

## Rairdon remembered 40 years later: The sins of her father

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, May 15, 2025

When a child is reported missing, the first line of questioning is most often directed to parents and family members. Sometimes answers surface, sometimes they don't. When 13-year-old Sarah Rairdon didn't come home from school on May 20, 1985, police had to start piecing together the puzzle of her disappearance, and they started with their normal line of questioning, her father, John Rairdon.

Sarah had stayed after school let out that day to work on a homework project with a friend. Once finished, they walked to the nearby store to get water balloons for the next day, a fun tradition during the last days of school before summer break. After they were done shopping, her friend offered Sarah a ride home, but she declined, saying her dad would be picking her up on his way home from work. By 6 p.m., when John hadn't picked her up, Sarah began walking home — around a four mile walk down a low-traffic road. That was where the facts ended and the police had to begin figuring out just what had happened.

Upon questioning, John provided an alibi, which the police soon verified — he had punched the timeclock to end his work day as a tractor tire repairman at 7:30 p.m. on May 20. With the solid alibi in place and no evidence to the contrary, police moved on with the investigation.

Days of ground, water and air searching turned to weeks, revealing no traces of Sarah. Money was quickly raised to aid in the search, and the initial \$1,000 grew quickly in hopes of urging someone to come forward with information on Sarah's whereabouts. Tens of thousands of posters and flyers were printed in search of the missing girl. Pepsi even put her photo on soda bottles. The community cried together, searched together and held its children close. All the while, Sarah's own father remained a strong frontman for the efforts, having been cleared of suspicion and maintaining he was just as concerned as everyone else.

After the discovery of Sarah's badly-decomposed body in a pasture near Rothsay on July 6, 1985, anger and fear grew stronger for the community that had pulled together for the little girl who loved teddy bears. It was a shirt with teddy bears on it that, in the end, led authorities to immediately recognize that the body belonged to Sarah Ann Rairdon.

Otter Tail County coroner Mehdi Orandi had said although the body was in a state that made it difficult to point to a cause of death, the fact that Sarah was clothed indicated there had not been a sexual assault.

Puzzled authorities, a terrified community, devastated classmates and a heartbroken family, led by brave-faced patriarch John, laid Sarah to rest on July 9, then they were back to the grind. It was time to find answers.

John sat on a panel to raise awareness about missing children that included Minnesota Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III. The day of the panel, John told a reporter off-camera that he thought Sarah's killer would be caught soon and that "everyone will be surprised" when they do. He wasn't wrong.

Investigators were starting to put pieces together rapidly. The once airtight work alibi surrounding John started unraveling when a witness reported they had seen John's work truck near an abandoned farmhouse by Underwood around 6:30 p.m. on the night Sarah disappeared. Secrets about the nightmare Sarah had been living were surfacing as well.

John was questioned again, after three days, the outwardly grieving and heartbroken father was arrested in connection with Sarah's disappearance and murder. The date was Aug. 13, 1985.

Authorities had pieced together a story that inspired widespread shock. It was contended that John left work and headed to Underwood on May 20. He located his daughter walking home and picked her up. What should've been a short ride home for dinner, turned into unfathomable terror for Sarah.

John took Sarah to an abandoned farm and tried to have sex with her. He confessed he had been doing that a few times a month since his daughter was about eight years old. He told investigators that it hadn't been happening recently however, because she had been refusing and said she just wanted to grow up to be a "normal little girl." That evening, when her father tried to assault her, she fought him off. John confessed that he stabbed her in the stomach with an awl from his toolbox, then struck her in the throat. Sarah bled to death and her father hid her body near the murder scene, then left to go punch out at work. He returned home and acted surprised when he was told his daughter hadn't returned home from school yet. While everyone was out looking for her, he moved her body, disposing of it near Rothsay. He returned to the search and assumed the role of a worried father, determined to find his daughter alive and bring her home. He was leading a community that believed in him.

