

FIRING BACK

AIA defeats Anchorage, 6-4
SPORTS C1

City amends firefighter contract
INTERIOR/ALASKA B1

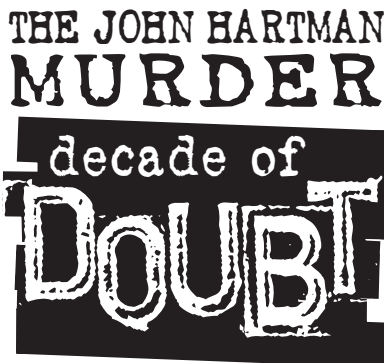
CONTRACTED

OVER THE HILL?

40-plus athletes belie their age
HEALTH D1

A wild night

Motel party sets the stage for murder investigation



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CONTENT WARNING: This series contains references to vulgar language and violent acts that may be objectionable to some readers and that parents may find inappropriate for their children.

Editor's note: This series is the product of a six-year investigation by former Daily News-Miner reporter Brian O'Donoghue and his journalism students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, with support from the News-Miner.

PART 3 OF 7

By BRIAN O'DONOGHUE
Special to the News-Miner

By 3 a.m., Alaskan Motor Inn's beleaguered night clerk sounded fed up. "I have a party out of control in these rooms," Mike Baca informed police. "And they're nothing but minors, dude." "We'll be over." "And do you know how long that will be?"

The question earned a chuckle on the Fairbanks Police Department's tape of front desk calls that second Saturday of October 1997. "We've got a lot of things going on right now," a dispatcher said. "But we'll be over as soon as we can."

It was Alaska Permanent Fund dividend time. The \$1,296 being paid to qualifying Alaskans turbo-charged downtown Fairbanks. As usual, the money drew shoppers into Fairbanks from surrounding villages. That fall,



Sam Harrel /News-Miner
The late Carol Pease, shown here handing out protest fliers in 1999, blamed herself when suspicion fell upon her son, Kevin.

many times their visits around the McCotter-Jones wedding.

The bride, Audrey McCotter, was a Fairbanks woman then living in the Norton Sound village of Unalakleet. The groom, Vernon Jones, hailed from Koyuk,

a small Athabascan community overlooking the Yukon 290 miles west of Fairbanks. Friends and relatives streamed into town from virtually everywhere in

Please see HARTMAN, Page A8

Climber buried at McKinley summit

By JEANNETTE J. LEE
Associated Press Writer

ANCHORAGE — A climber who collapsed and died on the summit of Mount McKinley has been buried there, officials at Denali National Park said Monday.

James Nasti, 51, of Naperville, Ill., died of unknown causes on Friday after his seven-person climbing party reached the top of North America's highest peak.

"It was a shocking thing to the group at the time," said park spokeswoman Maureen McLaughlin. "There weren't any obvious symptoms either observed or relayed to other team members."

Nasti was part of a guided expedition led by Alpine Ascents International. The group of two guides and five clients had set out on June 20 and made a strong climb toward the summit on a beautiful day, McLaughlin said. They had gone up the West Buttress, the most frequented route to the top of the 20,320-foot mountain.

"We are unaware of any pre-existing medical issues," she said. "We understand (Nasti) was very fit."

According to Nasti's climber registration form, this was his first attempt of McKinley. He had climbed several peaks in the western U.S., including Mount Rainier in Washington state, Mount Hood in Oregon and others in Montana and Wyoming.

Denali National Park mountaineering rangers said a recovery of Nasti's body from the jagged ridge would be extremely risky.

Please see CLIMBER, Page A5

TUBULAR DAY



Sam Harrel/News-Miner

Jenny Cathey throws a ball for her chocolate labrador Titanium on Monday afternoon, in the gravel pits near the Fairbanks International Airport. "Its more fun for me," Cathy said of her version of fetch. "Water and his ball are his favorite things."

By MARY PEMBERTON
Associated Press Writer

ANCHORAGE — Passengers aboard a cruise ship hoping to see whales and other marine mammals were left high and dry Monday after the vessel went aground near Glacier Bay National Park in Southeast Alaska.

