**TWO MIDWESTERN TEENS GO ON A KILLING SPREE, INSPIRING FILMS AND SONGS DECADES LATER**

Dateline: LINCOLN, NEB.

**Charles** **Starkweather's** eyes never worked right. He took grief for wearing glasses, but without them, the world was a permanent blur. At the age of 19, standing trial for murder and asked to identify the guns he had allegedly used in the crimes, the detached-looking defendant refused to put on his specs.

"**Charles**, would you rather not see what's going on here?" a lawyer asked him.

"There ain't nobody in here that I want to see," he replied.

For most of his short life, few people had taken much notice of **Charles** **Starkweather**, either. Slow-witted by most accounts, he was also unreliable and at times combative. "Of all the employees in the warehouse," one of his bosses recalled, "he was the dumbest man we had." Later, when **Starkweather** worked as a garbage collector, he was known to randomly curse at pedestrians along his route. The only person, it seemed, who took a liking to the short, bow-legged Lincolnite with the speech impediment was 14-year-old Caril Ann Fugate, whose parents were becoming increasingly unhappy with their daughter's older beau.

Fugate and **Starkweather** were an unlikely pair to have masterminded one of the most notorious killing sprees in American history. By the time the police caught them near the town of Douglas, Wyo., 11 people were dead, several towns had been terrorized, and the National Guard had been called out. "They were perfectly matched misfits; dull, cruel, cold killers," says Del Harding, a former reporter who covered the case for the Lincoln Star. To many people they've become folk heroes, which is just disgusting." Indeed, over the years, **Starkweather** and Fugate have been immortalized in song, with Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska," and in movies, with Terrence Malick's Badlands and inspiring Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers.

**Hold-up**

The rampage began with a robbery. Covering his face with a bandana, **Starkweather** held up a Lincoln gas station on Dec. 1, 1957, hoping to clean out the register. He kidnapped the 21-year-old attendant, then killed him with a shotgun a few miles down the road. He made off with about $100-much of it in change-spending it on clothes, movies, and presents for his girlfriend.

A month and a half after the killing, with the case still unsolved, **Starkweather** got into an argument with Fugate's parents, who lived in a small house near the service station. The quarrel escalated until **Starkweather** ended it with several rounds from his .22-caliber rifle, killing both the parents, then fatally stabbing Fugate's 2-year-old sister with a hunting knife.

Accounts of the killings are plagued with inconsistencies. **Starkweather** later testified that Fugate had watched him clean up the mess and hide the bodies in a pair of outbuildings. Fugate maintains that she didn't know her parents were dead. Whatever the case, the pair hid in the house for almost a week, watching westerns and having sex. They pinned a note to the door that said, "Stay a Way Every Body is sick with the Flue [sic]."

The ploy worked until there were more visitors than plausible excuses to rebuff them. **Starkweather** and Fugate gathered up some guns and cash and made a run for a farm in nearby Bennet. One resident of the town, the elderly August Meyer, had always been kind to **Starkweather**, allowing him to hunt on his land. But when Meyer came out to his farmhouse porch, **Starkweather** shot him dead.

Fugate and **Starkweather** were fleeing along a road from the farm when another teenage couple, Carol King and Robert Jensen, offered them a lift. **Starkweather** assured Jensen that the guns he and Fugate were toting were unloaded. They weren't. He marched Jensen to his death in a storm cellar back at the Meyer farm. King was shot and killed, too (it is not clear by whom) but only after a brutal sexual mutilation that some suspect was carried out by Fugate.

Meanwhile, the police had discovered the bodies at the Belmont Street house and were en route to the Meyer farm. Thinking that **Starkweather** was holed up inside the house, they shot in canisters of tear gas and waited. The house was empty, but police did find Meyer's body and the gruesome remains of Jensen and King.

With news of the latest murders spreading quickly, **Starkweather** and Fugate headed back to town, driving to Lincoln's country club district and the home of prominent businessman C. Lauer Ward. They shot and killed Ward and fatally stabbed his wife and the maid before stealing the family's Packard and heading out of town. Starkweather took the wheel, and Fugate sipped Pepsi through a straw. There were long periods of silence, Fugate recalled later, interrupted by **Starkweather's** odd monologues, which bore no relevance to events and seemed to ignore Fugate's presence.

When the bodies in the Ward house were found on January 29, panic hit Lincoln. Citizens called authorities with hundreds of **Starkweather** sightings, parents pulled their children out of school, and a mob of drunk, gun-toting men formed outside the county courthouse eager to join the search.

**Capture**

With the police on their trail and the National Guard mobilized, **Starkweather** and Fugate decided to make their escape across the Plains, heading for Montana. But they needed a different car. Near Douglas, Wyo., they came upon Merle Collison, a middle-aged shoe salesman sleeping in his Buick along the highway. **Starkweather** tapped on the window, then began shooting. When a second car stopped, **Starkweather** fought with its driver. A police car pulled up, and Fugate fled toward the officer. "He's killed a man!" she cried. **Starkweather** jumped into the Packard and sped off, surrendering not long afterward when the police shot out his rear window and a slice of glass slashed his ear. "He thought he was bleeding to death," Sheriff Earl Heflin was reported as saying. "That's why he stopped. That's the kind of yellow sonofabitch he is."

Fugate and **Starkweather** were flown back to Nebraska, a state that, unlike Wyoming, allowed capital punishment. **Starkweather** posed for the cameras like his idol James Dean, in leather jacket and T-shirt, with a cigarette in his mouth. Fugate wore a head scarf and white cowboy boots. In custody, **Starkweather** made a series of contradictory confessions to the slayings, while Fugate maintained her innocence.

In court, **Starkweather** claimed that he killed in self-defense and grew angry when his lawyers suggested he was insane. Jensen, **Starkweather** argued, had started back up the steps of the cellar toward him when he was shot. But the grisly autopsy photographs of the bullet holes behind Jensen's ear told a different story.

**Starkweather** was sentenced to death in the electric chair at the Nebraska State Penitentiary on June 25, 1959. Fugate was sentenced to life in prison. (Paroled in 1976, she now lives in Michigan.)

Reporter Del Harding was sitting about 15 feet away when **Starkweather's** sentence was carried out. "As I watched Charlie being jolted up and down like a puppet by the current," he says, "I wondered if such a quick, clean, relatively painless death was adequate punishment for a person who had caused so much pain, misery, and suffering."

William Allen, author of **Starkweather**: Inside the Mind of a Teenage Killer, writes that before the executioner flipped the switch, **Starkweather** was asked whether he would like to donate his corneas to an eye bank. "Why should I?" replied the myopic murderer. "Nobody ever gave me anything."