

Rairdon remembered 40 years later: Married to a monster

By Karrie Carlson Daily Journal Media May 8, 2025

Sarah Rairdon's life ended on May 20, 1985, at the hands of her father, John Rairdon. The community of Underwood, and the whole nation, watched in shock as the horrifying details of that day, and the days, months and years that lead up to it, became known.

The sad truth of the life Sarah lived was masked by her smile and bright eyes. Her parents John and Linda (Fox) Rairdon were married in Douglas County when the couple were in their early 20s. Together they had five children, Sarah being the only daughter. In 1974, the couple divorced after a seven-year marriage. John had custody of their children and, as Linda told The Forum in an interview in May 1986, she had visitation rights; but John and his second wife, Marilyn, made it difficult to do so. During the time of that interview, one year after the abduction and murder of her daughter, Linda hadn't been back to Otter Tail County in about 10 years. She had last seen Sarah when she was a toddler.

Much the same as the community that came together to search for the Underwood seventh-grader when she didn't arrive home from school, Linda didn't think John was capable of abusing their daughter, a reality John eventually confessed to doing since Sarah was eight years old.

Linda, remarried to Lionel Spinney and living in Massachusetts at the time of the abduction, had been unable to afford the time off work and travel expenses to return and help look for her daughter when she was informed she was missing. She told The Forum that John had changed radically in the years since they divorced, but she still had a hard time wrapping her mind around the abuse Sarah was forced to endure.

When John married Marilyn, they combined his five children and her four children from a previous marriage, then had two together. It made for a busy home life. Throughout the six-plus week search to bring Sarah home, Marilyn stood by her husband as he begged for her safe return. She told Fergus Falls Daily Journal reporter Kathy Berdan on May 24, 1985, just days after Sarah disappeared, that the family was holding up pretty well.

John himself, while searching for the daughter he had already murdered and discarded in a field, told the media, "It kind of scares you. You don't know if whoever may have picked Sarah up is still around and could pick up another kid. Not knowing is what's tough. You hope for the best, but think the worst."

After her skeletal remains were found by a Rothsay farmer, Jerome Toso, on July 6, 1985, and John's arrest on Aug. 14 of that year, Marilyn was in disbelief, saying to a reporter that John had watched his family live in fear of whoever murdered Sarah "and he just sat here. I guess he's going to pay for it. He'll never see his family grow up."

Marilyn filed for a divorce from John in 1986 and married again soon after. She faced charges of her own in the aftermath of Sarah's death. In July 1986, she pleaded guilty in Otter Tail County District Court to permitting the physical abuse of a child after being indicted by a grand jury in March. She told the court, as part of a plea arrangement, that John physically abused her and the children beyond normal discipline. She added that he spanked them with a belt and that on one occasion it was so violent she was forced to get a gun.

She stated that there was reason to suspect John was sexually abusing Sarah, but Marilyn lacked any direct knowledge of incidents. She was sentenced by Clay County District Court Judge James Garrity to a stayed prison sentence of four months, serving two months of probation instead. Marilyn was also ordered to seek family counseling with her minor children as part of the sentence.

Marilyn, and many from the area who stepped up to help find Sarah, became characters in John Raidon's twisted story. After Sarah was recovered and laid to rest in Underwood and John was arrested, he told a packed courtroom, "I was convinced I had killed her and was ready to admit it. I figured I had to figure a story good enough so they'd buy it."

This is the second article in a series about the 40th anniversary of the disappearance of Sarah Raidon.