The 207-foot Spirit of Glacier Bay was stranded for about nine hours.

A Coast Guard response boat managed to tow the ship on a rising tide to the middle of the bay late Monday afternoon, said Coast Guard spokesman Lt. Eric Eggen.

A National Park Service vessel was transferring all the passengers and some of the crew to the nearby port of Gustavus before being transferred to Juneau. Meanwhile, an evaluation of the ship's propulsion system was being performed to determine if it could get to marine facilities at Auke Bay under its own power or would need assistance, Eggen said.

The cruise ship with 24 passengers and 27

crew members was traveling just over 1 mph when it ran aground at 7:12 a.m., said Jerrol Golden, spokeswoman for Cruise West Enterprises, a Seattle-based company that owns the ship home-ported in Juneau.

Golden said the ship was moving slowly when the mishap occurred on a three-night cruise of Glacier Bay. It occurred in Tarr Inlet northwest of the park.

"It was barely a bump essentially," she said.

The Coast Guard said the hull of the ship was not compromised and no injuries were reported. There was no indication that the ship was leaking fuel. A boom to contain any fuel that might spill was deployed around the vessel as a precaution.

The cause of the grounding was not immediately apparent, Golden said.

"It is one of those crazy things. It is under investigation," she said.

Eggen said it is unclear whether the

Please see CRUISE, Page A5

Gov. Palin proposes in-state 'bullet line'

By STEVE QUINN
Associated Press Writer

JUNEAU — Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is proposing an in-state natural gas pipeline that could provide energy relief to the most populated areas of the state within five years.

Palin on Monday said the so-called in-state bullet line will not interfere with development of a proposed 1,715-mile natural gas pipeline designed to take North Slope natural gas to Canada and then to U.S. markets.

Palin said an in-state line could run north from Cook Inlet, near Anchorage, to the state's interior region and Fairbanks — the state's second largest city.

The prospective line could continue to the North Slope Foothills or potentially be connected to the proposed

main line now under consideration by the Legislature.

Palin said the Alaska Natural Gas Development Authority and Enstar Natural Gas Co. would become partners in the state project. The line would ship 460 million cubic feet of natural gas a day.

Palin said she expects construction to begin by 2011 — "at the latest."

"The tide is turning in Alaska. This project is really going to propel this state forward. Good things are just on the horizon, but they are coming to fruition today," she said.

On Wednesday, the Legislature enters a second special session and resumes debates on Palin's recommendation to award TransCanada Corp. a license toward construction of the larger pipeline.

Please see GASLINE, Page A5

Visiting cruise ship runs aground near Glacier Bay, towed free



The Associated Press

In this photo provided by the National Park Service, the cruise ship the Spirit of Glacier Bay is shown Monday after it ran aground in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

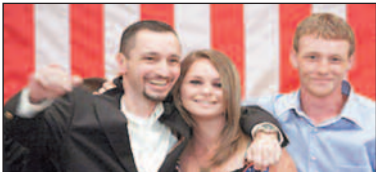
Inside

Classified C5
Comics D4
Dear Abby D2
Health D1
Interior/Alaska B1
Obituaries B2
Opinion A4
Our Town A3
Sports C1
Stock Markets C4
Weather A7
World A5

Vol. CIV, No. 189
24 pages



Rescued



Former hostages come home
Page A6



Sourdough Jack sez:

"That ship didn't just get a ground, it got the whole thing!"

Binge drinking games prove deadly to college students

The Associated Press

WINONA, Minn. — On the morning after the house party on Johnson Street, Jenna Foellmi and several other twentysomethings lay sprawled on the beds and couches. When a friend reached over to wake her, Foellmi was cold to the touch.

