

Indiscriminate and inexplicable: a 16-hour crime spree along Maine's quiet coastline

Quinton Hanna had a reputation for odd, sometimes disquieting, behavior. Police said he erupted in a spasm of violence, killing an 82-year-old Christmas tree farmer and assaulting a woman.

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated February 1, 2020, 3:28 p.m.



Mary Pearson was overcome with emotion as she stood in the spot where her father, Jim Pearson, was stabbed to death on December 15, 2019. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

SCARBOROUGH, Maine — If James Pearson had one bad habit, it was smoking.

He was a boy when he picked up his first cigarette. Now he was 82, with alabaster hair and rivulets of wrinkles radiating from the corners of his eyes and across his forehead. Passersby rarely saw him without a cigarette dangling from his lips as he drove his tractor or Ford F-250 around the neighborhood surrounding his sprawling 150-acre property. By mid-December, his farmstead and fields along Beech Ridge Road were cloaked in shimmering sheets of snow, from which dense rows of balsam firs emerged, like a parade of frost-dusted soldiers.

James, or Jim as everyone called him, started growing Christmas trees at Beech Ridge Farm in the mid-'80s. This was his retirement plan after 25 years teaching industrial and graphic arts at nearby Gorham High School. Pearson, his wife, and two children, Robert and Mary, raised the trees from seedling to maturity, planting and pruning them by hand.

His daily ritual still started with a cigarette. So around 8:15 a.m. on Dec. 15, a bright Sunday morning, he walked to his truck where he kept his stash of smokes. His wife, Nancy, looked out the window of their farmhouse and saw her husband talking to a stranger who'd parked in the driveway in front of his truck. In just three days, Beech Ridge Farm had sold out of Christmas trees for the season. Perhaps that's what he told the young man. Maybe he recommended another Christmas tree farm up the road. Pearson's family will never know.

Because when he returned to the house, he was clutching his chest. The T-shirt under his flannel was ripped and soaked with blood.

"Call 911," Pearson told his wife, "I'm dying."

The random murder of the Pearson family patriarch was unprecedented in this quiet Portland suburb. And Jim Pearson, a beloved fixture in Scarborough, was a most unlikely target.

The stranger in the driveway had stabbed Jim Pearson three times before driving off. When police arrived at Beech Ridge Farm that morning, they asked his children if he had any known enemies. Of course he didn't. Pearson was a quintessential "Mainah," as so many of his loved ones said: a down-to-earth family man with a dry sense of humor who married his high school sweetheart and would give a stranger the shirt off his back. In fact, when his daughter warned him that thieves might chop down and steal his trees at night, he simply said, "If they need one that bad, Merry Christmas." That was "true Dad spirit," said Mary Pearson, a retiring Scarborough police officer. Her parents would have celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary the day after Christmas, and she and her brother had been planning a surprise party with friends and loved ones. Instead, they planned his funeral.

Violence is so rare here that Jim and Regina Minott, who live down the road from Beech Ridge Farm, have a habit of e-mailing highlights from the local police blotter to their daughter in Southern California. People leave their doors unlocked during the day; their windows open in the summer. Dennis Holmes, one of Jim Pearson's close friends and neighbors, has lived in Scarborough for 48 years. He thought hard about the last time a crime of this magnitude occurred. Nothing came to mind.

"It's something you see on the news that happens somewhere else," said 68-year-old Joyce Alden, who lives about four miles from Beech Ridge Farm on Payne Road. "It doesn't happen here, our hometown."



Jim Pearson, a Christmas tree farmer, was stabbed to death last month in the driveway of the farm where he lived with his wife, Nancy. Jim's favorite hat and coat are on a coat rack in the home. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

By the time he was a freshman in college, Quinton Hanna had a reputation for odd, sometimes disquieting, behavior. Tall, lanky, and baby-faced with blue eyes and a swoop of brown hair, 22-year-old Hanna lived with his mother on the outskirts of Freeport, the house set back off a road hemmed in by thickets of trees.

