PURDUE'S HUNTER LEADS NFC OVER AFC IN SENIOR BOWL/SPORTS, 1C

PENSACOLA
News Journal

A Gannett Newspaper | Pensacola, Florida | Sunday, January 17, 1993 | Northwest Florida

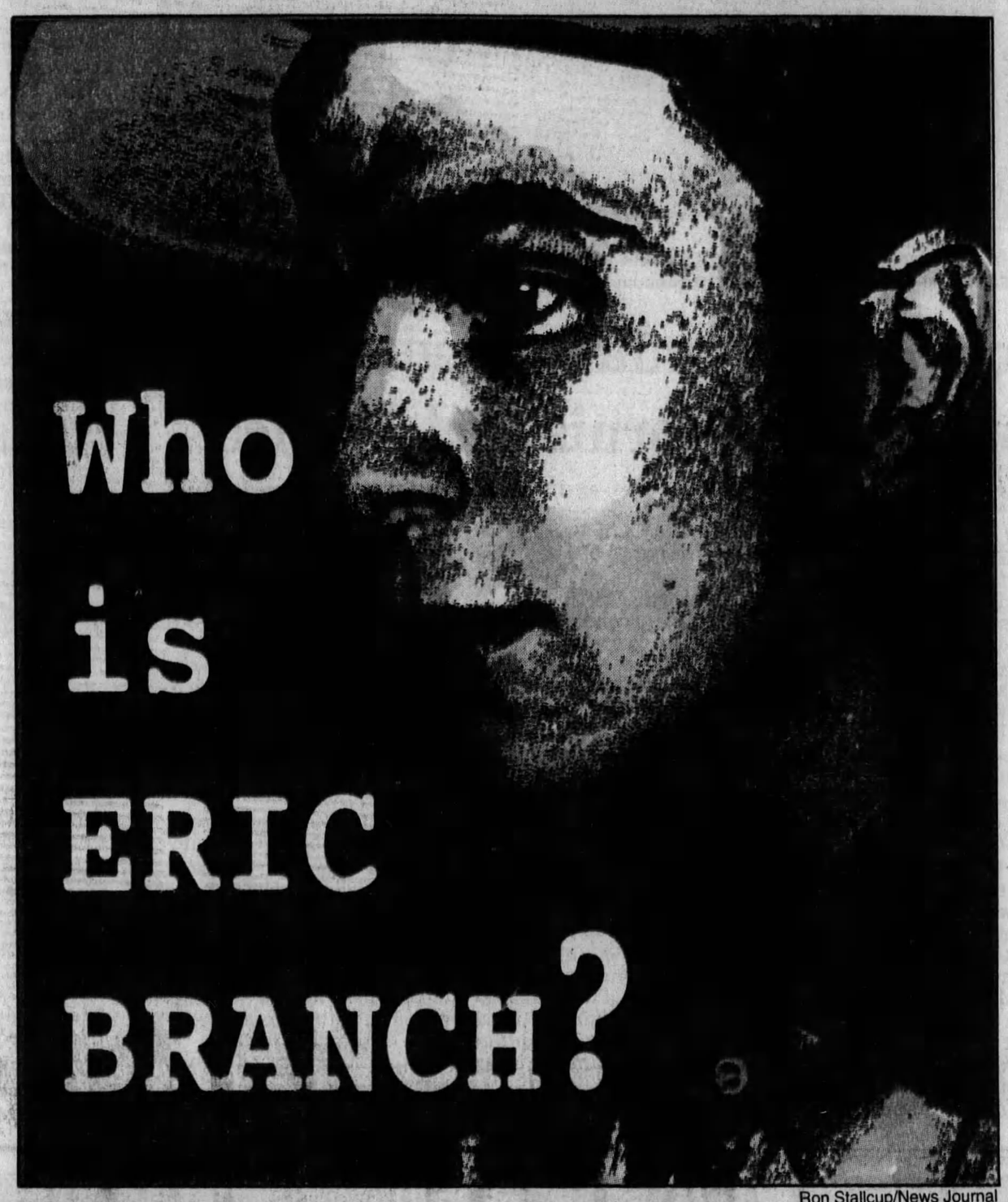
OFFICERS MAKE DRUG ARRESTS

Escambia County sheriff's deputies report arresting 10 people and confiscating drugs and cash Friday/**Local, 1B**

WHO WILL GO TO SUPER BOWL?

