

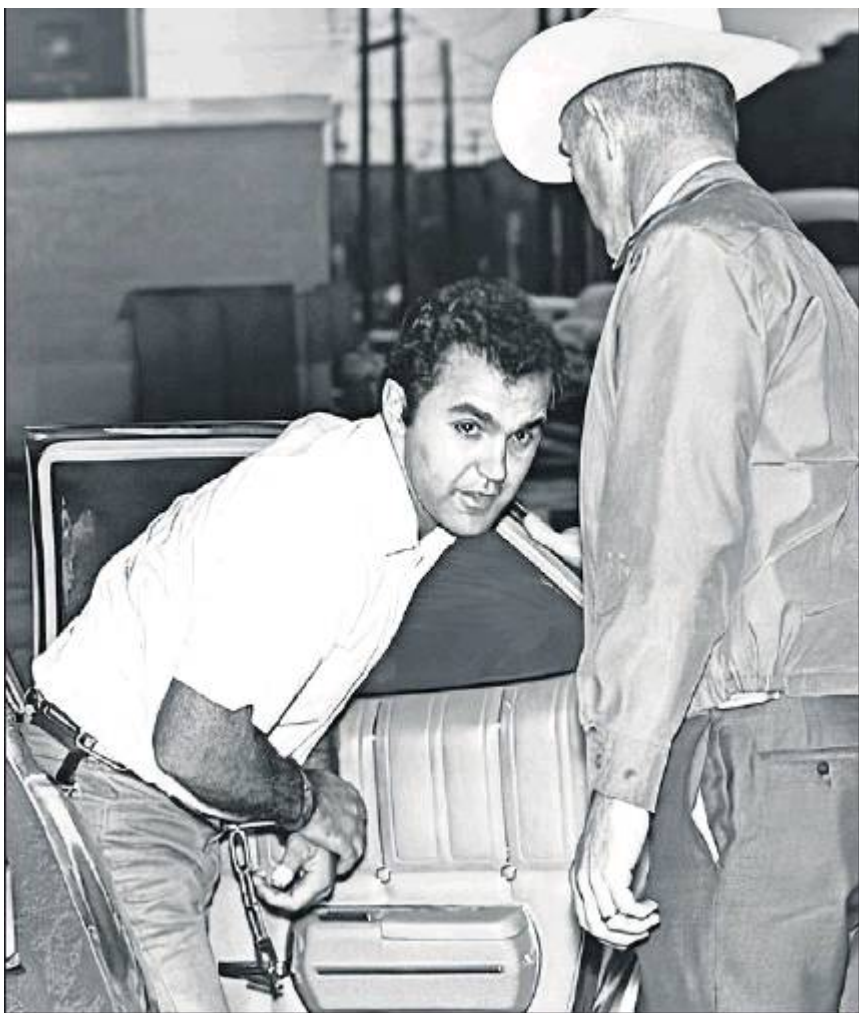
## CAPROCK CHRONICLES

# Lach case among most notorious of Lubbock's murder cases

CHUCK LANEHART



*Caprock Chronicles is edited by Jack Becker, Librarian at Texas Tech University. This week's article is by Chuck Lanehart and is about the most sensational murder to take place on the campus of Texas Tech and possibly Lubbock.*



**Benjamin Lach at the time of his arrest, March 13, 1968. [A-J MEDIA FILE PHOTO.]**

The body of Sarah Morgan was found in a blood-spattered laboratory on the third floor of the Texas Tech Science Building on December 3, 1967. Sarah, a 54-year-old Tech custodian, was found with her throat slashed by a scalpel. Her head was nearly decapitated by a bone saw. Her grandmaster custodial keys were missing.

The gruesome discovery was the beginning of one of the most notorious murder cases in Lubbock's history.

Local police, with practically no clues to the identity of the "Scalpel Killer," began their search for what one official labeled a "thrill slayer." Lubbock and the Tech community were alarmed.

Months later, Tech professor Kent Rylander noticed papers in his office had been disturbed, and he thought someone had broken into his office to obtain the answer key for a test he planned to administer the next day.

On March 13, 1968, Detectives Frank Wiley and Floyd Hargrave staked out Rylander's office, on the third floor of the Science Building, all night. Early that morning, a man opened the locked door to Rylander's office using Sarah's grandmaster key.

The detectives tried to arrest him, but he ran. A wild movie-style chase ensued. As police closed in, the man stole a parked car from campus. He ditched the car and sped off in another, reaching speeds over 100 mph, but he was ultimately arrested by police.

The man was Benjamin Lach, a 23-year-old Tech graduate student. Investigators believed he snuck into the building the previous December to steal test answers. Sarah caught him in the act, and he killed her.

Lach was soon indicted for "murder with malice"—a capital offense—and his case was eventually moved to Fort Worth on a change of venue. The case was tried in November of 1970, with Tarrant County District Judge Byron Matthews presiding.

Lubbock prosecutors Blair Cherry Jr. and Alton Griffin presented Lach's confession to the jury panel of eleven men and one woman.

“I caught her from behind,” Lach’s written statement to police began. “I think I strangled her. She fell to the floor and then I don’t remember what happened.” The confession continued, “I decided to cut her up. I looked around and saw a scalpel . . .” When he saw Sarah was dead, he grabbed her keys.

