

Connecting the Dots
A Theory of the Winter Garden Zeigler Furniture Store Murders
Based on the Area History of Extreme Violence Toward Blacks

- In the 1920s homes owned by blacks in Ocoee, adjacent to Winter Garden, are burned over voting rights issue. Black residents do not return until the 1980s
- In 1951 the home of Harry and Harriette Moore, black voting rights activists, is fire bombed, killing them
- An investigation of the Moore murders by Florida Attorney General Crist in 2004 concludes that law enforcement officers in the Winter Garden area were reluctant to talk for fear of retribution
- Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall becomes world infamous for arrest of black youths known as the Groveland Four. Lake County is adjacent to Orange Co.
- In 1939 Zeigler's father opens Zeigler Furniture Store in Winter Garden building successful business offering credit to white and black customers alike
- In 1949 Dave Starr becomes sheriff of Orange County. Starr is known to be a Ku Klux Klan member
- In the 1950s Volusia County KKK Grand Dragon, Jason Kersey, is father of childhood playmates of future Orange County Chief Deputy Sheriff Leigh McEachern
- In 1960s former McEachern playmate, Richard Kersey, testifies before the U. S. House UnAmerican Activities Committee, presumably on KKK local activities
- In February 1970 Winter Garden general store owner Shorty Reddick is shot to death in his store in a still unsolved murder. Undercover Detective Tom DeMars hears in 1976 that Charlie Mays was hired as the shooter for \$5 K
- Mays lives in Oakland and is a black crew boss for Harlem Heights migrant labor camp owned by Reddick. Mostly black migrant workers were used then for picking oranges in the vast Orange County groves
- Sheriff Dave Starr, a known KKK member, lives in Oakland, next to Winter Garden and retires there in 1971. An Oakland street is named in Starr's honor.
- Starr arranges for Robert Thompson to become Oakland Police Chief in 1972. Thompson had been in charge of Gov. Claude Kirk's security
- Thompson had a possible connection to the CIA at the time according to reports. Thompson may have used his position to acquire weapons for Contra movement in Central America
- Shorty Reddick's wife, Carol, marries her boyfriend, Robert Lovett. According to Undercover Detective DeMars Lovett had emptied Reddick's gun of live bullets before Shorty's murder. DeMars had been assigned by Chief Deputy McEachern to investigate loan sharking among migrant laborers by Carol and Robert Lovett.
- In the late 1960s Gov. Kirk appoints Winter Park police chief to head of State Beverage Department leaving a vacancy. Winter Park is near Winter Garden in Orange County
- Mel Colman of St. Pete police department is hired to replace the Winter Park police chief
- Colman hires his close friend Leigh McEachern of St. Petersburg police department as assistant police chief of Winter Park