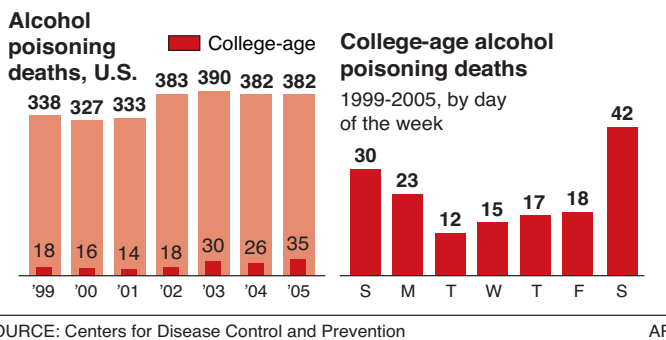
The friend's screams woke up the others still asleep in the house.

Foellmi, a 20-year-old biochemistry major at Winona State University, died of alcohol poisoning on Dec. 14, one day after she had finished her last exam of the semester. According to police reports, she had three beers during the day, then played beer pong

— a drinking game — in the evening, and downed some vodka, too.

College-age drinking deaths are up

The number of deaths from alcohol poisoning of college-age people in 2005 was almost double what it was six years before. Most deaths occurred on weekends.



Foellmi's death was tragic, but typical in many ways. An Associated Press analysis

of federal records found that 157 college-age people, 18 to 23, drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available. The number of alcohol-poisoning deaths per year nearly doubled over that span, from 18 in 1999 to a peak of 35 in 2005, though the total went up and down from year to year and dipped as low as 14 in 2001.

"There have always been problems with young people and alcohol, but it just seems like they are a little more intense now than they used to be," said Connie Gores, vice president for student life at Winona State. "The goal of a lot of

Please see DRINKING, Page A5

HARTMAN: Police forces stretched thin as permanent fund checks fuel nights of mayhem

Continued from Page A1

between. Permanent Fund dividends had a dark side. The windfall unleashed a surge of disturbances associated with free spending and substance abuse. Within Fairbanks' criminal set, some took aim at "check nights," which brought people out on the town with wallets fattened with dividend bucks.

"Rollers call it the dividend season," said Chris Stone, who was 14 that fall, during his testimony at the third Hartman trial.

"Rolling people," he explained, "is an individual will come up to somebody, hit them or knock them out and take their money; it's strong-arm robbery."

Between midnight and dawn on Oct. 11, 1997, Fairbanks police were overwhelmed. Off-duty personnel were summoned back to work as the thinly staffed department grappled with armed assaults, street fights, robberies, domestic violence and drunken driving.

Then came the discovery of a battered teenager whose injuries commanded the attention due a homicide case.

Detectives reasonably concluded they caught an early break when the motel clerk reported his run-in with a pistol-waving assailant. Police had no way of knowing — in those early stages

of investigating John Hartman's presumed murder — that the clerk's story expanded in each retelling, particularly during those first hours around the motel.

As Baca, the clerk, later acknowledged from the witness stand, a degree of "bragging" and "distorting" colored his boastful banter in the lobby.

"It was all part of the job," the clerk said. "I had to look like the tough guy."

By dawn, the clerk's claims had prompted the interrogation of a drunken teenager whose subsequent confession — later recanted — resulted in arrests and a declaration the murder case was solved.

Rash of robberies

Police logged Saturday's first assault 13 minutes into the new day. A theft and another assault call followed within 10 minutes. By 1 a.m., the night shift also chased reported burglary, DUI and disturbing the peace calls.

Strolling Third Avenue about midnight, Raymond Stickman spied three black teenagers running from a man sprawled on the sidewalk. The group fled in what Stickman later described to police as a "grayish" car, about the size of an older four-door Ford.

Police took about 20 minutes responding to a reported assault on south Noble Street. "Now the neighbor, a white male, is out in the parking lot in his underwear," a dispatcher relayed to the patrol car en route.

At 12:44 a.m., the officer at the scene requested an ambulance for a pistol-whipped victim along with backup. The man in his skivvies had fled inside an apartment building. "He's extremely intoxicated," the officer reported, "and was running around chasing a female with a firearm as well."

Police soon put a name to the suspect. "You guys use caution there," advised the station, "if we've got the right person, he's got an extensive criminal history, including weapons offenses and a couple felonies."

Approaching 1:30 a.m., police logged an assault at Arctic Circle, followed by a reported robbery near the Eagles Hall.