The Dallas Cowboys, San Francisco 49ers, Miami Dolphins and Buffalo Bills will vie today for the chance/**Sports, 1C**

Tousled hair, gentle voice, big, brown eyes. Warm and friendly. Charming and bright. A con man, a troublemaker . . . a killer?



Ron Stallcup/News Journal

By Ginny Graybiel
News Journal

EVANSVILLE, Ind. — Eric Branch's eyes, big and brown, looked through the steel cage in the Vanderburgh County Jail Saturday morning.

He smiled. His brown hair was tousled. His voice was soft, almost soothing.

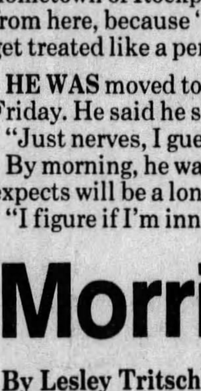
"I always seem to find myself in these messes," he said.

He smiled again, chuckled a self-deprecating little laugh.

In another setting, Branch, 21, could have been a college kid talking about the latest prank on fraternity row.

He's not.

He's the prime suspect in the murder and presumed rape of 21-year-old Susan Leigh Morris, a University of West Florida junior who was killed Monday.



News Journal reporter Ginny Graybiel questioned murder suspect Eric Branch on Saturday, in an exclusive jail-house interview in Evansville, Ind.

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He's soon to be arrested in the vicious rape of a 29-year-old Panama City woman early on New Year's Day.

And he's already been convicted and served time in the 1991 sexual attack on a 14-year-old girl during his freshman year at the University of Southern Indiana here.

Branch wasn't admitting to anything Saturday.

He said he decided to follow his grandparents' advice Friday and turn himself in to authorities who had launched a nationwide search for him after Morris' body was found Wednesday.

"I was kind of shaky yesterday. That's a big step to come walking in the jail," he said.

But he walked into the Spencer County Jail in his hometown of Rockport, a town of 2,500 about 35 miles from here, because "I figured if I went to Rockport, I'd get treated like a person rather than an animal."

HE WAS moved to the Vanderburgh Jail midday Friday. He said he spent the night throwing up.

"Just nerves, I guess," he said, shrugging.

By morning, he was feeling OK, settling in for what he expects will be a long wait for trial.

"I figure if I'm innocent, it'll get found out," he said.

Branch didn't deny killing Morris. He didn't admit it, either.

"I won't comment on anything happening in Pensacola or being in Pensacola or knowing where Pensacola is," he said.

BUT HE wanted to know what Pensacola people are saying about the murder. And no sooner had he asked the question, he offered his own version.

"The students want to hang me," he said. "I've already been tried and found guilty before I go to court. I don't think it's fair."

Branch denied raping or having sex with either the Panama City woman or the 14-year-old, although he admitted to being in contact with each the nights the attacks occurred.

In regard to the Panama City case, he said, "There are other circumstances that will come out later on."

He explained his guilty plea to a plea bargain in the attack on the teen-ager by saying his attorney insisted on it. He got a two-year sentence from which he was released early.

AS HE talked, he seemed totally unruffled, calm, smart, almost smug, as if he had a secret that would set everything straight.

He seemed proud of his brains, eager to match them with officers who have been on his trail.

He said he liked the two Florida Department of Law Enforcement agents who arrested him and said they were just "doing their job." But he complained, "They're building a case around me. They're not looking around me."

He scoffed at Panama City police, saying six of them

See PEOPLE PERSON, 17A

MILITARY

U.N. rejects Iraq limits on flights

■ More on Iraq/**2A**

Associated Press

Raising the prospect of renewed bombing raids against Iraq, the United Nations on Saturday rejected Baghdad's latest offer on allowing inspection flights into the country, saying its conditions were unacceptable.

Baghdad on Saturday bowed to pressure from the world body and promised safe passage for the flights, but said the U.N. planes must fly over Jordan, not two zones where allies have barred Iraqi aircraft.

