

TRUTH-SEEKERS



Who killed Mary Tanner?

Friends, family and classmates of Mary Tanner, hoping to keep her memory alive and possibly generate leads in her as-yet unsolved murder in 1978, meet on the bridge in downtown Kennebunk where she was last seen alive. From left, Charlie Tanner, Donna Merrill-Walls, Tim Ames, Shelley Wigglesworth, Tina Cole, Starr Stilphen, Jane Needham, Celeste Lessard, Jayne Condon, Corine Wormwood-Baker, Barb Spaulding, Kathleen Simonin, Francine Tanguay and Ray Tanguay.

Photo by Rich Obrey

GROUP IS DEDICATED TO SOLVING THE 18-YEAR-OLD'S 1978 MURDER

By Rik O'Neal

It was hot that July day in 1978, with temperatures in the 90s across southern Maine.

"Hotter than a firecracker," recalls Robert Pelletier, who was then a member of the Kennebunk Police Department. It was a Sunday afternoon, July 8, sometime after 3:30 p.m., when Pelletier's phone rang.

Someone had found a body in Gracie Evans

Field, a wooded, isolated area just over the Lyman line from West Kennebunk.

"I only live about a mile and a half or two miles from there," Pelletier said recently. "I jumped in the truck and went right up."

When Pelletier got to the scene, he found the body of a partially clad woman, lying in six inches of grass just off the dirt airstrip that was used on weekends by a group of skydivers. The pilot of a plane had seen the body from the air as he was taking off with three jumpers. He had circled around, landed and found someone to call authorities.

"She was laying face down in the field and

I didn't move her," said Pelletier, who was 32 years old at the time. "I secured the scene and called in the state police."

Pelletier speaks slowly, deliberately, reluctantly, as he recalls that day.

"It wasn't a pretty sight, even though I didn't know who it was at the time."

No one knew who she was.

For the next 36 hours, authorities scoured the town of Kennebunk, even going so far as to show some people a photograph of the body, in their attempt to identify the woman. She had been severely beaten, her body badly decomposed in the heat.

There were no signs of a struggle and police found nothing at the scene but the striped jersey she was wearing, a jacket and a gold chain with a star pendant, according to news reports at the time.

It wasn't until late-evening on Monday that the state medical examiner identified the victim as Mary Ellen Tanner, who had turned 18 just three weeks before. A senior at Kennebunk High School, she lived with her parents and two older sisters on Cat Mousam Road in Kennebunk, the last house on the right just before Cat Mousam Road passes over the Maine Turnpike.