

With brother's name, he hid for years

Accused of sex abuse, Richard Fisher fled in 1990. He was found last month, using the identity of his brother Jack. But what happened to Jack?

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DUNEDIN - Seventeen years ago, Richard M. Fisher was charged with sexually abusing a 6-year-old girl in Oldsmar. He confessed, police say, and pleaded guilty to lesser charges. He was released on bail while awaiting sentencing.

Then he vanished.

His family told police they had no idea where he went. Detectives looked all over. So did his bail bondsman, who was out \$25,000. But Richard Fisher was in the wind.

At the time, Richard's older brother Jack was a U.S. Army veteran who worked in the mobile home business.

Four years after Richard vanished, so did Jack. Family members say they haven't seen him in more than a decade.

But last month, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office received an anonymous tip.

Richard Fisher was living in Dunedin, the tipster said - as Jack Fisher.

Detective Marion Cobb tracked the man who called himself Jack Fisher to an electrician's shop in Dunedin.

Cobb asked Fisher's boss to summon him from a job site, but not to tell him why. Cobb then sat outside the shop and waited.

He saw Fisher pull up. He saw Fisher scan the street. When he got out, Fisher peeked around the building before heading inside. Cobb was certain, he said, that he had just seen Richard Fisher.

Cobb went inside and confronted him. "No, I'm Jack Fisher," the man said over and over.

His co-workers knew him as Jack. So did his neighbors. His driver's license and Social Security number came back to Jack Fisher.

But a fingerprint analysis showed it was Richard Fisher, officials said. Cobb booked him into the Pinellas County Jail on the 17-year-old sex abuse charge. Bail was denied. He is set to finally be sentenced on June 6.

Now, just one question remains: Where is the real Jack Fisher?

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The case began in 1988 when child welfare workers were summoned to an apartment building in Oldsmar. There, a 6-year-old girl said she had been sexually abused. A medical test confirmed it.

The girl identified her abuser as Richard Fisher, a neighbor. Pinellas deputies arrested him on Dec. 29, 1988, on two charges of capital sexual battery, for which he faced as much as 60 years in prison. Deputies said Fisher admitted the abuse.

That same day, the Clearwater Bonding Agency was hired to bail him out of jail. The agency put up \$25,000 to get Fisher released.

A year later, Richard agreed to plead guilty to two lesser charges of attempted sexual battery. As part of his plea, Richard agreed to serve 35 years in prison. Sentencing was set for Jan. 16, 1990.

Judge Horace Andrews allowed Richard to remain free on bail until his sentencing date. He warned him not to flee.

"I want you to understand that should you not come back here on Jan. 16th or should you actually get into some criminal activity involvement between now and then, that this deal is off as far as the court is concerned," Andrews said. "But you would just - you can't withdraw your plea. You would just be subject to getting a more harsh sentence."

Richard answered: "Yes, sir."

But Richard didn't listen to the judge's warning. His father, Donald, told police that when he went to pick him up for court, he was gone. He told police the family was looking for Richard because they had used their home as collateral for his bond. The police and the bonding agency scoured the area.

"They were looking under rocks for this guy," said Assistant State Attorney Beverly Andringa.

Bail bondsmen are usually very skilled at finding people who skip bail, but this one was all dead ends. "We lost \$25,000 on him," said Judy Stines, the bonding agency's operator. "I'll never forget that."

On June 5, 1991, officers with the now-defunct Dunedin Police Department received an anonymous tip that Richard was living with Jack and another brother, Peter, in Dunedin. Though Peter told police they couldn't search the home, officers did so anyway. Officers came back two days later and did the same thing.

Richard wasn't there.

A month later, Jack and Peter sued the Police Department, accusing them of violating their constitutional protection from an unlawful search. The case was later settled.

Eventually, the search went cold. Stines said they heard Richard was out of the country.

His parents paid off the bonding agency with \$15,000 up front and monthly \$500 payments.

"They never missed a payment," Stines said. "I've never had anybody be that good."

There are nearly 59,000 outstanding warrants in Pinellas County and only about 20 deputies assigned to find those people.

