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00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:07,000

As World War II finally ends, an infamous cold case begins.

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00:00:07,000 --> 00:00:12,000

Five siblings vanish in an instant.

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00:00:12,000 --> 00:00:15,000

They didn't find any traces of these bodies.

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00:00:15,000 --> 00:00:18,000

No bones, not even a piece of a tooth.

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00:00:18,000 --> 00:00:20,000

Where could these kids have gone?

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00:00:20,000 --> 00:00:26,000

Now we uncover the top theories surrounding every parent's worst fear.

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00:00:27,000 --> 00:00:33,000

Not only do we have an arson and a kidnapping, but a possible cover-up.

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00:00:33,000 --> 00:00:39,000

Were they brainwashed? Or did they just not want to be found?

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00:00:39,000 --> 00:00:42,000

Can new evidence finally reveal answers?

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00:00:42,000 --> 00:00:47,000

What really happened to the notorious Sotter children?

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00:00:56,000 --> 00:01:01,000

The Sotter Family

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00:01:05,000 --> 00:01:13,000

Just four months after World War II ends, American troops head home to spend their first post-war holiday with family.

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00:01:13,000 --> 00:01:21,000

One exception? Joseph Sotter, who won't be back in time to celebrate in his hometown of Fayetteville, West Virginia.

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00:01:21,000 --> 00:01:27,000

So who was the Sotter family? The parents were George and Jenny.

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00:01:27,000 --> 00:01:36,000

They had ten kids. Their oldest son was in the army, but nine of their children were home, living with them.

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00:01:36,000 --> 00:01:41,000

The kids are celebrating Christmas Eve. They're allowed to stay up well past their bedtime.

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00:01:41,000 --> 00:01:47,000

Unbeknownst to them, all of their lives are going to change within a matter of hours.

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00:01:47,000 --> 00:01:53,000

At 1 a.m., Jenny wakes up suddenly. She smells smoke.

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00:01:53,000 --> 00:02:01,000

She started a wake, runs down to her husband's study, where she sees one wall on fire.

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00:02:01,000 --> 00:02:08,000

We have to remember that back in the 1940s, smoke detectors had not yet been invented.

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00:02:08,000 --> 00:02:15,000

So by the time that Jenny discovers the fire, there is not much time to get out of the house, because the fire is already roaring in the study.

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00:02:15,000 --> 00:02:21,000

First thing they do is get the four children out of the house that are on the first floor.

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00:02:21,000 --> 00:02:27,000

And George and Jenny's bedroom was on the first floor, so this is very easy for them to do, get them out of the house right away.

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00:02:27,000 --> 00:02:38,000

Within minutes, George, Jenny and four of their children run outside. But as far as they know, the remaining five are trapped upstairs.

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00:02:38,000 --> 00:02:47,000

When they tried to gain entry to the second floor, the staircase was fully engulfed, and they were unable to save the children that were sleeping upstairs.

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00:02:47,000 --> 00:02:51,000

And within 45 minutes, the house burned down.

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00:02:52,000 --> 00:03:07,000

The heartbroken parents assume the remaining five siblings, 14-year-old Maurice, 12-year-old Martha, 10-year-old Lewis, 8-year-old Jenny, and 6-year-old Betty are dead.

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00:03:09,000 --> 00:03:11,000

But could there be more to the story?

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00:03:12,000 --> 00:03:19,000

Here's why it's such a mystery. None of the remains of the five children were ever found in the degree of the fire.

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00:03:19,000 --> 00:03:23,000

No trace. No bones. No nothing.

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00:03:24,000 --> 00:03:28,000

Despite this, authorities quickly jump to the simplest conclusion.

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00:03:32,000 --> 00:03:37,000

The official word was that the children died in the fire caused by an electrical issue.

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00:03:38,000 --> 00:03:42,000

But we have an investigation that was questionable at best.

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00:03:42,000 --> 00:03:49,000

As part of their investigation after they arrived on the scene, they interviewed Jenny and George as to what happened.

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00:03:49,000 --> 00:03:56,000

When Jenny first sees the fire in George's office, she reports it's burning near an electrical box on the wall.

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00:03:56,000 --> 00:04:01,000

The fire department believes the blaze accelerated up through the walls.

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00:04:02,000 --> 00:04:05,000

The fire appeared to have burned very quickly.

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00:04:05,000 --> 00:04:10,000

One of the theories out there is that the construction of the house was what is called balloon construction.

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00:04:10,000 --> 00:04:19,000

That is to say that it had vertical rafters from the basement running directly up to the second floor, creating a void space,

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00:04:19,000 --> 00:04:29,000

which if the fire started inside the walls, it would have created the perfect chimney effect and very quickly burned up through the roof area.

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00:04:30,000 --> 00:04:39,000

George tells authorities that after evacuating the four children downstairs, he next tried repeatedly to rescue the siblings upstairs.

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00:04:39,000 --> 00:04:46,000

Five of the children were upstairs on the second floor and they were unable to get out.

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00:04:46,000 --> 00:04:54,000

And the fire is out of control. There's too much smoke and he's unable to go to the second floor where the five children are sleeping.

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00:04:54,000 --> 00:05:00,000

George screams to the kids from the bottom of the stairs, but here's nothing.

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00:05:00,000 --> 00:05:05,000

He goes back out through the barrel of water he has outside to put out the fire.

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00:05:07,000 --> 00:05:10,000

But he finds the barrels frozen solid.