Looking back, that robbery phoned in from the payphone at the hall, where the McCotter-Jones reception remained in full swing, looms particularly large. It marked the beginning of what police soon would term a "spree of random violence" that culminated

Murder suspects emerge from wild night

TIMELINE:

1:35 a.m. Police log 911 call about robbery near Eagles Hall. The victim, Franklin Dayton, has returned to a wedding reception still in full swing.

About that same time, a resident of a women's shelter hears what she takes as a serious fight near Ninth Avenue and Barnette Street.

2:45 a.m. Motorist reports youth sprawled over curb on Ninth Avenue near Barnette Street.

2:58 a.m. Carol Pease reports her son, Kevin, assaulted her and is trashing their Fifth Avenue home.

3:05 a.m. Medics alert dispatch the Ninth Avenue victim may die from his head injuries.

Source: Police activity logs, ambulance run report

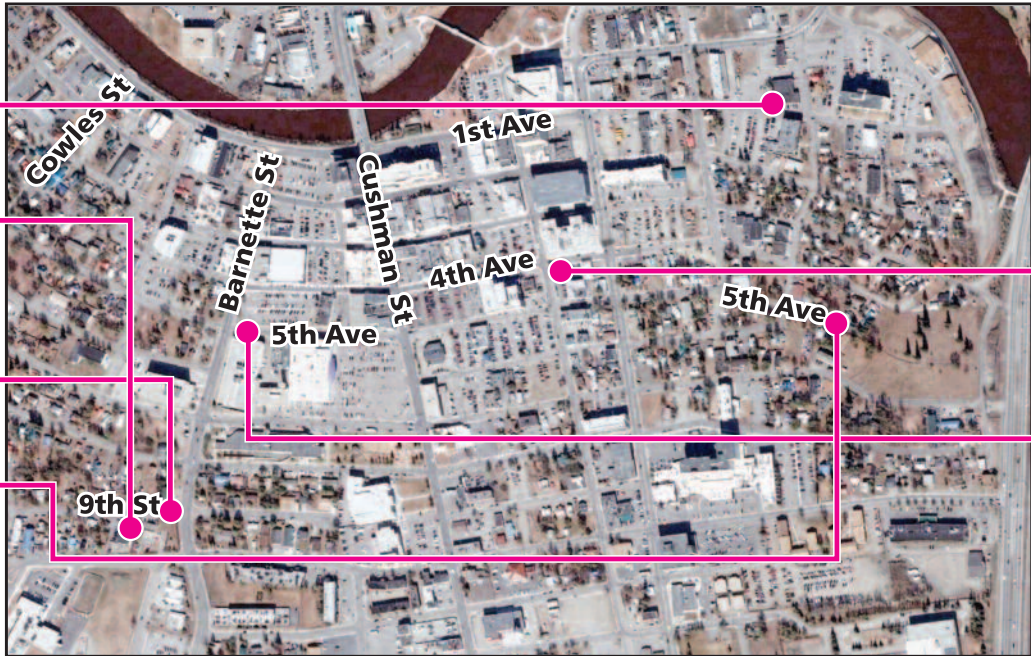


Image courtesy of DigitalGlobe

3:00 to 4:00 a.m., Alaskan Motor Inn's night clerk repeatedly requests assistance dealing with rowdy kids.

4:19 a.m., The night clerk reports using pepper spray on two kids who attacked him. Both are out front.

4:25 a.m., Kids flee as squad cars converge on the motel. Radio description of the Native fugitives carries warning that one has a gun.

4:30 a.m., Police detain Eugene Vent walking on Fifth Avenue near Barnette. Motel clerk identifies him as the kid who pulled a gun. No weapon is found.

About 5:30 a.m., Detectives begin questioning Vent, an intoxicated 17-year-old, about the motel incident and the Barnette Street assault.

DeeDee Hammond/News-Miner

ON THE WEB

Visit www.newsminer.com/hartman for more on "Decade of Doubt."

- Emergency calls and police radio tapes convey mounting mayhem alongside a presumed murder downtown.

