

# Robberies yield clues to slayings; Trail of evidence leads police to suspects 2 Baltimore brothers

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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## FULL TEXT

Inez Paesch was weaving her way around the tables at Kenwood Hall, handing out \$1 bingo cards as the women of Hamilton and Overlea settled in for another Saturday evening of gaming and good company. Suddenly, the gentle murmur of the hall was broken by the shouts of two armed, masked invaders: "Everyone freeze, this is a robbery."

"Well, it was a madhouse after that," Paesch recalls of the robbers, who carried a shotgun and an assault rifle. "The ladies just jumped up, started screaming and running toward the front door. Some hid under the tables."

Within minutes, the robbers had claimed their cash prize -- \$3,000 -- and escaped after firing shots in the hall's parking lot.

The February robbery was a brazen crime -- and one that recently yielded a potential break in the stalled probe into a double slaying at Loch Raven Reservoir.

Police say a trail of clues leads to two brothers from Northeast Baltimore as suspects in the June 15 slayings. To assemble the evidence, investigators followed a trail from the bingo hall through two Baltimore County banks, to a country club cocktail lounge and, finally, to the reservoir cove.

Along the way, detectives and FBI agents pieced together small clues, including a videotape recording from bank security cameras and the license plate numbers in getaway cars. They also exploited lucky turns: a chance conversation overheard by a police lieutenant, and a rookie officer's acquaintance with one of the suspects.

In the end, the evidence may be enough to overcome any missteps during the investigation. It was, at least, enough to build a case for last weekend's raid at the Hamilton-area home of Michael W. Zenone, 27, and Anthony John

Zenone, 30.

They are charged with the bingo hall robbery and two county bank robberies, and are suspects in the slayings of Vincent B.

Young and Vernon A. Smith at the reservoir -- though no charges have been filed in that case.

Police also are investigating whether the Zenones were involved in crimes in Anne Arundel County, such as 1993 holdups in which the robbers wore masks with the faces of former presidents.

At the Feb. 24 bingo hall holdup, the robbers wore ski masks, camouflage clothing and bulletproof vests. One carried a body shield.

As they grabbed for the money, many of the players upended tables -- and one another -- while scrambling for the door. Don Longway, a shuttle bus driver who was in the hall basement, ran upstairs to see what was happening, but one of the robbers yelled, "Get back, get back."

Retreating to the basement, Longway ran out another door just in time to see the gunmen get into their car.

He ducked behind a van, hoping to record the getaway car's license plate number. One of the robbers fired the assault rifle, and the two men drove away.

But a passing driver saw the Maryland tag as the gunmen's car darted onto Kenwood Road: CHC 467, he told police.

And back at the bingo hall, police found a significant piece of hardware. In the parking lot was a 7.62 mm cartridge casing, the kind used in an AK-47 assault rifle.

#### Mercantile bank holdup

William Stang knew it would not be a routine morning at the bank when the manager's eyes suddenly widened. The manager looked past Stang toward the lobby, and said, "Oh, my God."

Stang, a longtime customer at the Mercantile Safe Deposit and Trust Co.'s branch near White Marsh Mall, turned to see a man clad in a ski mask, dark clothes and dark gloves. He was waving a shotgun.

"Don't look," shouted the robber. Stang averted his eyes and raised his hands above his head.

For a tense five minutes on the morning of April 12, the masked man took charge of the bank branch. Peppering his commands with profanity, he ordered bank employees and customers against a wall. When one teller stumbled across the spruce green carpet, a second masked gunman shouted from the vestibule, "Lady, get up or I'll blow your - - - - head off."

Fleeing with more than \$8,000, the robbers left a smoke bomb, hopped into a blue four-door car, probably an Oldsmobile Cutlass, and drove off.

The license tag: CHC 475.

Two weeks later, on April 26, a blue Olds pulled into another bank, First Virginia on Joppa Road near Towson. A masked man backed the car into the parking space, as if preparing for a getaway.

By then, a second masked man had emerged from the car and headed toward the bank. What unfolded was almost a rerun of the Mercantile robbery: profane threats, waving shotguns, a smoke bomb and, in the end, a shoulder bag full of cash.