- In 1972 Gov. Askew appoints Winter Park police chief Mel Colman to replace Orange Co. Sheriff Dave Starr
- Colman hires his friend and acting Winter Park police chief, Leigh McEahern, as chief deputy sheriff of Orange County
- Soon after McEachern becomes chief deputy sheriff of Orange County, he assigns black deputy sheriffs to patrol Ocoee, possibly creating animosity toward the Orange County Sheriff Department
- Florida Beverage Lawyer, Maurice Paul, is appointed a circuit judge in Orange Co. by outgoing Gov. Claude Kirk. A lawsuit keeps Paul from taking office until 1973
- Soon after Paul becomes an Orange County circuit judge, he signs a warrant for beverage agent Herbert Baker to search the bar of black Winter Garden bar owner Andrew James. Baker accuses Andrew James of selling drugs in his bar. Andrew James owns the only black owned bar in west Orange County
- Winter Garden Furniture store owner Tommy Zeigler helps elect a new mayor by getting out the vote among his black store customers
- Furniture store owner Zeigler then helps his friend black bar owner, Andrew James, keep his bar after Beverage agent Herbert Baker had accused him of selling drugs in his Winter Garden bar
- In August 1975 Judge Maurice Paul arranges to testify for his friend beverage agent Herbert Baker and against Andrew James at trial. Zeigler testifies for James who ultimately is allowed to keep his bar and license
- Herbert Baker's house is later fire bombed as the result of the James trial
- Zeigler is instrumental in hiring new Winter Garden police chief, Don Ficke
- Zeigler becomes friends with police chief Ficke and encourages him to investigate loan sharking by Carol Reddick Lovett among her migrant worker crew at Harlem Heights
- Zeigler is threatened by a policeman in Winter Garden if he continues to advocate for investigation of loan sharking
- Four months after the trial of Andrew James that allows him to keep his Bar, Tommy Zeigler is attacked in his store on Christmas Eve 1975
- Tommy is shot through the abdomen and his wife, her visiting parents, and black store customer Charlie Mays are killed
- At the same time as the attack Oakland police chief Robert Thompson and future Winter Garden police chief Jimmy Yawn are in a KFC restaurant across from the Zeigler store
- The electric clock inside the furniture store office is stopped at 7:24 PM. The clock is found to have been shot from the back as it hung inside office wall. The main power to the building had been turned off outside the store and it is likely that the clock was shot to make it appear that it was stopped by a bullet instead of the power switch
- Ken and Linda Roach hear a string of gunshots, see more than two cars parked in front of Zeigler store, and a man - possibly Edward Williams who is late arriving at Zeigler's home - walking toward a pickup truck parked beside store about 7:30. Zeigler had asked Williams to help deliver Christmas presents. One car is described as a white Cadillac. A relative of 1970 murder victim Reddick is thought to own such a car.

- One theory is that Edward Williams was late because he went to the store to deliver Tommy's truck gun. He may also have thrown the outside power switch at this time
- Zeigler goes to store with his black handyman Edward Williams in Williams truck between 7:30 and 8:00. He enters the back door after locking gate as Williams backs his truck to loading door where it was found after the crime
- As Tommy enters storeroom he is struck on right side of head. He grabs the gun from his belt (used when he collects cash on accounts) and defends himself but is shot and falls unconscious
- During the attack by at least 3 people, Charlie Mays is shot and wounded, possibly by Zeigler or possibly it was always intended that he would be killed because of his connection to the Reddick crime in 1970
- Robert Thompson goes into compound behind store with another police officer, possibly the one who had threatened Tommy
- Thompson had delivered a "Christmas" basket to Mays family before Christmas which may have included the two cheap handguns bought by Edward Williams son-in-law Frank Smith. Mays young son would later tell a policeman that his father took a gun with him to the store that night
- Thompson bends the outside prong of gate to allow access to back compound. The padlock that Zeigler thought would keep out burglars is still there to this day. (See the picture here)
- The other policeman guards the back door while Thompson goes inside
- Jon Jellison, a tourist staying in a back room of the Winter Garden Inn, sees a police officer pointing his gun at the back of store. Jellison and his family then hear gunshots from inside the store. He reports this to an investigator for the state attorney weeks later by phone but the report is hidden from the defense because it confirms a police involved frame up
- Thompson orders that Mays be beaten to death since he had already been shot twice. He probably also saw that Zeigler was still alive and begins planning how to frame him
- Thompson takes Zeigler's truck gun, shoots the clock through the wall to make it appear that it was stopped during attack on Eunice and her parents instead of when electrical breaker outside is pulled by Felton Thomas or Edward Williams
- Thompson uses truck gun to shoot the Edwards again. Then he orders Eunice's body to be pulled from closet where she was hiding when she is killed (locked door to the office was broken by a kick leaving bloody footprint and bullet holes in wall near closet indicating she ran in office and locked the door) to kitchen door placing one hand in her pocket to make it appear she wasn't expecting to be shot. Killer leaves blood stains on inside of her jacket
- Thompson tells Edward Williams to get his truck out of the compound, but when it won't start Thompson gives him Tommy's truck gun and tells him to go to KFC and call police
- Tommy regains consciousness, crawls over Charlie Mays dead body getting Mays' blood on his shirt and finally calls police

