think she realized it was time to go, but she was probably afraid to. She never really said she was afraid, but you could just tell because she never really had an explanation for why she stayed."

Little more than a month later, she'd had enough. She called her sister in Centerburg. "It was a Friday night, the first weekend in February, and I was getting ready for bed," says Ruth. "She was very quiet. She said, 'I just had an argument with Clee. Brian was with me, and he was using all this vulgar language in front of him.' She said she took her keys and purse and the tuna-noodle casserole she'd prepared for dinner and just left. I asked her, 'So, are you ready to move out?'"

Mary said that she was. The two sisters organized a plan. They initially considered moving Mary in with their other sister, Debbie, in Dublin, but Debbie owned a dog, and Mary wasn't sure it would get along with her cats. Charlie then agreed to allow Mary to return. "Where else was she going to go with five cats and two rabbits?" he says. "I had the room. She made it very clear that she wasn't coming back to me, and I understood that. I told her, 'Just get away from the abuse. Do what's best for Mary.' Brian was really excited."



Police allege Clee Ridenour shot his estranged wife inside this Barrington Square apartment they'd once shared.

Ruth met Mary the next morning, while Clee was working, and the two sisters gathered up as many of her belongings as they could. "I never saw anybody as scared as she was the day we moved her out," says Ruth. "We had the apartment complex on-site security on alert, and I was walking around the apartment with a crowbar."

"It was a move I felt was going to change her life," says Ruth. "And it did—for about a month."

Clee stepped up the pressure, cursing her one moment, pleading with her the next. "As soon as she left, that son of a bitch went out and got another cat," says Charlie. "In my view, he knew it would get her back. Then he started telling her he was sick, or dying, and that he wouldn't be able to care for that cat, and that it would need a home. He knew it would get to her."

"Being a big baby and being abusive went hand in hand with him," says Dave.

"He'd treat her like hell and then become the big teddy bear. And she was a sucker for that."

Police say Ridenour began leaving vulgar, and occasionally threatening, phone messages and e-mails, both at her work and at Charlie's house, and Mary's co-workers at the library began to get nervous. "He'd call here every day, constantly mad, furious," says one library employee who asked to remain anonymous. "Frankly, I was afraid to work nights with Mary. I was afraid he'd come in here. I talked to my supervisor about it. We notified Westerville police to begin looking out for his orange truck. Police also began escorting Mary out to her car after work. But she had no fear. She'd say, 'This isn't necessary. He wouldn't hurt me.'"

Clee filed for divorce Feb. 22, although according to prosecutor Nancy Moore, it was just another game. "He found out she was going to file and beat her to it," Moore says. His complaint claimed he'd been a

"good and dutiful husband" and that Mary had been "guilty of gross neglect of duty," and "extreme cruelty towards the Plaintiff." It also was accompanied by a motion for a restraining order that stated, among other things, "The Plaintiff is fearful that unless restrained and enjoined by this Court the Defendant may assault, strike, lay hands on, harass, annoy, interfere with, harm or otherwise threaten in some manner, either at place of residence or place of employment or elsewhere."

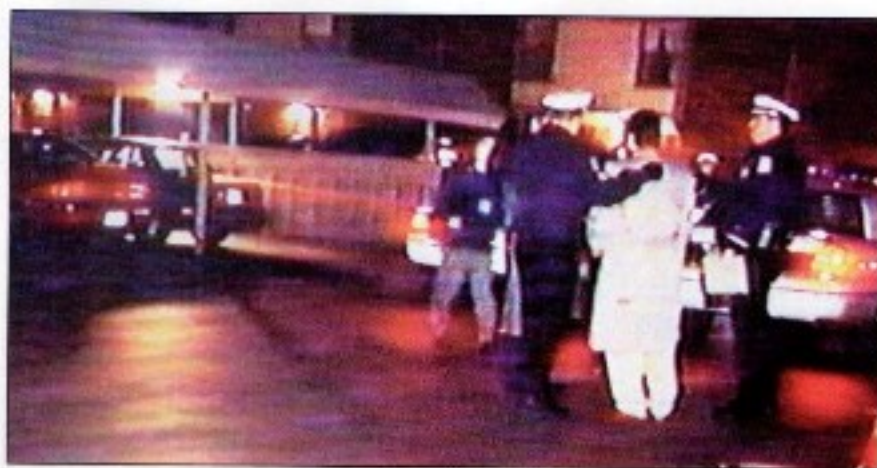
Mary filed a one-page counterclaim March 1, without an accompanying request for a restraining order. "A restraining order is almost de rigueur in divorce cases, even if there is no threat of violence, just to freeze the assets," says Mary's attorney, Rick Innis. "I always file one unless the client instructs me not to." Mary asked him not to.