From his one semester at the University of Southern Maine in Gorham in 2015, former classmates recalled Hanna as an unserious student with a proclivity for drugs, particularly marijuana. His friends called him "Q" or "Q-Tip."

"Most people weren't fans of him," his former USM roommate, 22-year-old Zach Brown, told the Globe in an interview over Facebook Messenger. "He made people uncomfortable and was constantly attempting to get sexual with females, which turned quite a few people away." Brown said Hanna got into fights and had little regard for authority. He accused Hanna of having "shifty hands," prone to stealing from businesses and friends. It "was well known not to trust him," Brown said.

While Hanna could be "kind" and "caring," as one former friend put it, his behavior was sometimes unsettling, even scary. A 22-year-old woman who knew Hanna from campus said she learned to stay away from him after he described "in graphic detail" the time he strangled and skinned a neighborhood cat.

"I remember him specifically saying, 'I don't remember when it died; it just stopped moving.' ... He was so casual about it," said the woman, who asked that her name not be used. "He could have been making it up ... [but] I took him very seriously. That was the biggest red flag."

Former friends and acquaintances who spoke to the Globe didn't know why Hanna suddenly left USM before the start of the second semester. Campus officials declined to say whether he left voluntarily. Brown said that one day he found court papers that Hanna kept in their room and asked him about them. Hanna told him "he was leaving the next morning and was being kicked out."

They didn't keep in touch.

In Maine, 16 hours of terror

On Dec. 14 and 15, a rash of harrowing crimes rocked several Maine communities. Quinton Hanna, 22, of Freeport, has been charged with the fatal stabbing of 82-year-old James Pearson, and police say Hanna is also connected to a brutal sexual assault and another stabbing that took place within hours of the murder.



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One night a year later in 2016, Hanna showed up on campus. He was arrested on Nov. 19 at USM and charged with unlawful sexual touching, trespassing, and disorderly conduct after he and a friend [allegedly cornered](#) a freshman in her dorm room. His mother, JennieLea Hanna, paid his \$300 bail. The bail order forbid Hanna from using or possessing illegal drugs or alcohol, returning to USM, or making contact with the student.

He would be arrested two more times that winter.

Hanna had just started a new job at a call center in Yarmouth for Cuddledown, a bedding retailer. On the evening of Jan. 29, 2017, he punched a co-worker, Ronald MacKinnon, without warning or provocation, according to witnesses and police. Hanna was working the night shift; the phones were quiet. MacKinnon, who had started his shift a few hours earlier, had just pulled on his jacket and was preparing to leave when Hanna rose from his work station and stopped MacKinnon in his tracks. He remembers turning around as Hanna said, "This is from what we talked about earlier." MacKinnon was perplexed; until that night, they had never spoken. Hanna reared back and hit MacKinnon in the face, fracturing his nose.

"You could tell when [Hanna] worked with us. He wasn't right. ... He was very jittery," recalled Cynthia Parisi, a former co-worker, who witnessed the attack. "The day he punched Ron, I was like, 'What were you thinking?' ... Ron was standing there, bleeding."

When a Yarmouth police officer apprehended Hanna later that night, he claimed MacKinnon had asked to be hit.

"The best guess I could make is some kind of delusion," MacKinnon said about Hanna's bizarre statement to police. Later, in court documents, Hanna's mother would indicate that her son was being treated for schizophrenia.

Hanna "needed help," MacKinnon said in an interview in January, "or he could hurt someone worse again."

Hanna's next run-in with the law came just a few weeks later. In the early hours of March 18, 2017, police investigating a possible domestic assault found him unconscious in the living room of an apartment in South Portland. Hanna vomited on himself twice as he struggled to stand up or walk on his own. According to court records, Hanna admitted to taking "a shots off a bottle" and "sipping off his friend's drink," violating a condition of his release.