Iraq also threatened Saturday to shoot down allied planes that enter its territory, and a confrontation simmered on the border with Kuwait over six police posts Baghdad should have torn down.

"THE RESPONSE is that the Special Commission cannot operate effectively if it is forced to enter the airspace of Jordan," said Tim Trevan, spokesman for the commission designated to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

He refused to elaborate on why the inspectors opposed using the longer route over Jordan. But he reiterated that Iraq was obliged to let in U.N. weapons inspectors from any point, under terms of the Persian Gulf War cease-fire.

And he indicated the next move was up to Iraq.

The development escalated the week-long confrontation between Baghdad and the world body, raising prospects of new military strikes against Iraq.

Police nab Peoples in New York

By Craig Myers
News Journal

A convicted armed robber who escaped from the Escambia County Jail more than two months ago was captured Saturday in New York.

Rochester, N.Y., police were holding 24-year-old Orlando Peoples for the Escambia County Sheriff's Department late Saturday, said Sgt. Jim Criazzo of the Rochester Police Department.

No details were available Saturday on how Rochester police captured Peoples.

Criazzo said Rochester authorities apparently filed no local charges against Peoples, but are holding him until he can be extradited to Florida.

Peoples escaped from the Escambia County Jail on Nov. 7. He was facing a 40-year sentence for armed robbery and was waiting to be transported to state prison when he climbed over the wall.

Peoples was sentenced for a May and June 1992 crime spree in which he robbed three convenience store clerks and two women at a gas station and stole a car.

An Escambia County sheriff's dispatcher was disciplined for failing to respond to a resident's apparent sighting of Peoples soon after his escape. Six jail employees also face disciplinary action.

Morris remembered for kindness, strength

By Lesley Tritschler
News Journal

Susan Morris' smiling face looked out at the hundreds of friends and family who gathered Saturday to remember her life and mourn her death.

Morris, 21, was killed Monday at the University of West Florida after she left a night class.

Her smile was captured in a family portrait that stood at the front of the sanctuary at Cokesbury United Methodist Church. Her family sat in one pew in the front, and other mourners filled the remaining seats and overflowed into the back of the church.

"IT IS only natural that our minds ask, 'Why, why did this happen?'" the Rev. Roy Sublette said. "Her death raises questions for her family and for the community." Faith in God and belief in resurrection are comforting Morris' family and should be of comfort to others, Sublette said.

Morris

"After the life we are living, there is more," he said. "Much, much more to come."

He asked the congregation to remember four basic principles of faith:

■ Truth is stronger than falsehood.
■ God and good are always stronger than evil.
■ Love always outlasts hate.
■ Life is always stronger than death.

Peter Gershon, Morris' student adviser, shared some of his memories of her. "Of the many gifts I received in this lifetime, one of the most precious was her friendship," he said, his voice breaking.

When Morris began college, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do, he said. When she decided on television production, she advanced from assistant director to director of some campus productions.

"SHE WAS a calm presence in the high tension of the control room," he said.

She was a kind, caring, considerate student who developed a close circle of friends. They depended on each other in television production, and pulled each other out of tight scrapes, Gershon said.

As the service ended, her friends were there for each other again. As the family and other attendants left the chapel, about 15 young people huddled together. Their faces were red and tear-streaked. They hugged each other and talked in quiet tones.

From the front of the church, Susan Morris smiled back at them.

WEATHER

Partly cloudy
Rain chance, 0 %
High 62. Low 44.

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Mood in Washington: Let's party

Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — The biggest, glitziest, hippest, most-watched presidential inauguration ever starts today, and this capital is ready to party.

It will take William Jefferson Clinton less than one minute to repeat the oath of office as 42nd president. But it will take five days of pomp, pageantry, parties and celebrities to hail the United States' newest chief.

"Inaugurations are our ultimate state occasion and our ultimate celebration of democracy," says inaugural historian Philip Brooks. "Americans expect it to be not a simple oath-taking but an investiture."

LIKE THE often-indulgent baby boomer generation that in Bill Clinton and Al Gore sees its own day arriving, this inauguration will have it all — and more television than ever before. Billed as "An American Reunion: New Beginnings, Renewed Hope," it features 11 balls, a parade and a two-day free festival on the Mall.