- Motel clerk describes alleged confrontation with armed gunman Eugene Vent to grand jury weighing murder charges.

- Police reports: Cab driver recalls victim's last ride; mugging investigation near Eagle's Hall.

- Motel surveillance video.

in John Hartman's fatal beating.

Critics of the murder investigation likewise regard that 911 call as pivotal, providing as it does a time reference for Marvin Roberts' claimed alibi. If valid, that alibi undercuts the crime spree scenario, which depends on Roberts supplying a getaway car.

At the time, however, the station's night watch focused on south Noble, where a dozen-member tactical team was assembling outside the apartment building.

Force stretched thin

Approaching 3 a.m., domestic violence on the lower end of Fifth Avenue added to the shift's burdens.

"I need someone to come to the house and get my son," a woman pleaded on the 911 line.

"What?"

"I need someone to come to the house and get my son," repeated Carol Pease, 47, gasping out the words between heavy breaths.

Her son, Kevin, was "freaking out," she said. He'd been drinking and had hit her.

Between the apartment stand-off and other calls, more than a third of Fairbanks' commissioned police force was on the street. Two more officers were awakened at home.

"Can you come in to work?" a shift supervisor said, outlining the situation.

"I don't know," a sleepy voice replied.

"Please, please, please, we're short-handed," the supervisor coaxed.

"I guess I can come in for a little while."

By then, the Alaskan Motor Inn's night clerk had been seeking assistance for 30 minutes or more. In one call, he referred to "at least seven" people fighting in the street fronting the motel.

Police had no one to spare.

A motel surveillance video documented the clerk's growing impatience. Clad in a lumberjack shirt, black hair trailing behind his hunter's hat, 27-year-old Baca paced to and from the lobby window, then bolted from the office.

Minutes later, he returned and reached for the phone. "Cancel that," he told police. He'd chased those kids off.

A mother's regret

Updates kept coming on the family violence over on Fifth Avenue.

"Kevin Pease, 19 years of age," a dispatcher said, "has assaulted his mother, Carol Pease. He's supposed to be tearing up the downstairs apartment at this time. There are several warrants for his arrest."

Police were familiar with the family.

Six months earlier, Carol's estranged husband, John Pease, had been gunned down in a bizarre triple-homicide. Jimmy Ray Price, a 53-year-old Bible-quoting loner, calmly turned him-



Alaskan Motor Inn's lobby surveillance camera captured Eugene Vent about 4 a.m., Oct. 12, 1997, chatting with a woman shortly after she checked out, complaining that kids were partying without permission in Room 107.

self in after shooting Pease and two fellow boarders at his 18-unit rooming house. "Excessive noise" coming from the TV in Pease's nearby room had upset him, the shooter explained.

The victim's son, Kevin Pease, was just shy of 6-feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. He possessed a considerable juvenile record, including a past conviction for armed robbery, and a temper. A traffic stop that August added to the teen's reputation. Early Aug. 23, a patrol officer saw Pease roll though a stop sign. Additional citations came for the badly cracked windshield, using studded tires out of season, and evidence of pot possession: "To wit, a brass colored marijuana pipe with burnt residue."

Pease, whose driver's license had already been suspended, was bound for jail.

A final charge underscored his explosiveness. "Pease started kicking the driver's-side rear door, breaking the interior padding," noted the criminal complaint regarding the estimated \$400 damage to Patrol Car No. 92.

Police radios now carried word of Kevin's flight from his mother's house on a three-wheeler.

About that time, officer Matt Soden heard, then glimpsed, a three-wheeler approaching his Tactical Team position from downtown.

"The vehicle appeared to speed up when it saw the police cars," he wrote in his supplemental report.

Pease eluded police and eventually claimed a spot on a friend's floor on Turner Street joining other teens winding down from the wedding reception. That night a friend noticed Pease trembling in his sleep; the prosecutor later attributed that to Pease's guilt.