John later said he didn't remember what happened on the evening of May 20, 1985, between the time he left his job site early and when he clocked out at work around 7:30 p.m.

John was charged in Otter Tail County Court with first- and second-degree murder and intrafamilial sexual abuse. According to a complaint, he admitted to sexually abusing Sarah as many as 60 times over the course of five years.

The trial was held in Stillwater in February 1986, the location moved to assure the fairest outcome. A jury of eight men and four women began deliberating on Feb. 19, and on Feb. 21, John was found guilty to the charges of murder and sexual abuse. He was sentenced to life in prison on March 6, 1985. He has fought for appeals, new trials and parole since, but remains incarcerated with the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

When a child is reported missing, the first line of questioning is most often the parents and family members. When 13-year-old Sarah Rairdon didn't come home from school on May 20, 1985, police had to start at the beginning and put pieces together.

Sarah had stayed after school let out that day to work on a homework project with a friend. Once they had finished, they walked to the nearby store to get water balloons for the next day, a fun tradition during the last days before summer break. After they were done, her friend had a ride home, and they offered Sarah a ride home as well. She declined saying her dad would be picking her up on his way home from work. By 6 p.m. when John Rairdon hadn't picked her up, Sarah began walking home, around a four mile walk down a low-traffic road. That was where the facts ended and the police had to begin figuring out just what had happened.

John had an alibi and the police soon verified that he had punched the timeclock to end his work day as a tractor tire repairman at 7:30 p.m. on May 20. With the solid alibi in place, police moved on with the investigation.

Days and days of ground, water and air searching revealed no traces of Sarah. Money was quickly raised to aid in the search. \$1,000 initially and it grew quickly in hopes of urging someone to come forward with information on where Sarah was and what had happened. Tens of thousands of posters and flyers were printed. Pepsi put her photo on soda bottles. The community cried together, searched

together and held the children close. All the while, Sarah's own father remained a strong frontman for the efforts. After all, he had been cleared of suspicion and maintained he was just as concerned as everyone else was.

After the discovery of Sarah's badly decomposed body in a pasture near Rothsay on July 6, 1985, the anger and fear only grew stronger for the community that had pulled together for the little girl who loved teddy bears. It was a shirt with teddy bears on it that in the end, led authorities to know right away that the body found was Sarah Ann Rairdon. Otter Tail County coroner Mehdi Orandi had said although the body was in a state that made it difficult to point to a cause of death, the fact that Sarah was clothed indicated there had not been a sexual assault.

After puzzled authorities, a terrified community, devastated classmates and a heartbroken family, led by a brave-faced patriarch, John, laid Sarah to rest on July 9, it was time to find answers. John sat on a panel to raise awareness about missing children that included Minnesota Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III. John told a reporter off-camera that day that he thought Sarah's killer would be caught soon and that "everyone will be surprised" when they do.

It was around that same time that investigators were starting to put pieces together rapidly. The once airtight work alibi seemed to start showing some holes when a witness reported they had seen John's work truck around 6:30 p.m. on the night Sarah disappeared near an abandoned farmhouse by Underwood. Secrets about the nightmare Sarah had been living were surfacing as well.

After three days of questioning by investigators, John, the grieving, heartbroken father of the little girl in everyone's hearts, was arrested on Aug. 13, 1985 in connection with Sarah's disappearance and murder.

Authorities had pieced together a story that would take everyone's breath away. It was contended that John left work and headed to Underwood on May 20. He located his daughter walking home and picked her up. What should've been a short ride home for dinner, turned into unfathomable terror for Sarah.

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John would later say he didn't remember what happened between the time he left his job site early and when he clocked out at work around 7:30 p.m. He was charged in Otter Tail County Court with first- and second- degree murder and intrafamilial sexual abuse. According to a complaint, Rairdon admitted sexually abusing Sarah as many as 60 times over the past five years.

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