HOLLYWOOD — After nearly 15 years of chasing mystery vans and jailhouse confessions across the country, police believe the top suspect in the slaying of 6-year-old Adam Walsh remains Ottis Elwood Toole, admitted serial killer, liar and opportunist.

No matter that he’s recanted his confession several times and was fed key information by a detective to bolster his story, reports show. Toole knew things none of the other suspects did, police say. A witness has linked him to the crime. And police have some circumstantial evidence against him.

On Friday, under court order, Hollywood police released more than 10,000 pages of documents detailing their investigation into one of South Florida’s most haunting unsolved murders. For years, Toole topped their list of suspects, and he still does. But there were others. One emerged as recently as August 1995.

The files do show that over the years police followed a steady trickle of clues lending credence to Toole’s inconsistent confessions:

Blood was found on the carpet of Toole’s Cadillac, where he said he placed Adam’s remains after snatching him from the Hollywood Mall on July 27, 1981. Tests of the blood were inconclusive; police now can’t find the carpet or the car.

Shorts and sandals were found in 1984 in the back yard of Toole’s mother’s house in Jacksonville, where Toole once said he burned Adam’s body. John Walsh says the clothes are not his son’s.

Toole told investigators details about the case that only Adam’s killer or someone close to him would know. But police now say a Jacksonville detective coached Toole’s confession to get a cut of potential book and movie rights from the story.

In 1991, a witness at the Hollywood Mall the day Adam was abducted said he saw Toole coax a boy into his dirty Cadillac. Another Hollywood woman said Toole tried to grab her daughter two days before Adam’s disappearance.

Adam vanished from a Sears department store while his mother left him alone to shop for a lamp. Police had no witnesses to his abduction. The disappearance of the gap-toothed 6-year-old sparked a nationwide search that ended two weeks later, when Adam’s head was found in an Indian River County canal. The boy’s body was never found.

Police questioned Adam’s parents, John and Reve Walsh, and their houseguest, Jim Campbell. The Walshes were quickly discounted as suspects, but detectives initially were suspicious of
Campbell's relationship with Adam. They interviewed Campbell several times and asked him to take two lie detector tests before ruling him out.

``Why are they treating me so rough?'' Campbell complained during one polygraph test. ``I know they think I'm responsible for Adam missing.''

Detectives also focused on Michael Monahan, a family friend who attacked another boy with a machete just days after Adam vanished, reports show. Eventually, he was ruled out too.

Meanwhile, police were fielding thousands of calls, from disgruntled ex-wives to jailhouse snitches, all of whom claimed to know Adam's killer. Some children playing in the arcade where Adam was last seen said they saw a blue van near the Sears entrance. Suddenly, blue van sightings were reported hourly. Police fruitlessly checked a list of 6,700 Ford vans sold in South Florida in the three years before the kidnapping. Adam was ``seen'' in an Orlando mall, his kidnapper in a North Palm Beach supermarket, the two together at a Melbourne doughnut shop.

A would-be psychic from Lexington, Ky., wrote chatty notes to one detective. The killer, he predicted, was a hairdresser named Pete Jones - a Taurus.

Investigators plodded through as many leads as they could; sometimes they seemed tantalizingly close to solving the case. For months, they focused on Edward Harold James of Pompano Beach, who was arrested in November 1981 for abducting a boy. His cellmate said James admitted he abducted a boy from a Hollywood store that summer. James had no alibi, but he passed a lie-detector test.

Police also briefly considered serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who was living in Miami Beach when Adam disappeared. In prison, Dahmer told detectives he did not kill Adam and had never even been to the Hollywood Mall, according to police reports.

MAKES FIRST CONFESSION

Ottis Toole, a 48-year-old drifter who dropped out of the seventh grade, emerged as a suspect in October 1983. While in jail on other charges - and suspected in dozens more - Toole told a Jacksonville detective, Jesse ``Buddy'' Terry, he had abducted a boy from a Fort Lauderdale-area mall two years before.

Hollywood detectives then questioned Toole, who said he and Henry Lee Lucas, his frequent partner in crime, snatched a blond boy in blue jeans from the Sears at the Hollywood Mall in July 1981. He said Lucas cut off the boy's head with a bayonet.

The problem was, Lucas was in a Maryland jail that day. And Adam, a brown-haired boy, was last seen wearing green shorts.

Toole changed his story, saying he lured Adam into his Cadillac with promises of candy and toys, then killed the boy himself. It was the first of many shifts in his story, reports show.

