

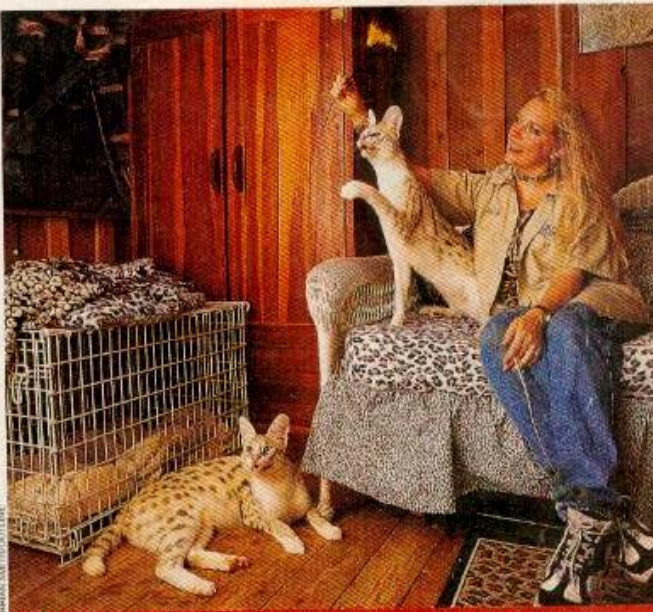
# People weekly

December 7, 1998 Vol. 50 No. 21

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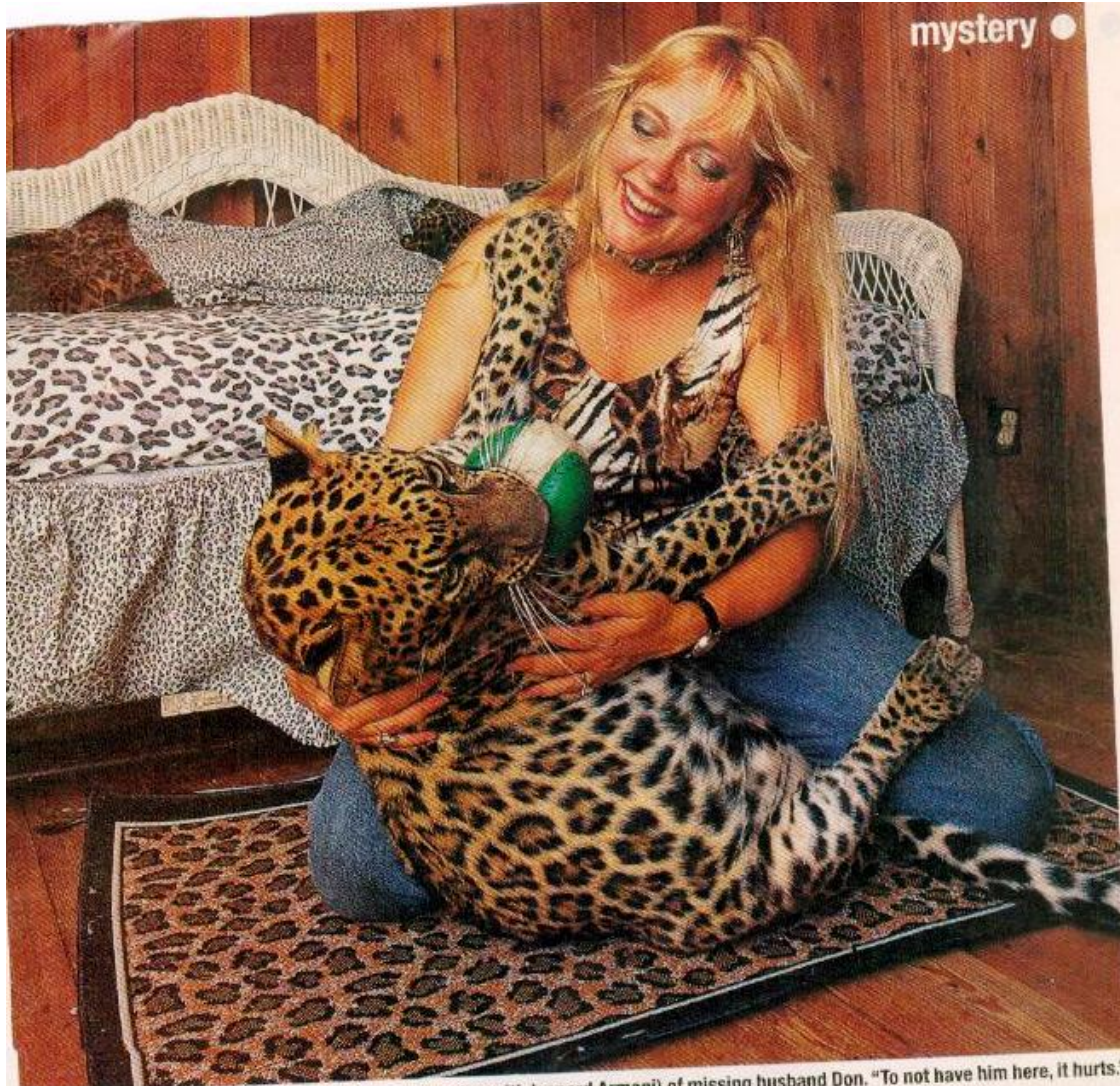
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"We did everything together," says Carole Lewis (playing with leopard Armani) of missing husband Don. "To not have him here, it hurts."

