



Lisa Smith of Petaluma, shown in 1970, was last seen in March 1971.

## Officials take new look at vanished Petaluma teen

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**F**orty years ago, a 17-year-old Petaluma girl stood along Santa Rosa's Hearn Avenue trying to hitch a ride.

Lisa Smith was wearing a white blouse with ruffles, cowboy boots, green bell-bottom jeans and a dark pea coat.

Nearly two weeks later, the March 28, 1971, edition of The Press Democrat reported she was missing and fears were mounting for her safety. No one had seen her since.

But there would be no newspaper story announcing a reunion with her

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family.

Her disappearance came just months before the nude bodies of teens and young women began turning up off rural Sonoma County roadways and in creek beds — the work of a serial killer.

Now local officials want to know if the case of Lisa Smith is connected to those cases, or perhaps discover that she is alive and well somewhere.

"We got a tip saying this girl went missing in the same time period as all of these other girls," said Lt. Dennis O'Leary of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office.

The tip launched detectives Jesse Hanshew and Gary Freitas about three months ago on a search for Smith, who, if alive, is a 57-year-old woman.

"We can't conclude she was ever found," Hanshew said. "She may be living well somewhere. We hope she is."

The 1970s murders are arguably the most heinous mystery in Sonoma County criminal history and detectives still are trying to solve them.

The question of what happened to Lisa Smith has surfaced as part of the most recent crack at the unsolved slayings.

Detectives acknowledged that there are far more questions than answers, and the passage of time hasn't helped.

Over the span of four decades, the original missing persons report to

the Sheriff's Office is missing, in all likelihood purged from the system after so many decades.

The detectives have followed several possible paths, hoping to find a trace of the girl at the time or perhaps leading to the woman now.

But the trail is cold.

They now are asking for the public's help, hoping someone will know her or remember the story and point them toward a definitive answer.

The 17-year-old girl disappeared March 16, 1971. She was last seen at about 7 p.m., hitchhiking on Hearn Avenue in south Santa Rosa.

That is a common denominator in at least some of the 1970s slayings, as some of the seven homicide victims had been hitchhiking in the Santa Rosa area.

Her age also falls squarely within the pattern of the killer's victims, who were 12 to 23 years old.

Smith's disappearance was detailed in the newspaper after her family reported her missing. A photo accompanied the article. It offered a forlorn image of a teenager with long, straight dark hair.

Family, friends and her boyfriend told deputies then they could think of no reason why she'd be gone that long, the article stated.

The story ended with sheriff's officials asking anyone with information to contact deputies.

A day later another article appeared in the paper.

This story's headline included a question: "Missing Girl Treated In Novato Hospital?"

The five-paragraph story said

Sonoma County authorities were investigating whether an assault victim treated at Novato General Hospital the prior Saturday was the missing Petaluma girl.

The girl at the hospital had allegedly been beaten after she'd been picked up by a man while hitchhiking. She'd given the name 'Lisa Smith' and was released after treatment. But the hospital believed she was 21 years old, according to the article.

Was she in fact the teenager?

The hospital today does not have records for the time period and detectives said they don't know if their counterparts back then were able to determine if the missing girl was the girl at the hospital, Hanshew said.

The family and boyfriend weren't named in the newspaper article and detectives now have no idea who or where they are.

Similar dead ends stemmed from checks of numerous high schools throughout the region, checks with vital records, the hospital and the Marin County Sheriff's Office. Specifically, the detectives checked school records from the years 1967 to 1973 and no one matched the girl they sought, Hanshew said.

"We've exhausted every angle," said O'Leary.

"Lisa Smith, there are millions of them," said Hanshew said.

Detectives ask anyone with information to contact them at 565-2185.

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