

16-yr. on the run comes to an end

Written by David Jackson and Gary Marx
Friday, 09 March 2012 12:56



The FBI arrested Giovanni Spiller in California this month after a tipster read a Chicago Tribune article on the case. (Riverside County Sheriff Handout / Feb. 27, 2012)

CHICAGO — Murder suspect Giovanni Spiller's more than 15 years on the run came to an abrupt end last week as he eased his car into the driveway of his suburban Southern California home.

An FBI agent was waiting to arrest the 65-year-old fugitive, wanted in a 1996 gun slaying outside a Northwest Side pool hall, reported the *Chicago Tribune*.

A person who knew of Spiller's whereabouts in the town of Hemet but was unaware of the

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seriousness of his alleged crime contacted Chicago police and the FBI after reading an article about Spiller's case that was part of the *Tribune's* "Fugitives from justice" series.

After he fled Chicago, Spiller had been traced to Memphis, Tennessee, then the Philippines as he used a string of aliases to conceal his location.

According to records and interviews, he had dyed his hair, obtained identification stating he was "Johnny Harrington," avoided family gatherings and rarely answered the telephone.

But Spiller also left clues to his whereabouts, the *Tribune* found.

In Hemet, Spiller was living at a house he co-owned — and his wife moved there from Chicago about five years ago, according to a law enforcement source.

The Spillers used that address and a Hemet bank account when paying property taxes on the Chicago house they continued to own, records show.

Spiller's wife died in late January, according to the Riverside County coroner, but the most recent check was mailed two weeks ago.

When the FBI agent approached Spiller at 5 p.m. Feb. 21, Spiller initially claimed he was Harrington — an identity he had obtained from an incarcerated criminal, according to a law enforcement source.

But Spiller's scars and tattoos gave him away, and fingerprints taken at the Robert Presley Detention Center in Riverside matched those from 1996, when he was first booked on Chicago murder charges, the source said.

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The two sons and former wife of Roberto “Bobby” Castillo, 53, who was fatally shot on Nov. 29, 1996, said they were shocked to learn of Spiller’s capture and hopeful that they might get closure after so many years and legal missteps.

Castillo’s son Roberto “Allen” Castillo had watched as Spiller surrendered to Chicago detectives in 1996 but then fled after posting a low bond.

Three years later, Spiller was located in the Philippines, but an extradition effort stalled in that country, records and interviews show.

“For the past 16 years I have been hoping and praying and wondering if this guy would ever pay for the crime. We’re finally going to see justice as long as someone doesn’t drop the ball again,” Castillo said.

“As far as I know, after the killing he just went free and went gallivanting wherever he wanted to go,” said Castillo’s former wife, Irene.

“I’ll be relieved if he really is caught and is in jail right now.”

Spiller’s story is in many ways emblematic of the criminal justice breakdowns highlighted by the *Tribune* in its investigation.

Those breakdowns enable suspects to flee trial for murder, rape and other felony charges by crossing a U.S. border, then thwart efforts to bring them to justice.

In addition to his low bond and an apparent lack of cooperation by the Philippine Government, spotty law enforcement oversight allowed the manhunt to drift for years.

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Six feet tall and muscular in his prime, Spiller told Chicago friends he was the child of an African-American U.S. serviceman and a Filipino woman.

People called him “Popoy.”

He and Castillo were longtime friends; both had grown up on tough streets in different communities in the Philippines.

In Chicago, the two worked only sporadically — Castillo managed an apartment building; Spiller drove delivery trucks.

Both were regulars at Marie’s Golden Cue, a pool hall at 3241 W. Montrose Avenue, where they and some two dozen Filipino-American friends put wagers on games of pool, cards and mah-jongg.

Late in 1996, Spiller and Castillo got into a fight, and Castillo, who worked out daily, lifting weights and running, beat Spiller severely, according to Castillo’s sons and a friend.

Castillo told his family that he was expecting retribution.

On a cold, wet evening the day after Thanksgiving in 1996, Castillo was walking toward the pool hall when he was shot several times with a .45-caliber pistol.

The gunman sprinted away, but at least one person on the bloodstained streets outside the pool hall identified Spiller as the assailant, according to *Tribune* interviews.

At Spiller’s house in the 2200 block of North Nagle Avenue, Chicago police detectives discovered books and pamphlets on how to switch identities and change one’s appearance.

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In fact, records show that, even before the Castillo shooting, Spiller used at least three driver's licenses with different names and birth dates, and was listed in law enforcement records under numerous aliases.

Spiller also had at least two wives simultaneously, although one of the women divorced Spiller on grounds of bigamy in 1992, declaring in a handwritten court complaint:

"I found out that my husband is married with another woman. He (beat) me up and try to kill me so many times, and I don't love him anymore."

Four days after the shooting, on Dec. 3, Spiller appeared in traffic court to pay a \$95 fine for a driving infraction from earlier that year, a Cook County court docket indicates.

On Dec. 17, Spiller turned himself in to Grand Central Area detectives.

His books and pamphlets about identity switching had been inventoried by police and made available to Cook County prosecutors, according to *Tribune* interviews with two former law enforcement officials involved in the case.

Spiller's warrant said he was to be held without bail.

But Spiller's attorney convinced a judge that Spiller should be released on \$200,000 bail — meaning he had to put down only \$20,000 cash.

The court clerk summarized the judge's decision with a handwritten docket note that added: "ELEC. MONITOR REQUIRED! TO STAY HOME 24 HRS. A DAY!"

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Spiller's wife posted the \$20,000 bond, and he returned home.

Roughly three months later, Spiller cut off the electronic monitor and vanished.

Spiller's cousin Leroy Outlaw later told an FBI agent that he drove Spiller to Memphis and dropped him off at a Greyhound bus station.

Outlaw added that "Spiller called him collect from the Philippines and left a message saying that he had made it," a federal warrant said. Outlaw was not charged with any crime and later died, records show.

Chicago police gathered — but could not confirm — tips that Spiller was working as a bodyguard for a Filipino government official.

Three years after the slaying, in 1999, the FBI got a fix on Spiller's whereabouts in the Philippines, and the following year, U.S. officials persuaded Filipino authorities to issue a provisional arrest warrant for him, according to a federal law enforcement official.

But Filipino officials told the Americans that they couldn't find Spiller at the specified address, and the case fell dormant.

At some point after that, Spiller apparently slipped back into California and moved into his two-story, tile-roofed home in Hemet.

Two hours after Spiller was arrested at the house on Feb. 21, he was booked into the county jail and is being held without bond.

Sally Daly, a spokeswoman for Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, said prosecutors

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on Monday signed and forwarded to California paperwork seeking Spiller's return to Chicago.

"The extradition is very much in the process of taking place," Daly said.

At a hearing Wednesday before Riverside County Superior Court Judge Michele Levine, Spiller agreed to be extradited to Illinois, and he waived the right that required the state of Illinois to seek a governor's warrant, according to Supervising Deputy Public Defender Eric Keen, who represented Spiller at the hearing.

Spiller's next court hearing is set for March 7.

Castillo's older son, Carlo, said the family plans to follow the judicial process to its end.

"My brother and my mom and I thought this day would never come. We honestly thought that he was going to get away with it."