For Special Agent John W. Barry of the FBI, the similarities were too many to overlook.

#### Checking the tapes

In late April, Barry sat down in a small room at the FBI's Woodlawn office. He has been chasing bank robbers for 25 years, and had been investigating the Mercantile and First Virginia robberies for weeks. He knew what he was looking for.

Scanning security camera videotapes taken in the days before the Mercantile robbery, he had identified two likely suspects -- apparently casing the bank. Now he wanted to see whether he could place one or both of the men inside the First Virginia bank sometime before it was robbed.

Moving carefully through the time-lapse videos, it didn't take him long to spot one of the men on the April 19 tape. The man was asking tellers about opening a checking account.

Excited that this tedious round of detective work had paid off, he immediately had fliers made with photographs from the video, and on April 29 sent them to area police agencies.

Results came quickly.

The next day, he and a Baltimore detective were driving south on the Jones Falls Expressway when a Baltimore County detective paged him. County Officer Timothy J. Zombro had seen the photos at an afternoon roll call and identified one of the men as Michael Zenone -- a co-worker from his days as a Hecht's security guard.

Soon, investigators began to link the bingo hall holdup and the bank robberies.

All three robberies, they realized, were carried out in the same manner: by masked men dressed in dark clothing and carrying rifles or shotguns. And a witness' report of the license plate on the bingo hall getaway car was nearly identical to that seen at the Mercantile robbery; Barry attributed the discrepancy to an excited witness.

Drawing a link among the robberies, Barry and county detectives wondered whether the assault rifle could be the common thread to yet another crime -- the Loch Raven slayings.

In February when the bingo hall was robbed, the cartridge left behind was compared to ones left at the reservoir.

Computer-generated images were compared, but there was no match.

This time, the actual cartridges were compared side-by-side under a microscope. They matched.

And even better, Zombro told Barry that Michael Zenone had left the Hecht's security department to work as a bartender at the Hunt Valley Golf Club -- where the red Jeep Cherokee of one of the Loch Raven victims was found.

The Zenones were no longer just bank robbery suspects -- they were murder suspects.

In a case that once had county detectives following many obscure leads, they apparently had missed an earlier chance to question Michael Zenone -- he was on vacation from June to August, when club employees were interviewed.

It was time to move in closer. County detectives started following the Zenones -- watching May 1 as Michael Zenone drove to the NationsBank branch in Hunt Valley. He walked in, talked to a teller about opening a checking account and left.

He didn't give his name, but told the teller he would be back.

The stakeout

Within days, the stakeout became the talk of Forest View Avenue, the Zenones' Hamilton-area street. Neighbors walking their dogs found it hard not to notice the strangers in cars parked in a normally vacant church lot. Drivers filling up at Arnold's Exxon chatted with attendants, trading guesses about what was happening. A helicopter circled overhead.

Mechanics at the gas station said the investigators would tell them only that "something big" was going to happen -- something they would see on the news.

But most in the neighborhood did not realize that the Zenones were under surveillance -- they thought the police were aiming for a suspected drug house down the street. The Zenones themselves thought the drug dealers were the ones being watched, according to one neighbor who said the brothers casually sipped beer on their front porch.

Finally, on May 4, the agents made their move. The brothers were arrested outside the house, and the search began. Police and FBI agents recovered \$5,000 and several thousands of dollars in stolen goods -- including golf clubs from the Hunt Valley Golf Club. The agents also seized two ski masks and two president masks.

Agents also found a license plate: CHC 475.

They found a Walt Disney World hat, one that brought to mind a Donald Duck hat found at the Loch Raven slaying scene.

And they found 21 rifles, including an AK-47. Police say tests show that the rifle fired the casing found at the bingo hall -- and a bullet recovered from the body of Vincent Young.

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### **Illustration**

PHOTO; Caption: Gave crucial tip: Officer Timothy J. Zombro helped break the robbery and homicide cases.; Credit: JOHN MAKELY : SUN STAFF

## DETAILS

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