Toole confessed and recanted over and over again, once just 12 minutes apart. In one version
of events, Toole was driving down the road tossing body parts out the window; in others, he had burned the remains in his back yard in Jacksonville. Police excavated alleged burial sites in his back yard and 4 miles south of where Adam's head was found: nothing was found at either.

Detectives also flew Toole to Broward County, taking him first to a mall in Plantation to test him. He said that wasn't the right mall. They took him to the Hollywood Mall. He said he wasn't sure it was the right one but later said it was.

**CONCERNS ABOUT RELIABILITY**

The investigators knew Toole was less than reliable. At the time, he was confessing to dozens of equally hazy murder cases across the country. Detectives also worried that he learned about the Walsh case from a television movie that aired two weeks before his first confession (Toole and other jail inmates said they watched football instead). Still, there seemed a hint of hope in his statements.

Police placed him in Jacksonville on July 24 and July 31, but they couldn't account for him on July 27 - the day Adam disappeared. Detectives also tracked down Toole's old Cadillac in a Jacksonville used car lot. Blood was found on the carpeted floorboards - where Toole said he placed Adam's remains - but tests at the time weren't as sophisticated as the DNA tests of today and couldn't say it was Adam's.

By Jan. 10, 1984 - just four months after Toole first confessed - Hollywood police had exhausted 3,500 man hours and $62,000 chasing his leads, reports show. They had traveled all over the South interviewing witnesses and relatives and cellmates, but were unable to corroborate his stories. All they had was his confession - and that day he recanted again.

The volumes of information on Toole take up nearly half of the Walsh file, and he never completely disappeared as a suspect. In 1988, he inserted himself in the case again, confessing to Adam's murder in letters to the The Orlando Sentinel, The National Enquirer, Sears and Walt Disney World.

But that year, detectives from the Broward County Sheriff's Office learned that Toole's confessions may have been bogus from the beginning.

Toole, by then serving time at Florida State Prison for murder and arson, met with detectives with a fellow inmate, Gerald Schaffer, a former Martin County sheriff's deputy suspected in the disappearance of 34 women. Schaffer, detectives noted, coached Toole through his confession and said he wanted any reward money to come from Toole's testimony.

**DETECTIVE FED HIM INFO**

In a 1988 memo, Broward detectives said they discovered that Jesse Terry, the Jacksonville detective who said he heard Toole's first confession, had done exactly the same thing five years earlier, feeding the impressionable Toole confidential details of the Walsh case and setting in motion the agonizing cycle of confessions and denials.
Terry had made a deal with Toole for the book and movie rights to his story, according to a memo in the Walsh file. Terry was kicked off the homicide squad when the scheme was uncovered, reports show.

As recently as December, Toole again denied killing Adam. He said he lied about the murder to get trips out of prison, food and cigarettes. Since Hollywood Detective Mark Smith reopened the case in 1994, Toole has been interviewed twice; both times he claimed innocence.

To this day, despite doubts about Toole’s reliability, enough evidence points to Toole to keep him alive as a suspect.

The medical examiner said a bayonet found at Toole’s sister’s home is the most likely murder weapon they have seen, reports show. And in 1991, one witness, William Mistler of Hollywood, identified Toole as the man he saw at the Hollywood Mall luring Adam into his dingy white Cadillac – giving details about the car that had not been in the news.

But in a Jan. 16 meeting between the Walshes, their associates and Hollywood police, John Walsh asked Chief Richard Witt to “make a loud, clear, unequivocal statement that Ottis Toole is the prime suspect and it’s only because of a lack of evidence or prosecutorial discretion that Toole has not yet been prosecuted and probably won’t be,” according to a summary by Walsh lawyer Michael Christiansen.

Christiansen said he concluded Hollywood police “gave up” on the case when they agreed to open the files.

FATHER BLASTS POLICE

John Walsh is convinced Toole is the person who abducted his son, cut off the boy’s head and threw it in an Indian River County canal, where it was found Aug. 10, 1981.

Walsh said Friday the “incredible incompetence” of Hollywood police and the opening of the files to the press have jeopardized any chance Toole will be punished for his son’s murder.

He also says Toole mailed him an extortion letter that outlined “what he did to Adam and what he did with Adam’s body,” but that as of last month the Broward County State Attorney had not seen it.

“I bit my tongue for 14 years,” Walsh said from New Orleans, where he was taping his television program, America’s Most Wanted. “I’m not saying all of the Hollywood Police Department is incompetent, but there was certainly incredible incompetence over the last 14 years.”

Hollywood police have said they would not comment Friday on the contents of the files.

After four newspapers, including The Palm Beach Post, sued under the state’s open records laws, police agreed in October to the Feb. 16 release. This week, the Walshes and the Broward
County State Attorney filed emergency motions to block the release, saying it would jeopardize the case.