She also continued to see Clee frequently, despite his motion, and despite the cautions of her co-workers. "It was so hard to watch this person self-destruct before my eyes, and there was nothing anyone could do," says the librarian. "I thought, 'She might as well just go back to him, because that's the road she's going down.'"

The tension between Clee and Charlie also began to mount. "He would call over and harass me every chance he got," says Altmiller. On the night of Feb. 25, Charlie says he got 30 to 40 calls—all hang-ups—between about 5 and 7 p.m. "I knew it was him, so I started to star-57 them, which will put a trace on the call through the phone company," Altmiller says. "To get results of the trace, you have to make a police report. So I did."

Westerville Lt. Tracey Myers verified the telephone harassment report and said the trace indicated the calls came from Clee's apartment. "We contacted Mr. Altmiller back and asked him if he wanted to press charges," says Myers. "He said he did not. He only asked that Mr. Ridenour be notified and told that if the calls continued, he would consider filing charges."

On Friday, March 9, there was more trouble. Clee stopped over at Charlie's house to pick up Mary. "He had that cat and they were going to take it somewhere," says Altmiller. When they returned, Charlie was working in the front yard. As Mary got out of the truck and went into the house, Clee stepped out of the truck. "He came around the front of the truck and said, 'You got something you want to say to me, motherfucker?' That's when I got a mood, and said, 'Yeah, get the fuck off my property,'" says Altmiller. "This guy loves to cuss, and that's when he started in with calling me 'pussy' and all that kind of stuff. Then he started to come toward me."



WBNS-TV footage of police investigating the murder scene (above), and escorting a handcuffed Clee Ridenour to the police station (right).

Altmiller says he'd been expecting just such a confrontation, and had armed himself in preparation. "I pulled it out and leveled it at him," says Charlie. "I'm 5-5, 150. He's 6-4, 280. It's my property. It's my house. I've got my son inside. He got in his truck and left."

More than an hour later, however, Clee showed up at the Westerville police station to file a complaint of aggravated menacing. Police took the statement from Ridenour, and called Charlie requesting statements from him and Mary. Mary filed her report the next evening, while Charlie stopped into the station Sunday to give his side of the story. "It seemed like more of a difference of opinion," says Myers. "These things happen all the time, where one party is angered, and there's some telephone harassment, then the other files a complaint in retaliation, saying he was threatened. We referred Mr. Ridenour to Franklin County prosecutors, just to see if he'd still be as motivated to file charges in a couple of days. But we also distributed an internal intelligence report to our personnel, letting them know that this was a potential hot spot. When the gun came out, the red flags went up."

Clee spent the weekend in Lorain, visiting his children at the home of his ex-wife, Debra. She later told Lorain police, "Clee appeared to be upset due to the incident with Altmiller [sic]." He told her, "I'm going to show her what it feels like to get a gun pulled on you." The report states, "Debra attempted to talk him out of it, and believed that he would not try to do anything." Clee left his ex-wife's house about 12:30 pm Sunday, the report says, and began consuming alcohol and becoming intoxicated on his way back to Columbus.

That entire week, he'd complained to Mary about not feeling well, and despite the altercation on Friday, she'd made Clee



a pot of chicken soup that weekend. She worked from 1 to 5 pm Sunday, and apparently knew Clee would be returning from Lorain that evening, for she told co-workers she was going home after work to get the soup and take it over to him.

At 6:30 pm, Debra told Lorain police she received a telephone call from Clee. According to the police report, "He began rambling on, stating, 'I shot her. . . I shot her!' over and over for approximately 10 minutes." Five minutes later, Clee called Debra again with a macabre query: how to get blood out of carpeting.

Debra then immediately called the Lorain police to tell them of the troubling phone call. She also gave them Clee's address, which a Lorain dispatcher promptly forwarded to the Columbus police. Clee's daughter then called her father back and told him they'd called the police. He said he only wanted to talk to Debra. When she picked up the phone, he told her, "I swear . . . I shot her, she's lying dead on my floor!"

The call to police came too late. Columbus police arrived at Ridenour's Barrington Square address to find Clee sitting in the front seat of Mary's car, in a carport, with Mary's body in the back seat. "There was no attempt made to conceal her," says Columbus homicide detective William Gillette. "It was pretty obvious when officers walked up to him."

Joe says police recovered two guns, a large amount of ammunition and a stun gun. Police would confirm only that a

9mm handgun had been used to commit the murder.

Patrol officers took Ridenour downtown, where Gillette attempted to interview him. He wouldn't talk. The television news stations broadcast the sketchy details of the crime that evening, though without a victim's name. Those watching who knew Mary didn't need any additional information.

Charlie was already in bed when the phone rang. It was Louis Lapos, Mary's dad. "I answered the phone and he just said, 'He killed her.' It threw me off, and I said, 'What are you talking about?' And he said, 'Clee—he killed Mary.' I could hear Mary's mom in the background, just wailing and wailing. That's how Mary's parents had to find out—by seeing it on the news. Police hadn't notified anyone because the jerk wasn't giving out any names."

