

## Sycamore murder sentence: Jack McCullough gets life for 1957 murder of 7-year-old Maria Ridulph

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More than a half-century after a 7-year-old girl disappeared from a neighborhood street corner in Sycamore, the man convicted of her kidnapping and murder was sentenced Monday to spend the rest of his life in prison.

But before he learned his fate, Jack McCullough, a 73-year-old retiree from Seattle, defiantly maintained his innocence in connection with the death of Maria Ridulph in 1957.

"I have been tried and declared guilty of the crime of the kidnap and murder of Maria Ridulph, a crime I did not, would not and could not have done," he told Judge James Hallock during a 13-minute speech.

Hallock, who found McCullough guilty in a September bench trial, did not comment further as he rendered the sentence. McCullough chose to be sentenced under the 1957 statute for murder, and although Hallock imposed the maximum sentence, McCullough could be eligible for parole in 20 years.

McCullough, a former police officer in Washington state who lived in Sycamore in his youth, was arrested in 2011 in what is believed to be the oldest solved cold case in U.S. history.

Assistant DeKalb County State's Attorney Victor Escarcida, in asking the judge to impose the life sentence, spoke of the damage McCullough caused to the Ridulph family in the many years since Maria vanished on Dec. 3, 1957.

"Jack McCullough left a lifetime of emotional wreckage in his wake," Escarcida said.

Charles Ridulph, Maria's brother, said his parents, who lived into their 90s, never got over their daughter's death.

"All their lives they longed to be with their little daughter," he wrote in a victim impact statement. "My mother, only days before her death, had a dream, a vision perhaps of being in heaven with Maria."

At trial, a childhood friend of Maria's, Kathy Chapman, described how the two were playing on a street corner on that snowy evening in 1957 when a man walked up and introduced himself as Johnny. He gave Maria a piggyback ride before Chapman, who was 8, went to her house to retrieve her mittens. When Chapman returned, Johnny and Maria were gone, she said.

Chapman identified a 1957 photo of McCullough, who was then a 17-year-old Sycamore resident named John Tessier, as the man who approached them that night. Maria's disappearance

sparked a townwide search and a police investigation that would involve the FBI and generate enough national interest that even President Dwight Eisenhower was reported to have asked about the case.

Maria's decomposed body was found about five months later in a wooded area near Galena, Ill. The girl had suffered what appeared to be three deep stab wounds, according to earlier court testimony.

The investigation eventually went cold until several years ago, when one of McCullough's half sisters, Janet Tessier, who suspected his involvement, persuaded the Illinois State Police to reopen his case.

That led to McCullough's arrest at the Seattle retirement community where he lived and worked as a security guard.

In his speech before sentencing, McCullough pointed to a banker box he had, saying it contained more than 4,000 pages of FBI records from the case, including ones that he said supported his alibi that he was in Rockford when Maria disappeared.

"In the name of justice and fairness, open the box and view the truth," he told the judge.

But Hallock, in pretrial hearings, had barred the reports as inadmissible because the agents who compiled them a half-century ago are no longer available to testify to their accuracy, either because of death or advanced age.

Former DeKalb County State's Attorney Clay Campbell, who won the case but lost a re-election bid last month, called McCullough's assertions "self-serving nonsense."

And McCullough's claims failed to impress Chapman, who was in court Monday and said she remained certain the old photo of McCullough she identified at trial matched the man who approached her and Maria that evening in 1957.

"He can say all he wants to say," Chapman said. "There's no doubt he's the one."

Also in court Monday was Mary Hunt, another half sister of McCullough, who suspected his involvement in Maria's death.

McCullough had been tried earlier this year on charges that he sexually assaulted another half sister, Jeanne Tessier, in the early 1960s, though he was acquitted.

"Jack McCullough is a man who harmed many people over many years, including me," Jeanne Tessier wrote via email Monday. "Until now, he has never been held accountable for the harm he's done. Now he is held accountable and now he will, by his own suffering, begin to understand the harm he's done."