On Thursday, Broward Circuit Judge Leroy H. Moe turned them down.

Even as they released the files, police said they are still actively pursuing the case.

They resurrected the case again in August 1994, when they turned it over to a "cold case" detective. In October, they brought it to the FBI’s Child Abduction Serial Killer Unit, and continue to pursue it. Detective Mark Smith reinterviewed witnesses and followed old tips that had been neglected during the last 14 years.

In the end, police came back to Toole.

Staff writers Barbara Feder, Scott Shifrel and staff photographer Caroline Couig and staff researcher Derek Willis contributed to this report.

SOME OF THE SUSPECTS

KENNETH LECLAIR, Fruitland Park:

Last August, Ohio police told Hollywood detectives about Leclair, a prime suspect in the 1972 Ohio murder of a 10-year-old. Detectives learned Leclair was arrested in Florida in 1982, 1983 and 1985. In December 1995, they went to the central Florida home where they believe he lives; they have been unable to contact him.

EDWARD HAROLD JAMES, Pompano Beach:

He was arrested in November 1981 for abducting a boy. His Broward jail cellmate, John Terry of Tennessee, said James told of abducting a 5or 6-year-old boy from a Hollywood store that summer. Terry said James told him he had kept a piece of the boy’s clothes under the seat of his 1973 Plymouth Fury, but got rid of it. Detectives later learned James was gone from his apartment for two weeks in the summer of 1981 and had a new seat cover put in his car Aug. 27. Detectives re-interviewed James in November 1995; he denied confessing and computer analysis showed no signs of deception.

ALZEMORE THIBAULT, Hollywood:

A man called America’s Most Wanted in March 1995 to say that Thibault, a suspect in the 1980 murder of 12-year-old Stacy Wytrva of Hollywood, may also have killed Adam. He said that when he was 15, he saw Thibault with a machete and that he drove a light blue van. He was not charged.
JEFFREY DAHMER, Wisconsin:

Ten years after Adam’s death, a man said he saw someone fitting the description of the serial killer dragging a boy into a white van. Another man also placed Dahmer at the mall. Police learned he was in Miami Beach from March until September 1981. Investigators flew to Milwaukee; Dahmer said he had never been to the Hollywood Mall. He said he wasn’t a pedophile and would have admitted to Adam’s murder because he welcomed the death penalty instead of rotting in prison. Dahmer was beaten to death by an inmate in 1994.

MICHAEL KELLY, Merritt Island;

KIM MORAN, Titusville:

When Kelly was charged with drunken driving in North Florida a month after the disappearance, a machete was found in his car. He later said a friend, Kim Moran, had told him he liked to kill boys. The machete was ruled out as the weapon used on Adam.

MARY GREEN-NORTHCU TT, Fort Pierce:

Former boyfriend Jerry Childress said she told him she and several others took a boy from the Hollywood Sears to Fort Pierce and killed him. She denied it and police concluded Childress concocted the story out of jealousy.

KEITH ALLEN WARREN, Las Vegas:

Las Vegas police wrote Hollywood detectives in March 1986 to say Warren was then in custody for attempted murder, kidnap, sexual assault and robbery. He was accused of raping a 15-year-old boy, then repeatedly cutting the teen’s neck and leaving him for dead. He had admitted to similar crimes in several other states but was ruled out because he was in the Keys when Adam was abducted.


OTTIS ELWOOD TOOLE

BORN: March 5, 1947, Jacksonville.

NOW: At Florida State Prison, Starke, serving five life terms for murder.

HE AND HIS LOVER, serial killer Henry Lee Lucas, confessed to hundreds of murders across the United States. Many confessions were later recanted or discounted.

HE CONFESSIONED TO ADAM’S SLAYING at least four times and recanted at least twice; he once confessed 12 minutes after recanting.

TOOLE TOOK DETECTIVES to a dirt road 4 miles from where Adam’s head was found and said he’d buried the rest of his body there. Nothing was found.
HE LATER SAID HE BURNED ADAM'S BODY in a refrigerator behind his mother's Jacksonville home and buried the ashes.

HE USED A MACHETE police later found. Police could not link it to Adam.

POLICE REMOVED BLOODY CARPET from Toole's Cadillac, but cannot find it or the car now.

POLICE CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR his movements the five days around Adam's death.

DETECTIVES LATER LEARNED a Jacksonville homicide detective - the one who first called Hollywood to say Toole had confessed - was seeking to cash in on book rights and had fed Toole confidential information about the case.