INSIDE

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■ Clinton's letter to America/**USA Weekend**

But what other inauguration also has boasted an Elvis impersonator, a precision lawn chair marching team, a 1-ton cheesecake, a 200-saxophone serenade or Fleetwood Mac's reunion?

"The president's personality carries over to the inaugural," says Charlie Brotman, parade announcer since 1957.

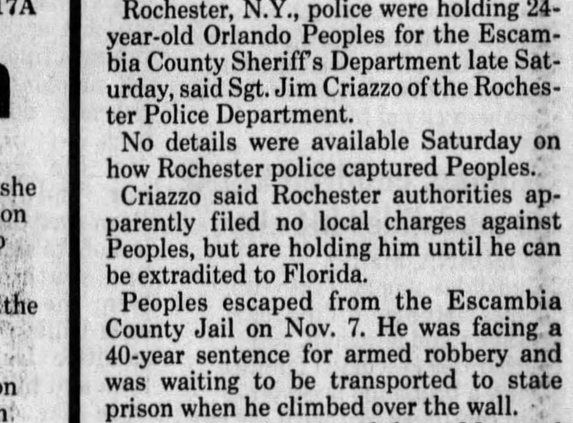
Where Dwight Eisenhower's was a simple, military-like affair and John Kennedy's "a fashion show," Clinton's inauguration will be "more casual and informal," Brotman says. Dignified, yes. But "meant to be fun, not stuffy, not formal."

NOT CHEAP, either. Planners at first said the inauguration would cost less than $20 million. Now they won't say how much. It's possible the tab could exceed the $29 million George Bush spent in 1989.

"I don't see why it costs so much," said former President Jimmy Carter. "That's seven times more than it cost when I was inaugurated."

Though hundreds of thousands will attend festivities, most will watch them on television. Perhaps it's just as well.

Tickets to the events are almost gone. Ditto for hotel rooms. Officials expect record crowds. Closed bridges and streets could mean traffic gridlock.