Four months later, on July 27, 2017, Hanna signed a deferred disposition agreement, which would allow him to avoid conviction if he complied with several conditions for one year. Those included receiving mental health and substance abuse counseling and taking his medication as prescribed.

But nine months later, in April 2018, prosecutors sought to terminate the agreement, according to court records. Hanna, they said, had failed to provide "proof of substance abuse and mental health evaluation and treatment" or report to Maine Pretrial Services as ordered. A warrant was issued for his arrest.

His attorney at the time, Jonathan Handelman, filed a motion to recall the warrant, arguing Hanna had been "struggling with mental health issues and only relatively recently [had] been well stabilized with regard to medication and counseling."

"He is employed, is sober, is receiving counseling for his mental health challenges, is receiving medication for his condition, and maintains appropriate contact with counsel," Handelman wrote. "If Quinton is arrested and jailed, all his progress will be jeopardized."

A judge agreed, and prosecutors withdrew their motion to terminate Hanna's deferred disposition in the USM case. By the end of January 2019, Hanna had fulfilled the terms of his disposition. He pleaded guilty to lesser charges of criminal trespassing and simple assault, and was unconditionally discharged.

What happened in Hanna's life over the next 10 months is unclear. His social media accounts offered no clues. His last photo on Instagram is a smiling, uncaptioned selfie from August 2018.

Mary Pearson opened the door to the barn where Jim's tractor is kept inside in January. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Then in December, a spate of inexplicable violence erupted along the Maine coast. The crimes were miles apart and appeared unrelated: a stabbing in Freeport; a murder in Scarborough; a brutal sexual assault and burglary in West Bath. At the time, they shared at least one thing in common: senseless, unprovoked acts that seemed to defy reason. The victims didn't know their assailant or why they had been targeted.

Around 7:45 p.m. on the night of Dec. 14, a car pulled into the driveway of 69-year-old Clifford Nadeau's house on Wardtown Road in the northern edge of Freeport. He wasn't expecting company, so he stepped onto the front porch. A tall, 20-something man with dark hair and a close-cropped beard approached and asked Nadeau if someone else lived at his address.

When Nadeau said no, the man abruptly stabbed him twice in the chest.

Nadeau stumbled back inside, thinking he'd been stuck with a pen. But it was clear from his wounds the stranger used a knife. And, the man seemed to be in no hurry to flee. Even in the dark, Nadeau was able to get a glimpse of the license plate: It started with a "5" and ended with a "Z" and a "W."

The following morning, about 31 miles away in Scarborough, Jim Pearson was approached by a tall stranger and was stabbed in the chest. He was dead an hour later. Then around 10 a.m. 50 miles away in West Bath, a woman was sexually assaulted in the woods.

The woman declined to be interviewed, but court records detail the moments of terror that followed. She had been jogging along an isolated section of road near her parents' home when a young man in a silver Subaru pulled in front of her. He told her he had hit a tree and asked if she'd look under his car. He said he thought something was wrong with his bumper.

She felt uneasy and tried to back away. But he grabbed her by the arm, brandished a knife, and then pulled her into the woods, putting the blade to her throat. She noticed what looked like blood on his hand. He would kill her, he said, unless she stopped screaming. Then he pinned her to the ground and assaulted her.

She kicked the assailant in the groin and ran away. He followed her in his car, revving the engine, the woman told police, and then ran her over, shattering her tibia and fibula. She realized her bones were broken when she tried to stand up and run.

Her screams caught the attention of a neighbor, who hurried to help her, while the assailant climbed out of his car and took off into the woods. Arriving on the scene, Sergeant Dale Hamilton of the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Department chased after him, but couldn't keep up.

At some point, the woman was able to give a description of the man: dark hair, blue eyes, wearing a gray hoodie and jeans. Hamilton noted the license plate on the abandoned car: 5999WZ. The registration belonged to Hanna.

Thirty minutes later, Hamilton got another call: Half a mile away, a tall, thin man had knocked on the door of 73-year-old Suzanne Temple's home and asked to use her phone, according to court documents. When she returned to the door with her phone in hand, the man was standing in her foyer. He pulled out a box cutter and demanded her car keys.