- KFC is closed when Edward Williams goes to door. Time is after 9:21 PM established by J. D. Nolan who is almost broadsided by Jimmy Yawn pulling out of Winter Garden Inn after hearing a radio call from Thompson that Tommy had called police
- Nolans were driving south on Dillard and turn in to parking lot beside furniture store and watch as Thompson arrives and carries Tommy to the hospital
- At the hospital Thompson sees Tommy's stomach wound is dry of blood and asks him who shot him. Zeigler says Charlie Mays
- Later that night Thompson writes 13 page report describing blood around Tommy's wounds as dry.
- Thompson returns to store and is first to go in seeking Charlie Mays with Don Ficke, Jimmy Yawn and two others. Thompson and Yawn are only ones with flashlights. No lights will come on
- Thompson finds Mays dead. Then poses Mays body, pulling down his pants and putting metal crank on his arm. (It's also possible that Mays pulled his own pants down to inspect his abdomen wound)
- Three other bodies are found and Thompson suggests to others that Tommy may have been the killer and may have had a homosexual motive for the crime. In 1975 homosexuality is still considered a crime and is often used to instill anger
- Don Frye arrives and quickly concludes that Zeigler is the killer
- Zeigler arrested while still in the hospital recovering from through and through gunshot wound about 1 inch to the right of his navel. Chief Deputy McEachern observes arrest, and is concerned about a rush to judgment
- Original judge in case sets low bail and Zeigler is released from custody to help in his defense
- Tommy says he has been threatened by a police over the loan sharking issue and suggests this could be a motive for the attack
- Eunice Zeigler and her visiting parents had gone to the store after closing to pick out a chair because Eunice had to take a sick cat to the vet unexpectedly during the afternoon
- Eunice and parents were not intended victims - only Tommy as revenge for his helping black people in an area with long history of violence toward blacks
- State Attorney Robert Eagan in office since the sixties and likely friends with Dave Starr and Maurice Paul orders that loan sharking motive for crime not be investigated
- Eagan hides 13 page Thompson report and has him write a one page report not mentioning blood. At trial Thompson says blood was damp
- In March 1976 Eagan arranges for Judge Maurice Paul to be assigned to try Zeigler whom he had opposed in the trial of Andrew James over Herb Baker's drug charge against James. Baker and Paul were friends and Paul had signed the warrant for the Browns Bar search by Baker. At the Andrew James trial in August 1975, Judge Paul had arranged to be subpoenaed to testify on Baker's behalf, violating Judicial Canon of Ethics
- In May 1976 Chief Deputy McEachern attends a pretrial conference which illegally includes Judge Maurice Paul with Don Frye and Robert Eagan. Paul tells Eagan that he will "fry" Zeigler if he can get a conviction

