

Winston Moseley, Who Killed Kitty Genovese, Dies in Prison at 81

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Winston Moseley, who stalked, raped and killed Kitty Genovese in a prolonged knife attack in New York in 1964 while neighbors failed to act on her desperate cries for help — a nightmarish tableau that came to symbolize urban apathy in America — died on March 28, in prison. He was 81.



Patrick J. Bailey, a spokesman for the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, confirmed the death on Monday. A medical examiner would determine the cause of death, Mr. Bailey said.

Mr. Moseley, a psychopathic serial killer and necrophiliac, died at the maximum security Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, N.Y., near the Canadian border. He had been imprisoned for almost 52 years, since July 7, 1964, and was one of the state's longest-serving inmates.

His life behind bars had been relatively eventful. Mr. Moseley was condemned to die in the electric chair, but in 1967, two years after New York State abolished most capital punishments, he won an appeal that reduced his sentence to an indeterminate life term. While at Attica Correctional Facility, in 1968, he escaped while on a hospital visit to Buffalo, raped a woman and held hostages at gunpoint before being recaptured. He joined in the 1971 Attica uprising; earned a college degree in 1977; and was rejected 18 times at parole hearings, the last time in 2015.

A half-century after the slow killing of Ms. Genovese, which began in the dead of night on a deserted street in Kew Gardens, Queens, and ended half an hour later in the vestibule of her building, the case still resonates with terror and collective regret in the popular imagination, sustained by films, books, behavioral studies, psychology classes and endless debates over the responsibilities of citizens who witness a crime.

Ghastly as the details of Mr. Moseley's attack were — selecting Ms. Genovese at random, stabbing her at least 14 times as she screamed and pleaded for help, retreating into the shadows as lights went on in apartments overhead, returning to rape and finally kill her — they by themselves might not have placed the case, or the Moseley name, into the annals of crime.

It was one of 636 murders in the city that year. The New York Times ran four paragraphs on it.

Two weeks later, The Times published [a more extensive, though flawed](#), front-page account quoting the police and Ms. Genovese's neighbors. "For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens," it began.

“Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead.”

“I didn’t want to get involved,” a witness said, using a phrase that was thought to encapsulate the age.

Winston Moseley, shown in a 1964 file photo, had been imprisoned for almost 52 years, and was one of New York State’s longest serving inmates.
Credit United Press International



While there was no question that the attack occurred, and that some neighbors ignored cries for help, the portrayal of 38 witnesses as fully aware and unresponsive was erroneous. The article grossly exaggerated the number of witnesses and what they had perceived. None saw the attack in its entirety. Only a few had glimpsed parts of it, or recognized the cries for help. Many thought they had heard lovers or drunks quarreling. There were two attacks, not three. And afterward, two people did call the police. A 70-year-old woman ventured out and cradled the dying victim in her arms until they arrived. Ms. Genovese died on the way to a hospital.

But the account of 38 witnesses heartlessly ignoring a murderous attack was widely disseminated and took on a life of its own, shocking the national conscience and starting an avalanche of academic studies, investigations, films, books, even a theatrical production and a musical. The soul-searching went on for decades, long after the original errors were debunked, evolving into more parable than fact but continuing to reinforce images of urban Americans as too callous or fearful to call for help, even with a life at stake.

Psychologists and criminologists called the reluctance of witnesses to involve themselves the “bystander effect,” or the “Kitty Genovese syndrome.” Studies discerned a “diffusion of responsibility,” finding that people in a crowd were less likely to step forward and help a victim. Some communities organized neighborhood-watch patrols. In New York, an emergency call to the police was simplified later in 1964 — from dialing “O” for operator or a precinct or a borough headquarters, to a central police number. The unified 911 system was not established until 1968.

Mr. Moseley seemed an unlikely serial killer. Soft-spoken, intelligent, with no criminal record, he was 29, a married father of two who owned his home in South Ozone Park, Queens, and operated business machines in Mount Vernon, N.Y. Later, in confessions and testimony, he said he had driven around late at night seeking victims, and had killed three women, raped eight and committed 30 or 40 burglaries.

He had been cruising around for more than an hour on March 13, 1964, when, around 3:15 a.m., he encountered Catherine Genovese, known as Kitty, the manager of a bar in Hollis, Queens, as

she was driving home after work. He followed her to the parking lot of the Long Island Rail Road station in Kew Gardens, near a faux-Tudor building on Austin Street, where she shared an apartment with another woman.

He followed her on foot as she walked toward her building, heading for its residential entry in the rear. She saw him coming and, frightened, ran. He chased her, caught up with her outside a darkened bookstore and, by his own account, stabbed her twice in the back with a hunting knife.

Ms. Genovese, 28, cried: “Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Help me! Help me!” — and was heard in apartments overhead, perhaps by a dozen people; the number was never precisely determined. Lights went on. Eyes looked out.

