

A Midsummer Manhunt in the Mountains: A Reluctant Remembrance

by [Jeff Plude](#) (September 2020)



Twilight in the Adirondacks, Sanford Robinson Gifford, 1864

My wife and I are riding through the Adirondacks, I'm driving and my wife is in the passenger seat, the sun is out and high in the sky, it's early August and we have the week off. We both grew up in the foothills, and we've lived other places but still like to take long drives through the woods and mountains and breathe the pines and clear air—we have the windows rolled down, the breeze ruffling my hair and half warming me and cooling me—and watch the lakes and streams roll by.

We enter the park from its southern central border and take Route 30 up into Wells and then Speculator. As we glide through the little sleepy towns and bend around the curves surrounded by tall trees like a dream, we see the ramshackle houses here and there of the people who aren't vacationers from Jersey or Connecticut or New York City or Long Island or downstate. They're the hardscrabble people who live here year-round year after year and endure the long brutal unforgiving winters.

And I think of Robert Garrow. He is the last person, if you can hardly consider him one, I want to think of.

But there he is, in my mind's eye: the burly bald former farmhand who murdered a young camper and then led police on the biggest manhunt in Adirondack and New York State history in late July and early August 1973. I was almost a teenager, just starting to realize that the world wasn't quite what I saw on sitcoms but more like the evening news.

As far as I can recall, it was the first big news event locally that I followed. Every night the three local TV channels thoroughly covered a whole army of law enforcement hunting Garrow down, who was ranging through the woods like some hyper-intelligent animal, half human and half monster. He was thirty-seven. He had a creepy stare behind his black-frame glasses in the black-and-white headshot of him. Cops were stopping vehicles throughout the largest state park in the country, a unique mix of public and private land that is sparsely populated but bigger in area than each of the states of nearby Massachusetts and Vermont, and along the Adirondack Northway, I-87. I remember seeing photos of backed up traffic at roadblocks, summer vacationers like us, opening their trunks and maybe wondering if they should turn around.

The village I grew up in was about sixty miles due east of where the chase began. Like all of our neighbors, we didn't have central air-conditioning and in the mild midsummer still

nights we kept only the screen door that lead into our living room shut. And my uncle had an Airstream he and my aunt and cousins stayed in on weekends at a campground at Minerva Lake, which was even closer to where Garrow had disappeared into the woods, and which we usually visited around that time.

Something like this, perhaps, was running through my mind, or imagination rather, all those years ago when Garrow was on the loose.

The whole saga ended twelve days later when Garrow was caught hiding outside his sister's house in Mineville. A conservation officer had spotted Garrow's nephew bringing food into the woods in the backyard and finally discovered the fugitive himself, who started to run but the officer shot and wounded him in the back, legs, and hand.

My fears had not been completely unfounded: after leading police on a brief car chase on dirt roads and ditching his VW hatchback and fleeing into the dense underbrush, eluding state troopers and local police and bloodhounds and searchlights and helicopters, one of which contained his wife and son pleading with him on a loudspeaker to give up, Garrow had trekked some sixty miles northeast on foot through thick forests, mountains several thousands of feet high, and miles and miles of streams. He was as resourceful as he was remorseless. He'd grown up in the Adirondacks, in Dannemora, near the Canadian border, whose maximum-security prison he did time in before and after the murders (and in 2015 was the site of a prison escape and scandal).

So that was as far as I followed it; the show was over for me. *The New York Times* had covered it, though in those days I looked no further than the sports pages of our local daily paper. I was just entering junior high at the time, and Garrow was now safely in prison (for a while, anyway). But I never forgot about him.

Little did I know that the best, or I should say the worst, was still to come.

In fact the trial turned out to be even more lurid than the manhunt and capture. Two decades before the internet, Garrow reported details that many ears, especially in small towns, had never dreamed of hearing. He was eventually found to have committed four murders, two young women and another young man in addition to the young camper.