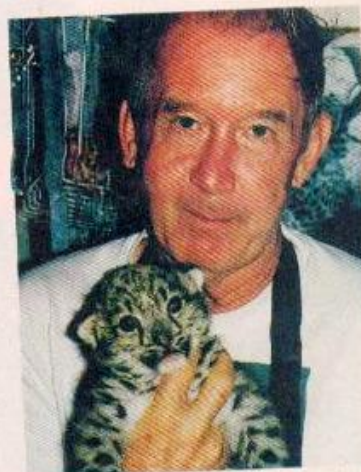
# Too Purrfect

The vanishing of millionaire cat lover Don Lewis has cops wondering: Was he killed, or did he fake his own death?

Following a trail beneath the cypresses and water oaks shading her Florida wildlife refuge, Carole Lewis stops to coo over one of her babies—a 300-pound Siberian Bengal tiger named Auroara. Looking more than passably feline herself in a leopard-print blouse, Lewis mimics a throaty purr. The tiger playfully prances close to the 12-foot fence. It paws at her long

blond locks. "Mommy loves you," murmurs Lewis, 37. "Yes, I do."

Indeed, in the six years since Lewis and her husband, Don, a self-made multimillionaire, turned 40 acres of prime Tampa real estate into Wildlife on Easy Street, a sanctuary for exotic cats, no one has questioned her fierce passion for her pets. When it comes to her feelings toward her spouse, however, that's another story. On a



"Don was not always an easy man," says Anne McQueen of her boss (last year).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN SMITH



## ● mystery

humid August morning last year, Don Lewis, then 60, disappeared without a trace, and some people—including his grown children from a previous marriage and his longtime secretary—suspect his wife of foul play. His daughters even speculate she may have fed him to the tigers.

"It's a perfect scenario to dispose of someone," says the oldest of his four children, Donna Pettis, 42. "We were upset that the cops didn't test the DNA on the meat grinder." For her part, Carole Lewis, who harbors suspicions of her own—among them the notion that Don may have staged his disappearance—finds the *Sweeney Todd* theory grimly humorous.

"My tigers eat meat; they don't eat people," she says. "There would be bones and remains of my husband out there. I'm amazed that people would even think such a thing."

If Don Lewis's disappearance sounds as though it might have been scripted by Elmore Leonard, so could much of the six decades of wheeling and dealing that preceded it. "He had the Midas touch," says daughter Pettis, a Tampa-area manicurist.



For her and Don, "it was love at first sight," says Carole (with him in 1993).


"He could walk through cow droppings and come out smelling like a rose." The Dade City, Fla., native could mentally compute interest rates in less time than it took most people to use a calculator. He had already amassed a small fortune through trucking, used cars and real estate—



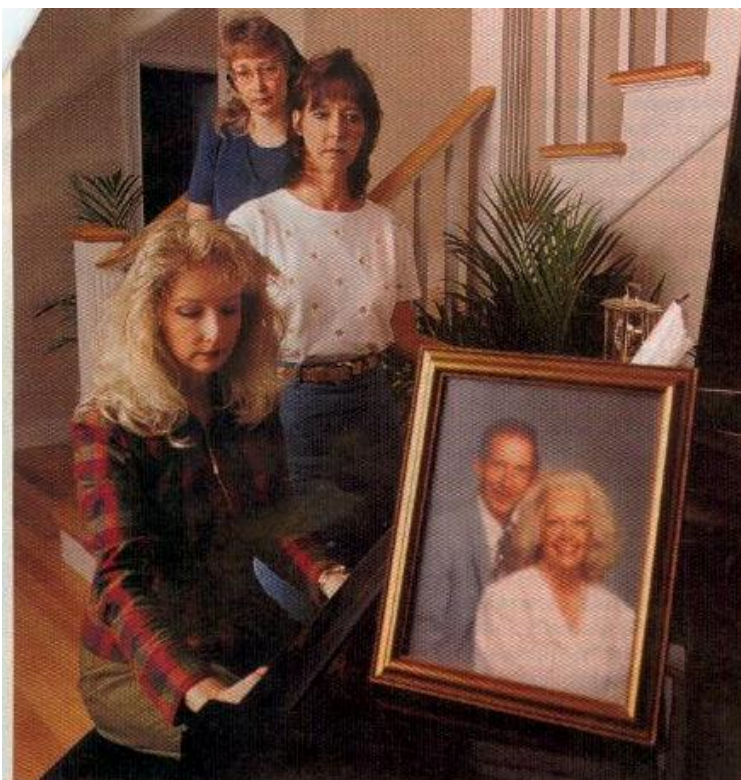
"Don Lewis would never leave without his money," says McQueen, his secretary.

as well as acquired a wife, Gladys, three daughters, and an adopted son—by 1981, when he spotted Carole walking barefoot down a Tampa street after a fight with her husband. The very next day, Carole, whose daughter Jamie was 6 months old at the time, became the latest

information

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Don's daughters (from left)—Donna Pettis, Gale Rathbone and Lynda Sanchez—suspect Carole. The photo on the piano is of Don with their mother, Gladys, his first wife.

in a long line of Lewis girlfriends.