“I heard a girl saying, ‘Help me, help me,’” Robert Mozer testified. “It wasn’t a scream, more of a cry. I got up and looked out, and across the street a girl was kneeling down, and this fellow was bending over her. I hollered: ‘Hey, get out of there! What are you doing?’ He jumped up and ran like a scared rabbit. She got up and walked out of sight, around a corner.”

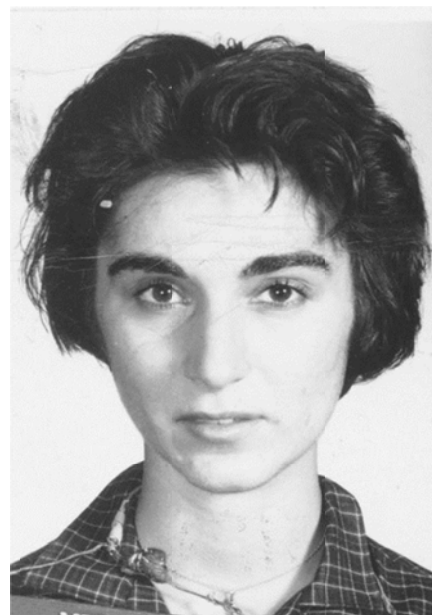
In his confession, Mr. Moseley said, “I had a feeling this man would close his window and go back to sleep, and sure enough he did.” In court, he said, “I realized the car was parked where people could see it, and me, so I moved it some distance away.” Mr. Moseley also said he had changed from a stocking cap to a wide-brim hat to cover his face, then walked back to the scene.

“I came back because I’d not finished what I set out to do,” he testified.

He found Ms. Genovese lying in a hallway at the rear of the building. She was “twisting and turning” on the floor, bleeding and still crying for help, he recalled. He resumed his attack, “and I don’t know how many times or where I stabbed her till she was fairly quiet.” Investigators said he stabbed her a dozen times, stifling her last cries and raping her before escaping.

Captured five days later during a burglary, Mr. Moseley confessed to the murders of Ms. Genovese and [two other Queens residents](#): Annie Mae Johnson, 24, who had been shot and burned to death in her South Ozone Park apartment in February, and Barbara Kralik, 15, who had been stabbed in her parents’ Springfield Gardens home the previous July. Both women had been sexually assaulted.

Mr. Moseley was never tried for murdering Ms. Johnson or Ms. Kralik, though he recited details only the killer could have known, the police said. He [testified at the trial](#) of Alvin Mitchell, who had already been charged in Ms. Kralik’s murder. The conflicting accounts left a hung jury. Mr. Mitchell was convicted in a second trial.



At his own trial, Mr. Moseley pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity in the killing of Ms. Genovese, but was found legally sane, convicted of first-degree murder and [sentenced to death](#) at a time when New York State still employed the electric chair. (The state abolished the death penalty in 1965)

As spectators cheered the verdict, the presiding judge, Justice Irwin J. Shapiro of State Supreme Court, said he did not believe in capital punishment, but added: “I must say I feel this may be improper when I see this monster. I wouldn’t hesitate to pull the switch on him myself.”

Winston Moseley was born in Manhattan on March 2, 1935, to Fannie Moseley. Her husband, Alphonse Moseley, was not his biological father, a fact withheld from the boy until late in his childhood. His parents were often separated. Winston grew up a bright but troubled boy, who had an inordinate fascination with ants.

Mr. Moseley and his first wife, Pauline, whom he married in 1954, were divorced. In 1961, he married Elizabeth Grant.

At the time of the 1963 and 1964 crimes that Mr. Moseley acknowledged, his wife was a night-shift hospital nurse; his mother lived with them and shared child care duties. Law enforcement officials said the arrangement facilitated Mr. Moseley’s nighttime prowls and criminal activities.

In 1967, the State Court of Appeals cut his death sentence to life imprisonment on the grounds that the trial court had erred by disallowing evidence of Mr. Moseley’s mental condition at a hearing to determine the severity of his sentence.

In 1968, on the visit to a Buffalo hospital for treatment of a self-inflicted injury at Attica, Mr. Moseley overpowered a guard, took his gun and fled. In his several days on the loose, he took five hostages and raped a woman before he was finally recaptured by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He received two 15-year terms, to run concurrently with his life sentence.

After Mr. Moseley earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Niagara University in 1977, The Times published an [Op-Ed article](#) by him, in which he expressed his regret for killing Ms. Genovese and said he was a changed man, “determined to do constructive, not destructive things.”

Many viewed the article as an attempt to lay the groundwork for his seeking his release in a series of later parole hearings, all of which denied him freedom.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/nyregion/winston-moseley-81-killer-of-kitty-genovese-dies-in-prison.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&viewport=desktop&module=more-stories®ion=top-stories-below&contentIndexValue=6&subIndexValue=0&feedIndexValue=9&summary=true>