The trial took place the following June at the county courthouse in Lake Pleasant, near both Wells and Speculator. Police surrounded the small building, snipers were posted. Reporters descended on the secluded alpine town.

Garrow was in a wheelchair; he claimed he was paralyzed, but a doctor attested that there was no physical reason Garrow couldn't walk. He reportedly took notes and smirked during the prosecutor's examination of witnesses, which included the three young campers who survived the horrific ordeal.

Then Garrow testified in his own defense—his two attorneys were asking the jury to find him not guilty by reason of insanity.

He testified to the various murders in a matter-of-fact tone. He was driving along one morning, July 29, 1973, having just stopped at a gas station to get a coffee and donuts. As he drove along the remote road, Route 8, which runs along with Route 30 and branches off it, he saw a couple of tents not far from the pavement and pulled over. He grabbed his .30-30 rifle and in one of the tents he found a young man, Philip



Domblewski, an eighteen-year-old college student, and a young woman, undressed, and in the other tent were two young men. They each ended up tied to a tree out of sight of each other. Domblewski reportedly gave Garrow a hard time and Garrow stabbed him to death in the chest. Garrow fled—the two other young men had wriggled free and run into town—and soon men from the town were scouring the woods for Garrow, who was now on the run.

He also recounted his boyhood—how he had grown up in a poor family, and his mother and his alcoholic father beat him mercilessly and relentlessly (which was corroborated by his sisters). As a young boy he was shipped out to local farms. He was withdrawn and awkward around people and had no friends. During his work he had sex with the animals.

If this weren't enough, something almost as shocking, at least in a legal context, came out of Garrow's mouth at trial besides his atrocities. In answer to a question from Belge, he revealed information that showed that he had told his lawyers, Frank Armani and Francis Belge, where he had dumped the bodies of two young women he had raped and murdered earlier that summer! Armani later claimed that he had gotten Garrow to confess to the murders and the details by hypnotizing him.

The two defense attorneys had visited one site together, an abandoned mineshaft near where Garrow had grown up—with Armani's help, Belge lowered himself into the hole and shined a flashlight and saw Susan Petz at the bottom and snapped a Polaroid of the body. Then Belge, without Armani, went to a cemetery in Syracuse, where Garrow had been charged with rape of two girls, nine and eleven, in late May, and found 16-year-old Alicia Hauck, whom Garrow had raped there and dumped in the woods behind the large graveyard. Garrow had described to his attorneys where the bodies were, and even drew them a map when they had trouble finding one of the places. Again Belge took photos. But this time, apparently

because the body was so decomposed, he put the young woman's severed head back on her body!

So now Belge was tampering with evidence at the scene of a crime. The first instance could be justified by attorney-client privilege, but the second instance could be construed as a crime.

I originally learned all this from two books about Garrow—*Privileged Information*, coauthored by Armani and published in 1984, and *Terror in the Adirondacks*, written by a local author and published in 2009. I read both, though I'm not an aficionado of the true-crime genre to say the least; in fact these are the only two such books I've read.

This quickly became a landmark case in legal ethics. Law professors and textbooks now cite it as a human dilemma in matters of attorney-client privilege. The question hangs there like a moral guillotine: Is it ever ethical for attorneys to divulge information a client has given them about a crime that has resulted in serious bodily injury or death?

The parents of both girls had no information on their missing daughters, and of course were in agony. Alicia Hauck went to the same school as Armani's daughter. And all the time Armani and Belge knew exactly where these dead children of tortured parents lay.

A grand jury in Onondaga County considered whether Armani and Belge should be indicted. The proposed charges were that as officers of the court, they are duty bound to report any crime that would result in death or serious injury. Belge, on the other hand, was also indicted on violating the public health law—that a person deserves a decent burial, and to report the discovery of a dead body. I just finished serving on a grand jury myself, which also put me in mind of this whole ugly affair.