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00:05:10,000 --> 00:05:14,000

He runs looking for the ladder that was on the side of the building.

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00:05:14,000 --> 00:05:21,000

The ladder that normally is there is no longer there and he doesn't know where it was or who took it.

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00:05:22,000 --> 00:05:25,000

So then he thinks he's going to use his trucks and he had two trucks.

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00:05:25,000 --> 00:05:30,000

He was going to pull those trucks up to the house, get on the roof to try to access the second floor.

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00:05:30,000 --> 00:05:33,000

But unfortunately, neither truck would start that night.

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00:05:34,000 --> 00:05:37,000

Jenny has a similar experience.

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00:05:37,000 --> 00:05:46,000

So while George is trying to rescue the children on the second floor, Jenny tries to call the fire department using their home phone, but the line is dead.

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00:05:47,000 --> 00:05:56,000

So then Jenny sends her daughter Marion to a neighbor's house to try to call the fire department, but Marion is unable to get through.

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00:05:58,000 --> 00:06:04,000

Eventually, a passing motorist offers to drive into town and alert the fire chief.

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00:06:04,000 --> 00:06:11,000

During this time in 1945, most of the fire departments in that part of the country were volunteer fire departments.

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00:06:11,000 --> 00:06:20,000

So when a fire would come in, it was up to the fire chief to start calling everybody to come to the firehouse, pick up their equipment and then rush over to the scene.

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00:06:20,000 --> 00:06:24,000

So as a result of that, the response time was quite lengthy.

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00:06:26,000 --> 00:06:31,000

Seven hours after the blaze first ignites, fire trucks finally arrive.

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00:06:31,000 --> 00:06:40,000

When the fire department finally shows up, they spend at most a couple of hours and they make a determination that the fire was still there.

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00:06:41,000 --> 00:06:49,000

The fire was caused by an electrical issue and that the five children who were sleeping on the second floor all perished in the fire.

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00:06:50,000 --> 00:07:03,000

Within five days, even though there were no remains, the coroner's inquest rules that these children died in the fire as a result of an accident, even going so far as to issuing death certificates.

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00:07:04,000 --> 00:07:20,000

The fire marshal tells Jenny he believes that as a result of the fire burning so hot, it consumed the bones, the organs and everything else associated with the human body.

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00:07:21,000 --> 00:07:29,000

But without concrete physical evidence of death, George and Jenny hold out hope that their children somehow escaped.

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00:07:29,000 --> 00:07:35,000

Jenny doesn't end up believing the fire chief's explanation that the kids died in the fire and that they're gone.

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00:07:35,000 --> 00:07:39,000

They didn't find any traces of these bodies, no bones, not even a piece of a tooth.

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00:07:39,000 --> 00:07:42,000

Jenny starts to feel like there's something else going on.

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00:07:44,000 --> 00:07:53,000

She goes and speaks to a local crematorium and they tell her that bones, at least the fragments of bones, usually survive all fires.

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00:07:53,000 --> 00:08:01,000

When you cremate a body at a crematorium, you're exposing it to temperatures of approximately 2,000 degrees for several hours.

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00:08:01,000 --> 00:08:09,000

And even after that type of temperature, they have to be ground up to make them into dust when they're given to their loved ones in the urns.

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00:08:11,000 --> 00:08:14,000

And George has his own reason to doubt the fire department's conclusion.

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00:08:15,000 --> 00:08:21,000

George keeps falling back on two pieces of evidence that in his mind, this fire is not accidental.

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00:08:21,000 --> 00:08:29,000

One is that during the fire, he noticed that there were so lights remaining in certain parts of the house while the building is burning.

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00:08:30,000 --> 00:08:35,000

So in his mind is how can this be an electrical fire if you still have lights on in the building?

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00:08:36,000 --> 00:08:41,000

But also just a few months prior, he had actually brought in an electrician to check the wiring of the house.

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00:08:41,000 --> 00:08:46,000

The electrician gave it a passing grade and George starts wondering if there's something else going on.

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00:08:46,000 --> 00:08:51,000

Now it is possible that the electrician might have missed something, you know, he is human after all.

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00:08:51,000 --> 00:08:58,000

Or it's possible that between the time of the electrician showing up and Christmas Eve, something else went on in that house.

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00:08:59,000 --> 00:09:03,000

Authorities soon discover what that something else might be.

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00:09:04,000 --> 00:09:09,000

So if you remember, Jenny actually tried to contact the fire chief the night of the fire, but her phone wasn't working.

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00:09:09,000 --> 00:09:18,000

So the police investigate that a few days later and what they find could alter the entire course of the investigation because they find the phone lines had been cut.

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00:09:24,000 --> 00:09:31,000

When five siblings seemingly perish in a devastating house fire, investigators initially see nothing suspicious.

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00:09:31,000 --> 00:09:35,000

They quickly rule that an electrical fire caused their deaths.

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00:09:36,000 --> 00:09:38,000

But then they make a startling discovery.

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00:09:39,000 --> 00:09:43,000

Telephone lines outside the house have been severed.

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00:09:43,000 --> 00:09:47,000

Is it possible the fire was no accident?

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00:09:47,000 --> 00:09:51,000

It is my opinion that this fire was intentionally set.

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00:09:56,000 --> 00:10:04,000

Classifying a fire as an arson instead of an accidental fire has a lot of implications because an arson connotes that there is a crime that's been committed.