Shortly before 3 a.m., an unconscious youth clad in a camouflaged jacket was reported near Barnette and Ninth. "Ambulance crew states he's a critical trauma patient," a dispatcher soon relayed to police, along with a code signaling that the location represented a likely crime scene. "They don't know if it's a hit and run. Or an assault. Or what. They're going to have to transport."

Amid radio traffic about the Tac Team operation over on Noble, dispatch clarified the seriousness of that Barnette assault. The victim was a "possible 10-79," medics had warned, indicating the youth was expected to die.

Lt. Paul Keller, Fairbanks' chief detective, was summoned at home.

Years later, Carol Pease, the mother who called police on her son, frequently berated herself. "He (Kevin) was mad because he didn't get to see his girlfriend. I was mad because he woke me up."

From her perspective, a family row had escalated from harsh words and overturned plants to making good on an old threat. "I've been meaning to call 911 on you for a long time!" she recalled shouting.

Pease, who died several years



Left: Brian O'Donoghue photo / Above: Alaskan Motor Inn surveillance video

ago, remained convinced her call caused police to eye Kevin for the murder. "It's just so stupid," she said, sobbing. "And it's all my fault."

Brewing confrontation

Fresh-brewed coffee and an all-night supply of cigarettes, priced at \$5 a pack, kept the Alaskan Motor Inn's lobby jumping. Baca, the clerk, ducked in and out; the motel phone kept him on a short leash.

Not far away, the McCotter-Jones wedding reception was breaking up. By 3:15 a.m., staff locked the doors at the Eagles Hall. Word spread of a party over at the Alaskan.

Baca's ongoing hassles with the crowd in Room 107 spiced the chatter captured in the surveillance camera's grainy black-and-white video.

"Now they're trying to get in the cab," announces Baca, gazing out the window. He provides a play-by-play as the drunken hooligans he had shoed from the room earlier seek to leave with the women who just checked out of Room 107. "Ha-ha-ha! Cab took off on them! They're standing there yelling at the cab."

The clerk and a friend chat by the window. Guitar riffs of a Neil Young song muffle the conversation, but the video shows the clerk motioning with one hand, as if shaking something. "Pepper them," Baca says, penetrating the background radio. "Give them a little pepper with their meal."

The phone rings. The clerk takes a message and leaves the lobby. Young is still wailing about "the woman in you that makes you want to play this game" when Baca returns, heading for the phone.

"Hate to bother you guys," the night clerk informs police in a call logged at 4:19 a.m. "But, ah, those guys came back. And I have two of them I Maced that are out here. Yeah, they tried to attack me and I Maced them."

The assailants are sitting in the street, the clerk says. "I've got some of that s---- all over me, man," he adds. "I've got that s---- up in my eyes."

Baca heads outside. "Mother f-----!", he exclaims on his return. "F----- pulled a gun on me."

Everyone gathers by the window. "They're here," Baca says within about a minute, then rushes outside to greet police.

A few blocks south, the apartment standoff ends about 4:40 a.m. with a suspect's arrest.

Inside the lobby, the clerk shares new details about his confrontation.

"I said, 'You want to fight?'"

According to Baca, the kid responded to his invitation by whipping out a gun. "That's when I, whooo!" He mimes diving toward a parked car, drawing laughs. "Threw a little dust behind the car."

Gunplay takes root

The gun figured ever more prominently in accounts of the police response. "I'd already called them like three or four times through the night," Baca told grand jurors. "The second I told them, 'Hey, I just got a gun pulled on me.' They were there."

That sequence doesn't jibe with the motel's video and the station tapes. Those indicate the squad car was dispatched as soon as the clerk reported being "attacked." The gun isn't mentioned until after the squad car's arrival at the motel.

Police had the video, yet two years later continued to echo Baca regarding the gun's role in the station's response.

"I just Maced these guys. They tried to cap me," then-Sgt. James Geier described the clerk saying on the video, confusing the word "attack" with "cap," a slang term for shooting someone.

Vent's defense attorney, Bill Murphree, objected. "That's a mischaracterization of what's on the tape."