Several witnesses testified they saw Lach in the building about 7 p.m. on the night of the murder.

Lach, represented by Lubbock lawyers Bill Gillespie and A.W. Salyars, relied on an alibi defense and contested the confession.

Joan Dominick testified she was with Lach at 8 p.m., the time of the murder. She said she met him by chance at the Student Union Building. He was with her between 6:30 pm and 9 p.m., she said.

A Dallas psychologist testified Lach was a paranoid schizophrenic and suggested he could have been pressured into making a confession that he killed Sarah—even if innocent.

The defense called Lach’s mother to the stand. Mrs. Herman Lach, of Boston, wept quietly during her testimony. She portrayed her life in Europe as a Jew during World War II and the extermination of many members of her family by Nazis.

She said her son was born in Poland and described the family journey to the United States after the war, and Benjamin’s upbringing. She traced Benjamin’s education and background, pointing out his participation in football, tennis, bowling, swimming and Red Cross lifesaving. Benjamin also served as a summer camp counselor, she said.

The defense also introduced a December 1968 Lubbock court decree which found Lach insane (incompetent to stand trial in today’s legal terminology).

In final arguments, prosecutor Griffin argued, “Sarah Morgan gave her life, so Benjamin Lach could make good grades.”

As the jury deliberated, Lach’s mother told the press, “In some countries, there is no justice. I hope there is justice in this country. But I wait to see. My son is innocent. He told me.”

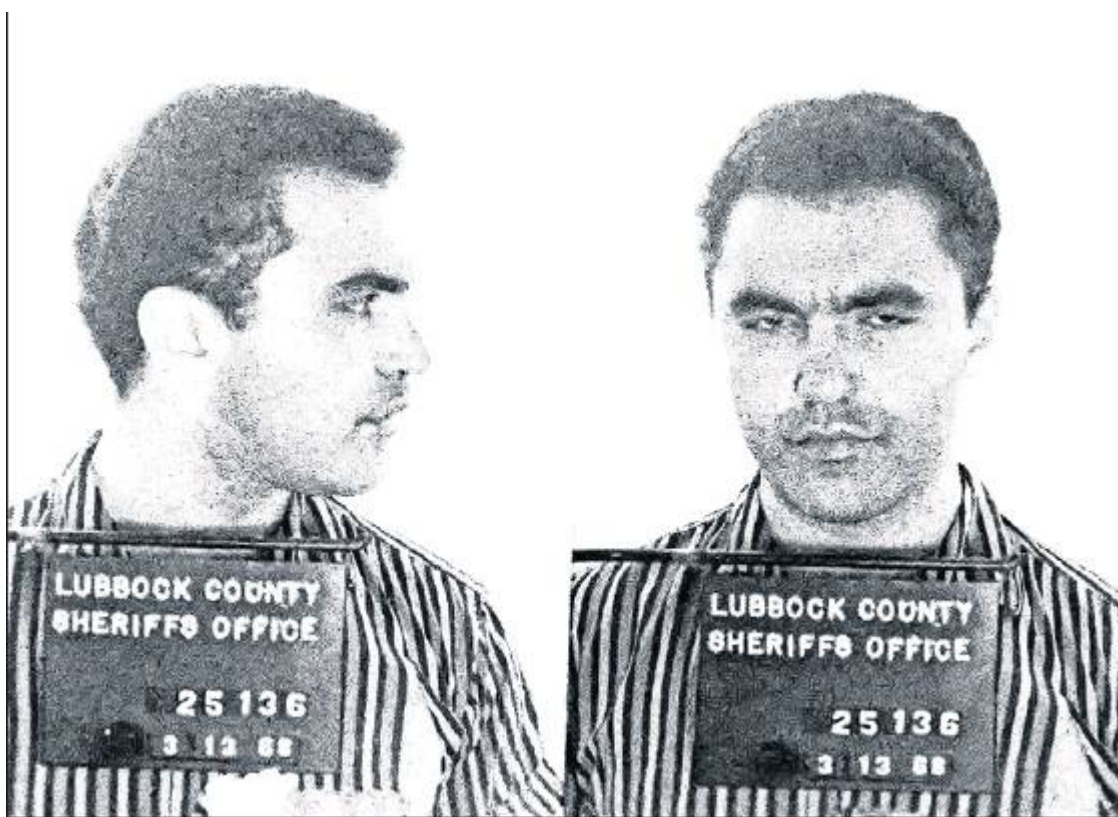
The jury deliberated two hours before convicting Lach.

Though the prosecution sought the death penalty, Cherry and Griffin presented no evidence at the punishment phase of the trial.

The jury sent Lach to prison for 40 years.

After serving 15 years, seven months of his sentence, Lach was paroled in 1983. Texas law allowed Lach to be released early, because the college degrees he earned in prison counted toward time served.

Lach is believed to be living in Massachusetts.



**Mug shot of Benjamin Lach. [PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LUBBOCK COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE]**

There is a legendary story — probably fictional — about prosecutor Cherry and defense lawyer Salyars following the trial. At a bar association meeting, Cherry complimented his friend Salyars, “If I were ever in trouble with the law, I would want Shorty Salyars to defend me.”

In response, Salyars grinned and said, “If I were ever in trouble with the law, I would want Blair Cherry to prosecute me!”