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00:10:05,000 --> 00:10:09,000

And if they would have found the remains of the children, it'd be classified as a homicide.

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00:10:11,000 --> 00:10:15,000

But it's interesting because the police just kind of brushed this off and they don't really look into that.

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00:10:16,000 --> 00:10:18,000

But maybe they should have.

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00:10:19,000 --> 00:10:23,000

Because as it turns out, George was far from well liked in Fayetteville.

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00:10:23,000 --> 00:10:29,000

I think authorities are missing the background story. What was going on prior to the fire?

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00:10:29,000 --> 00:10:36,000

George had a lot of enemies we've learned and we had conflict with other Italian immigrants in that area.

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00:10:36,000 --> 00:10:42,000

George Sotter actually born Giorgio Sodu in Sardinia, Italy in 1895.

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00:10:42,000 --> 00:10:45,000

Emigrated to the United States when he was only 13 years old.

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00:10:45,000 --> 00:10:48,000

Years later, George moves to Smithers, West Virginia.

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00:10:48,000 --> 00:10:52,000

He finds work as a truck driver and eventually gets to start his own company.

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00:10:52,000 --> 00:10:58,000

And he meets his future wife, Jenny, who is a fellow Italian immigrant.

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00:10:59,000 --> 00:11:06,000

The new couple moves to Fayetteville, West Virginia, a small town with a large population of Italian Americans.

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00:11:07,000 --> 00:11:13,000

Once George and Jenny settle down, they move to a little wood-framed house about two miles outside of town.

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00:11:13,000 --> 00:11:22,000

And they have their first son, Joe, in 1923 and really kind of start making their way as a well-respected middle-class family, at least at first.

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00:11:23,000 --> 00:11:28,000

But George's outspoken political beliefs alienate some neighbors.

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00:11:28,000 --> 00:11:38,000

It is very common for people that come to America from another country to want to live in the same type of community that they're used to, because it's familiar to them.

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00:11:39,000 --> 00:11:51,000

So George has a lot in common with these other people in his community, but politically he does not favor the ruling of Benito Mussolini and makes it known to the public.

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00:11:52,000 --> 00:12:02,000

At the time, Mussolini is incredibly popular, both with Italians at home and abroad, and especially in Fayetteville, West Virginia, which kind of leaves George as the odd man out.

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00:12:03,000 --> 00:12:12,000

George is telling everybody, I don't like what Mussolini is doing, and he makes it known to one person in particular, Cleeto Grosz, Giannettolo.

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00:12:12,000 --> 00:12:22,000

During that time, Cleeto Grosz, CG, is a local banker and a local businessman, and has his bankers in just about everything in the local community.

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00:12:23,000 --> 00:12:27,000

Giannettolo has many unusual connections to George Sotter.

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00:12:27,000 --> 00:12:31,000

CG Giannettolo is the director of the Fayette County Bank.

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00:12:31,000 --> 00:12:40,000

He also is the employer of George Sotter, and George Sotter has a mortgage that is written by the Fayette County Bank,

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00:12:40,000 --> 00:12:47,000

which has an insurance provision that Mr. Giannettolo will benefit if there's a fire at the home.

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00:12:49,000 --> 00:13:02,000

Yeah, this is where I have a real problem with this case, because the person that is the benefactor of this home should it be destroyed by fire or any other type of natural disaster is the CG Giannettolo.

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00:13:02,000 --> 00:13:09,000

Most banks don't do that. Most banks have the bank be the benefactor, not an officer within the bank.

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00:13:11,000 --> 00:13:22,000

In today's times, it would be not only a conflict of interest, but it would be illegal for Mr. Giannettolo to hold a financial interest in the property of George Sotter.

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00:13:23,000 --> 00:13:36,000

Just two months before the fire and without Sotter's knowledge, Giannettolo increases the insurance payout amount to \$1,750, almost \$27,000 today.

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00:13:36,000 --> 00:13:46,000

Giannettolo's greed didn't stop there, so about 60 days before the fire, he ends up sending one of his good friends, Russell Long, an insurance broker to George's house,

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00:13:46,000 --> 00:13:51,000

and at George's house, Russell Long attempts to sell him life insurance for his kids.

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00:13:52,000 --> 00:13:58,000

When George refuses the extra insurance, Giannettolo allegedly makes a chilling threat.

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00:13:58,000 --> 00:14:05,000

Giannettolo gets very angry and threatens him. He says his house is going to go up in smoke and his children are going to be destroyed.

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00:14:06,000 --> 00:14:15,000

And he also says that George will pay for the dirty things that he had been saying about Mussolini.

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00:14:16,000 --> 00:14:26,000

Let's put the pieces of the puzzle together. Giannettolo shows up at the house, threatens George, the very individual who was set to collect money if and when the house was destroyed.

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00:14:26,000 --> 00:14:37,000

The house does in fact burn down. And this starts putting everything together that this was in fact an arson and not an accidental fire as claimed by the local authorities.

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00:14:38,000 --> 00:14:40,000

But what about the cut phone lines?

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00:14:41,000 --> 00:14:50,000

If Giannettolo would have also cut the phone line that was found cut the day after the fire, he would be the prime suspect. But in fact, he isn't.

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00:14:50,000 --> 00:14:59,000

There is another suspect that comes to surface. Several days after the fire, an individual is arrested in possession of a block and tackle.

