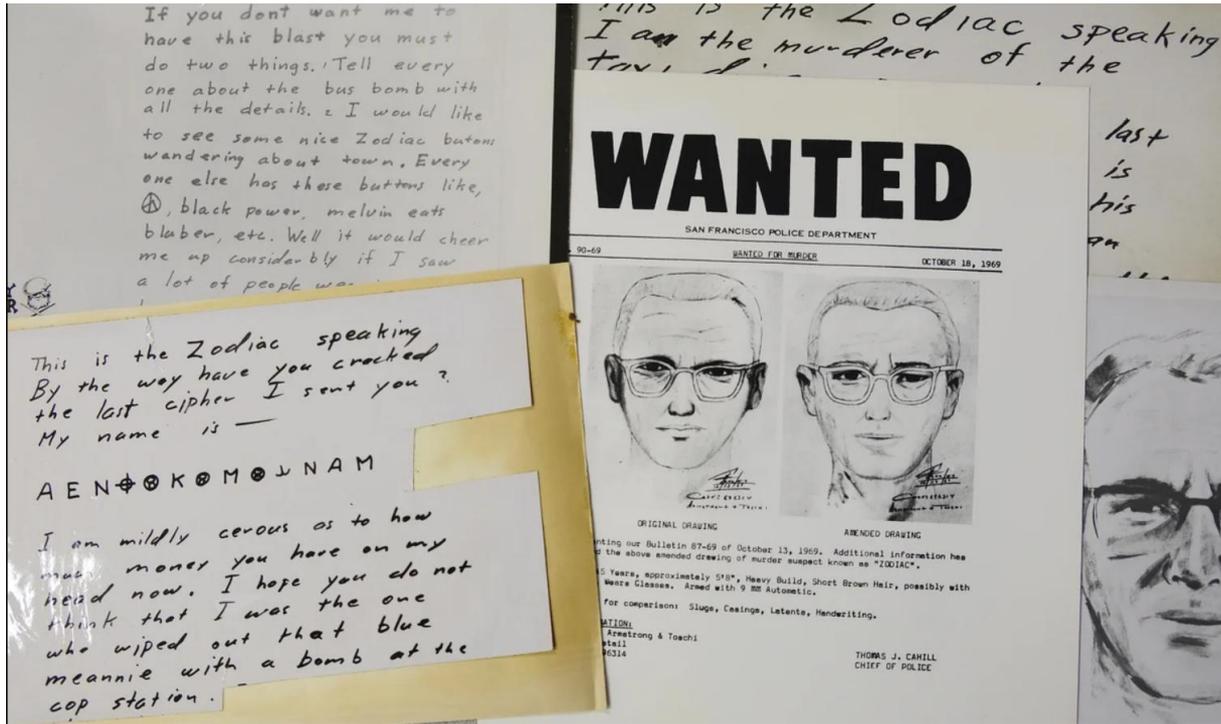


# THE ZODIAC KILLER: THE UNSOLVED CASE THAT HAUNTS CALIFORNIA

By Staff Reporter – October 2024

The name *Zodiac* first appeared in the late 1960s, when a man began sending strange letters to newspapers across Northern California. Each letter described a recent murder and contained a symbol resembling a cross within a circle. The writer signed himself “*The Zodiac*.”



The identity of the Zodiac killer, who terrorized San Francisco Bay area communities more than 50 years ago, has remained unsolved. Photograph: Eric Risberg/AP

## A Series of Attacks

Police have confirmed five victims, though investigators believe there may be more.

The first were two teenagers, **David Faraday** and **Betty Lou Jensen**, shot on **December 20, 1968**, near Vallejo. Six months later, **Darlene Ferrin** was killed and **Mike Mageau** wounded in another late-night attack.

In **September 1969**, the killer stabbed **Cecelia Shepard** and **Bryan Hartnell** near Lake Berryessa while wearing a black hood marked with his symbol. Two weeks later, a San Francisco taxi driver, **Paul Stine**, was shot. Afterward, police received a letter containing part of Stine’s blood-stained shirt.

In the more than 50 years since the Zodiac terrorized communities around the Bay Area, killing at least five people and sending taunting letters and cryptograms to news media, interest in the case has only intensified. The killings, which police continue to investigate, have been the subject of numerous documentaries, the 2007 thriller film *Zodiac*, and multiple books.



**Messages and Ciphers**

Between 1969 and 1974, the Zodiac mailed at least 21 letters. Some included ciphers—secret codes made of symbols and letters. The first was solved by amateur cryptographers in 1969; part of the message read, *“I like killing people because it is so much fun.”*

Others remained a mystery for decades. In 2020, a team of codebreakers used computer algorithms to decode one long-unsolved cipher, confirming it was authentic but revealing no name.



The Zodiac killer sent a cryptogram to the San Francisco Chronicle in 1969.

## Suspects and Theories

More than 2,500 people have been investigated. The main suspect for many years was **Arthur Leigh Allen**, a schoolteacher who owned a watch with the Zodiac symbol. He denied any involvement, and modern DNA tests did not match him.

Other names have appeared, including **Earl Van Best Jr.** and **Gary Francis Poste**, yet police say no conclusive evidence links any suspect to the murders.



## A Media Legend

The Zodiac case changed how the media and the public engage with crime. His letters were addressed to newspaper editors, not police. He demanded publication of his words and threatened further violence if ignored. Reporters described the fear that swept through the Bay Area as families kept children home from school.

The mystery inspired books, films, and online communities of amateur detectives still debating clues decades later.

## Why It Still Matters

For investigators, the case remains open. For scholars, it reveals how language and media can shape public fear. For readers, it raises questions about attention, identity, and truth in the age of mass communication.

Even after fifty years, one fact endures: *the Zodiac was never caught.*