"I'm probably the only woman he never fooled around with," observes Anne McQueen, 44, his secretary of 18 years and a partial beneficiary in his \$1.25 million life insurance policy. "I used to say it was the only time in my life that I was glad I was short and fat."

Despite his wealth, which grew substantially after Carole began helping him buy and sell real estate in 1984—much of it tax-delinquent properties he acquired at auction—Lewis had a split personality concerning money. The trained (though not licensed) pilot always carried enough cash to purchase an airplane, but he shopped for his clothes at garage sales. "I used to tell him," says McQueen, "that he put the 'chirp' in 'cheap, cheap, cheap.'" When Don and Carole finally married in 1991, the year after his divorce, he gave her a \$14 wedding ring during a courthouse ceremony.

But soon after, Don sprang for something Carole would love better than any bauble—a 6-month-old bobcat she named Windsong. Within

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## ● mystery

a few months, both Lewises were sufficiently smitten that they and Jamie (who's now 18) drove to Minnesota to buy another six bobcat kittens. "When we got there, it turned out to be a fur farm. The guy had 56 kittens," Carole recalls. "We couldn't just pick out six and leave 50 to die. So we bought every one."

Back at the Tampa home where the Lewises lived before moving to an equally modest residence on the refuge grounds, family and friends scrambled to bottle-feed the babies every two hours. As the couple began educating themselves on how to care for the animals, Carole says they also started to learn about the horrors the exotic creatures faced. Soon Don was going to auctions across the U.S. and bringing home every "abused, dying, maimed cat he could find," says Carole.

Eventually their collection expanded to include 200 cats of 17 species, housed in a nonprofit sanctuary staffed by five full-time employees and more than 100 volunteers. To help offset the costs, they turned four cabins into a unique B&B—for

\$75 a night, guests get their choice of tamed bobcats, cougars or servals as bedmates. "You'd pay that much at Holiday Inn," says Carole, "with no entertainment."

These days the solidly booked cabins are attracting their share of crime buffs, tantalized by the mystery of just what happened to Don Lewis on Aug. 18, 1997. There is currently a wealth of suspects and scenarios, but precious little evidence. Although Don's 1989 Dodge van was found at an airport 40 miles from the refuge two days after his wife reported him missing, none of his credit cards was subsequently used. Neither the private eye Carole hired, nor an extensive police investigation—including searches of property Don Lewis owned in Costa Rica, where he'd told some family and friends he was planning to move—uncovered anything more sinister than indications that he may have been involved in extramarital affairs and questionable business practices.

Police did learn that two months before he vanished, Don Lewis had filed court documents seeking a



"I think not knowing is the hardest," says Carole (with daughter Jamie and black leopard Jumanji).

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domestic-violence injunction against Carole, accusing her of threatening to shoot him. But after a judge failed to find grounds for an injunction, Don apparently didn't fear for his life very much since he continued to live with her. (Carole Lewis maintains she never threatened her husband and had no knowledge of a planned injunction. "The worst thing I ever did," she says, "was threaten to report him to the IRS.") Admits John Marsicano, one of the lead detectives on the case: "We don't have a good idea of what really happened to him."

Don's disappearance has left Carole Lewis ensnared in a nasty legal catfight with his children over control of his business affairs and holdings estimated at more than \$5 million. Accusing Carole of forging their father's will and power of attorney, his daughters want to prevent her from draining the coffers to care for the animals. Carole maintains that the children are entitled only to about \$1 million in properties that belonged to their father before he married her.

Under a temporary court order, Carole can use just \$152,000 from

the real estate operations to run the refuge—when the current annual budget is expected to exceed \$225,000. (Last year the sanctuary spent \$22,000 on veterinary bills alone.) As a result, Carole is trying to negotiate settlements that would give her stepdaughters a total of about \$1 million in properties and allow her to manage the bulk of the estate until Don can be declared legally dead in 2004. "The cats are her life," says Carole's mother, Barbara Stairs, 57, who has been helping run the real estate business. "She doesn't care what she lives in as long as the cats are taken care of."

A truce with Don's daughters would ease the financial crunch, but the cloud of suspicion hovering over Carole Lewis—and her beloved cats—may remain. "Can you imagine having people think you killed your husband or wife and not being able to prove otherwise?" she asks. "Without a body, there is nothing I can do to clear my name."

- Pam Lambert
- Tim Roche in Tampa



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