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00:15:00,000 --> 00:15:06,000

A block and tackle is used to lift a heavy object. This block and tackle, as it turns out, belongs to George.

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00:15:07,000 --> 00:15:15,000

The thief, while he's being interviewed, admits that yes, he did steal the block and tackle, but he insists that he did not start the fire.

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00:15:15,000 --> 00:15:21,000

He was just present when the fire was burning and used that as a distraction to steal the block and tackle.

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00:15:23,000 --> 00:15:34,000

Do we believe the thief's story? Sure, he could have just been there to steal the block and tackle, but why would somebody go all the way out to George's property to steal that one small thing?

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00:15:35,000 --> 00:15:42,000

He could have been there to start the fire and used the block and tackle theft as a red herring to lead the investigation astray.

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00:15:42,000 --> 00:15:49,000

And it's very plausible that this thief was actually sent by somebody like Genitolo himself.

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00:15:50,000 --> 00:16:00,000

It appears that the authorities believe what the thief told them, and also they don't bring in Genitolo to question him further about his possible involvement in this fire.

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00:16:01,000 --> 00:16:09,000

But in my profession, as an investigator for 33 years, I have found that there is no coincidences.

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00:16:10,000 --> 00:16:15,000

Whether the cause is arson or electrical, another question remains.

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00:16:16,000 --> 00:16:23,000

Did the five children die in the fire? To answer that, George starts his own investigation.

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00:16:24,000 --> 00:16:28,000

And in 1949, makes a shocking find.

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00:16:29,000 --> 00:16:32,000

A few years after the fire, George had an excavation done of the site.

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00:16:32,000 --> 00:16:36,000

And they did recover what they believed might be human bones.

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00:16:37,000 --> 00:16:39,000

And they sent those bones to the Smithsonian.

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00:16:40,000 --> 00:16:51,000

And an expert there said it was in fact human vertebrae, potentially from a young man between the ages of 16 and 24 years old.

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00:16:52,000 --> 00:17:01,000

If the bones were indeed from one of the children, the only possible match could be Maurice, 14 years old at the time of the fire.

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00:17:02,000 --> 00:17:17,000

Despite the fact that the report says that these were vertebrae from a male between the ages of 16 and 24, there's still enough uncertainty that a 14 year old could have been within that range.

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00:17:18,000 --> 00:17:27,000

However, what is interesting is that the report also notes that there didn't appear to be any evidence of charring on the bones.

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00:17:27,000 --> 00:17:31,000

That would be very unexpected for someone who was cremated in a fire.

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00:17:32,000 --> 00:17:38,000

So we have to ask whose bones are these? Were they already there before the fire started?

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00:17:39,000 --> 00:17:45,000

Or were they part of the dirt that was used to bulldoze over the site? Unfortunately, we'll never know.

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00:17:46,000 --> 00:17:55,000

Even though the soldiers were disappointed with the excavation's results, it reinforces their hope that their children still could be alive.

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00:17:56,000 --> 00:18:05,000

It's clear that the fire happened and burned down the house, and it's clear that the investigation that was done after the fire was incomplete at best.

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00:18:06,000 --> 00:18:10,000

And it's also clear that the remains of the children were never found.

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00:18:11,000 --> 00:18:15,000

So in George's and Jenny's mind, their children are not dead.

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00:18:16,000 --> 00:18:25,000

George and Jenny, because they're not getting answers, seek the public's help, and they ask for anybody knowing what happened to their children to contact them.

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00:18:31,000 --> 00:18:38,000

When their home burned down early on Christmas morning 1945, did five soldered children die in the blaze?

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00:18:39,000 --> 00:18:46,000

That's what buyer investigators believe, but the soldered parents are not convinced.

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00:18:48,000 --> 00:18:58,000

Over time, understanding that no remains were found and that the fire was most likely caused by arson, Jenny and George wanted to get some answers.

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00:19:01,000 --> 00:19:07,000

If law enforcement are not going to step it, the blade who else is going to do it? Nobody else has more on the line than you do.

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00:19:08,000 --> 00:19:12,000

What parents would do, they get desperate to try and find their children.

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00:19:13,000 --> 00:19:19,000

So seven years after the fire, they erect a billboard in their area.

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00:19:20,000 --> 00:19:25,000

George and Jenny offer a reward for any information about their children.

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00:19:26,000 --> 00:19:30,000

The offer is at 5,000 in the beginning and eventually increases to 10,000.

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00:19:32,000 --> 00:19:34,000

Which is a lot of money back then.

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00:19:34,000 --> 00:19:38,000

Eventually, that investment pays off.

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00:19:39,000 --> 00:19:44,000

A woman comes forward named Ida Crutchfield and she has information about the children.

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00:19:45,000 --> 00:19:51,000

Crutchfield runs a motel in Charleston, West Virginia, about 60 miles away from George and Jenny's home.

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00:19:52,000 --> 00:20:02,000

According to Ida, about a week after the fire, four children who matched the description of George and Jenny's children were at her hotel that she managed.

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00:20:02,000 --> 00:20:05,000

And they were accompanied by two men and two women.

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00:20:06,000 --> 00:20:11,000

She describes the men and the women as being of Italian descent.

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00:20:12,000 --> 00:20:20,000

Ida actually tried to have a conversation with the children but she was quickly shut out by the Italian speaking adults.

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00:20:21,000 --> 00:20:26,000

The group rents multiple rooms for the night. But the next morning, they're gone.