- Trial is held in Jacksonville in June 1976. One juror holds out for acquittal until Judge Paul orders her to be given Valium
- Edward Williams and Felton Thomas, both black, are the only principle witnesses/participants to testify against Zeigler. Trial is mostly circumstantial. Tommy was the only one who lived, ergo he must have done it
- Other witnesses are also mostly black. Mattie Mays says her husband had gone to store after dark to buy a TV even though his van is parked outside a six foot fence behind store. Frank Smith who bought two of murder weapons and Mary Ellen Stewart are blacks related to Edward Williams
- The juror given Valium faints twice during deliberations and lawyers ask judge for a mistrial but he denies
- Jury, consisting of 6 blacks and six whites, convicts Tommy but recommends life. Judge Paul overrules them and gives him the death penalty
- In 1978 Don Ficke investigated by Eagan for unknown reason. Ficke resigns, moves to Tallahassee and later becomes real estate salesman where he remains
- In 1980 Chief Deputy McEachern, who authorized investigation of loan sharking against Eagan's order and attended illegal pretrial conference, is charged with embezzlement of money used for drug investigation and is convicted in a high profile trial conducted by St. Petersburg State Attorney James Russell who was in private practice at the time McEachern was a St. Petersburg Police Officer and had issues with him
- In 1982 part time police officer and Oakland store tmanager Ed Rowe signs affidavit that his juvenile employee, Ernie Mays, had told him Charlie Mays, his father, took a gun with him to the Zeigler Furniture Store the night he was killed
- Zeigler Furniture Store is sued and eventually closes. Zeigler's mother dies a pauper several years later
- In early 1980s Circuit Judge Maurice Paul is appointed Federal District Judge and moves to Tallahassee
- Robert Thompson quits his job as Oakland Police Chief after the trial and soon opens a business in Tallahassee on same street as Don Ficke's business
- In 1980s Thompson is arrested in Costa Rica for gun running with a possible connection to Iran/Contra. Records are likely sealed by court order
- In 1981 Mel Colman loses the election for Sheriff to Robert Eagan's right hand man Lawson Lamar. Years later he is found dead in his backyard swimming pool
- In 1988, Robert Eagan retires and Sheriff Lawson Lamar takes over as State Attorney
- In early 1990s Charles Wells, an Orange Co. lawyer who was an advisor to Sheriff Mel Colman during Zeigler Furniture Store Murders is elevated to the Florida Supreme Court in Tallahassee
- In 2001 Florida Governor Bush considers Tommy Zeigler for possible clemency. Pro Bono lawyers petition for DNA testing which is approved
- DNA test results are so favorable that Zeigler's pro bono lawyer petition judge who authorized testing for immediate release of Zeigler from death row
- State Attorney Lawson Lamar, still being guided by Robert Eagan, arranges for black Judge Reginald Whitehead to take over the DNA hearing

- Whitehead's wife works as an Assistant State Attorney under Lamar, a fact not revealed to Zeigler. Years later when it is discovered by outsiders, Whitehead's wife almost immediately resigns and goes into private practice
- Whitehead rules that DNA evidence is not strong enough to exonerate Zeigler. Says that some spots that weren't tested might prove guilt and victim's blood on Charlie Mays might be result of fight with Tommy
- In 2007 Florida Supreme Court with Charles Wells writing the opinion for the court (should have recused) denies Zeigler appeal of Whitehead ruling
- After 2010 it is learned that Don Frye had lied about the name Robert Foster being a "typo" after Foster is located in Tallahassee. Foster is a black man who lived in Winter Garden at the time and was likely involved
- In 2015 Zeigler's pro bono lawyers petition for DNA testing of all spots including the blood stains on Eunice Zeigler's coat using the latest methods
- Judge Whitehead again denies the petition despite agreement of experts on both sides that DNA would prove Zeigler's guilt or innocence, The Florida Supreme Court affirms the circuit court with the concurrence of the Florida Attorney General, Pam Bondi.

Tommy Zeigler remains on death row and is eligible for the death sentence to be carried out with no appeal pending. Judge Paul, Don Frye, and Robert Thompson are deceased. Mattie Mays and Edward Williams are also believed to be deceased. One defense attorney, Terry Hadley, Robert Eagan, Leigh McEachern, Don Ficke and Robert Foster remain alive at this writing. The Zeigler Furniture Store murders are a stain on justice in Winter Garden, Orange County, and all of Florida. Few people are willing to connect the dots of this case perhaps because of the fear of being labeled a "RACIST."

Footnote: In the early 2000s a person came forward with information implicating Eunice Zeigler's brother as a participant in the murders of his sister and parents. As the only remaining family member, Perry Edwards, jr inherited a significant amount of property in Moultrie, Ga and elsewhere. No court has ever considered this theory.