

'Horse people' knew Gerber tale, but for 2 years no one asked them

By Kerry DeRochi
Staff writer

Elizabeth "Ruthie" Ambrose clipped newspaper articles on John Gerber's death, even though she had met the executive only once, at the Dunn Roven horse stables.

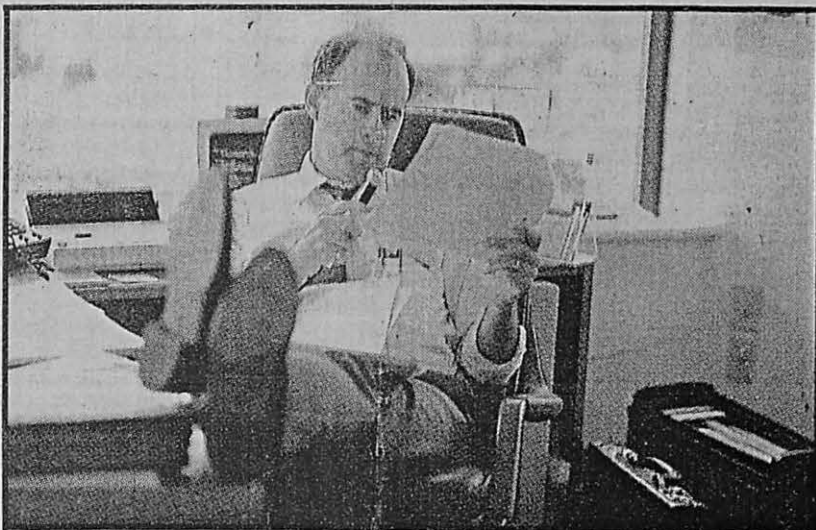
She watched television reports on the shooting from her parents' pale green home on Kempsville Road in Chesapeake, a few yards from the farm she visited daily.

She wondered why the police never came. "The first thing that crossed my mind was, 'I don't understand,'" Ambrose said. "I had so much stuff going through my head. Everybody talked about it, after Mr. Gerber was killed. Everybody was talking. There were too many questions."

The questions went unanswered for two years, until Jeremiah A. Denton III pulled his Volvo up the gravel and dirt drive of Dunn Roven stables.

Hired by two of Gerber's children, Denton, a lawyer, was searching for clues to prove that the executive's death was not accidental.

He went to the horse farm, hoping to get a glimpse of the life Sylvia Gerber lived when she was away



Staff photo by PAUL A. AIKEN

Jeremiah A. Denton III found leads at a stable the police never visited. "Everyone down there knew in their hearts what had happened."

from her home in Virginia Beach's Middle Plantation.

It was there, in the dust and straw of a barnyard, that Denton found the tools he needed to unravel the widow's story.

Through a handful of "horse people," Denton identified the man he believed to be Sylvia Gerber's boy-

friend, a dry wall installer who now cuts timber in Amherst County.

Using receipts that put the two in a motel the week John Gerber died, Denton convinced a civil court jury last month that Sylvia Gerber and her mother, Roma Luella Werth,

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were responsible for the millionaire's death. The jury ordered the two women to pay \$3 million to John Gerber's three children.

The verdict ran counter to the decision of an earlier criminal trial in which jurors ruled that the shooting was accidental and convicted Werth of involuntary manslaughter.

To Denton, the difference in the two verdicts begins and ends at Dunn Roven, a place police never visited.

"The horse people, they live basically outside of the system," Denton said. "It's not a natural thing for them to pick up the phone and call the Police Department to help them solve a crime."

"Everyone down there knew in their hearts what had happened. No one went down there to talk to them."

Few horse people were surprised when Denton showed up in August 1990. Some wondered why it had taken so long.

Most had never been to court. Yet they proved to be the key witnesses in the complex, three-week trial. They're the ones who cost Sylvia Gerber her millions.

"I don't have no reason to hide anything," said Dennis Todd Tidwell, who worked at Dunn Roven. "I never had a lawyer look me up before."

Said Ambrose: "They come to me, I tell them what I know. I'm the kind of person who believes in justice."

No one remembers the exact day Sylvia Gerber arrived at Dunn Roven, a collection of run-down barns where horses were rented for \$10 an hour.

At the time, Oliver Woodfin "Woody" Proffitt, a 46-year-old horse trader, ran Dunn Roven. He also managed the Circle P on West Road.



Sylvia Gerber

'She always had jewelry on'

Men and women of all ages drifted in and out of the stables. Most had dropped out of school. Few held steady jobs outside of the farm.

It was a closely knit group of people who knew each other well. Yet last names were seldom known and rarely used.

"You don't get too close with people like that," Tidwell said. "A horse trader is like a used-car dealer. If you trust a used-car dealer, you're stupid."

It was spring 1988 when Sylvia Gerber rented a pony with her son, Kelly, on her first visit to the farm.

One month later, Proffitt sold her a quarter horse mare for \$1,850.

"She just wanted to ride a horse," Tidwell said. "Once Sylvia started coming out, she was out there right regular. You got to know her like you knew the other regulars."