Jerry Kovach/News Journal

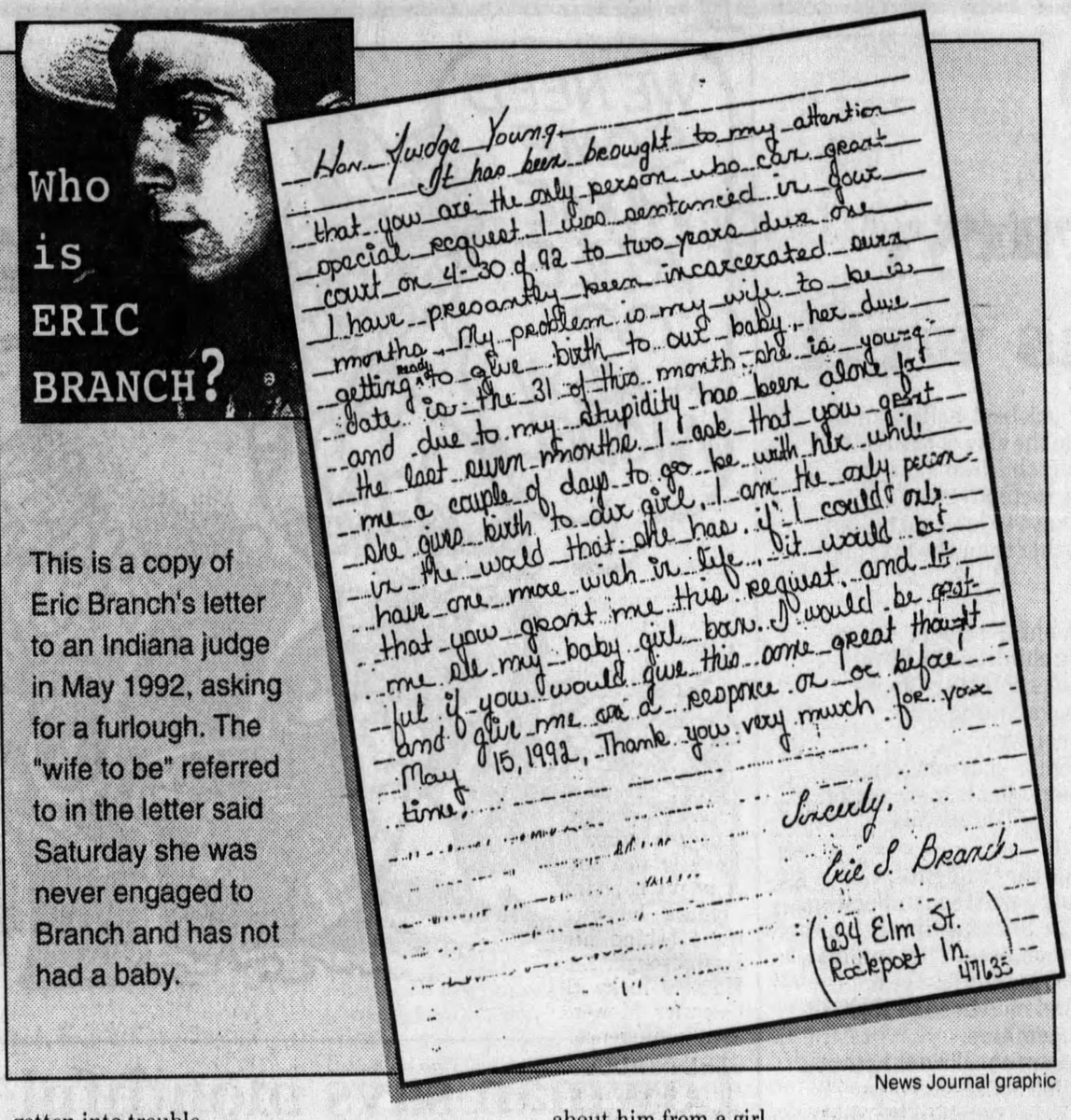
Derrick Scott, 14; Katrina Flores, 17; Toby Bordelon, 15; and Andy Hightower, 16, wait to check their bags before flying to Washington Saturday. They are part of a group of high school students attending inauguration activities.

COMING MONDAY: GET THE MOST YOU CAN — REVIEW YOUR EMPLOYER'S BENEFITS PACKAGE

UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA SLAYING

'I'm definitely a people person'

But police say man in custody may be a killer



This is a copy of Eric Branch's letter to an Indiana judge in May 1992, asking for a furlough. The "wife to be" referred to in the letter said Saturday she was never engaged to Branch and has not had a baby.

News Journal graphic

FROM 1A
converged on his condominium at 4 a.m. on New Year's Day. That was shortly after the rape was reported.

Branch said he walked right past the cops and waved. He said he didn't know at the time that he'd been accused of rape.

"It's not funny, but I couldn't believe it," he said, laughing. "I guess they figured whoever they were looking for wouldn't walk right by and say 'How you doing?'"

But then Branch's mood changed.

"I guess I'm not too smart," he said. " . . . My common sense is lacking. I can't explain it right now."

Vanderburgh sheriff's Detective Sgt. Steve Bequette, who arrested Branch in the attack on the Evansville teen-ager, said he spouted "a line of bull," most of it untrue two years ago.

"He's a real good con," he said. "He's not the smartest guy in the whole world, but he's no dummy either. He's spent his whole life worming his way out of stuff."

BRANCH GREW up in America's heartland, the small, blue-collar communities in the flat countryside of southwest Indiana.

His parents divorced when he was very young. Occasionally, he lived with one of his parents, who stayed in the area, but his grandparents were the ones left to bring him up.

Alfred and Marcella Branch, his father's parents, "have been excellent" he said.

"They treated me better than anyone ever has, except maybe my ex-girlfriend," he said.

As for his parents, "I love 'em both 'cause they're my parents, but I never spent much time with them."

But Al Logsdon, former principal of South Central High School near Rockport, thinks an "extremely dysfunctional" childhood may have had a worse effect on Branch than he realizes.

"Eric bounced from his grandparents to his mother and father," he said. "That kind of triangle makes it very difficult for a child to be successful."

Branch said Saturday he began getting into trouble at an early age.