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00:20:26,000 --> 00:20:30,000

So Ida Crutchfield really didn't know about the missing Sotter children at the time.

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00:20:30,000 --> 00:20:35,000

She just saw a situation that she thought was very unusual with children with a large number of adults.

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00:20:36,000 --> 00:20:40,000

Only later did she realize that she was a potential witness to a kidnapping.

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00:20:46,000 --> 00:20:49,000

This is good news and bad news for the Sotter family.

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00:20:50,000 --> 00:20:56,000

On one hand, there's actually a possibility that the children are alive and they've been taken under unknown circumstances.

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00:20:56,000 --> 00:21:02,000

But on the other hand, can we recover them? Is there any way to possibly get them back?

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00:21:03,000 --> 00:21:09,000

So knowing that they're alive is not enough unless you can actually recover them and bring them back to your family.

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00:21:11,000 --> 00:21:18,000

It's a known fact that George had enemies. It's one thing to destroy his property, but it's quite another thing to actually take his children.

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00:21:20,000 --> 00:21:25,000

Perhaps the most heartbreaking part of Crutchfield's account is its timing.

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00:21:26,000 --> 00:21:31,000

It took her seven years to come forward after she saw the children at her motel.

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00:21:32,000 --> 00:21:40,000

And even if it's true, seven years later, how could you follow it up, understanding that long period of time that has passed?

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00:21:40,000 --> 00:21:44,000

But Ida isn't the only witness to eventually come forward.

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00:21:44,000 --> 00:21:51,000

Over the years, the Sotter family are contacted with a lot of tips and different stories about what happened to their children.

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00:21:52,000 --> 00:22:02,000

In that time period, there were no security cameras. It was eyewitnesses. It was people that thought they saw something and you had to rely on their very often blurry memories.

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00:22:03,000 --> 00:22:08,000

Sifting through various leads, there are two accounts that catch the Sotter's attention.

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00:22:08,000 --> 00:22:16,000

One of the tips that comes forward is a woman who says, I saw all the children in a car being driven by somebody leaving the house.

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00:22:17,000 --> 00:22:22,000

Another woman comes forward who operates a diner between Fayetteville and Charleston.

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00:22:22,000 --> 00:22:27,000

And she says the night after that fire, there was children in that restaurant with a stranger.

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00:22:28,000 --> 00:22:35,000

Combining these accounts with Ida Crutchfield's story helps the Sotter family form a potential timeline.

189

00:22:35,000 --> 00:22:39,000

So in Fayetteville, we have a lady that believes that she saw the children in a car the night of the fire.

190

00:22:40,000 --> 00:22:45,000

Then we have a lady that thinks she sees the children in a diner between Charleston and Fayetteville.

191

00:22:45,000 --> 00:22:50,000

And then we have Ida Crutchfield that believes that she saw the children in Charleston.

192

00:22:50,000 --> 00:23:01,000

If these tips are true, it paints a picture of these children that were kidnapped that night and they're on the move, traveling with somebody against their will.

193

00:23:02,000 --> 00:23:07,000

After they leave the Charleston motel, there are no further sightings of the children.

194

00:23:07,000 --> 00:23:12,000

And while it seems like a dead end for the kidnapping theory, it won't be.

195

00:23:16,000 --> 00:23:23,000

The search for the missing Sotter children becomes more difficult with each passing year, but their parents never give up.

196

00:23:24,000 --> 00:23:29,000

Then in 1967, two decades after the fire, a mysterious letter arrives.

197

00:23:29,000 --> 00:23:35,000

George and Jenny are convinced it's proof one son, Louis, is alive.

198

00:23:42,000 --> 00:23:45,000

George wanted to find his children, and there's no doubt about it.

199

00:23:45,000 --> 00:23:48,000

He could follow every tip no matter what the cost.

200

00:23:48,000 --> 00:23:52,000

He would go anywhere to the ends of the earth to find resolution.

201

00:23:53,000 --> 00:23:59,000

George Sotter spends incredible time and resources scouring the country.

202

00:24:01,000 --> 00:24:05,000

Decades go by and he's tired and he's about ready to give up.

203

00:24:05,000 --> 00:24:15,000

But then in 1967, George and Jenny receive a strange letter addressed to them at their home and it contains a photograph.

204

00:24:16,000 --> 00:24:20,000

The photo was mailed from Central City, Kentucky.

205

00:24:20,000 --> 00:24:25,000

This photo was the first piece of physical evidence ever to be presented in this case.

206

00:24:25,000 --> 00:24:28,000

And I must say, it was substantial.

207

00:24:28,000 --> 00:24:32,000

It was of a man in his 30s that could be one of the children.

208

00:24:32,000 --> 00:24:35,000

It was what appeared to be a photo of Louis Sotter.

209

00:24:37,000 --> 00:24:41,000

I can't even imagine this has got to be huge for them.

210

00:24:41,000 --> 00:24:45,000

They finally see a picture of one of their children after all these years.

211

00:24:45,000 --> 00:24:49,000

When the Sotters turn this photo over, they are dumbstruck.

212

00:24:49,000 --> 00:24:56,000

On the back of the photo are three handwritten lines, starting with a name, Louis Sotter.

213

00:24:56,000 --> 00:25:01,000

But unfortunately, the rest of the writing on the photo is a mystery.

214

00:25:01,000 --> 00:25:05,000

Next to his name is written, I love brother Frankie.