There was a general uproar over their

conduct—particularly not helping the grieving parents who still could not bury their daughters (though one of the girl's bodies was found months before the trial), and had to learn the truth along with the public at the trial. Armani told the grand jury he agonized over the decision. Some have suggested that perhaps they could've anonymously informed the police of the bodies' location, but legal experts say this also would've violated attorney-client privilege as such evidence could be used against their client. Newspapers across the country chimed in; a number of pundits maintained that the lawyers acted properly.

But what some journalists and lawyers may consider proper in the course of their so-called professional conduct can cause a lay person to recoil. Also Belge, who brought somebody else with him to the cemetery to look for Hauck, already appeared to have disclosed the privileged information to somebody else.

Lawyers are ambivalent figures at best, and moral agnostics at worst. In the movie *Unplanned*, which I recently saw, Planned Parenthood sues the protagonist, a former director of one of its clinics who had finally quit and was telling others the truth about what the organization really does and believes, and as she and her lawyer are about to enter the courtroom he tells her: "Fair (fare) is what you give a cab driver. The law is something entirely different."

In the end the grand jury decided that Armani should not be charged for withholding the whereabouts of the murdered women. Belge, however, was indicted, apparently for trying to rearrange the evidence. But even that charge was eventually dropped. Though an appeals court confirmed the dismissal expressed concern about giving attorneys carte blanche to withhold information obtained from a client and should be governed by "basic human standards of decency."

Did Armani and Belge do the right thing? Do legal

ethics trump human decency? On one hand it is easy to say, I think, that they dutifully abided by their professional code of conduct. But I think the appeals court struck closer to not only the truth, but the whole truth. Or as "Cool Hand Luke" Jackson said: "Callin' it your job don't make it right, boss."

My own dealings with attorneys over the years has done nothing to improve what seems the general view of the legal profession, and in fact has confirmed it and then some. I would like to think that I would've told the police where the bodies were, or at least told the parents. Better to be maligned by lawyers and possibly disbarred, I say, than to stand in greater condemnation of my own conscience, not to mention the Chief Judge of the Universe. As Jesus said to the Pharisees:

Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.

What's more, it seems that such a revelation would have had virtually no effect on Garrow's defense. He willingly testified to the murders, and in great detail. The information would've added nothing to bolster Garrow's supposed insanity strategy (that is, that he supposedly didn't know what he was doing and that he didn't know it was a crime, which he most decidedly did know; otherwise, why did he hide the bodies and eventually flee?).

As it turned out, Armani and Belge were effectively ruined anyway, at least in the years immediately after the trial and publicity. Both of the men's law practices failed. Armani had a heart attack the day the grand jury decided to not indict him. Belge moved to Florida and died in 1989. But Armani started practicing law again, and turns ninety-three this month.

Garrow was not so long-lived. In early September 1978, four years after he was sentenced to twenty-five years to life for his murder convictions, his son smuggled an automatic .38 pistol in the bottom of a bucket of fried chicken when he visited him in a state prison in Fishkill. Garrow had been transferred to the downstate correctional facility because of his so-called paralysis. It also had a reputation for lax security. It was the beginning of my senior year in high school, and I vaguely remember this part of the case. Garrow escaped and apparently survived in a hole in the woods for three days—only a couple of hundred yards outside the prison fence, which was reportedly fifteen feet high and which he scaled. Again there was a manhunt and roadblocks. He wounded a young guard who discovered him, but he was immediately gunned down by a barrage of gunfire.

I know a woman, a professional my age from the Adirondack foothills, who is obsessed with Garrow and devours anything written about him and collects memorabilia and such, which I find unsettling. And I suspect she is not alone.

For my part, I wish I could forget all about him. As the apostle Paul counsels: “I would have you wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil.” The serene land of Adirondack chairs and Great Camps and deer-hunting guides and white-water canoeing and John Frederick Kensett, one of whose idyllic landscapes of Lake George hangs in my wife’s and my dining room, would never be the same. And neither would I. If only I could take down the picture of Garrow once and for all.

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