"I hung around some stupid people," he said. "I don't know if I got them in trouble or if they got me in trouble."

PRESSED FOR what sort of trouble he was in, he only admitted to "drinking, taking stuff. I don't know why. We all had money."

He said he didn't know why he was driven to trouble. If he knew, he said, he wouldn't have gotten into trouble.

He didn't mention more serious juvenile crimes that escalated from burglaries to setting South Central High on fire with some buddies in 1988 or '89. Nor did he mention the time he spent in the Indiana Reformatory School.

Ask others in town, and they know all about it.

"HE WAS well-known," said Tony Stephens, who's about Branch's age but wasn't a personal acquaintance. "He was pretty much the head honcho. He pretty much provoked everything."

Ex-principal Logsdon said Branch wasted his whole high school career on trouble-making. He could never buckle down to either studies or athletics.

Even when Branch returned from the reform school, he still didn't seem to consider the arson serious wrongdoing, Logsdon said.

"He would talk about it seriously, but then a few minutes later, he'd find something to laugh about," he said.

But Logsdon said he never had a hint that Branch could be violent. He never had a complaint about him from a girl.

"Murder and rape, there was nothing in his background to indicate that," he said.

Although he was a trouble-maker, Branch never had trouble making friends.

"I'm definitely a people person," he said Saturday.

"I never judged people. I could hang out with trash and fit in. I could hang around with preppies and fit right in, too."

Logsdon said Branch's friendliness is contrived.

"The boy had the ability to create a friendly atmosphere, like a con man," he said. "He had the ability to charm people, and he used that a great deal with his grandparents.

"He was always smiling, and he'd run up and hug you. He was always seeking attention."

BRANCH SAID he decided to move to Panama City in November after his release from jail in the 14-year-old's sexual battery. Officials later said they accidentally released him before his sentence was actually over.

He said he wanted "a fresh start."

He lived in a Panama City Beach condominium with his cousin and got a job at a Subway sandwich store.

He liked the job, and he liked his boss, Carrie Stauss.

He said he called Stauss on Saturday morning and asked for his work records after hearing that law officers are trying to determine where he was Nov. 20, the day Pensacola resident Joanna Otto disappeared.

He said a former girlfriend from Elberfeld, near his hometown, spent the first week in Panama City with him. He claimed, as he had to a judge last year, that he and his girlfriend of three years had a baby last year but gave it up for adoption to people "who can provide a lot more."

THE 16-year-old girlfriend, contacted later Saturday, said she had a year-long relationship with Branch but was never pregnant.

The girl's mother said she never wanted her daughter to date Branch.

"She finally saw he was a conniver and a wheeler-dealer," she said.

Branch said he planned to enroll in Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City on Jan. 4 but never did.

He's always liked school, especially learning about computers and art. During his brief stay at the University of Southern Indiana, he was a pre-med student, he said.

"I wanted to make a difference, and I didn't know how," he said. "I wanted to help kids so they didn't end up like me. I doubt if I'll ever get a chance now."

Branch said he likes to read.

He read a book on Greek mythology during his last stint in jail, he said. He also "glanced" at a book on serial killer Ted Bundy.

He wouldn't say where he was while on the run from law enforcement last week. But he said he could have kept running.

"I COULD of went to Canada and had a petty job all the rest of my life like I've always had, but I wouldn't be happy with that," he said.

He seemed rueful that he hasn't made a success of his life.

"I'm not a celebrity," he said. "A celebrity is a celebrity for doing good things. I haven't been accused of doing much good, and if I was, you wouldn't hear about it."

He knows he could go to prison for a long time, though he said he knew Florida prisoners generally serve only one of every three days sentenced. Asked if he's worried about the death penalty, he responded, "If I'm not guilty, I don't have to be."

He wouldn't say if he believes he needs psychological help.

"If you're actually doing something wrong, you obviously need help," he said. "But what they do is throw you in a cell. If you got locked in a 4-by-8 cell for 10 years with a bunch of bad apples, how are you going to be when you get out?"

How would he be?

"I'll be myself, I guess," he said. "My happy-go-lucky self."

Staff writer Lesley Tritschler contributed to this story.

