

Robert E. Odle, 39, 1005 S. 23rd St., died Friday at his home. . . . Mr. Odle was a mechanic for the Illinois Bell Telephone Co. . . . **He is survived by one . . .** Carolyn Louise Odle, 39, 1005 S. 23rd St., died Friday at her home. . . . Mrs. Odle was past president of the Horace Mann Parent-Teacher Organization and was a volunteer for the Horace Mann School library. . . . **She is survived by one. . . .** Robyn Lynn Odle, 14, 1005 S. 23rd St., died Friday at her home. . . . She was a student at the Mt. Vernon Township High School. . . . **He is survived by one . . .** Sean Robert Odle, 10, S. 23rd St., died Friday at his home. . . . He was a pupil at the Horace Mann School. . . . **He is survived by one . . .** Scott Jay Odle, 10, 1005, S. 23rd St., died Friday at his home. . . . He was a pupil at the Horace Mann School **He is survived by one . . .**

SURVIVED BY ONE

The Life and Mind of a Family Mass Murderer



Robert E. Hanlon
with Thomas V. Odle

Preface

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On November 8, 1985, five members of the Odle family were brutally murdered in their home in a small town in southern Illinois. Examination of the crime scene and autopsies revealed that four family members, including both parents and two children, had been repeatedly stabbed in the neck with a butcher knife. One child had been strangled to death. Forensic analysis revealed that the slayings were committed in a methodical manner over eight hours. Thomas V. Odle, the eldest son and only surviving member of the family, was charged with the murders the following day.

Odle's trial revealed that Tom's mother, Carolyn Odle, dominated the household. Although she was considered an upstanding member of the community and was president of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) at her children's elementary school, the trial exposed her darker side, characterized by sadistic physical and mental abuse. Tom was ultimately convicted of five counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to death. He spent the next 17 years on death row. On January 11, 2003, in response to the growing number of death-row prisoners who had been exonerated due to wrongful convictions, Illinois Governor George Ryan commuted the death sentences of all death-row inmates in Illinois and Tom is now serving natural life.

Tom's life unfolds in three distinct acts. Act 1 covers the lifetime of physical and mental abuse that culminated in the five murders. Act 2 is his trial, sentencing, and 17 years on death row. Act 3 begins the day his death sentence was commuted and he realized that he was not going to die, as he had thought for years. That realization led to a process of self-reflection and examination, a time during which he began to make something positive of his life. Tom reached out to Dr. Robert Hanlon with questions regarding his mother, his personality, and his brain, as well as the key question: "Why'd I do it?"

Told in chronological order, *Survived by One* is the story of a defiant and rebellious boy of superior intelligence and progresses from his earliest memories through years of physical and mental abuse by his mother. Drug abuse and petty crime contribute to the events and dynamics that precipitated the brutal murder of all other members of his family, including his parents, Robert and Carolyn, and his three siblings, Robyn, fourteen, Sean, thirteen, and Scott, ten. The story progresses through his trial, conviction, and death sentence, including the results of psychological evaluations and psychiatric examinations by forensic experts and the testimony of friends, neighbors, and local educators.

After being sentenced to death at the age of 19, Tom was confronted with the hard, cold reality of life on death row. As he waited for his date with a needle, he watched other men leave the row to be executed. However, for each condemned man executed in Illinois during that time, another death-row inmate was exonerated and freed. This was the result of

evidence presented on appeals that revealed an alarming trend of wrongful convictions in capital cases, due to false confessions obtained by police torture and perjury by key witnesses, as well as other factors. Seemingly oblivious to this trend, Tom occupied his time by reading, writing, and painting while patiently waiting to die.

At the request of Tom's attorneys, Dr. Hanlon conducted a neuropsychological evaluation of Tom on death row at the Pontiac Correctional Center of the Illinois Department of Corrections in January, 2001. The evaluation revealed that he possesses an IQ in the superior range of intelligence and that his cognitive functions and mental abilities are generally intact. Assessment of his personality revealed that he manifests personality traits consistent with antisocial personality disorder.

During the next three years, Dr. Hanlon had no contact with Tom. In 2003 came the commutation of death-row sentences.

Following Tom's sentence being changed to natural life without parole, Dr. Hanlon received a letter from him in which he said he was interested in trying to understand why he committed such a horrible crime and in learning more about antisocial personality disorder. Hanlon wrote back and provided him with some information about antisocial personality disorder and the psychological effects of long-term incarceration. This exchange resulted in more letters from Tom, who was clearly interested in gaining insight regarding his personality, his family, and his previous choices. As a result, Hanlon

offered to assist him by engaging him in a therapeutic exercise of self-exploration and self-assessment via a series of letters. Hanlon offered to provide him with questions and outlines of topics if he would be willing to write, in detail, about his development, his family, his relationships with his mother and father, his juvenile crimes and drug abuse, and his thoughts and feelings preceding and during the murder of his family.

In response, Dr. Hanlon began receiving lengthy, single-spaced, two-sided, typed letters with detailed descriptions of his childhood experiences, his relationship with his mother and father, his physical and emotional abuse, his drug abuse, his juvenile crimes, and the events that precipitated the murder of his family. Eventually, Hanlon visited him after he was transferred to the Lawrence Correctional Center in Sumner, Illinois, and they discussed the process, his progress, and his goals. Tom wondered if others might benefit from his story and if his story might help prevent future crimes of this type. At that point, they discussed the notion of publishing his story and subsequently initiated work on the manuscript. Excerpts from his letters are set off distinctively throughout the book. Tom Odle receives no financial compensation for his contribution to this book

The only reason Tom Odle is alive today is because thirteen men were wrongfully convicted of murders they didn't commit and sentenced to death. If the moratorium had not been instituted, Tom would have been executed, and, ironically, the redemptive element of his story would have been lost forever.