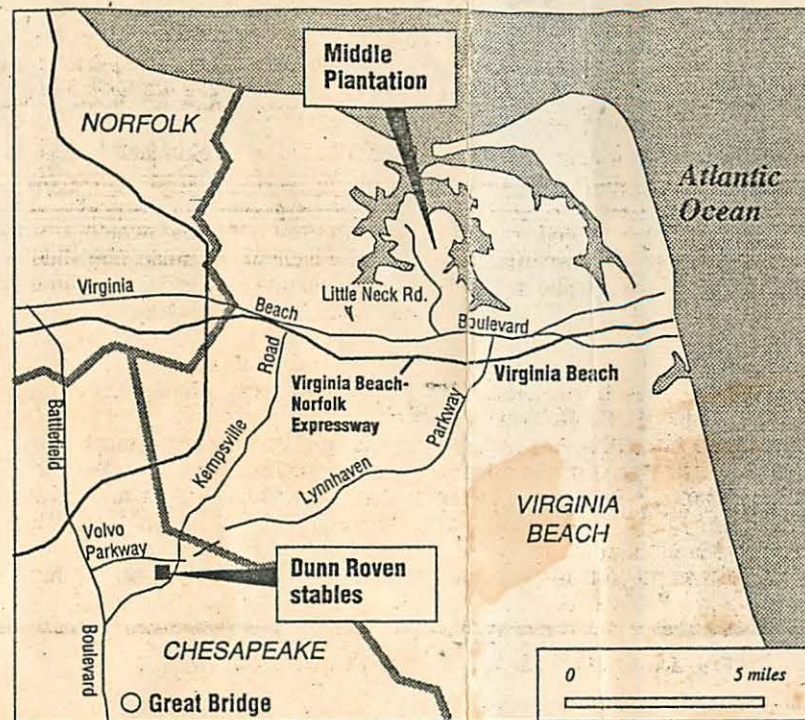
"It's right easy to relax when you get around critters like that. You know, country living."

But Sylvia Gerber, the wife of the founder of Dyna-fax Inc., stood out. She rarely wore jeans and seldom rode her horse above a walk. She once used a plastic stool to climb into the saddle.

"Horse people don't climb stools," Tidwell said.

Sylvia Gerber often brought homemade cakes and pies and Italian pastas to share with the others.

"She was always dressed so nice," Ambrose said. "She always



Staff graphic by JOHN EARLE

had jewelry on. To me, it was like she flaunted what she had. It was a rundown stable, for God's sake."

That spring, Sylvia Gerber and Charles R. "Chuck" Jabas, a 27-year-old dry wall installer, met at the stable.

Jabas, a tall, stocky man with a receding hairline, wore blue jeans, a cowboy hat and boots. He was considered a rural version of Don Juan. It was rumored he once shot a snake from horseback.

Gerber and Jabas became friends. And the relationship became the talk of Dunn Roven.

"They were having an affair together, and everybody knew it," said Ambrose, who once dated Jabas.

It got to the point that Proffitt, according to a deposition he gave in the civil case, approached Jabas in the tack room and warned him to be careful because Sylvia Gerber's husband was a powerful man.

"I said it because you could see them around there together and

they were being pretty tight together," Proffitt said in his deposition. "They could have been getting friendly. He was around the horses and she didn't know anything about one."

Proffitt, a gray-haired man who wears a gold ring in the shape of a horseshoe, declined to be interviewed.

In a sworn deposition, Tidwell described Jabas as "gold digging" when he began hanging around Sylvia Gerber.

"Bottom line is I ain't got no proof or nothing that they was together except for what I know in my gut, you know," Tidwell said in his deposition. "My feelings and my common sense. I'm book dumb, but eat up with common sense."

In June 1988, Jabas dropped by Ambrose's house on Kempsville Road with color aerial photographs of the Gerber home, Ambrose said.

"He showed me these pictures," Ambrose said. "He said, 'These are of Sylvia's house. This is going to be



Charles R. "Chuck" Jabas

Was 'gold digging,' co-worker said

mine someday."

About three weeks later, Jabas asked Ambrose to look after his horse, Eclipse, while he went to work a job on the Outer Banks. She agreed, and he disappeared.

That same week Sylvia Gerber asked Proffitt to help her move her horse to the Delmar horse stable in Virginia Beach.

John Gerber was shot several days later in the kitchen of his home. His mother-in-law, Werth, said she shot him in self-defense after he attacked Sylvia Gerber in a drunken rage.

The same week, Jabas returned to Dunn Roven to pick up Eclipse. He paid about \$500 he owed Proffitt and also moved his horse to Delmar.

"He didn't say nothing to anybody," Ambrose said in her deposition. "He didn't have nothing to say. He was in a hurry when he picked up his horse."

"Everybody was saying he's with Sylvia," she said in an interview later. "I put two and two together myself. Chuck just out of the blue gets his horse in a damn hurry and hauls ass out of here."

None of the horse people saw Jabas again.

Ambrose quit the stables a few months later and subsequently

moved to a mobile-home park in Suffolk.

Tidwell quit about the time of the shooting. He now lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Portsmouth and works nights as an electrician.

Proffitt no longer runs Dunn Roven. The place has been renamed Kempsville Stables.

Most had forgotten the Gerber shooting until August 1990, when Denton arrived at the farm.

"When I got down to the stables and started talking to people, I immediately got the feeling I was talking to Sylvia's intimate friends," Denton said. "It wasn't a situation of 'Oh, yeah, the rich lady who rented horses.'"

"She was good friends with a number of people down there, and she felt at home there."

Ambrose and Tidwell testified in the three-week civil trial. Proffitt did not, though his deposition was read in court.

Attorneys on both sides of the case said their testimony was critical to the outcome.

Sylvia Gerber's attorney, James C. Lewis, called the information that led Denton to Chuck Jabas "the eight ball."

The comments of the horse people may also prove critical in a second police investigation into the shooting.

After the July verdict, police and prosecutors both said they would review their investigations and decide whether to reopen the case.

"I really never expected anything to come out of what happened," Ambrose said. "After three years now the whole thing is coming back to me. It's something you can't forget. I think I'll live with this for the rest of my life."

Neither Ambrose nor Tidwell regrets testifying. Tidwell said it was "right neat."

"I look at the law," Ambrose said. "They're going to ask you certain questions. You can't lie about what you know. Sooner or later, somebody will find out."