Vent stood trial in July 1999. By then, Baca, though only 29, suffered from a stroke and recurring seizures. He now recalled the squad car coming down the street when the kid in the parking lot pulled his gun. Though Vent was acquitted of the alleged motel assault, the clerk's accusations hold lasting significance through the murder investigation.

Confirming a hunch

Keller retired within months of Hartman's murder. He now lives in Arizona, where he recently fielded questions about the case via e-mail.

"When Vent got picked up it seemed that it was logical that we should speak to him," wrote the detective.

"Mike Baca's ID of Vent did not have anything to do with the actual homicide investigation," Keller added. "He was reporting a separate incident."

Vent emerged as a murder suspect, according to the detective, when the "puzzle pieces" began providing shape to the investigation.

Police detained Vent at about 4:30 a.m. near Fifth Avenue and Barnette Street. The intoxicated teenager packed no weapon and, according to the arresting officer, displayed no signs of being Maced. Police fetched the motel clerk. From inside a squad car, Baca identified Vent as the gunman.

Amid the radio traffic on the arrest, Keller is heard speculating about possible connections with the unidentified youth savaged four blocks south.

The detective cruised over to Alaskan Motor Inn, where the clerk recounted his troubles with Room 107. The video shows Keller, who was unaware Hartman had spent the night partying across

ABOUT 'DECADE OF DOUBT'

This seven-part series offers no proof of guilt or innocence. It does document gaps in the police investigation that raise questions about the victim's last conscious hours. It points out that the group convicted of the teen's murder may have been prosecuted with forms of evidence identified later in national studies as contributing to some wrongful prosecutions elsewhere. And it shows how rulings from this state's courts have undermined Alaska Native confidence in the justice system by keeping juries from weighing all that's known about the crime.

Among the series' observations:

- The police investigation remained focused on suspects flagged through a pair of confessions, subsequently retracted, despite lab tests that yielded no supporting evidence.

- Jurors remained unaware that state crime lab experts couldn't match George Frese's boots with photos of John Hartman's bruises. Though it bore the lab's logo, the suggestive exhibit presented at trial was a non-scientific photo overlay assembled by police and the district attorney. Recent studies have shown that evidence lacking forensic merit often figures in convictions that are later overturned.

- Detectives referred to fictitious evidence throughout the interrogations that yielded confessions from Eugene Vent and Frese. Employing such trickery on suspects who profess no memory of a crime, while standard practice in 1997, today draws specific cautions in the nation's standard-setting criminal interrogation manual. The revisions reflect lessons learned from re-examining tactics used obtaining confessions later proven false in cases that sent innocent people to jail.

- The state's case strongly relied upon identifications made by an eyewitness standing 550 feet from a robbery. The distance raises the possibility of witness misidentification, which has emerged as the leading common denominator among hundreds of errant murder and rape convictions.

- Police paid scant attention to the last person known to have been with Hartman. Chris Stone, a 14-year-old self-described methamphetamine addict, had been hospitalized following a similar assault only weeks prior. And jurors never heard about Stone's attention-getting entrance into Carrs-Foodland about the time Hartman lay dying in the street. Also, no one involved in the Hartman case had access to Stone's sworn statement, sealed in an unrelated juvenile proceeding, suggesting, under one interpretation, awareness of his friend's plight.

All of this has contributed, in the eyes of many, to a decade of doubt.

town, asking, "Did you happen to see earlier that there was a guy in brown camos?"

"Yeah, there was," Baca says, nodding affirmatively. "I know there was."

He took police to inspect the room. Returning to the lobby, Keller directs the clerk to secure Room 107. "Maybe we'll take those beer bottles, something like that. I want to see if it fits together first."

Another officer present asks if this has to do with the tactical team's quarry over on Noble Street. Keller shook his head. "Same description of the guy we got," said the detective, alluding to the similarity between the kid Baca recalled and the Barnette victim's attire.

"I don't know if they're old friends or whatnot," he said of Vent's possible connection with the boy left for dead. "Maybe they were having a spot of trouble earlier."

Tomorrow: Case solved through confessions

Brian O'Donoghue is a UAF assistant professor of journalism. Former student Nate Raymond contributed to this report.