Charlie woke his 12-year-old son and told him his mother was dead. "I don't think either one of us went to bed that

"According to the police report, 'He began rambling on, stating, 'I shot her. . . I shot her!' over and over for approximately 10 minutes.' Five minutes later, Clee called Debra again with a macabre query: how to get blood out of carpeting."

night," he says. "Brian and I just sat there. It was like a dream—it's not true. We were in shock. We didn't cry until the next morning."

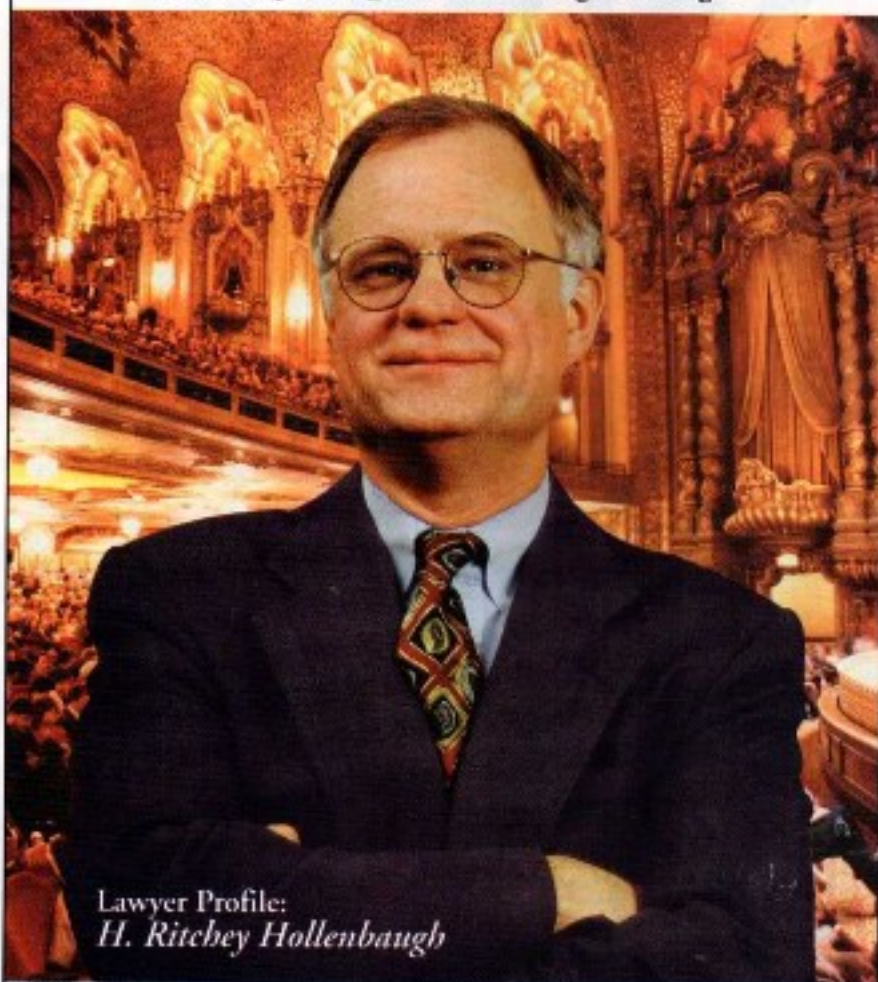
"It just didn't fit: this 95-pound person with a personality of a queen with this 6-5, 290-pounder who was the biggest brute out there," says Ruth. "She couldn't give up. I think she was trying to achieve some closure. She wanted to make good on something that couldn't be made good. She got twisted in this little web and couldn't break loose." ■

Postscript: Clee Ridenour was found dead in his cell at the Franklin County jail downtown May 17. Coroner Bradley Lewis said the cause of death was a massive heart attack resulting from coronary artery disease. Ed Morgan at the prosecutor's office said the murder case would be declared nolle prosequi, meaning that prosecution will cease, and taken off the docket.

Eric Lyttle is a staff writer for Columbus Monthly.

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Lawyer Profile:
H. Ritchey Hollenbaugh

Where is your hometown? Shelby, Ohio.

What's your area of practice? Litigation, Employment Law and White Collar Criminal Defense.

How long have you been a lawyer? 27 Years.

What do you do when you're not practicing law? Play golf, work with Bar Associations to improve the profession. Follow political issues.

If you weren't an attorney, you'd be ... A geography professor. The affect of places and geography on history and events has always fascinated me.

Who would you most like to meet? Winston Churchill.

Wish I'd said: ...to my broker in 1978, "Buy Microsoft."

What do you value most in your life? Time with my wife and kids.

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