TOOLE SAID LUCAS HELPED him; Lucas was in jail in Maryland that day.

A WOMAN AND HER DAUGHTER identified Toole as the man who tried to grab the girl at a Hollywood Kmart the month Adam was taken.

IN AUGUST 1991, a Hollywood man said he saw Toole lure a boy into a 1971 black and white Cadillac near the Sears garden shop entrance.

IN 1988, TOOLE again began confessing to Adam's slaying. But in 1991, and again as recently as 1995, he said he didn't do it.

SOURCE: Hollywood police files

NOWHERE LEADS

In nearly 15 years, detectives have sifted through thousands of leads that range from the bizarre to the outrageous:

FALSE CHARGES

One woman said she saw a man chasing a boy through a Sears at Twin City Mall in North Palm Beach. The man later turned out to be a security guard.

WATERGATE CONNECTION

In 1981, Hank Blum of Vero Beach says he knew things about Watergate and that a John Davis of Fort Pierce was being paid by the CIA to keep Blum quiet by murdering Walsh, actor Gig Young and his wife, actor Bob Crane, and others. Davis says he didn't know Blum. Blum later can't explain why the CIA didn't just kill him, police said.

TOBY

Palm Beach police receive an anonymous letter postmarked West Palm Beach in September
1981 that says they should check someone named Toby. The letter says Toby, who attended a homosexual self-help group called Acceptance, liked molesting young boys. It also said he drove a blue van and was away for three or four days around the time Adam was killed. Police spend three days trying to find out more about Toby, running down the owner of a Rolls-Royce and a butler at a Palm Beach home, but come up with nothing.

HEAD PHOTOGRAPH

In August 1981, while cleaning room 306 at Sannibel Inn in Daytona Beach, an employee says he found a photograph of a young white male's head stuck in the bottom of a picture frame belonging to the motel, according to a Volusia County Sheriff's Office report.

RAYMOND

Ronnie Carroll of Hollywood tells police that he met a man named Raymond at a North Miami topless bar. Raymond bragged about killing Adam Walsh, showing him photos of Adam both dead and alive. The police conclude Carroll is a psychopathic liar. Eventually, Carroll admits making the whole thing up.

THE PSYCHIC

On the third day after Adam's abduction, Peggy Rodgers Gordon tells the Hollywood Police Department she has 'certain feelings' that Adam is alive. She later gets in touch with Reve Walsh and even draws a map showing where Adam can be found. Later still, she tells police, 'I had an attack' and knew 'Adam Walsh was just killed.'

OBSESSED

Terry Alan Green, 41, says that a week after Adam disappeared, he saw Adam drive away from a Mister Donut in Melbourne with a man in a blue van. Detectives say he is 'somewhat obsessed with this case,' and a polygraph test was inconclusive.

THE OIL DRUM

An anonymous caller tells the Okeechobee Sheriff's Office that John Alden killed Adam and placed his remains in an oil drum off State Road 70. Police determine the caller is Kenneth Bosch, an ex-Riviera Beach police officer in a dispute with his neighbor, Merton Alden.

SIGHTINGS

In October 1995, Jennie Warren of Hollywood tells police that she now remembers seeing Adam with Reve at the mall that day, and noticing a suspicious man in khaki shirt and pants with dirty blond hair.

In November 1983, Alvin Simmons says he and his wife saw Adam at the Time Saver near a truck stop in Okeechobee County with a man and a woman. The woman told Mrs. Simmons
that the trio had just come from a Hollywood shopping center, where they reclaimed their son from someone else who had taken him. Dolores Simmons later says she saw Adam alive five days before the murder was verified in the media.

In November 1982, Fort Pierce police find a photo album with numerous clips of the Adam Walsh case in the possession of Edward Joseph Deatley of Fort Pierce, who was arrested. Deatley says he is a teacher and loves kids - ‘I mean extremely’ - and had been upset by the case. He said he'd kept albums of similar cases, but that they must have been stolen during his travels.

On Oct. 16, 1991, Fort Pierce Police Chief Jim Gabbard gets an anonymous handwritten letter, postmarked Orlando, saying John Resetar admitted to killing Adam in 1989. Hollywood police compare the handwriting to another anonymous letter written to the Tippin, Kan., police, which says Resetar was guilty of an unsolved rape. Handwriting analysis reveals both letters were written by the same person. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation also received an anonymous letter accusing Resetar of the murder of a 20-year-old, but they say Resetar was in court in Ohio at the time of their murder. They identify the author as Tom Cronin, a mental patient and Resetar’s former fraternity brother. Resetar is ruled out as a suspect.