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Man convicted in 1957 murder of 7-year-old girl

Friday, September 14, 2012 | Updated: Friday, September 14, 2012 5:34pm

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SYCAMORE, Ill. (AP) — For most of five decades, it seemed no one would ever be held accountable for murder of the 7-year-old Illinois girl who was snatched from a small-town street corner as she played.

Fifty-five years after Maria Ridulph vanished from the streets of Sycamore, her friends and family let out a deafening cheer Friday as a judge pronounced a former neighborhood teen — now a 72-year-old man — guilty of the murder and kidnapping.

The cheers and applause soon gave way to loud sobs from those who knew the little girl whose body was found after a monthslong search that haunted the nation. McCullough, who was 17-year-old John Tessier at the time, showed no hint of emotion as the judge convicted him in

FILE - This July 27, 2011 file photo provided by the DeKalb County Sheriff's Department in Sycamore, Ill., shows Jack McCullough, of Seattle. On Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012, the defense rested its case on behalf of McCullough, 72, who is accused of killing 7-year-old Maria Ridulph, of Sycamore in 1957. McCullough was arrested in Seattle in 2011 and returned to Illinois.

one of the oldest unsolved crimes to make it to trial in the U.S.

"A weight has been lifted off my shoulders," said Kathy Chapman, 63, who was playing with Maria in the snow on the night of Dec. 3, 1957, before she vanished. "Maria finally has the justice she deserves."

Chapman testified that McCullough won Maria's trust by talking about dolls and giving her piggyback rides. At some point, authorities say he dragged her into an alley, choked her with a wire, then stabbed her in her throat and chest.

McCullough was one of more than 100 potential suspects in the 1950s, but he had an alibi for the day of Maria's murder. He told investigators he had been traveling to Chicago to get a medical exam before joining the Air Force. He ultimately settled in Seattle, where he worked as a Washington state police officer.

A deathbed accusation by his mother in 1994 — passed on to police by his half-sister in 2008 — led to a chain of events that brought about his conviction.

His mother, Eileen Tessier, had lied to police canvassing the neighborhood in 1957 about her son's whereabouts, buttressing his alibi, prosecutor Julie Trevartchen said Friday.

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Fragile Childhood

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"She knew what she did and she didn't want to die with that on her conscience," she said.

McCullough's girlfriend in the 1950s also contacted police with evidence that called his alibi into question. She had found his unused train ticket from Rockford to Chicago for the day Maria disappeared.

The case seemed a long shot — at least at the beginning.

DeKalb County State's Attorney Clay Campbell was taken aback when investigators told him they had a suspect in a 1957 murder. "When they said 1957, I said, you mean 1977? 1997?" he said Friday, remembering the initial call.

McCullough was arrested on July 1, 2011, in Washington state at a retirement home where he worked as a security guard.

One reason authorities thought they were on the right suspect was that Maria's friend, Chapman, picked out McCullough as the teen who identified himself as "Johnny" while the girls were playing. Chapman last saw Maria with that man before the girl vanished.

Chapman said the man's image haunted her for decades. "I never stopped looking for Johnny's face," Chapman said Friday.

Maria vanished at a time when grease-backed hair and automobile tail fins were in. Child abductions, if not unheard of, rarely made headlines.

This one did.

President Dwight Eisenhower even asked to be kept apprised of the search for the girl, which lasted five months and ended when her decomposed body was found in a forest 120 miles from her hometown.

The otherwise sleepy town of Sycamore, some 60 west of Chicago, would never be the same.

"I had nightmares — all Sycamore kids did," said Jeanne Taylor, 57, who grew up near the Ridulphs and attended each day of the trial. "From then on, I never trusted strangers.

To conceal the body, prosecutors said, McCullough at one point dragged it through a window at his family home, then later loaded it into a car and drove to a wooded area where he been before on family outings.

"He left her there for animals to feed on her body," prosecutor Victor Escarcida said in his closing.

Maria's brother, Charles Ridulph, said he was relieved by the verdict, though the trial had been stressful — both because it brought up old memories and because it provided him with fresh details about how his sister died.

"I feel totally spent, exhausted," he said. "I am not pleased with the new thoughts that I will have (about Maria's death). Some things I wish I did not know."

The half dozen relatives of McCullough who attended the trial all said they wanted a guilty verdict.

Members of both families hugged each other after the lanky McCullough was led away in handcuffs.

One of his half-sisters, Janet Tessier, who told police about her mother's deathbed comments, spoke with her eyes still red from tears.

"He is as evil as prosecutors painted — and some," she said minutes after the verdict.

At a news conference later in the day where Maria's brother and sister spoke, Janet Tessier asked if she could step up and say something to them — to apologize her brother wasn't caught decades earlier.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice cracking as she looked at the Ridulphs. "I'm so sorry it took so long."

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BarryGroan 11:34 AM on September 14, 2012

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He's already lived too long. Hopefully, someone will rid the world of this piece of garbage as soon as he enters prison.



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