With no new leads, the hunt for Richard Fisher eventually faded into the background.

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About three years after Richard vanished, Jack moved to Long Beach, Miss., on that state's gulf coast, where he worked for a mobile home manufacturer.

He stayed in touch with his parents, Donald and Betty, who live in Clearwater. In late July 1994, Jack told his parents he was heading out of state, perhaps to Missouri, to help victims of a flood.

They say they haven't heard from Jack since.

"Nobody knows where Jack is," Betty Fisher said Friday. "We have no idea."

The family said they filed a missing persons report in Mississippi, but said they didn't feel the police took it seriously. The family searched on its own, but found no trace of Jack.

Richard's whereabouts immediately after his disappearance remain a mystery, though he at some point assumed Jack's identity, authorities say. Work records place Richard in Ocala in the mid 1990s.

Though the brothers don't look a lot alike, Richard got a driver's license in Jack's name. He also used his Social Security number, and began working as an electrician.

Not too long ago, Richard moved to Dunedin, back to the same county where he was a wanted man. He rented a brown and beige duplex, where he lived with two teenage daughters, according to neighbors.

The home is not far from various family members. His brother Peter lives only about 1 mile away. His parents' house is a 15-minute drive away.

Family members interviewed for this article said they had no idea Richard was living here. He had no arrests in Florida while posing as his brother.

Six months ago, Richard was hired at the Dunedin electrician's shop. The office manager made a copy of his driver's license - it said Jack Fisher - and put it in his file. His application included a letter of recommendation - for Jack Fisher - from a former employer in Ocala. He said in his application he was never convicted of a felony.

He was the perfect employee, said Margaret Romell, the office manager.

"He didn't look like somebody who would do anything to anybody," said Romell, who had Fisher out to her own home to install some outlets. "He's a very small, shy, friendly person."

Fisher talked little about his personal life, though he did speak of his daughters' school activities.

"Jack or Richard or whoever he may be was a very nice person," Romell said.

After Richard was arrested, a woman came to his workplace to pick up his last paycheck.

She identified herself as his sister, Romell said.

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The identity of the person who tipped authorities about Richard's whereabouts is unknown, but whoever it is knew quite a bit about the circumstances. They knew Richard was using his brother's name and that Jack was missing.

Still, Detective Cobb had to do a lot of legwork, including recruiting a homicide detective, to find where Richard was living and working. Cobb said he couldn't reveal exactly how they found Richard.

Cobb said Richard was nervous when he confronted him on March 24, though resolute that he was Jack Fisher and the "real" Richard was missing.

Cobb took him to the jail to run his fingerprints through a database.

Richard kept saying: "I'm Jack Fisher. I'm Jack Fisher."

But 15 minutes later, the fingerprints results were in. "Richard, why did you lie to me?" Cobb said.

He told Cobb he had wanted to care for his teenage daughters.

Knocks to the door of the duplex where Richard was living with his daughters were not answered this week.

Andringa, the assistant state attorney, said Richard cannot withdraw the guilty plea he entered 15 years ago. He faces at least 35 years in prison and possibly more because he absconded.

His public defender could not be reached for comment this week. Betty Fisher insists her son is innocent.

If Richard could withdraw his plea, it could complicate the case. It's unknown where the child victim - who would now be about 23 - lives today.

The child's mother, ironically, also is a fugitive from Pinellas County. She is wanted on probation violation charges.

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After Richard's arrest, Andringa assigned an investigator to look into into Jack's disappearance.

The obvious question: Did Richard have anything to do with it? Family members say no.

"There is absolutely no connection between my two sons at all," Betty Fisher said.

The investigator assigned to the case, Rick Hart, agreed it seems unlikely.

So where is is Jack?

Hart has contacted authorities in Mississippi and is trying to trace his last steps.

Betty Fisher said she hopes he finds some answers.

"It was a devastating thing to lose a son," she said.

Anyone with information about Jack Fisher can call investigator Rick Hart at (727) 464-6760.

Times researcher Carolyn Edds contributed to this report.