
In the late 1960s Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty saw thousands of young Americans flooding rural and underserved areas to work on projects to uplift the local populace. This was especially true in Appalachia. One of these groups was VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) which served as a domestic Peace Corps. Although the work of these young idealists had positive effects in the regions that they served, they were not always welcome by the local people.

Former Los Angeles Times reporter and Duke University graduate Mark Pinsky’s book *Met Her on the Mountain: A Forty-Year Quest to Solve the Appalachian Cold-Case Murder of Nancy Morgan* tells the story of how one of these conflicts went terribly wrong. This well-researched book focuses on the murder of twenty-four-year-old VISTA member Nancy Morgan, who was raped and murdered in 1970 in Madison County North Carolina. Her partially clothed and hog-tied body was found in the back of her government-issued car on a muddy back road.

The book is sectioned into three parts: The Murder, The Trial, and The Reinvestigation. It begins with an examination of the region itself including its topography and sociopolitical climate.

Pinsky focuses especially on the nature of rural power, especially the prevalence of family controlled political machines and how those organizations can exert control over both the local people and law enforcement. Also included is a brief history of VISTA’s activities in the region. Once the stage is set, he details Nancy Morgan’s last weeks before her death. He covers the initial investigation of the murder, muddied by shoddy police work and territorial conflicts among the FBI, the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, and the Madison County sheriff’s office. Although some suspects were identified, the case eventually went cold, haunting the region for over a decade.

The second part focuses on the reinvigorated investigation and the 1982 trial of Ed Walker, a VISTA coworker of Morgan’s who was also the prime suspect during the initial investigation. Pinsky vividly recounts Walker’s arrest and trial, building genuine tension in the reader. The conflict between the local Sherriff E. Y. Ponder (a brother of the leader of the local political machine) and Walker’s folksy, yet skilled, defense lawyer Joe Huff is particularly compelling. The state’s flimsy case, based largely on the testimony of a convicted felon, soon fell apart and led to Walker’s acquittal. After the trial there were still more questions than answers about the horrific events of 1970.

The final part of the book focuses on Pinsky’s own efforts to solve the case. His personal research includes interviews with persons of interest and review of information gleaned from police files. He eventually finds evidence pointing to a group of local ruffians as the most likely culprits. He even gets a confession from one of his suspects, who was serving life in prison for the poisoning of his own daughter. Throughout this part of the book, Pinsky describes his unsuccessful attempts to get the investigation fully reopened. The murder remains unsolved.
This well-written book contains only one flaw. Although it provides the reader with an incredibly deep account of the murder, trial, and investigation, it does not include any footnotes or a bibliography to indicate where much of the information was gleaned. This surely would have strengthened the book as a whole. Despite this, Pinsky provides interested readers with an engaging, if morbid, story.

This book is suitable for advanced readers and both public and academic libraries.

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