Cab driver: Suspect acted strangely

By Lesley Tritschler
News Journal

He kept his face turned to the window, didn't want to talk about college and left a big tip.

All three actions were enough to make Blue Angel taxi driver Eddie Wallace remember the ride he gave Eric Scott Branch from Pensacola Regional Airport to the University of West Florida on Monday night.

About two hours after Wallace dropped off Branch at the UWF Commons, student Susan Morris disappeared. Her body was found Wednesday in woods a few hundred yards from the Commons.

During the 15-minute ride to the campus, Branch seemed bothered and upset, Wallace said.

"HE WAS very, very quiet," Wallace said. "Normally, I like to strike up a conversation. I asked him if he was a student. He answered me by changing the subject. He asked me for our street location."

The cabbie didn't ask any more questions.

When Wallace first saw Branch outside the airport terminal about 6:15 p.m., he thought he was a "meeter-greeter," someone who comes to the airport to pick up a friend or relative. He had no luggage and was wearing shorts despite the cold weather, Wallace said.

Wallace

Branch came to Wallace's station wagon, asked the cost of a trip to the campus and rode in the front seat, but stayed close to the door. He never looked at the meter to check the cost, Wallace said.

"That's one of the rides where I was glad to be paid and be gone," Wallace said. "He just didn't want to be bothered."

When Wallace pulled up at the Commons, Branch gave him $15 for the $9.60 ride and told Wallace to keep the change. "I guess he was as glad to get the ride over as I was," Wallace said.

Wednesday afternoon at the airport taxi stand, some of the drivers were talking about how one of them may have given Branch a ride to UWF, Wallace said.

"We all laughed it off," he said.

JUST OUT of curiosity, Wallace walked over to a picture of Branch, which was posted on a punch-out clock. "I looked at it for about two seconds and realized my life was about to get complicated," he said.

Wallace called the Florida Department of Law Enforcement number on the poster and was interviewed for more than four hours over the next two days, he said. They also fingerprinted his cab and found one good print on the window, he said.

Wallace does not know if it was Branch's.

For a few seconds after seeing Branch's picture, Wallace hesitated, he said. The picture he saw of Branch wasn't very clear, and he didn't want to lead police in the wrong direction. He thought of his wife and two children and made the call.

"It did scare me," he said. "That was one of the things that motivated me to make the call because she (Morris) was still missing and I had a lot of grief for the family."

FDLE agents compiling evidence against Branch

By Lesley Tritschler
News Journal

With Eric Scott Branch in custody, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement is concentrating on compiling evidence and building a timeline of his whereabouts.

"The main thing is for us to get together," FDLE Special Agent Supervisor Larry Smith said Saturday.

Four agents were in Indiana with Branch while others remained in Florida.

Branch, 21, of Rockport, Ind., is accused in the brutal rape of a Panama City Beach woman and in the killing of University of West Florida student Susan Morris.

A warrant has been issued in the Panama City case. No charges have been filed against Branch for Morris' death, but they will be.

"It's not a matter of if, it's just a matter of when," Smith said.

"Since Bay County charges are in place, we want to get our information together and proceed accordingly."

An FDLE crime-scene analyst examined Morris' Toyota Celica for evidence Saturday. Branch was spotted driving the car in Panama City the day after the killing. Law officers found the car in Bowling Green, Ky., Thursday.

Branch may have stolen another car in Bowling Green to get to Indiana, but police have not recovered any of the cars reported stolen in the area during the time Branch was there.

The FDLE has been receiving calls from other law enforcement agencies who have unsolved sexual assaults and homicides to see whether Branch could be a suspect.

Investigators will develop a time line of Branch's whereabouts to see whether he can be placed in any of those areas.

Fund started for safety equipment

By William Rabb
News Journal

The University of West Florida has started a fund to increase lighting and enhance security at the 1,000-acre campus, and keep the memory of Susan Leigh Morris burning brightly.

Although dubbed the Adopt-a-Light program, the money likely will be used for several projects, including more direct-line phones for campus escorts and more equipment for student patrols, said Pat Howe, vice president of university relations and executive director of the UWF Foundation, which will administer the fund.

