

Police mum about leads in slaying of lawyer, wife

Ventura County Star 3-18-1980

By Gregg Zoroya

Ventura police detectives continued probing the deaths of attorney Lyman R. Smith, 43, and his wife Charlene, 33, today, but were offering no new information about what had happened or why.

The two were found, bludgeoned to death, in the bedroom of their hillside home in the Clearpoint area of Ventura Sunday.

Investigators were especially close-mouthed about how the killings occurred.

A 7-hour autopsy conducted Monday at County General Hospital, Ventura, confirmed that both had died as the result of blows to the head by a blunt object. Ventura County Medical Examiner-Coroner Dr. Ronald Kornblum estimated the time of death for the prominent attorney and his attractive wife at sometime Thursday night or Friday morning.

"I'm very optimistic that we may solve the case. We have no suspects. We have no motive in the case yet. It's just under active investigation," said Capt. Paul Lydick.

Twelve-year-old Gary Smith, who first found the bloody bodies of his father and stepmother in their bedroom Sunday afternoon, and then calmly notified authorities, seemed to be handling the crisis well Monday evening.

"We talked about it and he gets it all out and I think he's going to do very well," said his mother, Marjorie Smith.

Gary missed school Monday, but will probably attend class today, his mother said.

Predicting that things may get worse as a memorial service for the boy's father draws closer — it's tentatively set for 2 p.m. Friday at Santa Paula Episcopal Church — Ms. Smith remained confident her son would be fine.

"He's really a level-headed kid," she said. "He doesn't keep anything inside. That's important. But he doesn't dwell on it, either."

Neighbors around the Smiths' expensive Clearpoint home were a bit skittish Monday night as they considered how close violence had come to their own lives.

"I'm sure it's not going to make sleeping too easy," one man said, after asking that he not be identified. "What really unnerves me is that I figure in this neighborhood there's enough homes (with people) observing other homes, it surprises me that this kind of thing could have occurred."

"I guess it doesn't matter where you live," said Susan Petresco, whose home overlooks the Smith residence. "If somebody's going to come and get you, they're going to come and get you."

Although she said she is not really frightened that the slaying occurred so close by, Mrs. Petresco said, "We probably will be keeping the door locked anyway, just to keep it safe."

Some neighbors speculated, as others have, that Smith's death may be related to his widespread activity in civic affairs. A leading candidate for appointment to one of two vacancies on the Superior Court, Smith was also a prominent figure in the county's Democratic Party leadership.

He was a member of the Santa Paula law firm of Romney, Smith & Drescher.

"He was very quiet," said Joan Taylor, who, with her husband Don, lives just below the Smith residence on High Point Drive.

They, like other residents, noticed nothing unusual between Thursday when the Smiths were last seen alive, and Sunday when their bodies were

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Slaying

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found, although Mrs. Taylor can remember an eerie feeling when her huge dog Saxon woke her at 2 a.m. Friday and led her out the back door.

"He went around to the side gate (facing the Smith home) and just looked around. He didn't bark and there wasn't a sound around," said Mrs. Taylor.

"It was kind of scary, really," she said of the whole affair.

"It's comforting to have Saxon around, isn't it?" Taylor asked his wife at one point.

The executor of Smith's will is his law partner, Phil Drescher. Drescher said the memorial service will be under the direction of the Robert A. Stetler Funeral Home.

The mood at many businesses and government offices turned toward the brutal slayings Monday. At the noon meeting of the Santa Paula Rotary, of which Smith was a member and past president, the mood was particularly somber.

In a short address, acknowledging Smith's untimely death, president Elbert "Eb" Tate said nothing prepared him, as chief Rotarian, for the sudden shock of losing a fellow member.

"I do not know what Lyman would wish us to do in this situation," Tate said to the dozens of other members present. "I can only rely on my own belief that our tasks and functions must continue. Although our rage and grief may be concealed, the resumption of our ways is evidence of deep regard and no disrespect."

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