215

00:25:05,000 --> 00:25:08,000

And then underneath is I.L. I.L. Boys.

216

00:25:08,000 --> 00:25:12,000

And finally there are two numbers, A90132 or 35.

217

00:25:12,000 --> 00:25:17,000

The desperate parents struggle to decipher the message.

218

00:25:17,000 --> 00:25:20,000

No one knows who Frankie is.

219

00:25:20,000 --> 00:25:25,000

No one in the family's name Frankie, none of the friends of the family are named Frankie.

220

00:25:25,000 --> 00:25:27,000

So who could Frankie be?

221

00:25:27,000 --> 00:25:29,000

Could be the name of the kidnapper?

222

00:25:29,000 --> 00:25:32,000

Or it could be the name of a person that's been kidnapped?

223

00:25:32,000 --> 00:25:35,000

Or it could be the name of a kidnapper?

224

00:25:35,000 --> 00:25:39,000

Or it could be the name of a person that is harboring the children or Louis.

225

00:25:39,000 --> 00:25:42,000

The little boy comment is disturbing.

226

00:25:42,000 --> 00:25:48,000

We don't know what that means. Does that imply something nefarious has happened with a child molester?

227

00:25:48,000 --> 00:25:53,000

Or is this someone talking about their little brothers? We don't know.

228

00:25:55,000 --> 00:26:00,000

And it appears that all the useful clues that are left are possibly those numbers at the end of that photo.

229

00:26:00,000 --> 00:26:05,000

A90132 or 35.

230

00:26:05,000 --> 00:26:08,000

It's a sequence that looks familiar.

231

00:26:08,000 --> 00:26:18,000

When the photo comes in, it's actually only four years after the U.S. postal zip code system had actually been implemented in the United States.

232

00:26:18,000 --> 00:26:26,000

So it's fresh in everybody's minds and that's actually the first thing that George and Jenny think when they see those numbers printed on the back of the photograph.

233

00:26:26,000 --> 00:26:32,000

Could be zip codes. 90132 and 90135.

234

00:26:32,000 --> 00:26:35,000

Are they actually in the United States?

235

00:26:35,000 --> 00:26:43,000

Well, they go to check it out and it turns out that neither one of those numbers applies to any zip code in America.

236

00:26:45,000 --> 00:26:51,000

But the United States isn't the only country to use five-digit postal codes.

237

00:26:51,000 --> 00:26:57,000

We have to look a bit further. George is of Italian descent and is from Italy.

238

00:26:57,000 --> 00:27:10,000

Those zip codes match Palermo, Sicily and Palermo is the capital of Sicily and also is the home base of the reputed organized crime organization across the Nostra.

239

00:27:11,000 --> 00:27:18,000

I do think that there is a distinct possibility there could be some Sicilian mafia involved in this case.

240

00:27:22,000 --> 00:27:27,000

Could this be the break the solders are looking for?

241

00:27:27,000 --> 00:27:37,000

For one, George is from Italy. For two, the views of George really weren't that endearing to the Italian government.

242

00:27:37,000 --> 00:27:43,000

And third, because of the organization of the fire and the events thereafter.

243

00:27:44,000 --> 00:27:58,000

I think that the zip codes are pretty telling sign that even if they're not where Lewis was or if Lewis was alive, it just adds to this idea that these children did not die in this fire, that they might be out there.

244

00:27:58,000 --> 00:28:03,000

Initially, George and Jenny are reluctant to share this information.

245

00:28:04,000 --> 00:28:15,000

George and Jenny don't say anything about this possible Sicilian connection because they don't want the kidnapers to possibly do something to Lewis and or the other children who may have survived.

246

00:28:15,000 --> 00:28:21,000

Eventually though, curiosity gets the best of both Jenny and George and they can't lay low forever.

247

00:28:21,000 --> 00:28:29,000

So they actually hire a private investigator to go down to Kentucky, which is where the postal code had been printed on the front of the envelope.

248

00:28:30,000 --> 00:28:35,000

That investigator is never seen or heard from again.

249

00:28:35,000 --> 00:28:41,000

It makes you question what this private investigator did. Did he take the money and run?

250

00:28:41,000 --> 00:28:50,000

Did he maybe find something out he wasn't supposed to know? And the people involved either kidnapped him or took him out.

251

00:28:50,000 --> 00:29:01,000

The investigator may have disappeared, but the family hires another private detective to investigate in Fayetteville. His name is Oscar Tinsley.

252

00:29:01,000 --> 00:29:10,000

Tinsley keeps digging and the more he digs, the more that he finds evidence that whenever happened to these kids, it was not an accident.

253

00:29:11,000 --> 00:29:24,000

When private investigator Oscar Tinsley begins looking into the disappearance of the Sotter children, he has no idea what he'll uncover.

254

00:29:24,000 --> 00:29:33,000

The official investigators, they think that Sotter family children died in a house fire, whereas George and Jenny, they believe that their kids were kidnapped.

255

00:29:33,000 --> 00:29:46,000

The investigator hired by George and Jenny, Mr. Tinsley, uncovered something that was breathtaking, that the authorities, the police, the fire department may have been in on the kidnapping.

256

00:29:50,000 --> 00:29:57,000

We have four things in this case that are suspicious and are significant.

257

00:29:57,000 --> 00:30:09,000

Number one, we have a fire that was not investigated. Two, we have threats against George and his family that people were not questioned or interrogated.