"Do you want to die?" he asked.

At that moment, Temple's husband walked into the room with a loaded handgun, and the intruder fled.

About 45 minutes later, at 11:17 a.m., another woman reported that her vehicle, a black Ford Explorer, had been stolen, less than a mile through the woods from the Temples' home.

Around noon, police spotted the stolen Ford Explorer 10 miles away in Brunswick, Hanna behind the wheel. A small knife tumbled out of the vehicle as Brunswick police ordered him out of the car.

He was taken to the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's office. Hanna's jeans were covered in red and brown stains and his right hand was marred with cuts. Under questioning from Maine State Police, Hanna claimed he had been in a car crash that totaled his vehicle — that's why he took the Ford Explorer. He insisted he had fallen in the woods while looking for help — that's why there was blood on his pants.

But police had information from neighbors that a man matching Hanna's description and driving a silver Subaru had been seen near Pearson's home that morning. The officers asked if Hanna had visited a Christmas tree farm earlier that day; he cut the interview short and requested an attorney. Then he was arrested.

Mary Pearson walked through a field of planted Christmas trees on the farm in January. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Hanna [has been charged with murder](#) in Jim Pearson's death and is being held without bail at Cumberland County Jail. He faces a [battery of charges](#) for the other incidents, including attempted murder, elevated aggravated assault, and unlawful sexual contact. Prosecutors have requested a forensic evaluation to determine Hanna's mental state, and their motion quoted Hanna's mother as saying her son "may have been off his medication."

"This is a very sad and unfortunate case for all involved," Hanna's lawyer, Andrew Wright, said in an e-mail to the Globe. "Right now we are at the earliest stages of the case and do not know exactly where it is headed." Hanna's mother did not return multiple requests for comment.

The Maine State Police Crime Laboratory examined the knife seized during Hanna's traffic stop and found a single DNA profile that belonged to neither Jim Pearson or Clifford Nadeau. Investigators are still searching for the weapon or weapons that killed Pearson and wounded Nadeau.

Meanwhile, his former friends and co-workers question whether they missed signs that Hanna might have been spiraling out of control. They didn't know he was struggling with mental illness. Some wondered if they had narrowly missed a brush with a violence themselves.

"There were kind of indicators there," said a 23-year-old man who used to hang out with Hanna at USM. When Hanna was high, he would claim he knew all of life's answers, including "our purpose on the physical plane," the former friend said. He had the impression "this kid is missing a little bit of screws there," the friend said, but otherwise found Hanna "a genuine guy."

"He was just a scared boy trying to make it in this world and if anything, yes, his crimes were heinous, unforgivable, inexcusable, but he needs help more than anything," the former friend said. "We want to know why he did it. Why? What put him on the course to do this?"

For Dennis Holmes, Jim Pearson's close friend and neighbor, the answers to those questions don't matter.

"I have empathy for people who are addicted or have mental illness, whatever it might be," Holmes said, "but when it's this close, I don't give a damn."

That Sunday morning, Holmes said, he was tinkering in the garage. Now he wonders whether his friend would still be alive if he had simply stopped by to shoot the breeze and smoke a cigar. Holmes can't wrap his mind around the cruel and indiscriminate circumstances of Pearson's death.

"If [Jim's wife, Nancy] would called me and told me he dropped of a heart attack in the driveway, I would have felt bad. But it would have been much easier to grasp than what actually happened," Holmes said.

Pearson's daughter, Mary, takes some solace in the fact that her father didn't suffer long, clinging to life with tubes and monitors and struggling to remember the names of his children.

"He wouldn't want that. Nobody wants that," she said, her voice breaking on a snow-doused winter afternoon at Beech Ridge Farm. A few of her father's cigarette butts still littered the railing along the front porch near his favorite chair. No one had had the heart to sweep them up.

Emily Sweeney of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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