

Rairdon remembered 40 years later: 'This just doesn't happen here'

By Karrie Carlson Daily Journal Media May 1, 2025

Before rural Minnesota joined together to search for Jacob Wetterling, another missing child consumed Otter Tail County — Sarah Rairdon.

It's been nearly 40 years since the community of Underwood was altered to its core. On May 20, 1985, a 13-year-old girl, almost finished with seventh grade, began walking home from school on a warm spring afternoon. Sarah Ann Rairdon lived with her father, John Rairdon, step-mother and numerous step-siblings a few miles east of Underwood on what locals know as Whiskey Road — County Highway 122. By nightfall, it was clear she had vanished.

It didn't take long for word to spread and panic to set in. Things like this don't happen here, as the sentiment goes.

A young reporter who had grown up in the area was assigned to cover what would turn into weeks, months and years of disbelief and pain. Kevin Wallevand, who spent his youth in Vining, had been working as a reporter at WDAY News in Fargo, N.D., for less than three years when he began the assignment in Underwood.

Wallevand recalls that it took the span of a 12-hour news cycle before the assignment landed on his desk. That was when the reality set in at WDAY: "This seems like it could be the real thing, a kid is missing."

When a reporter covers a story like Rairdon's, they have no background of the people involved. Wallevand explained: "Once you could tell that the sheriff's department was pretty serious about it, it didn't take long before they wanted to do a search and everything." Wallevand had the advantage of not only being able to get the story out, he knew the area and was familiar with surroundings.

In a time long before Amber Alerts and social media posts that could reach audiences instantaneously, police relied on the help of townspeople desperate to find one of their own, and strangers who prayed they would never feel what Sarah's parents were going through. Looking for Sarah was top priority, with searchers between County Highway 122 and the school, surrounding farms, fields and sheds scouring the area for any trace of evidence and answers.

"People were actively busy searching for several weeks," Wallevand recalled. "They had community members folding posters and mailing them out. Truckers were putting her picture on trucks."

Wallevand spent time speaking with Sarah's father, John, while digging into the girl's disappearance. On the two- or three-month anniversary of her disappearance, Wallevand interviewed the man in a hay field near Underwood, where he was working.

"It was just he and I out there. I was interviewing him about the fact that they hadn't found her yet," Wallevand recalled.

One statement made that day remain forever-seared in Wallevand's mind: "(John) said, 'Whoever did this to her is going to pay!'"

Wallevand didn't know how haunting that statement would become, especially given the circumstances surrounding Sarah's disappearance, which came to light after Sarah's badly decomposed body was discovered in July by a Rothsay farmer.

"After her body was found, things moved a little quicker," Wallevand explained. "Law enforcement and social services began getting a better understanding of what had been going on in the family, and it was not good. There were some step-brothers that law enforcement were kind of looking at, too."

Law enforcement really began to close in on John, putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

Sarah was laid to rest in Sverdrup Cemetery in Underwood following a funeral service on July 9, 1985. Wallevand attended the service, which was held at the Underwood School to allow room for the hundreds gathered to say goodbye to Sarah.

By August, John had confessed that he picked Sarah up as she walked home from school that day in May. He admitted to sexually abusing her since she was 8 years old, and disclosed that she had recently started fighting off his advancements and telling him no. John's intent when he picked her up was focused on her continued abuse at an abandoned house. When she fought him off, he stabbed her in the abdomen and left her to bleed to death, later transporting her body to the Rothsay field while he was supposedly out helping to search for her.

John was convicted of first- and second-degree murder, and first- and second-degree intrafamilial sexual abuse in 1986.

Cases like Sarah Rairdon's would look very different with the widely-utilized advancements in modern technology. Wallevand believes that while the outcome may have been the same, the search and discovery would be much different.

"I honestly think they maybe would've solved (Sarah's case) quicker because of door cams and ring cams in farmyards and highway cameras all over our county," he shared. "Someone would've picked up his car, where his cell phone is pinging."

In the years following the disappearance of Sarah Rairdon, Wallevand has continued his career in journalism with WDAY, which has taken him to many areas of the globe and introduced him to countless fascinating people; but from the rookie reporter he was to the seasoned journalist he is today, this particular case has stayed with him. In more than one way, this one hit close to home.

This is the first article in a series about the 40th anniversary of the disappearance of Sarah Rairdon.