258

00:30:09,000 --> 00:30:18,000

Three, we have a letter with a picture with possible ties to the Sicilian mafia that was not followed up on.

259

00:30:18,000 --> 00:30:27,000

And four, we have a conclusion that the children died in the fire, but yet you don't have any remains.

260

00:30:27,000 --> 00:30:36,000

Any one of these things individually or collectively should have launched a major investigation, but none resulted.

261

00:30:36,000 --> 00:30:42,000

Tinsley, he thinks he's uncovered evidence that the authorities were in on it.

262

00:30:42,000 --> 00:30:47,000

And soon enough, he uncovers potential proof.

263

00:30:47,000 --> 00:30:51,000

Tinsley starts with the coroner's report that came out of the inquest.

264

00:30:51,000 --> 00:30:56,000

A coroner's inquest takes place after an incident has occurred.

265

00:30:56,000 --> 00:31:00,000

The coroner selects 12 individuals from the community to sit in a jury.

266

00:31:00,000 --> 00:31:13,000

They're presented with the facts of the crime or the incident, and then they determine if there's enough there to classify this fire as either accidental or as an arson.

267

00:31:14,000 --> 00:31:21,000

Without finding the remains of the five children, what could they have concluded?

268

00:31:21,000 --> 00:31:29,000

In the coroner's inquest, evidence that they might have been considering, in my opinion, was non-existent.

269

00:31:29,000 --> 00:31:35,000

They didn't recover any evidence. They didn't even have time to recover any evidence.

270

00:31:35,000 --> 00:31:41,000

On the official record, declaring the fire an accident is a familiar name.

271

00:31:41,000 --> 00:31:47,000

So do you remember CG Giannitolo, the man who had threatened Georgia's life and was the director of the bank?

272

00:31:47,000 --> 00:31:54,000

He was also one of the members of the coroner's jury who had ruled at the Sotter family house fire in accident.

273

00:31:54,000 --> 00:31:59,000

And his name is on all five of those children's death certificates.

274

00:31:59,000 --> 00:32:07,000

He signs, under penalty of perjury, that those children died in a fire and that they died of asphyxiation.

275

00:32:08,000 --> 00:32:11,000

How does he know that? They never found the remains.

276

00:32:12,000 --> 00:32:19,000

I think Mr. Giannitolo is trying to use his influence in the community to cover up what really happened.

277

00:32:19,000 --> 00:32:24,000

Did he make good on his promise to burn down the Sotter home?

278

00:32:24,000 --> 00:32:32,000

And two, did he use his contacts within the Sicilian mafia to have the children kidnapped?

279

00:32:33,000 --> 00:32:37,000

According to Tinsley, the cover-up might go even higher.

280

00:32:37,000 --> 00:32:48,000

During his investigation, Tinsley discovers that the fire chief spoke to the parish priest and told him that he did find some remains, but buried them at the fire scene.

281

00:32:49,000 --> 00:32:55,000

George confronts the fire chief and they go back to the house and they dig up a tin box.

282

00:32:55,000 --> 00:32:58,000

But what they find doesn't add up.

283

00:32:58,000 --> 00:33:06,000

In that tin box is what appears to be some sort of old, rotting organ of some sort.

284

00:33:06,000 --> 00:33:09,000

And the fire chief says, these are human remains.

285

00:33:10,000 --> 00:33:17,000

So they take these remains to the local funeral director and he tells them, it's not human remains, it's a beef liver.

286

00:33:17,000 --> 00:33:26,000

And the funeral director tells them that not only are these remains not human, they appear that they've never been burnt, that it's just rotted.

287

00:33:26,000 --> 00:33:29,000

Because of it being buried in the ground.

288

00:33:29,000 --> 00:33:35,000

Why would fire chief F.J. Morris lie about finding human remains?

289

00:33:35,000 --> 00:33:37,000

There are two ways you can look at this.

290

00:33:37,000 --> 00:33:43,000

One is the sympathetic way and that the fire chief is just trying to give the family closure.

291

00:33:44,000 --> 00:33:54,000

The other way to look at it is that the fire chief is involved in the conspiracy and he's trying to keep George and Jenny from continuing to look for their children.

292

00:33:54,000 --> 00:34:01,000

So potentially, chief Morris may have been in on the conspiracy with Jan Utolo.

293

00:34:01,000 --> 00:34:07,000

This isn't the only time the fire chief is accused of working against the soldiers.

294

00:34:07,000 --> 00:34:15,000

It's important to remember that back at the night of the fire, it took over seven hours for the fire department to show up to the Soder family house.

295

00:34:16,000 --> 00:34:26,000

One of the reasons Morris came up with why he and his crew took seven hours to arrive at the fire scene was that he had no one available to drive the fire truck.

296

00:34:26,000 --> 00:34:28,000

They were away at World War II.

297

00:34:29,000 --> 00:34:32,000

Now, World War II is actually kind of the convenient excuse.

298

00:34:32,000 --> 00:34:41,000

Christmas Eve, 1945, this was over seven months after the Allied victory in Europe and about three months after the Allied victory in Japan.

299

00:34:41,000 --> 00:34:48,000

So while there could have been some volunteer firefighters serving over seeds, it wouldn't have been that many and there certainly wouldn't have been a complete lack of manpower.