SEVERAL PEOPLE at a UWF news conference Thursday criticized the campus for having many dimly lit areas, and mentioned the idea of a fund for better lighting. But Howe said it was Louise Colaw, a Pensacola housewife, who coined the phrase and made the first donation.

"It was something I just couldn't get out of my mind," Colaw said. "If darkness is helping an act like that to occur, then let's get rid of the darkness."

"She wanted to do something to keep Susan's name alive and show that she had not died in vain," Howe said.

Lights and phones would go in areas that need them the most, she said. Purchases could begin as soon as next week because the foundation is not subject to laws that require universities to seek low bids on most purchases.

Howe was quick to add that the university is not depending on private donations to ensure public safety, a role traditionally reserved for government.

"UWF will spend the money to do what we have to do," she said. "This will give us a little more flexibility to provide additional enhancements."

Howe pointed out, however, that the university's budget for next year will be tighter than ever. State Senate Republicans this week vowed to cut $300 million from the state budget and not raise taxes.

BUDGET CUTS in recent years have been blamed for not hiring more police officers and installing more emergency call boxes.

The new lights and phones won't come cheap.

Light fixtures range from $500 for a 20-foot pole for a walkway to $2,200 for a 30-foot parking lot lamp, Howe said. Direct-line phones run about $200, and walkie-talkies for student patrols can cost about $450.

Campus police welcomed the idea and said crime prevention is the best approach to fighting attacks like the one that killed Morris.

"More phones, more personnel; there are numerous things we need," said interim UWF Police Chief Dick Granson.

ADOPT-A-LIGHT

Donations to the University of West Florida Adopt-a-Light program can be made payable to the University of West Florida Foundation and sent to 11000 University Parkway, Pensacola, Fla. 32514. Donations should be marked Adopt-a-Light.

PJC officials want better lighting

By Cindy West
News Journal

Insufficient parking lot lighting and overgrowth of trees covering the lights at Pensacola Junior College's three campuses have raised concerns for Richard Coffey.

Coffey, director of public safety for PJC, said 20 to 30 lights in the parking lot west of the Adult High School on the Pensacola campus continuously have problems.

Also, a PJC student was attacked in her car on the Milton campus in mid-December; and even though the woman knew her attacker, Coffey believes better lighting might have prevented the attack.

On PJC's Pensacola campus, the parking lot with so many lighting problems is primarily used by students in the Adult High, Social Sciences and Art buildings, Coffey said.

"I don't know why they can't stay repaired. I'm told by maintenance that they're fixed. All I see is a dark campus. The darkness is not acceptable. We've had a lot of complaints from students about lack of lighting," Coffey said.

COFFEY ALSO said broken lights are not immediately fixed. It takes at least several days in most cases between the time problems are reported and the time they are repaired, he said.

"Obviously, we have hundreds of lights, and some are going to be broken, and they're not always fixed as fast as people would like," said Larry Bracken, director of college advancement at PJC. "The problem is, even when you find an area, an instant fix is not always possible."

Because of Coffey's comments and concerns, Bracken said, "PJC officials will immediately look into the problem of delays in lighting repairs, if indeed there are any."

On Jan. 7, J.P. Kury, a public safety officer at PJC, filed a report complaining about the lighting on the west end of the Adult High School. Kury said the lighting situation was reported several times to the maintenance department, but that only a small light was added to a wall on the building.

"THE PROBLEM needs to be corrected with bright flood lights," Kury wrote in his complaint. "As it is now, the lights that are there only work half the time and aren't bright enough."

In addition, Coffey said trees have grown too high in some cases and block the lights. There have been reports of indecent exposures in areas where lighting is insufficient, he said.

The student at the Milton campus was attacked about 9 p.m. after taking a final exam, Coffey said.

"A guy from her class tapped on her car window, and she thought he wanted to talk about the exam so she let him into the car," Coffey said.

But the man grabbed and kissed her and exposed himself. She managed to escape, and the incident was reported to authorities. Initially, the woman did not want to file charges, but Coffey said the case remains open.

Lighting at the Milton campus, Coffey said, also is inadequate. "But it wouldn't have mattered this time because she knew the person," he said. "But if lighting had been better, someone might have seen her getting attacked."