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Vicksburg Police Sgt. Sandra Johnson stands on the front porch of a home on China Grove Road where Mary Franklin lived. Johnson is the great niece of Franklin, who disappeared from her home 20 years ago today. (Katie Carter • The Vicksburg Post)

Franklin missing 20 years today, and no trace of her has been found

She remembers that her great-aunt was untrusting - suspicious of everything and everybody.

That's part of the reason Mary Franklin's disappearance 20 years ago today is still unsettling to Sandra Johnson.

"When the sun went down, her shades came down, her doors were shut and her windows were closed," Johnson said. "She was a very private person."

But there was no sign of forced entry into the home where Franklin lived alone - meaning Franklin may have welcomed any person or people who had a role in her disappearance.

"There's no doubt in my mind that she knew the perpetrator or perpetrators," Johnson said. While Franklin was last seen July 26, 1986, more than two days passed before the 71-year-old was reported missing to the Warren County Sheriff's Department. No trace of her has been found since.

About 50 feet off China Grove Road near Gibson Road stands the Franklin home. Trees and shrubs cover what used to be the front yard. Windows are missing, providing different views of the two-bedroom house from its caving front porch.

Johnson, now a 15-year veteran of the Vicksburg Police Department, took a quick look through the front door. It has been 12 years since she's been on the property, where she spent many days and nights as a child.

"I get an eery feeling when I pass by this house at night," she said. "But I don't stop. It's too spooky."

Indeed, the house has developed quite a history.

In October 1994, the bodies of three Hinds Community College students were found in the home. They had been shot to death with their hands tied behind their backs.

Arrests followed on the theory that the murders were related to drug trafficking and the empty house was merely an opportune place for executions. There was no connection to Franklin's disappearance.

"I did go into that house in 1994, but I hadn't been in there since," Johnson said. "That was very scary. I recall picking up some family pictures off the floor."

Also, three years earlier, fugitive Dennis Henry DePue of Michigan, profiled earlier the same night on "America's Most Wanted," ended a year-long run from police near the front of the house by taking his own life after a shootout with Sheriff Paul Barrett and his deputies.

"That's a bit much," Johnson said of the history around the property.

Jay McKenzie recalls the initial investigation.

Warren County's chief deputy was an investigator in 1986. He remembers spending much of the day looking for clues on the 15-acre property.

"There were signs of something possibly happening inside the house," he said. "The lady's walker was there and her walking canes were still there. Her purse was there."

It was a Friday that she was last seen. It was when she didn't show for Sunday services at Hickory Tree Baptist Church in Bovina that someone called a family member to say she was missing.

Reportedly, the relative had found people inside the home before authorities started the investigation. But McKenzie said the contaminated scene played no role in hindering the investigation.

"Family members had already been in the house. The scene wasn't as pristine as other crime scenes. But we processed it the best we could. I don't know if we could have done anything differently."

Searches around the property, in the Big Black River and in a landfill on Halls Ferry Road yielded nothing. Numerous leads led nowhere. And a confession by a man who said he and three others killed Franklin before burying her body in a dump was useless because of the suspect's mental state.

Although the case remains open, no new information has been uncovered.

"There were numerous people interviewed," McKenzie said. "Although investigators at that time followed promising leads, nothing was solid enough to prosecute. The Mary Franklin case has grown cold."

Johnson has childhood memories.

As a 9-year-old girl living with her family on Mississippi 27, Johnson remembers running through the woods to her aunt's house nearby. She called her Aunt Mae.

"We were pretty close. If she didn't walk to our house and visit, we would go to her house."

Johnson pauses and smiles.

"She was very strict but very compassionate," she said. "Going through the woods, you'd get ticks on you and she'd pull out the alcohol and rub it on us."

In those days, the area was mostly rural - with little traffic and few neighbors. The best friend Franklin had lived beside her in a house at the intersection of China Grove and Gibson. Johnson remembers him as Joe Williams.

"He pretty much took Aunt Mae everywhere she needed to go."

Still fresh in her memory is the way Franklin guarded her property - and herself.

"She was such a scared person. When we'd come back from town, she'd have us look under the beds to make sure no one was under them. She had a big wooden gate at the front of the house that was always locked, and she didn't trust us kids to go to the mailbox to get her mail."

Some of Franklin's friends shared what they remember.

The Rev. Elzie O'Neal had been with Hickory Tree Baptist Church about 20 years when Franklin began attending services there.

"Everybody was looking for her the day she went missing. That's all I can recall. She just didn't show up for church, and that was unusual. But she was a beautiful person. Nobody has never known what happened."

Another friend, Lenore Jones-Davis, lived near Franklin on China Grove.

"We used to see one another on occasion," she said. "I knew her maybe 10 years or something like that. She was a nice person. I don't know what could have happened to her back there."

Johnson believes she knows what happened.

"In my opinion, because she was such a careful and private person, she knew whoever knocked on her door. She was sharp in mind, so I don't think she wandered off."

In 1986, Johnson was 24 and working for the public schools.

"I found out about her disappearance from my granddad," she said. "I don't remember where I was. He just said, 'Mae is missing. Nobody knows where she is.' I don't remember what I said."

Five years before Franklin disappeared, Johnson saw her great-aunt. Little was said.

"She wasn't very friendly. We had a tragedy in our family in 1981, and she probably felt like some harm may have come to her. When she went missing, I hadn't talked to her in a couple of years."

But Johnson thinks whoever is responsible for bringing harm to her aunt had "a drug problem or mental problem."

"I can't imagine her offending anyone at all, and I can't imagine anyone doing something like this to an elderly person."

The property on China Grove is owned by a relative in Milwaukee, Wis. Johnson said he has refused to sell