300

00:34:49,000 --> 00:34:57,000

Whatever was going on at the time, there were definitely people in that town that did not want the truth to come out and they would have done anything to make sure that it didn't.

301

00:34:59,000 --> 00:35:06,000

I think any parent can understand George and Jenny wanting to search for their children all of these years.

302

00:35:07,000 --> 00:35:17,000

But should we also consider another theory as unpleasant as it may be? What if the Soder children disappeared on purpose?

303

00:35:22,000 --> 00:35:30,000

In the decades after the five Soder children seemingly vanished, countless new questions arise and the case captures the public's attention.

304

00:35:31,000 --> 00:35:35,000

Sleuth's focus on one mystery in particular.

305

00:35:35,000 --> 00:35:42,000

I often ask myself, if the children survived the fire, why didn't they ever present themselves to

their family?

306

00:35:42,000 --> 00:35:49,000

Were they brainwashed? Did they want to protect their families? Or did they just not want to be found?

307

00:35:50,000 --> 00:36:02,000

One of the theories is that the children didn't die in the fire, that they actually started the fire as a distraction so that they could escape and disappear forever.

308

00:36:03,000 --> 00:36:11,000

At 1967, the same year the Sotters received the mysterious alleged photo of their son, Louis, something else happens.

309

00:36:11,000 --> 00:36:21,000

A woman from Houston, Texas sent a letter to the Soder family, stating that she was in a bar with Louis Soder and Maurice Soder.

310

00:36:21,000 --> 00:36:29,000

And that Louis Soder, in a drunken stupor, confessed that he was one of the missing Soder children.

311

00:36:30,000 --> 00:36:37,000

So much for Louis Soder being in Italy, right? Either the photograph is fake or the lady in Texas is lying.

312

00:36:37,000 --> 00:36:47,000

But what if there is more that might lead you to think Louis is in Texas? Remember those postal codes. 90132-90135.

313

00:36:47,000 --> 00:36:52,000

They're actually also found in Mexico, which is in very close proximity to Texas.

314

00:36:52,000 --> 00:37:00,000

Is it possible that Louis has been living in Mexico and that he's now crossed back into the United States?

315

00:37:01,000 --> 00:37:05,000

George has no choice but to follow up with the Houston, Texas lead.

316

00:37:05,000 --> 00:37:15,000

It's either going to lead to the long list of leads that led nowhere or it's going to lead to finally finding his children.

317

00:37:15,000 --> 00:37:21,000

George and his son-in-law Grover Paxton take a road trip from West Virginia to Houston.

318

00:37:21,000 --> 00:37:26,000

So George travels to Texas and tries to find this woman and he cannot.

319

00:37:26,000 --> 00:37:32,000

He is, however, able to contact the two men described by this woman in the letter.

320

00:37:35,000 --> 00:37:43,000

I'm sure possibly on the eve of meeting his children, he's fraught with anxiety.

321

00:37:44,000 --> 00:37:56,000

He's nervous. He probably is on an emotional roller coaster of finally being able to meet his children, live in person.

322

00:37:57,000 --> 00:38:03,000

George meets with the two men and asks if they're his long lost children.

323

00:38:04,000 --> 00:38:17,000

George asks and they deny that they are his sons. No matter how much he presses them, they still hold that they indeed are not his sons.

324

00:38:18,000 --> 00:38:26,000

As a parent myself, I can imagine George actually approaching somebody that he believed could have been his children and then they deny they're his children.

325

00:38:26,000 --> 00:38:34,000

And he really has no way to know for sure. All he had was their word and that just wouldn't have good enough for him.

326

00:38:34,000 --> 00:38:40,000

I can't even imagine how that must have felt for George on that long drive back to West Virginia.

327

00:38:40,000 --> 00:38:47,000

You just met two potential sons that you've been looking for all these years and they deny that they're your children.

328

00:38:47,000 --> 00:38:50,000

But yet you think they are. They look like them.

329

00:38:50,000 --> 00:38:55,000

You had information that they were telling people that they were them.

330

00:38:55,000 --> 00:39:00,000

I just, I can't imagine how he must have felt the disappointment.

331

00:39:01,000 --> 00:39:11,000

After that meeting, George believed until the day he died that the two young men that he talked to in Houston, Texas were indeed his sons.

332

00:39:12,000 --> 00:39:21,000

On one hand, I'm sure George was very happy and relieved to believe that his children were still alive.

333

00:39:21,000 --> 00:39:27,000

But it also must have been very heartbreaking to think that they were denying that he was their father.

334

00:39:28,000 --> 00:39:34,000

George Sotter died in 1969, two years after his trip to Texas.

335

00:39:34,000 --> 00:39:41,000

When Jenny died in 1989, the weathered billboard pleading for information was finally taken down.

336

00:39:41,000 --> 00:39:47,000

The youngest Sotter child, Sylvia, died in April of 2021.

337

00:39:47,000 --> 00:39:54,000

Sylvia's children have promised to carry the torch and keep looking for their aunts and uncles.

338

00:39:54,000 --> 00:39:56,000

But time is running out.

339

00:39:56,000 --> 00:40:00,000

The missing children would be between 81 and 90 years old.

340

00:40:00,000 --> 00:40:04,000

If there's any chance they're still alive and waiting to be found.

341

00:40:04,000 --> 00:40:06,000

I'm Lawrence Fishburne.

342

00:40:06,000 --> 00:40:10,000

Thank you for watching History's Greatest Mysteries.